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Automated Translation, Creativity and Ethics: General Considerations

Human-Centred AI in the Translation Industry. Questions on Ethics, Creativity and Sustainability

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Automated Translation, Creativity and Ethics: General Considerations

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1 Lead-in

Wherever you look in the language industry at present, one thing is certain: Tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming workflows, reshaping communicative practices and shifting power relations. This inevitably raises the question of responsibility: Who decides what AI is allowed to do—and who bears the consequences? Who benefits from these technologies? Who bears their potential disadvantages or the risks that come with them? These seemingly simple questions touch on fundamental issues regarding ethics, politics and society. They also permeate current debates in translation and language studies, where automation affects not only technical processes but also cultural and normative dimensions of both theory and practice. For translation studies in particular, this entails challenges that should not be underestimated. With the present is-

sue, we therefore place the interests of human beings and specific collectives at the center of attention.

From different perspectives, the contributions gathered here aim to prevent the discussion on AI from being reduced to questions of technical feasibility. Instead, they frame the debate on AI as a profoundly human and societal one. After all, AI systems are not developed and deployed in a vacuum, but always operate within social, economic and cultural contexts. Although the ongoing technologization and automation of translation have the potential to greatly enhance productivity, they may also limit translatorial agency and consequently reduce the quality and creativity of translations. By the same token, translation tools based on AI, such as DeepL and ChatGPT, may also devalue human labor. While these critical issues require rigorous examination, the significant opportunities afforded by AI-based translation tools should also not be overlooked.

2 Translation, Creativity and AI

Conceptions of translatorial creativity remain elusive, even though this term has been widely discussed, not just in association with the AI-based transformation of the language industry that started to gain momentum when machine translation went neural in 2016 (for general perspectives on translatorial creativity, see Bayer-Hohenwarter 2011; Cercel et al. 2017; Kußmaul 2000; O'Sullivan 2013; Reynolds et al. 2020; Schreiber 2023). Since by now automation has also entered areas of translation that are perceived to require particularly high levels of creativity, such as literary or audiovisual translation, there has been concern that machine-based, post-edited translations tend to be more homogenized and impersonal, as well as engage readers and viewers less than human translations (see

Guerberof-Arenas/Toral 2022: 207 and 2024: 240–41; Kolb 2024: 64–66). At the same time, new AI-related creative possibilities and workflows in- and outside translatorial contexts have also been explored. One seminal text that takes a positive outlook on the manifold relationships between AI and creativity in general terms is du Sautoy's *The Creativity Code* (2019). Within translation studies, it has been demonstrated that AI-based tools can potentially enhance creativity in the interlingual transfer of particularly challenging terms, including occasionalisms or neologisms often used on a one-off basis in Nestroy's plays (see Kolb et al. 2023: 564). Furthermore, Macken et al. (2022: 109) have stated that for full-length literary texts post-editing can achieve human parity, provided that enough space is given to a bilingual and subsequent monolingual revision of machine output.

In a significant attempt to provide a concrete, hands-on definition of creativity in association with both human and automated translation, Guerberof-Arenas/Toral (2022: 190) have identified textual "units of creative potential" (UCPs). The interlingual transfer of such UCPs involves implementing "creative shifts," a term coined by Bayer-Hohenwarter (2011: 669) that refers to changes made to the wording or sentence structure of a source text in the target language. While translation usually transforms a source text significantly, Schreiber highlights that a genuinely new solution is not required every time such a change occurs:

> The need for creativity therefore arises when there is a gap that must be filled for the first time in the translation being produced by creating a new solution. If the same translation problem arises again in a later text, the translator can rely on the preliminary work of translators, lexicographers, or translation scholars and, provided the preliminary work is of sufficient quality, no longer needs to be creative themselves. (Schreiber 2017: 357; our transl.)

Accordingly, for Schreiber explicit knowledge of and recourse to a (once) creative solution in a subsequent text is no longer creative.

No matter how closely related some languages may be, no two language systems are identical. The more remote from each other two languages are, the more rewording and restructuring is required in translation. In fact, Reynolds et al. (2020: 131) state that "*Translation generates multiple new texts: it is inherently creative*" (see also Kußmaul 2000: 16; original emphasis). Among other things, this implies that both texts and languages are inherently flexible, so that the meaning of a text is strongly contingent on how it is concretized in each specific receiving situation. Interlingual translation, which for Venuti (2013: 10)—and in general for translatorial hermeneutics—is always interpretive, magnifies the shifts in meaning, however subtle they may be, that inevitably occur when a written text is received by any new reader. As automated translation tends to reproduce patterns found in the source language and select normative structures in the target language, especially for texts with many UCPs, the benefits of a potential increase in productivity due to AI-generated raw translations has to be weighed against the disadvantages that can arise, for example, from "priming" (see Kolb 2022: 20 and 2024: 55). This term refers to a limitation in the variety of translation options a human translator can conceive of due to being influenced by machine output, a phenomenon that frequently occurs with post-edited automated translations.

When the limiting effects of AI-based translation tools on translatorial creativity are concerned, priming is certainly not the only issue. Post-editors' work can also be compromised by a "fatigue" and an "obstacle effect" (Hamm 2024: 16). The former is a consequence of working with two drafts, the source text and an automatically generated target text that always re-

quires revision. The latter term refers to the difficulty of detecting errors in machine output, which resembles human language but operates on fundamentally different principles, based on probabilistic algorithms. Another problem worth mentioning is that post-edited machine output typically manifests reduced linguistic diversity compared to human translations (see Toral 2019: 276; Helm et al. 2024; Walter 2025a). In any case, following Schreiber (see above), a translation solution based on probabilities alone cannot be considered as "creative." Another significant question in this context is whether one wants to allow for creativity, a feature normally reserved for humans, to characterize machines at all. Ultimately, only humans may designate an operation performed by machines as a "creative act."

3 Automation, Agency and Ethics

In fact, some AI-critical publications discuss whether AI-generated or AI-translated texts might not ultimately put into question an essential reason for human creative endeavors. The processes underlying human creativity have always been linked to the search for answers to fundamental questions of humanity—a task that arguably cannot or should not be taken over by machines (see Mjölsnes 2022: 65; Kissinger et al. 2021: 52). Since the very beginnings of writing, for example in Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs, texts have gone beyond a mere functional level to also address religious and mythological issues that concern the possible reason for and purpose of human life and seek to describe and understand human societal orders. When seen in this light, outsourcing writing and translation to AI-based tools seems nothing short of absurd. Nevertheless, when in autumn 2022 large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT began to be widely used for

both generating and translating texts, less than a decade after neural machine translation (NMT) systems such as DeepL had already massively transformed the language industry, many people thought that the end of language mediation as a viable professional field for humans was imminent. The fact that the current chairman of the German Social Democratic Party, Lars Klingbeil, predicted the demise of the profession in November 2018 is not merely anecdotal but believed to have led to a decline in student numbers in the relevant degree programs all over German-speaking countries (see Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2019: 2; Krüger 2025: xiii).

While some studies on the impact of AI on the language industry have established an overall decline in the need for language skills (Frey/Llanos-Paredes 2025: 20), most researchers emphasize that, despite the partial automation of many language mediation processes, the translation industry continues to grow and requires staff skilled in both languages and technology (see Hackenbuchner/Krüger 2023; Krüger 2023: 321; Łukasik 2024: 38). The question even arises whether skills required for handling generative AI should already be taught or learned in foreign language and translation classes at school (see Kapnas et al. 2025). However, one problem many language service providers now face as a result of AI-based changes is that their work tends to be undervalued, leading to pricing pressure and income loss (see ELIS Research 2025: 13–14; Agnetta 2025: 155).

The question whether the potentially sustaining practices of writing and translation should be taken out of human hands and transferred into the algorithmic landscapes of AI-based tools is, first and foremost, an ethical question. In fact, machine-generated language output entails many such ethical questions, which often also have important legal repercussions. Well before general-purpose AI models such as ChatGPT

once more transformed the already highly technologized language industry, Bowker (2020: 265–71) identified a number of key issues related to automation, which will be outlined below:

- the ownership of technology-related resources, such as translation memory tools,
- data privacy and confidentiality,
- the quality of translation output,
- translatorial agency and professional satisfaction,
- the need for ongoing technological training,
- productivity gains and remuneration, and
- linguistic and cultural diversity.

Echoing Bowker's apprehensions, Park (2023) draws attention to the importance of reconciling translation practice with the legal copyright framework for translation memory tools. Undoubtedly, issues around data privacy, confidentiality and copyright have also been amplified by the omnipresence of automatically generated and translated LLM output (see Zhuk 2023; Walter 2025b). This applies not only to (literary) text translation in the narrower sense, but to all practices associated with the intercultural transfer of all kinds of goods—in audiovisual translation, for example, to the translation of scripts, to unsolicited subtitling corpora, and to speech synthesis, which literally steals the voices of professional speakers (see Agnetta 2025). Also, since generative AI has shifted translation and writing towards more collaborative modes of production, traditional conceptions of translation copyright as secondary to the copyright on original texts may well be difficult to sustain in the long term (see Walter 2025b). A homogenization of language output that would limit intralingual diversity and consolidate the hegemony of global languages such as English at the cost of smaller languages, which Cronin (2020: 281) aptly calls "globotics," was firmly in progress when general-purpose LLMs hit the market in 2022. Moreover, concerns around the

attractiveness of the language industry as a professional field have been addressed for years in the European Language Industry Survey, which in 2025 identifies a downward pricing trend and drop in profitability as key issues associated with automated translation (ELIS Research 2025: 13–14). As early as 2020, Bowker (2020: 272–3) established the need to discuss the technologization of translation as an overarching societal issue that requires a substantial adaptation of translator training. By now, new models for translator training that emphasize AI, data and machine translation (MT) literacy are well under way (see Hackenbuchner/Krüger 2023; Krüger 2023; Agnetta/Walter 2025).

Apart from the obvious legal consequences, one also needs to consider the effects of automatic text, image, and sound generation once these outputs—often unnoticed—enter into people's everyday communication. While in some cases a distinction between human- and AI-generated material may still be possible, a clear-cut dichotomy, as is frequently drawn in the research literature, appears increasingly untenable. Generative AI has, within a very short time, become embedded in the communicative practices of entire social groups. This implies, first, that AI-generated communication essentially builds on human input—one might speak of a *generative human-machine continuum*—and, second, that such communicative outputs are reintroduced into the cycle of human communication, where they are, perhaps mistakenly, interpreted either as genuinely human texts or through the genuinely human interpretive apparatus—we could call this the *interpretive human–machine continuum*. The creative, ethical, and political dimensions of human meaning-making do not simply vanish because a text did not flow directly from a human pen. Perhaps humans cannot but approach these (hybrid) texts as *homo narrans* (see Katan 2023: 87 and Hagemann in this issue) or *homo hermeneuticus*—

that is, as individuals engaging with them through the entirety of their experiential background, their embodied existence and their socialization. Nevertheless, this development entails innumerous risks (see Pym 2025). It is therefore not surprising that voices are now being raised calling, on the one hand, for stronger regulation, if not the outright prohibition, of the exploitation of human-produced work by AI corporations[1], and, on the other, for clear labeling of machine-generated and/or post-edited communicative outputs (see Pym 2025: 40–41[2]).

The contributions in this *YTH* special issue address these and other central questions concerning the societal implications of automated translation; however, they cannot provide definitive answers. Nor do they offer generalizable solutions to the problems identified.

4 This Special Issue

Contributions gathered in this thematic *YTH* issue on ethics and translatorial creativity in the age of AI address some or all of the following questions:

- Which ethical, legal and hermeneutical challenges arise from the widespread use of AI in different language services?
- How is sustainable, high-quality and creative translation possible in the age of AI?

1 One manifestation includes recent demands by professional associations (see Agnetta 2025).

2 Pym (2025: 41) proposes a rough, two-part framework for labeling translations: In his model, "UMT" stands for *Unedited Machine Translation* and designates any purely computer-generated translation output, whereas "BRT (Bilingually Reviewed Translation)" refers to translations that have been produced by a human translator or, at the very least, reviewed and approved by one.

- How is the language industry changing due to new and ever-improving AI tools?

From different philosophical angles, the contributions by Baumgarten, Lukenda/Twardon, and Laghi respectively cover emerging ethical and legal challenges arising from the rapid development of AI-enhanced translation. Hagemann's, Şahin et al.'s and Walter's articles, on the other hand, offer more hands-on perspectives on creativity and hermeneutics in automated and post-edited translations. The extent to which creativity as a quality can be associated with automated translation at all (before and after post-editing) is also addressed. With the geopolitically relevant contributions by Badshah and Shyma P., international power relations are examined: for instance, how minority languages are (further) disadvantaged by current developments, or how the cultures and languages of indigenous tribal communities, such as those known in India as the Adivasis, are pushed to the margins as a result of algorithmic bias in AI models.

Baumgarten explores the social and cultural interplay between translation technologies and society, identifying it as a focal point of an emerging field known as sociotechnical translation studies. First, he suggests that transcultural communication and technology have long been closely intertwined. While acknowledging that technological and economic issues concerning translation technologies have received significant critical attention, Baumgarten argues that the individual, sociocultural, and ecological consequences of new technologies and labor practices have been overlooked. He proposes a consequentialist ethics to examine the sociotechnical implications of translation technologies in today's globalized, digitally networked world. Baumgarten states that revolutionary leaps in the development of the latest communication technologies, including the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, are steadi-

ly influencing human perception, communication, and societies in general. His contribution explores various philosophical frameworks and societal discourses concerning technology and digital translation, including critical theory, posthumanism, and the Anthropocene. Specifically, he highlights that the political economy of translation is heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology and characterized by significant power imbalances.

Lukenda/Twardon's article draws on Antoine Berman's genuinely hermeneutical concept of the "experience/trial of the foreign" to explore the ethical dimensions of translation in the age of AI. Using Berman's definition of translation as an ethical and hermeneutic practice as a foundation, the authors examine how the experience of translation (and of the foreign) changes with AI-assisted translation. They emphasize that, from a professional translator's perspective, AI-assisted translation engenders a Marxian sense of alienation from the product of their labor. They continue that this alienation is compounded by AI models' prior appropriation of foreign-language text content. Lukenda/Twardon suggest that translators must return to and reconsider the original text, bearing in mind that this process is facilitated by the "lens" of the AI-generated text. They argue that this shift in perspective has the potential to profoundly transform the experience of translation and reshape the dynamic relationship between languages and cultures.

By zooming in on the operational mechanisms of AI technologies and identifying their potential creative and critical applications, Laghi directs attention to frequently overlooked aspects of the relationship between humans and complex digital technologies. Laghi emphasizes the importance of discussing the problems associated with current AI definitions and suggests making a creative effort to re-translate these terms to find more suitable expressions. Although specialized lan-

guages have always relied on the metaphorical transfer of familiar terms or concepts to new technologies and insights, the author inquires into the implications of the pervasive anthropomorphization of "the machine" through terms such as "artificial *intelligence*," "deep/machine *learning*," "*neural* networks," and the like. Even the staunchest critics, however, draw on and thereby reinforce the very same framing mechanisms when they promote strategies such as "data poisoning" as a way of countering the unlawful use of human-generated data by AI corporations. A novel approach to translation, Laghi explains, should mediate between the capabilities of machines and our ability to understand them. This ability is often obstructed by the fact that the internal processes of machines are difficult to explain in a way that is understandable to humans. By elaborating on creative forms of interaction with language and image models that support artists, writers, and creators who resist copyright infringement, Laghi helps build an ethical, critical, and sustainable relationship between humans and digital machines.

Hagemann explores the term creativity, whose definition in a translatorial context has been further complicated by the rise of AI. Hagemann shows that recent advancements in neural machine translation (NMT) systems and large language models (LLMs) have produced translations that can be considered creative. According to Kußmaul (2000: 31), translatorial creativity is characterized by changes to the source text that result in novelty and appropriateness in the target culture. Hagemann notes that the question of whether human creativity can thrive in automated translation remains unresolved. Hagemann continues to suggest that functionalist approaches, such as Vermeer's *skopos* theory, may offer a potential answer. Using concrete translation examples from two post-editing courses taught at FTSK Germersheim during the summer of 2023,

Hagemann demonstrates that certain *skopoi* continue to pose significant challenges for AI systems in various translation scenarios.

Şahin et al. discuss the impact of computer-assisted literary translation on creativity and voice. Specifically, the authors focus on distinctive stylistic features and evaluate the creativity of outputs generated by three English–Turkish machine translation (MT) models. The first one is a customized MT model trained with literary texts. The second one is a pre-trained MT model with general texts. The third one is an online MT model, namely Google Translate. The examined texts pertain to two subgenres within the literary domain: fiction and nonfiction. The analysis of style and creativity is based on two primary methodologies, human evaluation of samples and qualitative corpus analysis of full texts. Then, the outputs of the three models are compared with translations by two renowned translators, Nihal Yeğinobalı and Belkıs Dişbudak. Using a range of methods to investigate style and creativity, Şahin et al. observed a higher level of creativity in the human translation and in the fine-tuned model for the nonfiction. Furthermore, the authors also established that a customized MT model trained with Turkish literary translations generated outputs that were stylistically closer to the human translation than those created with a pre-trained model or an online MT tool.

Walter investigates the role of creativity in human and AI-assisted literary translation with the help of a keylogging experiment performed at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Six MA students translated Virginia Woolf's prose poem "Green" (1921), half of them working solely with dictionaries and the other half post-editing a draft produced with DeepL's next-generation language model. Using Inputlog and screen recordings, Walter's study examines both the final translation products and the underlying processes. The findings show that

post-edited translations tend to be more homogeneous and less creative than human translations, often adhering closely to machine output. Human translations, by contrast, exhibit greater diversity and more deliberate creative interventions overall, particularly in handling metaphorical and anthropomorphic imagery. Contrary to expectations, in this experiment post-editing did not involve significant time savings, as thorough revision proved to be nearly as time-consuming as translating from scratch. Moreover, translatorial agency and target text engagement were restricted by the difficulties associated with personalizing the machine draft and detecting machine errors, as well as by the strain resulting from having to forge the final version from both a source text and machine output. The experiment thus confirms that for literary texts whose translation requires a high degree of creative shifts, post-editing may be counterproductive, offering little improvement in terms of efficiency while diminishing interpretive richness and creative variety.

Badshah states that while AI-based translation tools, such as Google Translate and DeepL, are highly accurate when translating between high-resource languages, the efficacy of automated translation for languages from the Global South is inconsistent. The underlying reasons for this discrepancy are often overlooked or wrongly attributed to the inherent complexities of these languages, according to Badshah. In his article, Badshah draws on the theoretical framework of world-systems analysis to argue that the suboptimal performance of automated translation technology in certain languages is the result of a deliberate project to subordinate the Global South. Badshah concludes that, although the roots of this development lie in European colonialism, automated translation continues to function as a mechanism for propagating the ideologies that underpin prevailing structures of power.

In her article, Shyma P. explores the ethical challenges of translating indigenous epistemologies in the era of AI. While also acknowledging other important challenges AI presents to a human-centric world order, Shyma P. foregrounds its inability to mitigate the crisis posed by social inequality. She emphasizes that the abundance of indigenous intelligence, coupled with social exclusion and segregation, significantly interferes with the effective translation of indigeneity with AI-based tools. The article further analyzes how enforced peripherality amplifies the risk of the misrepresentation and erasure of indigenous knowledge in Kerala. The first part elaborates on the multiple facets of indigenous knowledge abundance based on select texts. The complexities of translating this abundance by humans are juxtaposed with the homogenized rendering by AI tools to illustrate the ethical issues of AI-enhanced translation. The second part of Shyma P.'s article analyzes stereotyped representations that subsume Adivasi communitarian identity into a monolithic, timeless entity.

5 Outlook

Based on a 2024 survey study with professional translators, Jiménez-Crespo (2025) suggests that in increasingly technologized work environments language professionals require "flexible, adaptive, usable, and customizable tools and tool environments developed with the input of translators, paired with translators' control and autonomy over the outcome of the translation process." Collectively, the contributions gathered in this special *YTH* issue also show that it is irresponsible to use AI without human guidance or quality control not only in high-risk situations, which may, for instance, occur in the healthcare sector. With good reason, risk management has been established as a key term related to negotiating the possibilities and

limitations of AI-based translation technology (see Nitzke et al. 2019; Pym 2025)—thus making translation-related technology assessment indispensable (see Suppan 2025). However, critical voices in literary translation studies have shown that significant risks also arise from irresponsible uses of automation in domains where poor translation quality does not involve a risk to life and limb, such as literary translation. An original author's reputation may suffer from poor translation quality, as will readers of the target text and translators themselves, whose important contribution to cultural exchange must be valued as ever, even if also in this field workflows are becoming increasingly more technologized (see Taivalkosky-Shilov 2019, Kolb 2024).

Sustainable, high-quality and creative language mediation requires an efficient teaming of humans and machines that puts humans at the center. This human-centered approach ensures accountability, ethical responsibility and cultural sensitivity—standards that machine output alone cannot guarantee. As the field evolves, collaboration between AI developers and language professionals will be key to building tools that truly support expert human judgment.

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