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Translation
as a Profession

Daniel Gouadec

■ LIBRARY

Translation as a Profession

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Translation as a Profession

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Foreword

Many people still think that professional translation is just a matter of ‘languages’, that anyone who has translated at school can become a translator and that translating is something rather easy and straightforward.

It must be emphasized from the start that the **qualified** professional translator is a vital player, both economically and technically: professional translators are highly skilled technical experts, both on account of the contents they translate and of the various ever more sophisticated IT tools and software they must be able to use. They are in fact experts in multilingual multimedia communication engineering.

Languages are essential, but insufficient. What is needed beyond absolute linguistic proficiency is a perfect knowledge of the relevant cultural, technical, legal, commercial backgrounds, and a full understanding of the subject matter involved.

What is needed too, is a gift for writing, an insatiable thirst for knowledge and the stamina, thoroughness and sense of initiative needed to find any information (or informant) that might be required to fully understand that subject matter. And no translator can hope to survive and thrive without the ability to relate effectively and smoothly – both professionally and personally – with numerous partners: clients, colleagues, suppliers of information and terminology, revisers, employers, tax and social security officers, Internet access providers, and many more. A good grounding in marketing, management and accountancy will do no harm in this respect.

At the same time, those persons whom, for lack of a term that would encompass the whole range of activities involved in translation service provision, we keep calling *translators* can be all things to all men (and women), because:

- they come in many flavours, depending on the types of materials, modes of translations, domains, technologies and tools involved;
- the freelancer and the in-house (salaried) translator do not face the same kind of problems;
- the practice of *translating* can cover a wealth of different experiences, depending on the applicable combination of work organisation, translation tools used, and partners involved;
- although translators all belong to the same profession, there are in fact so many different translation markets that one could say there are many

different *translation professions*. Professional practices and conditions differ considerably and can be worlds apart, with the paradoxical result that those who know the least about the profession are often the translators themselves: freelance translators turn their backs on the world of salaried (in-house) translators and the latter deliberately ignore the freelancers (except when they happen to “supply them with work”). Translators on one side of the fence pretend not to know what is happening on the other side.

Be that as it may, all translators are united in that they face the same challenges, *i.e.* the general lack of consideration for their work, the complexity and technicality of the tasks involved, the impact of the ICT revolution on their working practices, the upheaval caused by the Internet, the industrialisation of the translation process and translating practices, market globalisation and job de-localisation, the increasing encroachment of language engineering applications, the rivalry between ‘linguists’ and ‘technicians’, the stringent requirements of quality certification, the fight for official recognition of a professional status (where this is not already effective), or even the fight for survival of the more traditional ‘cottage industry’ translators. Not to mention the fact that cost-effectiveness, both direct and indirect, both in the short-term and in the long-term, tends to be the be-all and end-all of professional practice, since most people who need or request translations want ever more for ever less.

This book seeks to describe and analyse the true world of professional specialised translation, taking the diversity of practices, situations and environments into account. It will explain why professional translation is the cornerstone of multilingual multimedia communication. It will describe the professional translator’s everyday work practices and answer the queries of those who are thinking of entering the profession as well as of those who are already practising translators and who want to be more successful in their field. It will identify and deal with the major issues currently confronting the translation industry and try to outline a vision of the future for the profession, or more precisely, for all the different branches of the profession.

It also purports to explain the complexity and diversity of the tasks involved in the translator’s work so that everyone should understand that quality in translation never comes cheap and also, the other way round, why ‘cheap’ translations, sub-contracted at knock-down prices, can generate huge costs in the long run because of their potentially disastrous consequences.

The first section is an overview of what translation is about. It explains the nature of translation and the issues at stake, describes the extremely diverse categories of translation-localisation and analyses the translation process from A to Z.

The second section describes the **translation profession and markets**. It explains who the translators are, their professional statuses, the type of service

they offer, their work organisation, their partners and their job profiles. It analyses the organisation on the supply side (freelancers, companies, agencies, brokerage firms, bureaus, etc.) and on the demand side (market structure and translators' individual or collective strategies)

The third section answers the **queries** of all those who might be considering working as a translator. It lists the qualities required, describes the options open once the choice has been made, outlines the different steps to becoming a practising freelancer or to set up one's own translation business and explains how to find and hold on to clients by avoiding basic mistakes.

The fourth section concentrates on current vital interests for the translating profession. These include the difficulty of reconciling rates, productivity, deadlines, and quality, the complexities (and rewards) of having to work with innumerable partners, the necessity of strong professional ethics, the impact of standards and certification, and the endless battle for recognition.

The fifth section is devoted to the developments that have provoked **major changes** in the translation industry. It describes the translator's workstation and various 'tools', analyses the effects of both the friendly revolution of ICT and the possibly unfriendly revolution of machine translation, and explains the workings and impact of industrialisation, on the one hand, and globalisation, on the other.

The sixth and final section is devoted to **translator training**. It looks at all the issues involved in terms of profiles, outcomes, and curricula and indicates ways of meeting the challenge. It emphasises the need for well thought-out course structures and contents and for co-operation with practising professionals. It insists on the recognition of prior professional experience. It describes how qualified teaching staff can best be recruited and trained.

A **glossary** of terms is provided in the appendix.

Whenever relevant, advice is provided about how to update the information. This usually comes in the form a particular query to be submitted to search engines. A list of documents for further reading (mostly Web sites) is appended.

This book is based on:

- the results of studies and surveys undertaken by the author in connexion with the development of a translation quality management project (1999–2001).
- surveys and analyses of the translating profession over the 1991–2006 period.
- a 2002 publication in French under the title “Profession traducteur”.

Translations are by D. Toudic and the author.

SECTION I

Translation

An overview

It is posited here that professional translation has nothing to do with the academic exercise of ‘translation’ as practised in traditional language courses; the latter is a purely linguistic exercise, generally applied to literary texts, and without any implication of publication. Nor does it have any relation to “*translating for pleasure*”, which is translation carried out in relaxed circumstances, just ‘for fun’. If professional translators get satisfaction from their work, they certainly do not translate for the sheer pleasure of translating. They mean business.

1. Talking at cross purposes

People usually become aware of translation when it does not work, as witnessed by the laughably inadequate or nonsensical user instructions or manuals that come with some imported appliances or devices. More generally, the most common contact with translation is through language classes – not the best way to figure what professional translation is about since academic translation and professional translation are like chalk and cheese – or the interpreter’s voice-over on TV (and that seems ridiculously easy) or, nowadays, the instantaneous and free translation service (just click the ‘translate’ button on the Web). No wonder many people think that translation is “not real work”, that “all you need, to translate, is knowledge of the language and a good dictionary” and that translating simply means changing the words and sentences from one language into another.

Many translation requesters think translations are clearly outrageously over-priced, that most translators are just wet-behind-the-ears language graduates who probably “know nothing about the subject” and that there are now machines and software packages that “*do the same thing just as well for a fraction of the cost.*” They even “*would do it (them)selves if only they had the time.*” So why, they wonder, does it take so long? Why is it so expensive? And why do translators insist on asking so many questions?

The translator, on the other hand, knows that good translations are the outcome of a very demanding and ever more complex technical activity. He just cannot understand why the client inevitably finds the translation too expensive, would like it to be finished before the work has even started, has usually forgotten