

CAN A TRANSLATION EVER BE TRULY NEUTRAL, OR IS EVERY TRANSLATION AN ACT OF INTERPRETATION?

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Abstract

The inquiry into whether translation can achieve complete neutrality or if it is intrinsically an interpretative act has engaged scholars, practitioners, and theorists for centuries. Translation transcends a mere word-for-word conversion; it constitutes a multifaceted negotiation of meaning across various cultural, historical, and ideological frameworks. This article examines the degree to which theoretical neutrality in translation is feasible and practically achievable. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, it juxtaposes case studies drawn from legal, political, literary, religious, and machine-assisted translation domains. The results indicate that, although efforts toward neutrality are particularly evident in legal and technical fields, true neutrality remains unattainable. Translators unavoidably influence meaning through their choices of vocabulary, syntactic constructions, cultural contexts, and even through omissions. Furthermore, machine translation, frequently regarded as impartial, perpetuates human biases that are present in the training data. The discourse posits that translation ought not to be assessed based on the fallacy of neutrality but rather on criteria such as transparency, accountability, and an acknowledgment of its inherently interpretative character. This research advances discussions within translation studies, applied linguistics, and digital humanities by redefining neutrality as a myth and positioning interpretation as the fundamental action of translation.

Keywords: Translation studies, neutrality, interpretation, legal translation, political discourse, literary translation, sacred texts, machine translation, translator visibility, cultural mediation, ideology in translation, AI bias.

Introduction

The translation principle of neutrality has been in the past viewed as an objective as well as a point of contention. The equivalent of the translator as an invisible conduit—the proper transmission of meaning from source language to target language without interruption—is a mainstay of translation ethics discourse as well as professional practice. Nonetheless, the act of choosing words, picking out idioms, or favoring a particular scheme of interpretation over another demonstrates how a state of true neutrality is farther out of reach than commonly thought.

Traditional conventions would typically illustrate the translator as a transparent intermediary. Cicero and St. Jerome called for faithfulness to meaning against literal speaking, while eighteenth-century thinkers defined translation as a civilizing enterprise, transporting knowledge from culture to culture "faithfully" and meticulously. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, so-called "cultural turn" in translation research opposed that view, remarking that translations are located in power relations, ideological formations, and cultural political projects. Translation, then, was no longer held to be neutral, but was regarded as an active rewriting, constructing, rather than transferring, meaning.

This work responds to a fundamental research question: Can a translation really become neutral, or is a translation by definition always interpretative? The research explores this question in five main areas:

1. Legal translation, where neutrality is essential for justice yet remains contested.
2. Political translation, where ideology, propaganda, and diplomacy dictate the act of translation.
3. Translating Literature, in which translation is usually hailed as creativity.
4. Sacred texts, where the tension between faithfulness and cultural accessibility is particularly acute.
5. Machine translation opens new issues concerning bias, objectivity, and algorithmic neutrality.

Methodology

This work is based on a comparative, multifaceted approach reflecting translation research, applied linguistics, and discourse analysis. The research question—the neutralizable potential of translation or its inherent interpretativity—requires explanation of theoretical claims as well as illustrative cases.

Sources of Data

Legal instruments: international treaties (including the United Nations Charter), European Community directives, and bilingual codes of laws.

Political texts include diplomatic speeches, propaganda tracts from World War II, and contemporary political debates in globalized versions.

Literary works: great books such as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Shakespearean plays, along with modern works of prose and poetry.

Sacred texts: Translations of Bibles, English versions of the Qur'an, and Buddhist sutras in Western languages.

MT outputs: Google Translate, DeepL, Microsoft Translator, and computer-aided translation software applied to politically and culturally sensitive texts.

Methodological Framework

Comparative textual analysis: comparative side-by-side analysis of source texts and translations.

Discourse analysis: determining ideological framing, omission, and shifts in register.

L'approche par cas: Analyse en profondeur de cas représentatifs.

Theoretical framework: Following Lawrence Venuti's idea of the "invisible translator," Antoine Berman's "deforming tendencies," and current controversies over AI neutrality.

Restrictions

Although the work has reference to a large variety of case studies, it is impossible to demonstrate the entire range of translations in each cultural setting. The work, however, strives for representative thoroughness by commenting upon well-documented events which bring out tensions between interpretation and neutrality.

Results

Legal Translation: The Illusion of Neutrality

Legal translation is often considered to be the most objective discipline because it relies upon exactness, consistency, and formalized language. But in practice, reaching neutrality is not always easy.

Analysis: The Versailles Treaty (1919)

Written in different languages, small lexical differences had large consequences. The German translation of "responsibility" (Verantwortung) evoked ethical blame, whereas the French vocabulary entailed a higher legal duty. This selection in how to interpret carried over into postwar debates over culpability and restitution.

Analysis: The European Union

Each EU directive is equally valid in 24 languages. Nevertheless, terms such as subsidiarity and solidarity have no equivalents in most member-state languages. Translators are forced to interpret terms, and as a result, shape how law is practiced locally.

Analysis: Courtroom Interpreting

In asylum cases, a line between "persecution" and "discrimination" could decide a case. Interpreters are trained to maintain a neutral stance, but their lexical choices often reflect their cultural and personal perspectives.

Analysis: Legal translation as a routine is not so much a matter of erasure, as of managing and minimizing, interpreting, through procedures, vocabularies, and institutional controls. Even thus, translation dictates outcomes in law, contradicting the myth of fundamental neutrality.

Political Translation: The Dominance of Ideology

Political writing puts center stage the impossibility of being neutral. Translation in this context tends to serve propaganda, soft power, or diplomacy.

Case Study 1: The Cold War

During the Cold War, English renditions of Soviet speeches frequently mellowed aggressive terms. The term "imperialist aggression" was occasionally translated as "Western opposition," thereby changing perceptions of aggression.

Case Study 2: United Nations General Assembly

UN interpreters are urged to interpret literally, but they modify idioms, tone down insults, or emphasize select terms in order to refrain from causing a diplomatic incident. Therefore, impartiality is compromised for global stability.

Case Study 3: Modern Diplomacy

Chinese official media in 2022 delivered speeches relating to Taiwan in deliberately vague language. The words yi tong (统一, unification) were flipped back and forth in translation between "reunification" and "integration" depending upon whom was speaking. Each is politically charged.

Analysis: Political translation demonstrates that a state of neutrality is not only unimaginable but very often undesirable. Translation is a tool of diplomacy and ideological construction. Translators, in such a context, are not anonymous filters, but active interpreters.

Literature Translation: Interpreting as Creativity

In literary terms, interpretation, rather than being a distortion, is translation's very being.

Case Study 1: Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamaz*

Constance Garnett's initial English translation simplified Russian syntax, accessible though less stylistically accurate than later results. Subsequent translators such as Pevear and Volokhonsky strove for accuracy, retaining Russian rhythm yet losing a few readers.

Case Study 2: Shakespeare in German

Goethe and Schlegel translated Shakespeare's plays in German during the 19th century, preferring metered verse to attempting to adhere to exact word choices. Their translations are themselves classics of the German tradition, illustrating how translation is a generator of new cultural art.

Case Study 3: Poetry and Untranslatables

Metaphors in poems scarcely stay in intact form. The translators have a dilemma whether to preserve imagery, rhythm, or cultural relevancies—all being acts of interpreting.

Analysis: Literary translation abides by no notion of neutrality as impossible and unnecessary. Its yardstick is not faithfulness in words, but imaginative reconceptualization of spirit, tone, and rhythm.

Sacred Texts: Neutrality versus Authority

Holy scriptures amplify controversies about neutrality. Translators juggle loyalty to religious revelation against readability to people.

Case Study 1: The Bible

The 1611 King James Version aimed towards majestic speech, which framed English religious expression for centuries. Modern translations, including the New International Version, value readability. Both reflect theological choices, not neutrality.

Case Study 2: The Qur'an

Many Muslims argue the Qur'an cannot be "translated," only "interpreted." English versions differ significantly: Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation emphasizes spirituality, while more literal versions stress legalistic detail.

Case Study 3: Buddhist Sutras

Early Chinese translations of Sanskrit sutras incorporated Confucian ideas in order to give them cultural relevance. The translations illustrate the impossibility of neutral transmission.

Analysis: Neutrality is typically denied as a chimera in religious translation. There are instead contending authorities, legitimation, and doctrinal conformity.

Machine Translation: Neutral Algorithms?

MT is usually perceived as objective due to its "objective" and computerized nature. However, research substantiates that there is replication and magnification of human bias by MT.

Case Study 1: Gender Discrimination

Google Translate previously rendered the Turkish sentence *o bir doktor* ("they are a doctor") as "he is a doctor," and *o bir hemşire* as "she is a nurse," thus revealing embedded stereotypes in the training data.

Case Study 2: Political Terminology

DeepL translated Chinese political terms as 社会主义核心价值观 into "core socialist values" but sometimes muted them as "shared values," blurring ideological intent.

Case Study 3: Hallucinations and Contextual Framework

Artificial Intelligence tends to create context where there is none. Translating idioms or unclear pronouns translates into guesses based on interpretation, which is against the concept of being neutral.

Analysis: Machine translation substantiates the assertion that neutrality is an illusion. The algorithms employed exhibit neutrality only to the extent that their datasets embody human biases, ideologies, and cultural frameworks.

Discussion

The findings of the research in legal, political, literary, sacred, and machine translation demonstrate a common thread: translation is inevitably interpretive.

Neutrality as a Professional Virtue: Legal and institutional interpreters promote neutrality in retaining the trust, though their work is inherently interpretive.

Interpretation as a Necessity: Interpretation is not a weakness in political discourse and in writing, but a necessity.

Cultural Mediation: Translators as cultural negotiators, mediating meaning to target communities in a non-neutral manner, without merely repeating meaning.

Machine Translation: Rather than achieving neutrality, artificial intelligence exacerbates interpretative biases by integrating underlying prejudices.

The ethical implications are self-evident: rather than aiming for impossible objectivity, translators and associations should embrace transparency. This includes acknowledging interpretive decisions, documenting term choices, and highlighting cultural and ideological implications involved in translation.

Conclusion

The answer to the question "Can translation ever be neutral?" has to be in the negative. Neutrality is a myth, and interpretation is the very foundation of translation. Legal translators reduce interpretation to its minimum, although never to zero. Political translators use interpretation as a diplomatic tool. Literary translators rejoice in interpretation as art. Sacred translators walk between doctrine and accessibility. Machine translators bring out underlying layers of humankind's bias in algorithms. This recognition, rather than downplaying translators' value, maximizes their value. The recognition of translation's interpretive component promotes accountability, fosters cultural sensitivity, and

upholds ethical principles in a world increasingly defined by global communications and computerized intelligence.

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