1 Why Talk about Risk?

Risk management is something translators – the term here includes interpreters – are always doing, along with anyone who works between cultures, and in fact anyone who communicates. People who communicate between cultures tend to manage risks more consciously than many others because, in general, there is less certainty in the frontier spaces: we know less about the people we are talking with; the multiplicity of languages compounds the complexity of each language; we are less familiar with expected procedures; we are less likely to trust fully the people we communicate with; they are more likely to distrust us. Those greater uncertainties are good reasons for talking about how translators manage risks.

A second reason is more philosophical. Much thinking on translation, at least in the Western traditions, assumes the ideal of a perfect translation. The words for that ideal have changed over the centuries, from *fidelity* to *adequacy* to *equivalence* to *accuracy*, but all those terms assume that the aim of a translation is to reproduce something from the previous text – the better the reproduction, the more ideal the translation. Risk, on that view, would be the probability of misrepresentation, of the translator making a linguistic mistake. And avoiding risk would involve things like training more, paying more attention, checking more, or generally working harder. On that view, more effort will bring you closer to the ideal representation by reducing uncertainty. That is a very common way of thinking about translation, and an unfortunately common mainstay of translation pedagogy.

I do not share that view. This is not because I shun hard work – not that I seek it either. It is because I do not believe there is just one ideal translation. Or rather, if there happens to be just one possible translation of a given sentence, a translation that everyone agrees is much better than all others, then that certitude concerns areas of terminology or grammar that are imposed by an external authority, perhaps the Microsoft glossary or the institutional powers that decide what correct grammar is. For the parts of translation that are of interest to me here, the problems of translating a text do not have clear, simple solutions. They require interpretation. And since different people interpret in different ways, there are many possible solutions to a translation problem and no infallible rule-based way of deciding between those solutions. Try it for yourself: translate a longish sentence, then retranslate it as many ways as you can, then attempt to say why your first translation should be the only one that fits some kind of ideal. If the experiment *does* give just one ideal translation, do a few more sentences, and make sure they are really complex! In sum, for the translation problems that concern me here, there is no such thing as an ideal

solution, no matter how much popular belief continues to accept and circulate that ideal.

Once you accept that view, risk is not just the probability that an error might be made. It becomes a way of explaining how translators can work, communicate, and be trusted in situations where there is no absolute certainty. Part of that is news to no one: many people tell us that interpretation is necessary, transformations are everywhere, translation is creative, and so on. With apologies, here I would like to say something a little less empty and hopefully more useful and precise. For me, the great attraction of risk management is that it enables an account of translation that does *not* require ideals of fixed, stable meaning, and yet can still explain part of what translators do, can do so empirically, and can also help in their training.

How can we avoid the facile ideals? The first step is to insist that risk is the probability not just of misrepresentation but more generally of the entire communication act failing in some way. Once you take that step, risk becomes something more than a particular set of hazards. Risks can also be mitigated, transferred, or taken on in the hope of achieving communicative rewards. That is one very good reason for talking about them. You can do different things with them, as opposed to the basic language error that is only right or wrong.

This Is Not Particularly about Running a Business

What is risk? It is the probability of failure. That is a standard view, found in economics, psychology, sociology, and a hundred other places, right through to pandemic control and climate-change science. Here, though, the failure is specifically in cross-cultural communication, and more specifically in failures to reach the kinds of understandings needed for cooperation (on which, more later). The point to make now, so as not to disappoint anyone, is that I am *not* offering lessons in how to run a translation business, as can certainly be done (Stoeller 2003; Lammers 2011; Canfora & Ottmann 2015, 2018). Good communication will hopefully lead to good business, but there are a few even more interesting ways in which the two sides can be related.

I am concerned with the way translation decisions are made in situations of uncertainty, then with the strategies that orient those decisions, and then with ways the strategies of participants meet in a communication act. The one set of concepts should be able to follow those steps from the cognitive to the social. That requires more than business. The business kind of risk has to do with numbers: profits and losses are quantifiable reductions of uncertainty. But risk is also a set of psychological and social constructs and dispositions, operating

at the levels of intuition and ideology more than in any careful numerical calculations. Confronted with several ways of rendering a problematic sentence, translators intuitively assess the effects that each solution will have on the imagined receiver, just as they subconsciously assess the ways those choices will fit in with the translation interaction as a whole. Their innate emotional responses might be seen as embodiments of successful risk-management decisions over millennia of evolution (Harari 2016: 391), but the translators are not particularly thinking like the economic subject – the rational egoist – that runs a good business. They do not have numbers flashing in their mind. Yet they are managing risks nonetheless.

As an example, I will have quite a lot to say about a high-stakes message in Australia telling people that a bushfire is approaching and it is too late for them to leave their homes – although risk management is by no means limited to such extreme cases. The addressees must prepare for the fire, quickly. As I translate the text, I wonder whether to reproduce the second person *you*, as in 'It is too late for *you* to leave.' In contemporary behavior-change messages in English, that second person is normal enough. It is actually recommended in most guidelines, so I should probably use it. But if I am translating into Japanese, the passive is more normal, so I might decide to get rid of the second person: 'It is too late to leave.' And in Chinese, having many short sentences with 'you' does not sound authoritative enough, so the receivers may not take the message seriously. And then, if I am preparing a text to be machine-translated into many languages, given that everyone has to understand this message and the fire is advancing fast, I might delete the second person altogether, given that it is likely to create problems down the line. Many languages make distinctions between the formal and informal (*tu* vs. *vous* in French, *tú* vs. *usted* in Spanish, *du* vs. *Sie* in German, *εσύ* vs. *εσείς* in Greek, 你 vs. 您 in Chinese) and machine translations rarely make consistent selections between the two. All those possible risks can flash through my mind, none of them based on any numerical calculations but all of them constituting certain estimated likelihoods of failure, felt as consequences that it might be good to avoid. On the basis of accumulated experience or recycled collective imaginings, the risks have thereby become psychological constructs that are accorded more or less weight in the decision-making process. And then, once I settle on the idea that the form of the second person is rather unlikely to affect the actual understanding of the message and that what counts more is the speed of the translation because the fire is approaching, I could just leave as many second persons as there are in the existing text, accepting the risks in the interests of urgency – I let machine translation do its work and pray for the best. What would you do? (Remember, the fire is approaching fast.)

Although such decisions are rarely based on any exact calculations, the numbers can sometimes come later. For example, probabilities are calculated on the basis of past usage whenever translations enter the training data for machine translations or various forms of generative AI. Other times, there is a virtue in calculating them through research on how a specific text genre works linguistically in different languages. If you are in a hurry, you might go with the probabilities that are used in the algorithms of our automation systems, running risks that you cannot control but that have indeed been calculated in places we cannot see. Of course, if you have time, check them with a little research: gather a handful of parallel texts and contextual examples for each target language. A few meaningful numbers can help you make decisions with enhanced confidence, but without implying at any moment that the translating mind is a narrow rationalist.

Note that this is a matter of felt probabilities. When I use terms like 'high-stakes' and 'low-stakes' (for the estimated consequences of a choice) or 'high-risk' and 'low-risk' (for the degree of consequence plus the estimated frequency of occurrence), there are no simple binary oppositions at work. The probabilities locate any number of points between those named polarities.

There are, however, cases where a more business-oriented kind of risk management works against that interiorized, affective kind of probability, in fact against any personal confidence in translation decisions. Take, for instance, the fact that many subtitlers are required to work from a written script without seeing the actual film they are translating. Why? Because the logic of business says there is a high probability that the audiovisual file will be leaked into the public domain, which might eat into the company's profits. That is a numerical kind of risk. At the same time, it incurs the risk that the subtitlers' renditions will contradict what happens on the screen, or will be general, vague, and contain omissions – since those are the kinds of strategies subtitlers tend to employ when they cannot access the audiovisual information and are effectively flying blind. That second kind of risk, the kind that the blindfolded subtitlers must deal with, has no numbers associated with it, even though it is being managed through the subtitlers' risk-averse decisions. Similarly obscured are the kinds of losses thereby incurred to viewers' receptions of the translated film, hopefully with some financial consequences down the line. For as long as there are no numbers able to address questions about the risks taken in the production and reception of subtitles, the business practice will probably continue as if a publicly available audiovisual file were the only risk to be considered, in a situation of classical information asymmetry. A little empirical research, a simple comparison of reception processes with and without subtitlers being able to see the film, could hopefully show the companies some

further numbers, given that numbers seem to be the only kind of language that could change a nefarious business practice. And those further numbers can come from researchers. This is one of the many areas in which research can intervene and help change the kind of risk management that is being applied.

Does that mean that the risk is actually in the numbers? Not at all. Risk is a creation of human minds when we try to decide between different courses of action. We *sense* the effect a subtitle might have, just as the film distributors – truth be told – *fear* uncontrolled release of the film more than can be justified by actual market numbers. Fansubbed versions of bootlegged films can generate public interest and thereby *enhance* commercial success – the classic case is how repeated copyright infringements created a market for Japanese anime in the United States (Leonard 2005). But what company directors fear most in translation is loss of control. Their decisions are at least as affective as they are numerical.

This Is Not about Everything Translators Think They Do

Risk management can help explain the ways translators solve problems, just as it can help translators think about how to solve problems more effectively or less instinctively. Of course, translators do many other things as well, and when they do those other things, they have no reason at all to consider risks or be concerned with managing them. When there are fixed grammatical rules and standard terminology, there is no strictly translational problem to solve: you apply the rules, obeying and reproducing authority. Or when a translator stays as close to the text as possible, following the author and making only the adjustments necessary to ensure the translation is comprehensible, they are probably not thinking in terms of risk management. That does not mean, however, that their activities cannot be *explained* in terms of risk management. When a translator applies authorities, playing it safe, the risk of communicative failure has implicitly been *transferred* to those authorities – don't blame me, blame the Microsoft glossary! And when a translator follows the text closely, there is also a certain transfer of responsibility to the original authors – they said it, not me! Risk management can offer explanations, even when the translator is not particularly aware of having any particular disposition to risk.

That is not to say that all risks are efficiently managed in the mind of the translator or simply intuited in the moment of production. In 1405, Leonardo Bruni complained that when something was good in his translation, all praise went to the author, and when something was bad, all blame went to the translator (Bruni 1405/1969). That tells us risk management is also happening in the minds of the people who *receive* the translations. Bruni claimed that this

injustice was because only translators can see how much work is involved. Outsiders do not appreciate the fruits of those labors because they do not see the labors. If a little research can help show how much work is involved, or can hopefully change the way film companies treat subtitlers, the wider aim might be to change the way translations are received.

This Is Not Particularly about How to Be Rational

Frege thought that knowledge of different languages allowed people to somehow become more logical: "when we see that the same thought can be worded in different ways, our mind separates off the husk from the kernel. [. . .] This is how the differences between languages can facilitate our grasp of what is logical" (1979: 6). The idea implies that logic is common to all languages. If you get the logic right, all you have to do is express it in whatever language you are working into. That should make translators the most rational people in the world! Yet Frege's was an external vision, like the readers who did not see or appreciate Bruni's labors as a translator or the subtitlers who cannot see what is happening in the film. The more information the translator can find, and the more information we obtain on the mind of the translating translator, the less we can assume that there is any pure logic at work. As for the thing to be translated, it can be anything from a price to an emotion, a linguistic function, a pragmatic effect, a semantic unit, a gesture, or anything in accordance with the purpose of the communication. There is no pure logic to be found there.

The question is important because the dominant models of risk management tend to assume a logic of rational calculations, especially in neoclassical economics, where there are not only numbers but also clear concepts to which the numbers are supposed to be attached. Risk, on that view, is often calculated as the uncertainty of a fixed expectation, as in ISO 31000:2018 on risk management (Section 3.1). For me, working with language translation, the assumption of fixed certainty is philosophically untenable – Frege's underlying logic is no guarantee of anything – so there is no absolute stable zero point from which uncertainty can be measured. That is why, when I talk about risk management, I do not view translators as calculators, rational egoists, or retainers of some hidden truths – numbers rather than feelings. As I said, the risk is not particularly in the numbers, which means that one is not required to operate in terms of neat calculations of any kind. Risk management is better seen in the use of strategies to avoid communicative failure, to which categories and numbers can sometimes be attached.

That does not mean economics has nothing to say. For example, when I read Kahneman (2011) on psychological experiments where people make decisions

in situations of uncertainty, numerous human biases become clear and many of them sound highly applicable to what we find translators doing. At the same time, most of Kahneman's experiments do concern numbers, and the human heuristics are measured in relation to what the rational economic egoist would have done. That is, the economic subject is there, as a reminder that some numbers do win out in the long run, just as the banker always wins whenever I am foolish enough to play blackjack in a casino. You cannot just wish the numbers away.

Anyone who lived through the lockdowns of the COVID pandemic of 2020–21 should be familiar with the language and effects of risk management. Was it ever *just* a question of numbers? For some, the main risk was the loss of life, so we calculated deaths and made people stay at home – numbers on one side (deaths) and numbers on the other (days of lockdown). But lockdowns killed economic and social activity, which was a second kind of risk, so various trade-offs were reached: a certain death rate might be tolerated in the interests of people retaining employment. Numbers against numbers again, as if it were a neutral rationality. Yet the numbers are only responses to the questions asked. When economists argued that risk should be calculated as the probability not of deaths but of years of *productive* life (Foster & Frijters 2022), the greatest negative consequence became the privation of socialization in schools. The risks depend on how the questions are asked, since different questions encapsulate different criteria for success.

The COVID example does have something to do with translation. In Melbourne, where we went through the longest cumulative lockdown in the world, more than 270 languages are spoken at homes, so pandemic information had to be translated. The initial strategy for this was to employ professionally certified translators only, on the supposition that the greatest risk would be the wrong terminology in what looked like medical texts. Other problems soon surfaced, however: professional translations arrived too late to be of use; they were only available in print or on websites, not on the social media where most people were actually going for information; they failed to address and counter conspiracy doxa; they tended not to be trusted in certain language communities; vaccination rates in some language communities were higher than in others (Pym & Hu 2022). The risks were clearly wider and more diverse than mere terminological accuracy. The response was a change in communication strategy, as official messages were relayed to some communities by nonprofessional mediators, particularly trusted people like doctors and religious leaders, who spoke the languages but had no training as translators or interpreters. That was very much a risk-taking change – the government was flouting its own official translation policy, which required the use of certified translators, assuming that