

The Ethical Choice of Business English Interpreters under Chesterman's Model of Translation Ethics*

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This paper explores the ethical challenges encountered by business English interpreters using Chesterman's Model of Translation Ethics, set against the context of economic globalization and the "Belt and Road" initiative. With the increasing demand for interpreters, the paper delves into the ongoing discussion about the role of AI in translation and its limitations, especially concerning cultural subtleties and ethical issues. It highlights the importance of human interpreters' cross-cultural understanding and the ethical principles that inform their work, such as the Ethics of Representation, Service, Communication, Norm-based Ethics, and Commitment. Moreover, the paper examines how these ethical models are applied in practical business situations, including business banquets, business negotiations, business talks and business visits, etc., and investigates the cultural misunderstandings that may occur during these interactions. The study concludes that although AI provides efficiency and cost savings, human interpreters are essential for their capacity to handle the intricacies of cross-cultural communication with cultural awareness and ethical discernment.

keywords: Chesterman, translation ethics model, ethical choice, business English interpreters

Introduction

With the continuous development of economic globalization and the rapid growth of international trade, in particular, with the deepening of the "Belt and Road" initiative around the world, the demand for interpreting talents is also increasing in our country. As early as December 8, 2017, Wang Gangyi, deputy director of the China Foreign Language Administration and Executive Vice President and Secretary-General of the Translators Association of China, pointed out in an interview with "China Talk" that the construction of the "Belt and Road" is in urgent need of language services and translation talents (Wang, 2017, p. 1). However, the number of outstanding interpreters is limited and cannot fully meet the market demand around the world.

In recent years, China's science and technology enterprises have developed rapidly in artificial intelligence language technology, and intelligent voice assistants have become the main battlefield for technology to compete with each other. In order to compete for the huge market of voice translation, Tech giants are definitely competing fiercely in the field of artificial intelligence instant translation. As Ma Xianquan said,

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Artificial intelligence language technology is a new trend in the science and technology industry. In the past few years, global Internet companies such as Microsoft, Google, iFlytek, Tencent, Baidu, Sogou and Double Monkey Technology have invested a lot of funds and talents... It provides new technical support for global language sharing and application... According to the survey, there are more than 60 online machine translation systems in China, of which 8 systems, such as Double Monkey Technology's All-language brand, can support automatic translation in 90 languages. (Ma, 2019, pp. 138-139)

Given the excellent performance of AI-powered translation software, a widespread debate has arisen over whether interpreters will be replaced by AI. Liang Huang, Baidu's chief scientist, said: "We hope that AI technology can reduce the pressure on human interpreters. We are not trying to replace human interpreters, and we will continue to rely on them to provide more consistent and precise translations on important occasions in the future" (Liang, 2023, p. 1). Perhaps one day, artificial intelligence will substantially replace some of the jobs that humans currently do, but that day will not come soon enough. For a long time, the main role of artificial intelligence will be an assistant and partner of humans, rather than a replacement. In the foreseeable future, interpreters will still be the main force in the field of simultaneous interpretation, of course, the value of artificial intelligence will gradually become prominent. Moreover, there are still some drawbacks in the development of artificial intelligence, the most significant of which is that "after AI is really applied to formal scenarios, AI ethical problems will appear immediately" (Shen, 2017, p. 1).

Microsoft established the AETHER Committee (Artificial Intelligence Ethics Committee) in 2016, which is composed of engineers, researchers, and legal experts, and is responsible for discussing and evaluating issues related to artificial intelligence ethics within Microsoft. At present, every Microsoft technology product, every service research and development process, will conduct artificial intelligence ethics review. Shen Xiangyang believes: "Building responsible and trustworthy artificial intelligence is not only our vision, but also our common responsibility" (Li, 2019, p. 1).

Compared with AI-assisted translation software, the biggest advantage of human business interpreters is their cross-cultural awareness. Chesterman's translation ethics model is a framework to consider the ethical issues in translation activities, emphasizing that translation is not only a technical process of language conversion, but also involves moral responsibility and choice. In the field of business English interpretation, this model is particularly important, because interpreters play the role of communication bridge in business activities, and the accuracy and ethics of their translation directly affect the effect of business communication and the interests of all parties.

The Chesterman Translation Ethics Model and the Ethical Choice of Business English Interpreters

Antoine Berman is the initiator of the concept of "translation ethics" (Berman, 1992, p. 9), who holds that in crafting a translation that stands as an esteemed work and is deemed "ethical," it is imperative to honor the linguistic and cultural distinctions inherent in the source material while also recognizing any intentional adaptations made within it (Berman, 2009, pp. 74-77). For Berman, each translation endures the "trial of the foreign" (*l' épreuve de l' étranger*), and through meticulous textual analysis, one can assess the extent to which the target language incorporates the source text's elements into its own structural framework (Berman, 2021, p. 247).

According to Andrew Chesterman,

“Translation ethics” (or “translator ethics”) refers to the set of accepted principles according to which translation should be done (and, *mutatis mutandis*, interpreting), and hence the norms governing what translations should be like. As translating is a form of linguistic behaviour, translation ethics can also be seen as embedded in anethics of language or communication more generally. (Chesterman, 2018, p. 443)

Andrew Chesterman made a systematic study of this theory and finally put forward five models of translation ethics: Ethics of representation, Ethics of service, Ethics of communication, Norm-based ethics and Ethics of commitment (Chesterman, 2001, p. 39). The ethics of representation emphasizes that translations must accurately and faithfully convey the original text’s meaning and the author’s intent, particularly in terms of cultural representation. The ethics of service views translation as a business service for clients, aligning with Nord’s functional theory, particularly Skopos theory, which suggests that loyalty in translation is not about the source and target texts but rather about the relationship between the translator, the client, and the target audience. The ethics of communication highlights that translation is a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic activity aimed at facilitating communication. Norm-based ethics stipulate that a translator’s work should adhere to specific social moral and ethical standards within the target language culture, ensuring acceptance by society and alignment with cultural expectations at a given time. The ethics of commitment model integrates the first four models while removing any irrational elements present in them. Each of the five models outlined above highlights different ethical values: truth (representation), loyalty (service), understanding (communication), trust (norm-based), oath(commitment) (Chesterman, 2001, pp. 142+147).

Chesterman moved away from the ethical standards of source or target languages and instead concentrated on the translator themselves. As a result, his perspectives on translation ethics are more relevant to the professional ethics of interpreting, offering greater guidance for interpreting tasks that are highly unpredictable, require individual judgment, and involve real-time decision-making. Given that both AI-assisted translation software and human business interpreters can meet the Ethics of representation, Ethics of service, and Ethics of commitment, this case study will primarily concentrate on the remaining two models of translation ethics: Ethics of communication and Norm-based ethics.

While AI Translation offers several benefits, including rapid processing of large volumes of text, cost-effectiveness for budget-limited projects, consistent translations for similar texts, scalability for various project sizes, and the ability to manage multiple languages and complex data formats, it also has notable limitations. These include a lack of contextual understanding, making it challenging for AI to accurately interpret context, humor, puns, or culturally specific expressions; inconsistent quality, particularly with technical terms or intricate sentence structures; inflexibility when dealing with unconventional or creative texts, which may yield unsatisfactory results; and potential privacy and security concerns when handling sensitive information through cloud services.

Human translation offers notable benefits in cultural adaptability, largely due to the translator’s deep understanding of the target language’s culture. Translators can grasp cultural references, idioms, and humor in the original text and effectively communicate these nuanced cultural elements to the target audience. They modify the text to fit the social customs and values of the target culture, helping to prevent misunderstandings or offense.

Another key strength of human translation is creative expression. Translators can be inventive during the translation process to ensure the final text is engaging and persuasive for the target culture. They leverage the flexibility of language, tailoring their approach to the expressions and habits of the target language, thus steering clear of rigid, literal translations. Additionally, their awareness of non-verbal cues, such as tone, emotion, and body language, is vital for successful cross-cultural communication.

In specialized fields like law, medicine, or technology, human translators guarantee the precise and appropriate use of technical terminology. They also take into account the expectations and needs of the target audience, making the translated content more relevant. By applying localization expertise, translators can adapt products, services, or content for specific markets, avoiding literal translation pitfalls and ensuring the translated text feels natural and suitable within the target culture.

When addressing sensitive subjects, human translators exhibit a strong sense of cultural sensitivity, honoring the norms and taboos of the target culture. They also consider the historical context and collective memory of the culture, which is crucial for interpreting certain culture-specific phrases. In conclusion, human translation, with its various advantages, delivers accurate, natural, and culturally sensitive translations, playing a vital role in facilitating cross-cultural communication.

In the practice of business English interpretation, interpreters need to make reasonable ethical choices under the guidance of certain ethical principles to ensure the professionalism, fairness, and efficiency of their work. At the same time, they also need to respond flexibly to various complex situations, balance different interests, and make ethical decisions when necessary.

Case Studies

The case analysis part will primarily focus on specific contexts that arise in various aspects of business activities, such as business banquets, business negotiations, business talks and business visits, etc..

In business banquets, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes humility, often expressed through phrases like “粗茶淡饭，不成敬意” or “菜准备得不好，请多多包涵。” This presents a dilemma for interpreters regarding whether to translate these phrases literally as “simple food and drink, not enough to show respect” or “The food is not prepared well, please forgive us.” Such literal translations may confuse guests from different cultural backgrounds, as they might wonder why they are being invited to eat poorly prepared food. Alternatively, interpreters can adhere to Norm-based ethics by transforming the translation to phrases like “I hope you’ll like it,” “Please enjoy yourself,” or “Please feel at home,” which align better with both norms-based and communication ethics and the expectations of the target audience. The choice is clear.

As we all know, many business negotiations often turn into a tug-of-war. After prolonged and arduous discussions, when both parties still cannot reach an agreement on certain issues, their emotions often undergo changes, sometimes even leading to a loss of control. At this point, impolite or even hurtful language may emerge, leading to verbal conflicts between the two sides. For example, a Chinese representative may say, “你们完全没有诚意，这生意我们不做了” or “不要再浪费时间了，我们只能给这个价，要不这生意我们就不做了” (Di & Ao, 2013, p. 119). In such situations, the interpreters are also faced with the ethical choices of whether simply translating the source language in a straightforward and direct manner as “You have no any sincerity in this business, we will end the deal”, and “Don’t waste more time. This is the only offer we can give,

other-wise, there will be no deal”, or in a softer and politer way: “If that is the case, there is hardly any need for further discussions, we might as well call the whole off” and “We would say that it was unwise of you not to accept this favorable offer” (Di & Ao, 2013, p. 119).

Since interpreters serve as a bridge in business negotiations, they not only help the two sides to communicate in language exchange, but also act as lubricants, making the conversation between the two sides smoother, reducing misunderstandings, and helping the two sides to successfully reach a deal. Therefore, it is strongly suggested for the interpreters to choose the latter translation in conform to both the ethics of business norms and effective communication.

In our personal and business lives we often have to engage in small talk with people, which refers to conversation about general subjects without real meaning or any particular purpose, which one starts with unfamiliar people in order to be more involved, to make new friends, or which is used to make the atmosphere better. Small talk in business negotiations is actually very important, because it is the first step to close the relationship with the customer, but also the premise of establishing a long-term close cooperation. However, small talk in business negotiations is different from other types of small talk. There are many topics that should not be covered, such as health, private life (age, weight, income, marital status, etc.), personal gossip, religion, politics or offensive jokes.

Here's an example of a small talk that escalates into a disaster for both a Vietnamese businesswoman and her British client, Jack. After the businesswoman asks Jack about his birth year, which is 1948, she remarks that he is much older than her. She then refers to him as a rat, which visibly offends Jack, and she calls herself a pig, leaving Jack shocked as he responds, “You're a pig? Well, you don't look like a pig to me.” The uncomfortable conversation continues as the woman inquires about Jack's business, implying it must be successful by saying, “So, how is your business? By your size, it looks good.” Jack feels insulted but holds back, replying, “I am hoping to do some good business deals in Vietnam. Keep my fingers crossed,” while making a cross-finger gesture (Lonergan, 2005, Unit 6).

In this case, the interpreter struggled to navigate the cultural differences between Vietnam and the UK, failing to avoid sensitive subjects that are considered taboo in American culture, such as age, weight, and certain social customs. The interpreter should recognize that in Vietnamese culture, being older is viewed as a sign of respect. Vietnamese businesswoman typically expresses the care and respect towards their guest in line with their cultural norms, while in Western cultures, mentioning “old” can be seen as offensive, particularly when referring to older individuals. The interpreter could have defused the awkward situation when the Vietnamese woman inquired about Jack's age by translating her comment to say, “You look much younger than your age,” and then steering the conversation away from that topic. Additionally, when the woman referred to Jack as a rat, the interpreter should have provided context about the Zodiac, which includes twelve animal signs used in China and East Asia to represent years. In this context, the rat is one of the twelve zodiac animals, symbolizing longevity, happiness, and good fortune, in contrast to its negative connotations in Western culture, where it is often associated with dirt, death and destruction. The rat's position as the first sign in the zodiac not only signifies its “beginning” status but also highlights its importance in the animal hierarchy.

In addition, the interpreter failed to adequately explain to the Vietnamese businesswoman that the British businessman was making a friendly gesture by crossing his fingers for good luck. This led to a

misunderstanding, causing the Vietnamese businesswoman to feel angry, as crossing the index and middle fingers is considered a highly offensive gesture in her culture.

In summary, in this scenario, the interpreter's insufficient cross-cultural understanding resulted in a straightforward translation that caused confusion between the two parties involved in the conversation. He failed to make a suitable ethical choice, leading to a breach of both ethical norms and communication standards.

One more example will be given. At the end of a successful business talk between an European visitor and his Chinese host, just out of cultural customs, the former politely praised a painting of the latter's office, and the Chinese businessman misunderstood his meaning and insisted on giving it to European merchants. As a result, the Chinese businessman lost his true love painting, while the European businessman was at a loss with the "gift" he did not want. In the West, it is common for guests to praise the host's home and furnishings. When misunderstandings occur, the interpreter should explain the cultural differences to the Chinese businessman, convey the true intention of the European businessman, and avoid awkward endings for both side

Another example can be provided. After a successful business meeting between a European visitor and his Chinese host, the visitor, following cultural norms, complimented a painting in the host's office. However, the Chinese businessman misinterpreted this gesture and insisted on gifting the painting to the European visitor. Consequently, the Chinese businessman lost a cherished painting, while the European visitor found himself with an unwanted "gift." In Western culture, it is typical for guests to compliment their host's home and decor. When such misunderstandings arise, the interpreter should clarify the cultural differences to the Chinese businessman, communicate the European visitor's true intentions, and help prevent an awkward situation for both parties (Lonergan, 2005, Unit 6).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explores the ethical dilemmas encountered by business English interpreters using Chesterman's Model of Translation Ethics, which encompasses the Ethics of Representation, Service, Communication, Norm-based Ethics, and Commitment. It highlights the crucial importance of Chesterman's model in guiding interpreters through the intricate ethical issues they face, ensuring the protection of professional ethics and client interests while maintaining translation quality. By following the principles outlined in Chesterman's model, interpreters can effectively facilitate cross-cultural business communications, upholding the integrity and effectiveness of the exchange.

The research also emphasizes the essential role of human interpreters in business English interpretation, as they provide not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural relevance and ethical responsibility. Although AI translation technology has advanced, the nuanced understanding of cultural contexts and the capacity for immediate ethical decision-making by human interpreters cannot be replaced. As globalization continues to shape the business landscape, the demand for ethically aware interpreters who can bridge cultural divides and ensure effective communication will increase. Therefore, the ongoing development of ethical guidelines and training for interpreters is strongly recommended to improve their ethical decision-making abilities and to adeptly navigate the evolving dynamics of global business communication.

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