

XXVIII. Ethics of Translation: Accountability

Accountability is now a central concern in all professions. It requires every professional and every citizen to demonstrate that he or she is cognizant of the impact of their behaviour on others, aware of its legal implications, and prepared to take responsibility for its consequences. While traditionally shielded from the consequences of their decisions by proclaimed values such as impartiality and neutrality which position them outside the interactions they mediate, translators and interpreters are now being held accountable for these consequences in ways that are forcing their educators to introduce more critical thinking and informed decision making into the curriculum. The arrest and trial of Mohamed Yousry in the US in 2005 is a case in point.

Mohamed Yousry, an Arabic translator and interpreter appointed by the court to assist in a terrorism trial, was convicted by a New York jury of aiding and abetting an Egyptian terrorist organisation (U.S. v. Ahmed Abdel Sattar, Lynne Stewart, and Mohamed Yousry, 2005). The charge was based on prison rules designed to prevent high-risk inmates from communicating with the outside world. Yousry was held responsible for translating a letter from the defendant (Sheikh Omar Abdel Raman), at the instruction of the attorney (Lynne Stewart), which Stewart later released to the press. He had played no part in devising Stewart's legal strategy and was not present when she contacted the press.

As Hess explains (2012: 24), the ruling against Yousry was paradigm-changing for the interpreting industry. For the first time in US legal history, “an interpreter was held responsible for the actions of an attorney for whom he worked and for the content of the attorney-client conversations which he facilitated”. The case, and others that followed, reminded the profession that interpreters and translators can be held accountable not only for how they translate but also for the content, provenance and circulation of what they translate. If they are to be held accountable in these respects, they must be trained to make ethically informed decisions for which they can knowingly assume responsibility.

Text by: Mona Baker, 2013, Ethics in the Translation and Interpreting Curriculum

<http://www.monabaker.org/?p=660>

Reading Guidelines:

Never once lose track of the essential points: reading aloud, memorization and conversing with colleagues, friends and teachers.

Q.I Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: ethics, accountability, demonstrate, cognizant, impact, consequences, shielded, proclaimed, impartiality, mediate, curriculum, convicted,

jury, abetting, inmates, defendant, attorney, devising, paradigm, provenance , circulation.

Q.II Derive as many words as you can from the following words: ethics, accountability, implications, shielded, proclaimed, interactions, mediate, curriculum, strategy, facilitated, provenance , circulation, assume.

Q.III Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: accountability, central, cognizant, shielded, impartiality, neutrality, informed, prevent, responsible, present, facilitated.

Q.IV Answer the following questions briefly:

1. What are ethics and accountability?
2. How were translators and interpreters shielded from accountability before?
3. What should translation educators introduce into the curriculum?
4. What was the charge of Yousri?
5. What does the phrase "the ruling against Yousri a paradigm-changing" mean?
6. Do you think and agree that translators and interpreters be well trained to make ethically informed decisions?

Q.V Collect and list as many as legal words you can find in the text and give their Arabic equivalent.

Research Activity:

Go to the full text by Mona Baker and study the examples given by her to have a good picture of the role of ethics in translation.

Quote of the Day:

Translation is like a woman: if she is faithful, she is not beautiful; if she is beautiful, she is not faithful

Russian Proverb