

# “no one was aware of my doings” The ethics of literary machine translation

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# 1. literary machine translation

## literary machine translation (from Kenny & Winters forthcoming)

an emerging interdisciplinary field that embraces a range of phenomena related to the application of MT to the translation of literary texts, touching upon or intersecting with, i.a:

- speculative and empirical enquiry into the features that make literary texts amenable to or difficult for MT (e.g., Voigt and Jurafsky 2012; Taivalkoski-Shilov 2019a);
- computational techniques that might meet the attendant challenges (e.g., Van de Cruys 2020);
- the application of generic MT to literary texts (e.g., Fonteyne et al. 2020);
- the customization of MT systems for use with literary texts (e.g. Toral and Way 2018; Kuzman et al. 2019; Hansen 2021; Hansen et al. 2022);
- the systematic evaluation of literary texts translated by MT (e.g., Toral and Way 2018; Moorkens et al. 2018; Matusov 2019);
- literary translators' interactions with MT (Kenny and Winters 2020; Oeser 2020);
- reaction to the use of MT in the literary translation profession (Oeser 2020);
- readers' reception of machine translated literature (Guerberof-Arenas and Toral 2020, 2022);
- style in human, raw and post-edited literary MT (Kenny and Winters 2020; Lee 2021);
- studies of so-called 'universals' in post-edited literary texts (e.g., Castilho and Resende 2022).

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## 2. ethical issues in (literary) machine translation

## ethical issues in machine translation in general



### INTRODUCTION

#### Fair MT

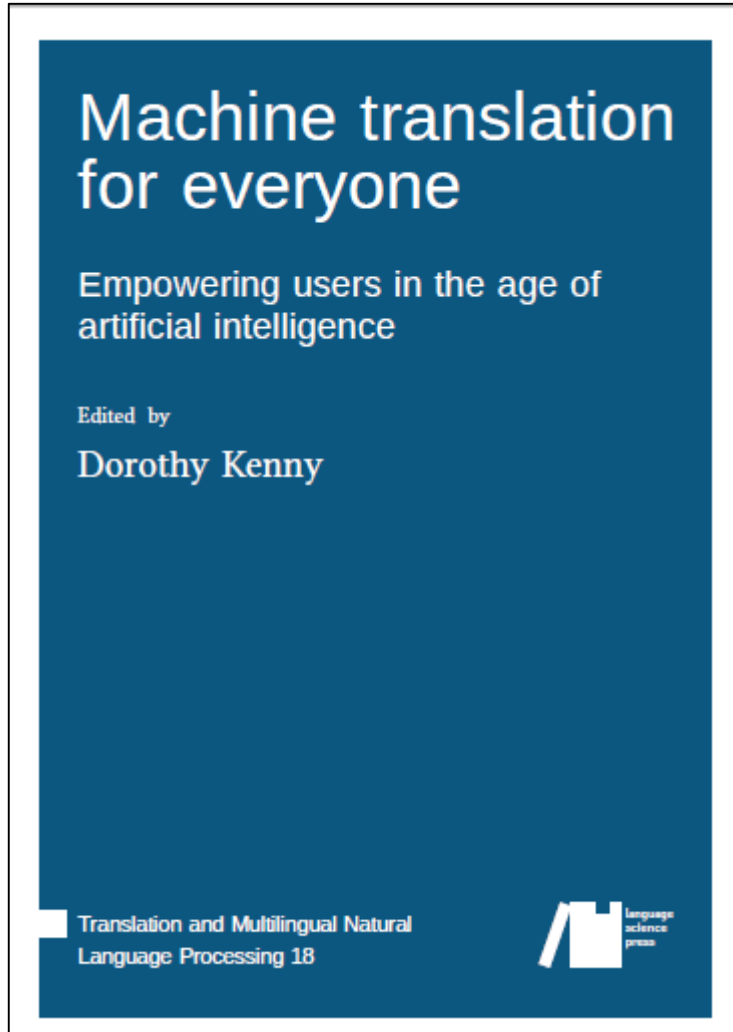
Towards ethical, sustainable machine translation

Dorothy Kenny<sup>1</sup>, Joss Moorkens<sup>1</sup> & Félix do Carmo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dublin City University | <sup>2</sup> University of Surrey

“For much of the history of machine translation, questions of ethics and sustainability were largely ignored.” (2020:1)

ethical issues in machine translation in general



## Chapter 6

# Ethics and machine translation

Joss Moorkens

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## ethical issues in literary machine translation (see Taivalkoski-Shilov 2019b)

“lower quality” of MT outputs poses risks for:

- the ST author’s reputation and the status of their work
- the intelligibility and enjoyability of translated works from the reader’s point of view
- the development of linguistic skills in TT readers, especially children
- the transfer of literary ideas and repertoires from one culture to another






## risks to the ST author's voice

- potential homogenization of different authors' styles in contexts where a single machine translation engine is used to translate the work of multiple authors
- heterogenization of a single author's style in contexts where the data used to train a machine translation engine come from multiple different sources

(Taivalkoski-Shilov 2019b; Kenny & Winters 2020)



## Machine translation, ethics and the literary translator's voice

**Author(s):** Dorothy Kenny  and Marion Winters 

**Source:** Translation Spaces, Volume 9, Issue 1, Aug 2020, p. 123 - 149

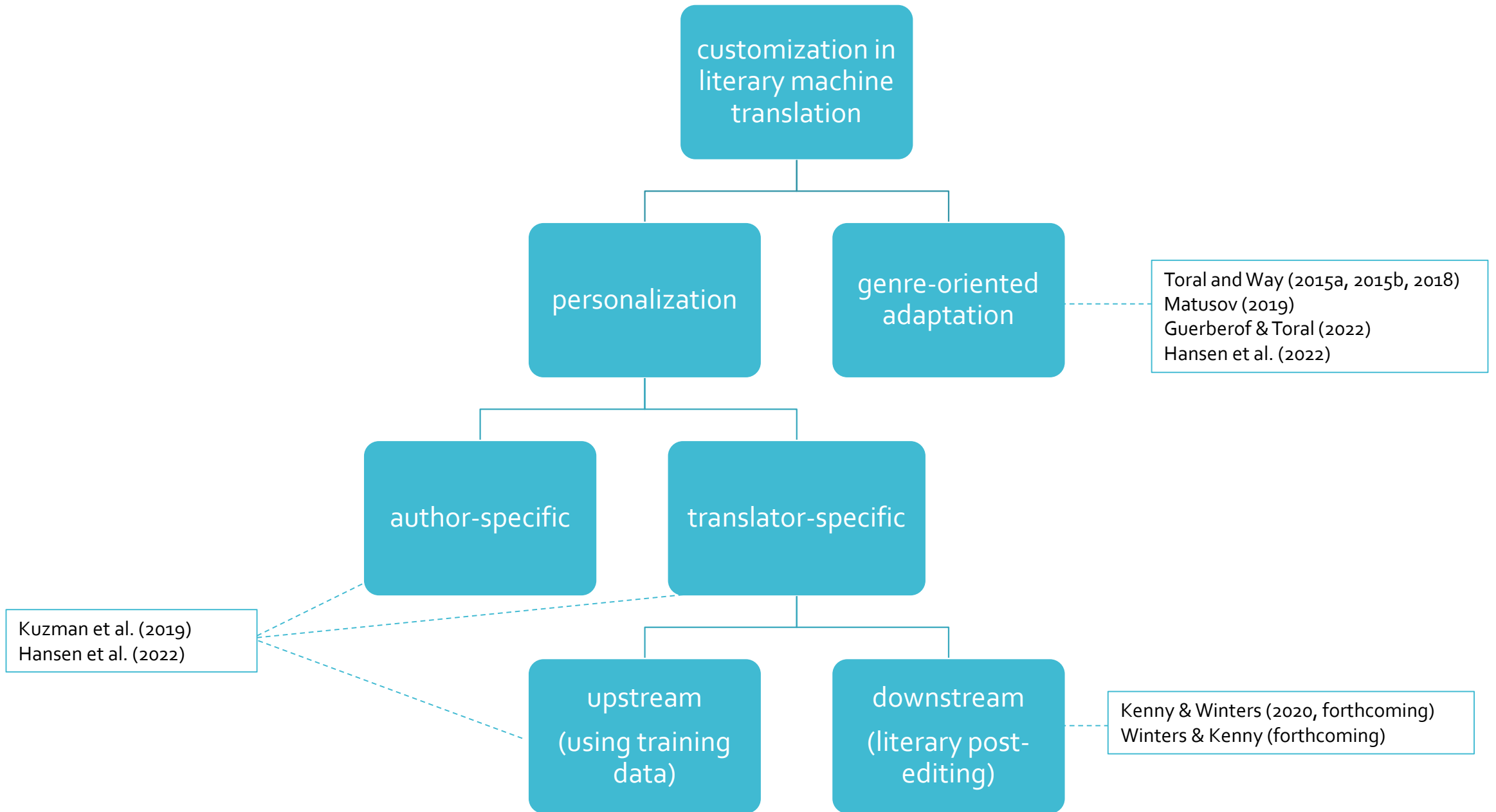
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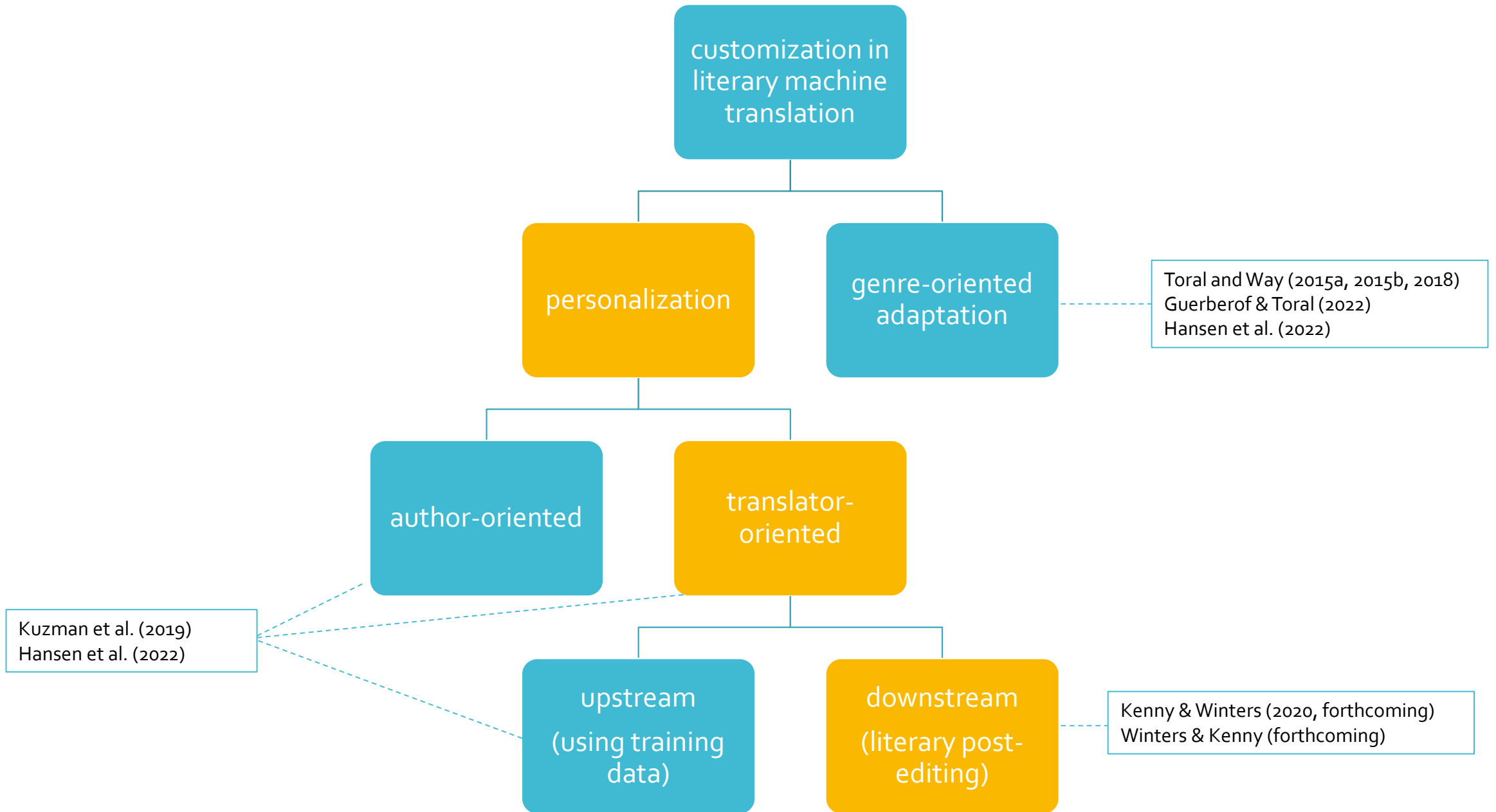
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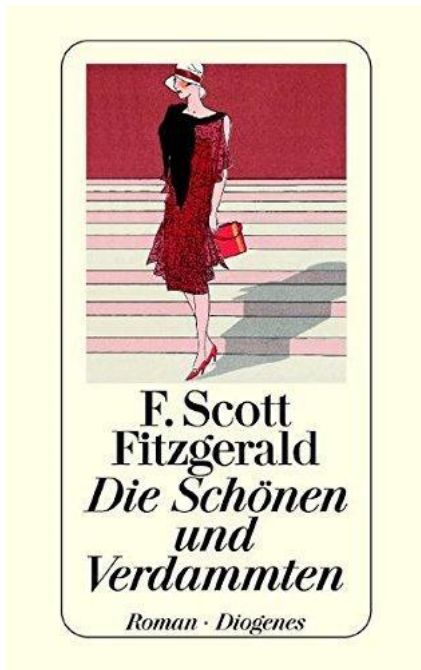
### The translator's voice

- “an index of the Translator’s discursive presence” in a text (Hermans 1996: 27)
- Its recognition is an inherently ethical move.
- The translator’s textual and contextual voice (Alvstad et al. 2017) is generally not heard in research in literary machine translation.
- It’s very faint in Besacier (2014); Toral and Way (2015) but slightly stronger in Toral et al. (2018); Moorkens et al. (2018)

3. towards the integration of the literary translator's voice in literary machine translation







Hans Christian Oeser  
Photo: Barbara Schaper-Oeser

First of a series of studies with Hans Christian Oeser (HCO)

Tracks HCO's use of NMT+ Post Editing to translate an excerpt from a novel he had translated from scratch more than 20 years previously . 'Experimental' setup.

RQs:

- How does HCO's post-edited work compare to his translation from scratch?
- Is HCO's textual voice (aka style) still discernible in his post-edited translation?
- What about his contextual voice?

# What our data look like...

Kenny & Winters (2020)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

*Die Schönen und Verdamnten*

*Roman*

Zweites Buch

1 Die strahlende Stunde

*Am 3. Mai 2019 auf der Grundlage einer von DeepL Pro erstellten maschinellen Übersetzung aus dem amerikanischen Englisch übersetzt von Hans-Christian Oeser*

Nach zwei Wochen begannen Anthony und Gloria, sich in „praktischen Diskussionen“ zu ergehen. So nannten sie jene Sitzungen, da sie unter dem Deckmantel eines strengen Realismus in ewigem Mondlicht wandelten.

Nicht so sehr wie ich dich“, beharrte der Kritiker schöngestiger Literatur. Wenn du mich wirklich liebst

**Comment [1]:** Natürlich fehlt mir für die Übersetzung dieses Auszugs die Einbettung in den Gesamtkontext des Romans (das Vorher und das Nachher). Meine frühere Übersetzung liegt Jahrzehnte zurück, und die Personen ebenso wie die hier geschilderte Situation sind mir vollkommen fremd! Überhaupt sind bei der Auswertung des Experiments und dem Vergleich zwischen der Übersetzung des betreffenden Abschnitts von 1998 und der von 2019 mindestens vier Faktoren zu berücksichtigen: 1. die diesmalige Verwendung einer von einem maschinellen Übersetzungsprogramm erstellten Vorlage, die den Übersetzer mit zwei „Folien“ konfrontiert: dem Original und der Maschinenübersetzung), 2. der zeitliche Abstand (was hat der Übersetzer in der Zwischenzeit verlernt bzw. dazugelernt?), 3. die „Künstlichkeit“ (i.e. Kontextlosigkeit) der Übersetzungssituation, 4. Damals lektorierte Fassung, heute nicht!

**Deleted:** „...raktischen Diskussionen“... zu ...

**Deleted:** des ...ines strengen Realismus in ein...

**Comment [2]:** „als“ ist falsch, „wenn“ richtig, weil iterativ. Bei mir „höherer Stil“: „da“.

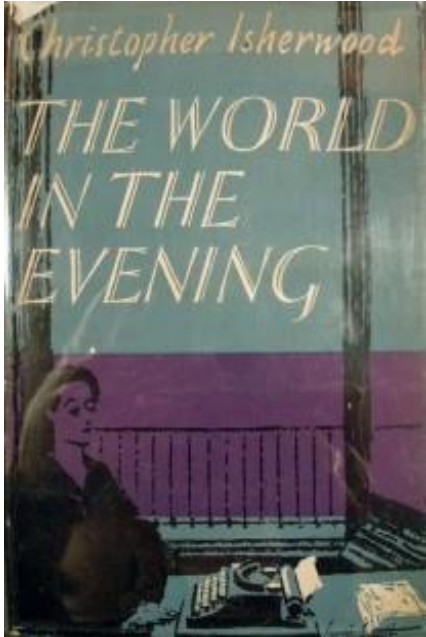
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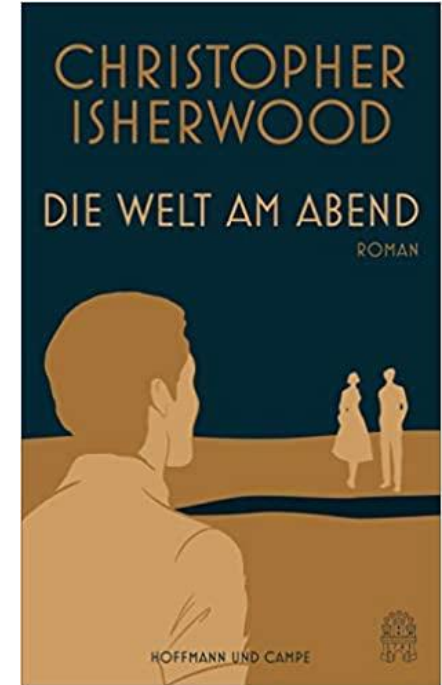
**Deleted:** „...enn du mich wirklich liebteest wü...“

**Comment [3]:** Ich erinnere mich, daß A. sich in diese Richtung betätigte, aber weder an das genaue Ausmaß noch an den Grad der Ironie, die hier zur Geltung kommt. Insofern schwanke ich zwischen Belletristik, belles lettres, schöner und schöngestiger Literatur.

**Comment [4]:** Auch hier würde ich der Entstehungszeit wegen etwas „höher stechen“, also



Hans Christian Oeser  
Photo: Barbara Schaper-Oeser



Second of a series of studies with Hans-Christian Oeser (HCO)

Tracks HCO's use of NMT+ Post Editing (DeepL) to translate all 342 pages of Christopher Isherwood's (1954) *The World in the Evening*.

Real brief; even greater ecological validity than previous study.

RQ: Is HCO's style/textual voice discernible in his post-edited translation?



# Parallel Corpus Data [+comparable translations by HCO, +comparable originals in German]

(Kenny & Winters forthcoming; Winters & Kenny forthcoming)

Original	MT Output	Post-edited MT Output
<p>It was quite late already and several people were drunk; not acting badly, just boastful and loud and thick-voiced. I was about halfway; which was the best way for me to be. As long as I was sober, I sulked. If I went on drinking, I was apt to turn nasty and say something embarrassing, or else fall asleep and snore. Jane was always worried about that, and yet she never could tear herself away until the end. 'Why in hell don't you go on back home, if you're so bored,' she sometimes whispered to me furiously, 'instead of drooping around like a Goddam martyr? What's the matter? Afraid I might do something you wouldn't do?' I used to grin at her without answering. That was exactly how I wanted her to feel: unsure of me and uneasy and guiltily aggressive. It was the only way I knew of hitting back at her.</p>	<p>Es war schon ziemlich spät und mehrere Leute waren betrunken; nicht schlecht, nur prahlerisch und laut und dickstimmig. Ich war ungefähr auf halbem Weg; das war der beste Weg für mich. Solange ich nüchtern war, schmollte ich. Wenn ich weitertrinke, war ich geneigt, böse zu werden und etwas Peinliches zu sagen, oder einzuschlafen und zu schnarchen. Jane machte sich immer Sorgen darüber, und doch konnte sie sich bis zum Ende nie losreißen. „Warum gehst du nicht nach Hause, wenn du dich so langweilst“, flüsterte sie mir manchmal wütend zu, anstatt wie ein gottverdammter Märtyrer herumzuhängen? Was ist denn los? Aus Angst, ich könnte etwas tun, was du nicht tun würdest?“ Ich grinste sie an, ohne zu antworten. Das war genau das, was ich wollte, dass sie sich fühlt: unsicher gegenüber mir und unbehaglich und schuldig aggressiv. Es war der einzige Weg, wie ich davon wusste, sie anzugreifen.</p>	<p>Es war schon ziemlich spät, und mehrere Leute waren betrunken; zwar benahmen sie sich nicht daneben, waren aber doch prahlerisch und laut und sprachen mit schwerer Zunge. Ich befand mich irgendwo in einem Zustand dazwischen; für mich der beste. Solange ich nüchtern war, schmollte ich. Wenn ich weitertrank, neigte ich dazu, unangenehm zu werden und etwas Peinliches zu sagen oder aber einzuschlafen und zu schnarchen. Jane machte sich darüber immer Sorgen, und doch konnte sie sich nie vor Ende des Abends losreißen. „Warum zum Teufel gehst du nicht nach Hause, wenn du dich so langweilst“, flüsterte sie mir manchmal wütend zu, „statt wie ein gottverdammter Märtyrer herumzuhängen? Was ist los mit dir? Hast du Angst, ich könnte etwas tun, was du nicht tun würdest?“ Dann grinste ich sie nur an, ohne zu antworten. Genau so sollte sie sich fühlen: meiner unsicher, unbehaglich und schuldbewusst-aggressiv. Es war die einzige mir bekannte Möglichkeit, ihr Kontra zu geben.</p>

SPECIAL FEATURE: MACHINE TRANSLATION AND LITERATURE

# Duel with DeepL

Literary translator *Hans-Christian Oeser* on machine translation and the translator's voice

aesthetic concerns:

“would it be a faithful and creative rendering of Christopher Isherwood in German? Would there be a recognisable translator's voice at all?” (Oeser 2020:20)

## Oeser's other concerns

“...there might very well be legal and contractual implications. Whose work is the finished product? The machine's (or its producers' and providers'), the human translator's or both? Who can, in the end, claim copyright? Could DeepL Translator rightfully maintain that, in spite of my post-editing efforts (which would place me in a position similar to that of a publisher's editor and copy editor), I had appropriated “their” translation? Could the publishers contend that not I myself but rather a translation program was the originator of the German version and that therefore I should receive less pay?” (2020:20)

Are translations protected by copyright? If so, who holds the copyright? How about machine translation?



“A translation produced by a machine in general is not a work capable of copyright protection. Only the code of the translation program is protectable. Nonetheless, if an author is using machine translations as a supporting tool for recommendations, but the translation is still the result of his intellectual act of creation, copyright will still apply.”

<https://www.lr-coordination.eu/node/251>

# aesthetics

“the translation, as proffered by the machine, bears no resemblance whatever to a readable – and enjoyable – human translation... The machine has, as of yet, no proper sense of context, of wordplay, ambiguity, polysemy and metaphor or of rhetorical devices such as alliteration and assonance. It frequently mistranslates, using inappropriate words and phrases...

...on a syntactical level, sentence structures often remain very “English” if they are not outright ungrammatical...

...the machine has no awareness of elegance, of beauty, of stylistic coherence... and is unable to create an unmistakable “sound”, combining the original author’s personal voice with that of the translator. Its output is altogether uninspired and uninspiring.”

Oeser (2020:20-21)

“Postediting”, in fact, entails painstaking retranslation. Hence, in the case of Christopher Isherwood’s novel there was hardly a sentence that did not have to be thoroughly revised and rebuilt.”

Oeser (2020:22)

**Was your translation fee any different than if you hadn't used an MT tool?**

As no one was aware of my doings, I was paid my usual fee. However, there are justified fears among literary translators that in future publishing houses might commission book translations stipulating the use of machine translation tools in order to reduce fees and to downgrade the literary translator, who only recently has been able to secure some degree of social standing, to the role of out-of-house editor.

Oeser (2020:22)

Conclusion:  
An empowered  
translator  
seeking  
distributive  
justice?

“I would propose that every literary translator ought to have the possibility and the right to utilise every tool at their disposal, that is to say: not only analogue and digital dictionaries, not only translation memory and terminology management software but also online or offline translation programs of every description. On the other hand, no literary translator must be coerced into doing so or made to merely redact machine translations, with the corresponding loss of income and status.”



go raibh maith agaibh

danke

merci

thank you

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