

## Risk Management in Translation

PYM, A. (2025). *Risk Management in Translation*. Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by NAQUI AHMAD JOHN

Anthony Pym's *Risk Management in Translation* (2025) is a path-breaking book in the series of Cambridge Elements in Translation and Interpreting. It introduces a novel aspect to the subtle art of translation, i.e., risk management. His central argument is refreshingly simple- translation is not just about words, it is about risks. Pym dismisses the Western concept of "perfect translation" as philosophically unsustainable and pedagogically harmful. The book discusses the key purposes of translation, the types of risk associated, the importance of trust relations, and the risks and opportunities of translation automation. The key message highlighted is that translators tend to be risk-averse and that more risk-taking is needed if translation has to become a general social activity able to stand in sustained cooperation between cultures. Pym exhorts us to stop the pursuit of perfect translation and start looking at what translators actually do: they manage uncertainty to help people cooperate.

Pym defines risk as the probability of not achieving the aim of translation. Not achieving the aim could be identified as the possibility of a failed communication. Specifically, a failure to reach the understanding necessary for cross-cultural cooperation. By drawing on a diverse range of case studies from Australian bushfire alerts to medieval medical texts, Pym theorises a practical framework for how translators manage uncertainty.

The book is systematically structured into six chapters, which progressively develop Pym's paradigm of risk management. Chapter one, "Why Talk about Risks", establishes the fundamental concept by critiquing traditional ideals of translation, which are fidelity, equivalence and accuracy. Pym instead posits a more empirically anchored alternative: risk management, which is more responsive to the inherent uncertainties of intercultural communication. The

complaint of Leonard Bruni articulates the problem of translators in an amusing way in this chapter.

In the second chapter, “Risk of What”, Pym raises questions like – “What is Successful Communication?”, “Is there ever Just One Purpose?”, “What is Cooperation?”, “How Can Anyone Measure Success or Failure in Communication?”, “Who Cooperates?”, “Why is Intercultural Communication Especially Prone to Risks?” and “Why Look at Translation in These Terms”? These questions create a sensitised mind by validating the forthcoming core principles of types of risk management. Pym delineates the scope of risk. He reconceptualises it not merely as linguistic misrepresentation but as the probability of communicative failure. Pym is particularly concerned with the disruption of cross-cultural cooperation.

In the third chapter, “Types of Risk Management”, Pym gives his analytical core. He enumerates the key risk management strategies in this chapter which are – (i) Risk avoidance achieved through simplification, omission and generalisation so that the text becomes easier for the receiver (ii) Risk transfer, achieved through deference of the risk of potential failure to external authorities like glossaries (iii) Risk taking, which is accepting a probability of failure while pursuing communicative gain and (iv) Trade-off which is balancing of competing risks like compromising stylistic naturalness in favour of “actionability” during emergency messaging.

In the fourth chapter, “Trust as Risk Management”, Pym elevates trust as a pivotal mechanism of risk mitigation. He frames it as the relational foundation which enables translators to navigate ambiguity, taking recourse to rigid equivalences. Interestingly, Pym also talks about the special role of distrust and about the concepts of thin and thick trust in this chapter, too.

In the fifth chapter, “Risks in Automated Translation”, Pym critically interrogates the perils of automated translation technologies, including machine translation and generative AI. He highlights the propensity for errors where the stakes are high with regard to cultural contexts. Pym maintains that with different technologies, there are different types of risks. He also addresses the concerns for consumer protection, risks of data breaches, special

risks of language automation and the strategies of working with language automation.

In the sixth chapter, “A Case for More Risk-Taking”, Pym makes a provocative call for greater risk-taking. He challenges the translator’s risk-averse tendencies to foster democratic translation practices. Throughout the chapters, Pym adduces brilliant case studies to substantiate his arguments, ranging from emergency messaging during Australian bushfires to contentious court interpreting in Barcelona. These render his abstract theory palpably relevant, although at times, methodological rigour seems compromised. The structure of Pym’s book is cogent, suiting the brevity of the Elements format of the Cambridge series.

## **The Strengths of the book**

### **i. Radical Pragmatism and Accessibility**

The primary strength of Pym’s work is that he has democratised translation theory. Pym has stripped away the shallow ideals of equivalence. He provides an analysis of translation that is empirically observable and instantly applicable to practice. His reference to the “Too late to leave” bushfire message as a recurring motif is particularly effective. It persuades the reader to transcend beyond linguistic aesthetics and to consider “actionability”, in which a wrong translation can actually cost lives.

### **ii. The “Via Negativa” approach to Success**

Pym’s focus on the “worst possible outcome” is a brilliant pedagogical tool. Rather than chasing an elusive “perfect” version, he encourages translators to identify the greatest hazards they wish to avoid. This shift from positive ideals to negative risk mitigation provides a clearer decision-making path for students who often struggle with the “paralysis of choice” in complex texts.

### **iii. Integration of Automation**

Unlike other scholars, Pym does not see Machine Translation (MT) as a threat; instead, he considers it as an integral part of the risk landscape. He provides a nuanced “Trade-off positions” model

that demonstrates how different workflows like pre-editing, post-editing, or “MT with discussion” balance speed against actionability. This way, he validates the “better than nothing” use case for MT in low-stakes scenarios while highlighting where the “human-in-the-loop” remains critical for high-stakes certification.

## **The Limitations of the Book**

In spite of its innovative approach, *Risk Management in Translation* has notable lacunae that limit its scope as an all-inclusive psychological model.

### **i. Lack of Systemic Cognitive Integration**

Pym admits his obligation to Kahneman’s “Prospect Theory,” yet his typology often treats biases and strategies as isolated “silos”. In real-world translation, cognitive errors are rarely singular. A translator may be prejudiced by a “cocktail” of confirmation bias and the overconfidence effect. Pym provides the what of the strategies but offers less insight into the why of the “operating system” view, the interconnected psychological mechanisms that lead a translator to prefer risk transfer over taking.

### **ii. The “GI Joe Fallacy” of Actionability**

Pym admits that “merely knowing about a bias... does not necessarily help you avoid it”. This underscores a latent gap in his pedagogical endorsements. While he recommends “teaching the risks of automation,” he offers little evidence that this intellectual awareness results in better behavioural performance in high-pressure situations and contexts. Pym identifies “bad things” to avoid but lacks a robust “choice architecture” or “nudging” system to help struggling translators overcome their essential risk-aversion.

### **iii. Derivative Limitations in Automation Theory**

His ideas on AI are forward-looking, but they depend heavily on rapidly ageing data (e.g., 2023-2024 experiments). Whereas Generative AI transits towards multi-modal capabilities and “agentic” reasoning, Pym’s differentiation between “raw MT” and “human intervention” may become unclear. The book infrequently

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falters into oversimplification, such as suggesting that “anonymising” text is a “superficial” protection against data breaches, perhaps underestimating the legal and financial stakes of corporate intellectual property.

## Conclusion

Anthony Pym’s *Risk Management in Translation* is a timely, pragmatic and vigorous intervention against the traditional pedagogy. It is a masterful synthesis of economic theory, cognitive psychology, and practical linguistics. Anthony Pym downplays the sanctified ideals of perfect equivalence. He attempts to replace them with an empirical framework for decision-making under the conditions of uncertainty. The cooperation model promulgated by him may require some more testing. His insights into the trust-deficit for AI and the essential “notary” function of the human translator are revolutionary. This book shall go on to be an essential reading for translation scholars, translators and educators who wish to comprehend not just “how” we translate but “why” we undertake the risks we do in the more cooperative world.

## References

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## About the Reviewer

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