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# Translation Ethics: An Investigation into Lady Welby's Upward Translation from the Perspective of Meaning Triad

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## Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive survey of translation ethics within the theoretical frame of Lady Welby's meaning triad concerning the relationship between ethics and translation in the meaning process of sign activities. The paper mainly discusses such aspects as: (1) the relationship between meaning triad and translation ethics, (2) upward translation as a method to maximize ethical value and (3) enhancement of translation ethics as a goal of upward translation. The results of the paper can be found as the following: 1. the evolutionary process of meaning from sense to meaning and then to significance is the path for the improvement of translators' cognitive ability and the sublimation of translator or interpreter's ethics and morality. 2. Upward translation serves as a key to enhancing translators' ethical consciousness. 3. translation, meaning and ethics are correlated and interrelated mechanisms. Therefore, the implications of the dynamic and dialogic view of translation and meaning will provide an interdisciplinary theoretical vision for the construction of translation ethics.

**Keywords:** Meaning Triad, Upward Translation, Translation Ethics

## 1. Introduction

"The whole world is filled with signs" (Peirce CP 5.441). Human beings not only think, express and transmit ideas with signs, but also reflect on signs and interpret the meaning of signs. The process of understanding and interpreting sign meaning is the process of translation, and the meaning is formed in the process of translation. American modern Semiotician Charles Morris (1901-1979) pointed out "meaning" refers not only to the semantic aspect of the sign, but also to the evaluation aspect – "what something represents and the value or meaning of what it represents." (Morris 1964: VII) In *Philosophy of Translation and Language*, Liu Miqing (2001:98-115) regarded meaning as a very complex multidimensional entity involving concept, context, intention, cultural background, aesthetics and so on. According to Victoria lady Welby (1837-1912), meaning has three dimensions: sense (instinctive or response to the environment), meaning (intentional or willing) and significance (moral). Welby's meaning triad aims to explore the relationship between various forms of human sign activities (such as translation) and meaning, consciousness and value (practical value, social value, aesthetic value and ethical value). As a typical sign activity, translation is inseparable from meaning and value, because the translation process

involves a variety of value choices and judgments of different subjects, such as the choice of translators'; translation strategies and the evaluation criteria of translation critics, which are related to value judgment. Value judgment runs through translation activities. Welby's exposition of the essence of translation and the relationship between translation and meaning, value, especially ethical value, from the perspective of her signification theory serves as an indispensable theoretical supplement to the construction of translation ethics, which has attracted more and more attention of scholars in translation research.

## 2. Meaning triad as a trajectory for developing translation ethics

### 2.1 Meaning triad

Meaning triad is the core of Welby's signification theory, including "sense," "meaning" and "significance" which are these three terms employed by Welby to indicate three different stages in the process of meaning interpretation. **Sense** stage is the sign interpreter's direct feeling and grasp of the sign and its context (not only the context, but also the broad context of communication situation, society and culture). Sense is the response of the sign interpreter to the sign, which is the sign interpreter's translation and interpretation of the sign. **Meaning** is the second stage of sign activity. Meaning is not the lexical feature of words as signs, but the intention of sign users when using signs in specific communication situations. As the third level of meaning, **significance** includes sense and meaning, but goes beyond them in scope, and includes the far-reaching results, hints, final results or results of certain events or experiences, its emotional power, ideal value, moral aspect, universal or at least social scope ( Welby 1903: 5-6). The value of meaning hierarchy emphasizes the influence of signs on sign recipients and interpreters. This influence can be emotional, practical and ethical. This influence and effect are based on the reasoning and evaluation of the sign receiver and interpreter on the basis of the perceived value of the sign preliminarily identified in the first stage and the intended value of the sign sender in the second stage. From sense, meaning to significance, the hierarchical development of the interpretation process of sign meaning by sign interpreters clearly shows the relationship between translation, meaning and value in signification theory.

### 2.2 Enhancing translation ethics in the trajectory of meaning triad

From "sense" to "meaning" and then to "significance," with the continuous promotion of the translation interpretation activities of sign interpreters (such as translators), translation interpretation grasps the elements of the context of signs in the way of "dialogue," predicts the interpretation strategies to be adopted and predicts the results of interpretation behavior, and the sign meaning is clarified in the context, At the same time, the sign interpreter's own cognition has also been deepened. The context is constantly updated and upgraded in the dialogue, and the meaning is gradually clear in the dialogue until the maximum effect of meaning is obtained, that is, ethical, practical or aesthetic value. Under the guidance of the sign interpreter, the sign interpreter and the context carry out continuous dialogue to promote the dynamic promotion of meaning; This sense of "dialogue" highlights the ethical dimension of meaning process by grasping the sign context, the intention of sign users and paying attention to the effect of signs. So that people can know the "meaning," that is, to explore the ideal value containing ethical value, which can be called the direction of signification (Sun Feng, 2019:53).

The triad of meaning is a universal and effective way for human beings to understand the world through signs and sign activities. Meaning is divided into sign activities, that is, the direction and track of the development of the translation process. From one sign system to another, linguistic or nonverbal translation behavior. When analyzing the three stages of Welby's meaning, Petrilli pointed out: sense, meaning and significance correspond to instinctive value, intended value, inferential value respectively. (Petrilli, 2009:265) Values are related to each stage of the sign process, and each stage involves different degrees or types of values. The highest level of meaning, that is, the formation of ethical value, is related to reasoning ability. The establishment of ethics can be a gradual growth process from low to high. The increasingly involved translative-interpretative activities result in the spiraling growth tendency of meaning and the sign users' ethical awareness develops along the way.

### 3. Upward translation as a method for internalizing translation ethics

#### 3.1 "Upward translation"

The subject of sign interpretation adjusts his translation behavior, reflects and predicts the translation effect at any time in the changing context. This positive and responsible translation view is called "upward translation" in Significs. The meaning triad is not only the "upward" evolution process of meaning, but also the process of upward translation. As the third level of "meaning triad," significance refers to the final stage of activity, and directly points to ethical value. According to Taylor (1989), Chomsky (1995) and Lakoff & Johnson (1999), meaning is essentially an individual psychological phenomenon, which is closely related to human cognitive activities. It is not difficult to see that what is closely related to the problem of meaning is people's cognitive ability embodied in the process of translation and the ethical orientation of pursuing meaning.

Translation under the framework of Welby's significant theory is the logical thinking and reasoning ability of the sign interpreter in the form of nonverbal signs in the brain of the sign interpreter in the communicative context. This process of integrating various contextual elements is the translation interpretation behavior that runs through the three stages of meaning derivation. From the perspective of significs, the generation of sign meaning is synchronized with translation interpretation activities. The meaning of signs increases with the increase of this "upward translation" process, which means the continuous dialogue between the sign interpreter (translator) and the context in which the sign text is located, promoting sign meaning until the highest-level ideal value, including aesthetic, practical and ethical values are achieved.

Welby's theory of meaning triad provides a methodology for cultivating translators' internal pursuit of the most ideal effect and the highest meaning (ethical value) through upward translation. Cultivating the translator's sense of responsibility with the goal of obtaining "meaning" is of great significance to improve the quality of translation, realize effective communication and resolve cross-cultural communication conflicts and contradictions. If the translator's translation behavior is "meaning" oriented, that is, constantly reflect on the impact and effect of his translation behavior on others outside himself, that is, the translation may have on society, culture, aesthetics and ethics, the quality of the translation will be more guaranteed.

#### 3.2 Internalizing translation ethics -- the goal of "upward translation"

Every translation interpretation of sign meaning means an attempt to approach higher meaning and value. The translation process in which sign interpreters capture the meaning of signs is a process of constantly reflecting and considering the social, economic, aesthetic and ethical effects of their own translation behavior. As translation activities are concerned with difference, how to deal with the existing differences and how to deal with the relationship between self and others is an ethical problem in the final analysis. The fact is that translation itself is regarded as an ethical activity (Goodwin, 2010; Baker & Maier, 2011) it can be regarded as an activity with a set of ethics and ideology, not just a language activity (Tymoczko, 2006:443)

People use signs to think and exert influence on the surrounding world using signs (especially language signs), which requires translators to have a strong sense of responsibility and ethics, and to pursue "upward translation" and "upward" translation value. "Upward translation" is not only an appeal for higher translation quality, but also the requirement of the times for the continuous improvement of translators'; cognitive ability and the sense of responsibility for others. The dynamic meaning triad emphasizes the (ethical) value dimension, that is, a reflective and critical attitude towards the possible impact and results of human behavior. The most basic responsibility of the translator is to pursue the promotion of the meaning and value of the translation. Welby's "upward translation," to enhance value and enhance ethical awareness, is not only suitable for interlingual translation in the conventional sense, but also closely related to the promotion of morality and ethics at the level of human social and cultural life. Whether it is specific translation practice or our daily life, what the meaning triad of significs needs to cultivate is such a thinking habit and reflective critical attitude. What the meaning triad explores is a sense of responsibility that always maintains the interest in questioning the meaning of things and seeks the highest ethical value.

## Conclusion

As discussed above, the conclusion can be drawn as follows: Firstly, from the perspective of Welby's meaning triad theory, ethics is more an attitude of reflection and criticism on sign behavior, an ethical pursuit existing in the translator's heart, emphasizing the attention to the translation context and dialogue with the context, conscious sense of responsibility and the moral requirements of pursuing higher meaning and value. Secondly, this internalized and spontaneous ethical quality and pursuit complement and support each other with the translation ethics that translators need to abide by, both of which constitutes the internal and external integration of translation ethics. Thirdly, to cultivate the translator's translation interpretation ability, is to establish the ability of connection and transformation between different fields. Only those translators who have this cognitive ability of translation and have an internal upward pursuit of morality and value can they actively abide by the norms of translation ethics and shoulder the cross-cultural mission of "respecting differences and respecting civilization" in the era of globalization.

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