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Are translators and interpreters risk-averse?

Cultural mediation can be seen as an ongoing process of pragmatic risk management. Professionals instinctively learn to invest their efforts in the solving of high-risk problems, while energy is saved on the numerous low-risk problems. In the low-risk areas of renditions, errors thus commonly abound and no one notices. The identification of risk and the corresponding distribution of effort is a complex process that escapes most linguistic analyses, although relevance theory can be of some help. Most theories suppose that high-risk problems warrant investment in additional information processing, and thus necessarily require high effort. The study of actual processes, however, reveals several low-effort strategies commonly used to solve high-risk problems, notably generalization, explicitation, and omission. Surprisingly, the very few proposed 'universals of translation' are precisely of this kind: they are all strategies by which translators and interpreters avoid or minimize risks rather than invest effort in them. It follows that linguistic mediators may be characterized as 'risk-averse' by nature or by profession. It also follows that such low-risk professionals fail to attract high economic rewards, resulting in what has been termed the 'poverty cult' of professional translators. The theoretical problem, however, is to determine to what extent the risk aversion is real, and whether it can be overcome. High-risk discussion is invited.

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