



GLD Professional Forum: Ethical Challenges in the German to/from English T&I Business

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Agenda

- **Introduction (5 min.)**
- **Remarks from Abby Huber (5 min.)**
- **Collated survey results (5 min.)**
- **Breakout groups (15 min.)**
- **Breakout groups (15 min.)**
- **Takeaways from breakout groups (10 min.)**
- **Wrap-up and conclusion (5 min.)**

Introduction

German to/from English T&I professionals frequently encounter ethical dilemmas. These range from requests to translate sensitive historical documents, such as Nazi-era texts, to interpreting personal letters without consent, and navigating offers to work for significantly lower compensation than standard rates. GLD members were invited to submit ethical issues they have been confronted with by email prior to the conference.

Remarks on ethical challenges from Abby Huber

Challenge	Response to challenge
<p>Disclosing, acknowledging, and supplementing the limits of our abilities:</p> <p>I often work with German-Jewish family letters, and sometimes there are also letters from European Jewish Yiddish speakers who were writing in German. I do not know Yiddish and am not Jewish, and so the ethical consideration is that it is important to acknowledge and supplement the limits of my knowledge. Clients have sent me handwritten letters that contained Germanized Yiddish that could seem an awfully lot like “bad German” to the untrained eye. In fact, I’ve had fellow German translators tell me that the writers were writing in poor German, when really, as it turned out, the writers were Germanizing their Yiddish because censors forbade them from writing in the Yiddish alphabet.</p>	<p>Disclosing, acknowledging, and supplementing the limits of our abilities:</p> <p>When in doubt, I contact a Yiddish translator to be sure of what I am looking at; do these sentences have a different meaning if read as Yiddish? I also ask Jewish and Hebrew-speaking contacts to help me when faced with cultural or linguistic references beyond my knowledge. It could be tempting to some translators to skip these collaborative steps for ease and simplicity’s sake, but this would mean sacrificing the integrity of our work and pretending to understand more than we do.</p>

Remarks on ethical challenges from Abby Huber (2)

Challenge	Response to challenge
<p>Pricing:</p> <p>Sometimes, after I have translated some, but not all, of a client's family letters written by victims of the Holocaust, or by deceased relatives who emigrated from Europe, I think the client feels like they are really depending on me and their heart and wallets are sort of in my hands. This is an ethical consideration because clients might not be sure how to search effectively for another translator specializing in this area and this kind of family history can be very treasured and/or very traumatic.</p>	<p>Pricing:</p> <p>I think it's important when working with Holocaust letters or treasured family history to be clear and consistent with pricing and allow clients to feel free to work with other translators if they desire. The ethical thing is to be open and honest about pricing and how it works, making sure the clients have that information in advance, and to avoid any "price gouging" once I have started working with them. ("Price gouging" could look like: Working slowly once the clock is running, greatly overestimating the number of words for a quote, asking for rush fees unnecessarily, or being dishonest in any way on the invoice.) I reach my rates using math, calculating what is a good hourly rate for me, and I stick to them, to make sure I make a good living, but I am careful not to choose random or exorbitantly high rates when working with individuals with treasured family history, especially Holocaust history, and to be honest on the invoice. And I am eager to refer clients to trusted colleagues if they express any hesitation about a cost estimate, so that the client does not feel obligated to work with me and entrust their treasured family history to me.</p>

Remarks on ethical challenges from Abby Huber (3)

Challenge	Response to challenge
<p>Receiving sensitive or confidential documents: A man once sent me photographs of what seemed to be his girlfriend's diary asking for translation. His explanation seemed implausible; he said it was for an archive but he did not seem to work for an archive, and the diary sounded contemporary.</p>	<p>Receiving sensitive or confidential documents: I requested that the potential client with the diary pages give me a call to talk about the situation. He did not call, so I did not proceed. I concluded that the translation request was probably part of a violation of privacy.</p>
<p>AI: I've been approached with requests to work on projects where my translation output will be used to train AI. I have my reservations about AI.</p>	<p>AI: I turned down those projects rather than feeding the machine that could threaten to put me out of work or change the nature of my work.</p>

Survey
results



Feedback

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Ethical challenges faced – survey results, condensed

- Translation subjects:
 - Scientology
 - Tobacco industry texts
 - Blockchain/crypto
 - Anti-Semitic texts, material related to WWII and the Nazis, letters from Hitler's associates, interviews with concentration camp survivors
 - Marriage certificate w/ photo of SS Officer groom and a letter indicating he had not been a party member, just a farmer looking to start over in the US...
 - In translating family records, memoirs and correspondence from those terrible times, we sometimes uncover secrets such as illegitimate children, but also betrayals, theft of property or inheritance, most likely occasioned by the unimaginable pressure and sheer terror under which people were living. Do we simply translate the words on a page or do we provide context that is obvious to us but perhaps not to the client?

Ethical challenges faced – survey results, condensed (2)

- Asked to do already existing translations (such as sections of German laws)
- Don't share same values as client (QAnon)
- Gender issues (lacking in source text)
- "Poverty-level rates"
- The environmental impact of AI
 - *The Guardian*: Three Mile Island nuclear reactor to restart to power Microsoft AI operations.
 - *BBC*: Google turns to nuclear to power AI data centers. Last year, US regulators gave California-based Kairos Power the first permit in 50 years to build a new type of nuclear reactor. In July, the company started construction of a demonstration reactor in Tennessee.
 - Immense amounts of energy and water consumed by servers that run chatbots
Forbes: ChatGPT consumes over half a million kilowatts of electricity each day, an amount staggering enough to service about two hundred million requests. ChatGPT's daily power usage is nearly equal to 180,000 U.S. households, each using about twenty-nine kilowatts. A single ChatGPT conversation uses about fifty centiliters of water, equivalent to one plastic bottle.

Ethical challenges faced and how they were handled

Challenge	Response to challenge
Translating Scientology works.	I did it early on in my career because I needed the work and the money.
GLD members may recall a proposal from a professor of history to translate an anti-Semitic text from the 1920s for its historical value.	I contacted him and we discussed the harm that it could do. He decided to no longer pursue the project.
The primary ethical challenges I have faced have been related to the content of the texts I'm asked to translate or edit. Over the years, I've been asked to translate a lot of marketing materials for companies in the tobacco industry, for example. It gets a bit thornier, though, in terms of deciding where I draw the line: for example, in the past, I have edited annual reports from a foundation involved in blockchain/crypto.	I have drawn up sort of a boilerplate text that tells my clients that I am not willing to work on texts from clients in the tobacco industry, firearms industry, etc. If I turn down a project on moral grounds, I will also say as much.

Ethical challenges faced and how they were handled (2)

Challenge	Response to challenge
<p>1. I was once asked by an agency to translate a passage that I recognized as a translation text from a call for tenders.</p> <p>2. I got a job from a public institution client to translate something about maternity protection. I realized fairly quickly that it was the verbatim text of the Mutterschutzgesetz, and the translation for that is provided online by the Bundesministerium der Justiz. So should I copy/paste everything and accept the money? Or should I tell the client?</p>	<p>1. I informed the agency that the passage was a test translation. They thanked me and cancelled the job.</p> <p>2. I told the client and she thanked me and cancelled the job. I am aware that this lost me some potential money (around €300, I think), but it built up quite a bit of trust with the client, and I think that's worth more than €300 in the long run, especially considering the trust that would have been lost if she had figured it out (e.g., if after submitting the translation she had asked "why did you use term XY?" and I had to respond "cause that's what the official translation says...").</p>
<p>The only recent issue I had was when it turned out that a client had turned conspiracy theorist/QAnoner or something like that.</p>	<p>I finished the job I was working on, let him know that I didn't share his world view and hoped that he would never contact me again. So far, he hasn't.</p>
<p>Gender issues - I work with life sciences texts and in specialist-facing material coming from Germany the gender is most of the time masculine (der Pruefarzt, der Patient, etc.) When I translate it in English I use "they" or "he/she" but my frustration is that I have to be the one who makes it ethically correct as opposed to the creators of the source texts.</p>	

Ethical challenges faced and how they were handled (3)

Challenge	Response to challenge
Translating material related to WWII and the Nazi. Letters from Hitler's associates. Interviews with concentration camp survivors.	I translated the material because it was in the public domain and shed light on the thinking at the time that might be of historical interest to scholars. It was hard for me mentally. I could not work on these documents all day long because the details were so depressing to think about.
As an early-career translator, I have taken jobs for poverty-level rates just for the "experience" but knew that in doing-so I was negatively impacting my colleagues' and my own ability to earn a fair wage for the profession, driving down prices. I no longer do that as incoming work has increased. In addition, I have been confronted by the requirement that I am not allowed to use AI in any way (for literary translation) and had to debate whether or not to not submit my work to that publication or to ignore the requirement and submit. I do use AI but take measures to protect the copyright vulnerabilities of creatives. I understand the reason for the requirement, but believe we as creatives should talk about how to use AI ethically to protect the work of other creatives.	I stopped taking low-paying work, and do not submit to publications that require work not produced with any AI.

Ethical challenges faced and how they were handled (4)

Challenge	Response to challenge
Request to translate two documents: marriage certificate from WWII and letter approving an application to emigrate to the US after the war. The marriage certificate had a photo of the groom, and noted that he was an SS Officer. The letter indicated that he had not been a party member, and was just a farmer looking to start over in the US; it was accepted based on that information.	I was taken aback, but I didn't know the reason for the translation: was it building a case to prosecute? was it building a case as a defendant? I did research the person, who was still alive at the time but in his 80s. He appeared to have been engaged in his community. I decided that since I did not know the purpose, and because I am bound by confidentiality, I could either accept the job or refuse it, but could not disclose the information to others, no matter how tempting.
I am primarily a technical translator so I haven't encountered any ethical issues there. However, I have sometimes translated personal documents related to the Holocaust. When those were for direct clients I did the translations free of charge.	

Ethical challenges faced and how they were handled (5)

Challenge

I've translated a lot of letters written in German in the late 30s and early 40s by Jews stranded in Europe to their relatives who had managed to reach the US.

In one such case the correspondence was between my client's father and uncle But one letter, which was signed by one brother, started, "*Meine liebe Schwester [first name]!*". I asked the client whether his father and uncle had had another sibling; he said no. I easily found the sister's name in the Yad Vashem database of Holocaust victims, with the date she was deported to Riga and the date she was murdered. Apparently no one had ever spoken of her again. Question: Do I tell the client? After all, he had not hired me as a researcher or genealogist.

On the other hand, my experience or knowledge has also solved trivial mysteries to everyone's great satisfaction. Example: Opas and Omas had silly nicknames that I intuited were actually variations of their Hebrew names. I didn't hesitate to offer that information.

So I did send the client the link to the Yad Vashem entry. He did not respond in any way, but thanked me for my work on the translation.

In translating family records, memoirs and correspondence from those terrible times, we sometimes uncover secrets such as illegitimate children, but also betrayals, theft of property or inheritance, most likely occasioned by the unimaginable pressure and sheer terror under which people were living. Do we simply translate the words on a page or do we provide context that is obvious to us but perhaps not to the client?

Ethical challenges: environmental impacts and sustainability (Ellen Yutzy Glebe)

I would like to raise the issue of environmental impacts and sustainability as factors to consider as we talk to others about AI, as well. Of course any digital resources and the PCs on our desk have significant environmental and carbon footprints, but I have only recently seen several news stories that have caught my attention and given me pause. Perhaps when there are alternatives to asking ChatGPT to answer simple questions or complete tasks, it is worth considering.

Just a few of the things I have seen:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/sep/20/three-mile-island-nuclear-plant-reopen-microsoft>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c748gn94k95o>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/cindygordon/2024/03/12/chatgpt-and-generative-ai-innovations-are-creating-sustainability-havoc/>

Tangential here, but one of the things that caught my attention:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/10/07/is-a-chat-with-a-bot-a-conversation> ((None of these proposed measures addresses the immense amounts of energy and water consumed by servers that run chatbots: a study by the *Washington Post* estimates that using ChatGPT to compose a single hundred-word e-mail uses up more than half a litre of water.))

More broadly, but with an environmental aspect:

<https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3442188.3445922>

Suggestions & solutions to ethical problems in general

Do you have any suggestions or solutions when it comes to ethical problems in general?

Anything prohibited by law is obviously a no go. For anything else, the question is: How bad do you need the work. If you don't do it, somebody else will! It's a free country!

I've never encountered a client who was upset or punitive when I expressed moral reservations about work, so my suggestion is simply to turn down work you're not willing to take on ethical grounds, and to be professional but clear about your boundaries.

Try to determine any possible ethical problems before accepting the assignment. Do not accept such materials. The (usually minor) income is not worth the potential problems faced. You also have to live with yourself afterward.

I'm someone who lays in bed at night thinking of everything that could go wrong, so my guideline is always: What choice will not keep me up at night? ;)

The more people are out there with conspiracy theorist/ White supremacist/Putin propaganda-influenced convictions, the more likely it is that you'll encounter them as colleagues and clients, and you need to make decisions about what you are willing to discuss and where you simply need to cut ties and live with the loss.

Not doing anything that make your ethics seem questionable, for instance taking a bribe or what could look like one.

Suggestions & solutions to ethical problems in general (2)

Do you have any suggestions or solutions when it comes to ethical problems in general?

When controversial material had to be translated I was always warned beforehand and asked if I wanted to accept the translation. I think this is the way it has to be. If the client doesn't ask, then we have to take matters into our own hands and make our decisions.

Must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. I found it difficult to translate the material on concentration camp survivors because the details were horrific, but I felt that the truth should be known and I wanted to contribute to bearing witness to these events even though it was hard for me mentally to think about these events and details during my daily work.

Give responses and solutions that line up with our professional principles

Professions need to collectively decide ethical guidelines, and having this discussion is a great way to engage in that process. Thank you!

I teach ethics courses, and use case studies based on real-life. The only reason any case is a dilemma is that we are human, and our personal beliefs and morals may not align perfectly with a code of ethics and professional practice.

Pray as required.

Breakout groups



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Breaking into groups

- Break into groups of no more than 4
- Assign one notetaker per group

Topic 1): Ethical challenges faced

Topic 2): Discuss how to handle being approached with an unethical text

Takeaways from breakout groups



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Photo by Patrick Tomasso on Unsplash

Takeaways from breakout groups: Ethical challenges faced

- Maternal protection doc with text/legislation that had already been translated by *Bundesministerium*: referred client to the already translated content
- The boundaries between DE>EN and EN>DE: knowing when you can help in the other direction without jeopardizing accuracy
- Sexist language in Oktoberfest cookbook: preference to not have your name associated with certain language
- We talked about the inclusive language exchange on the GLD list back in April. We learn language in school as a set of rules. It's a cultural imposition. As people grow and develop, they may find that they don't like how the culture/language holds them and refers to them. It's important that language be a discussion about each other's experience instead of a set of rules that we all must follow, even when it's uncomfortable.
- Situation where son (in Arizona) of deceased mother (who was German) wanted family docs translated. He seemed too enthusiastic about an ancestor being in the SS and Luftwaffe. Translator wasn't sure how to proceed. Son might have been excited about knowing more about his family or feeling a sense of connection with them. But he might not have understood the historical/societal implications. What was going on with him was not clear.

Takeaways from breakout groups: Ethical challenges faced (2)

- Translator was approached to translate a casino app into English with the promise of great potential money returns. Translator hesitated to cash in on people's gambling habits and addictions especially after hearing that a person had lost 50k gambling through the app.
- Several gambling scenarios all turned down due to ethical concerns
- Husband approached translator to translate a wife diary as he was concerned that she was cheating on him. Translator consulted an attorney to see if he can do this translation and the answer was yes because the diary was part of the marital common property.
- Translator was approached by millionaire to translate a questionable medical advice book which she turned down after her doctor husband informed her that the advice was faulty.
- Interpreter was approached to make a call for the purpose of personal interpreting between two lovers. She discontinued her services after she realized the man was married to someone else and had children.

Takeaways from breakout groups: Ethical challenges faced (3)

- Example of a translator being asked to work on a project for a Holocaust memorial museum built in LA. She was asked to transcribe interviews with German WWII veterans and translate them for use in the museum. She was asked to do this for free because, as a German, she is considered “responsible” for both the events of the Holocaust and for completing this work. She politely declined.
- Another translator mentioned sexism appearing in an Oktoberfest cookbook she was asked to translate.
- Discussion around *Freikörperkultur* and the moral challenges that might pose. Some countries, such as the US, have complicated relationships with nudity and implications of sexuality. In some areas of the world, such topics may be heavily censored or disallowed altogether. It is important to ask who the audience is, what the purpose of the translation is, who is requesting the translation. Beyond ethics and morality, situations such as translating texts around sexuality and/or nudity also highlight the attention that should be paid to cultural sensitivity as the translator grapples with creating an accessible, appropriate text.

Takeaways from breakout groups: How to handle being approached with an unethical text

- First step: research the author and text.
- A few questions to ask: Why does the client want this text translated? How did they procure the text? Have you previously established trust with this client or is this a new situation?
- What is the role of the translator? Do we remain faithful to the text or soften the edges? Translator as censor vs. educator.
- Annotations would be needed for such a sensitive text. Raises the issue of who would read the annotations, how heavily it would need to be annotated. Translator's introduction could be an option, but many people skip over this section of a book, and thus the message might reach fewer people and the translator's intent could be misinterpreted. Also the danger of the client removing the translator's annotations/introduction prior to publishing.

Wrap-up and conclusion



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Thanks & good-bye!



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