

## **The Death of the Amateur - Translator Skills in the Modern World**

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*The translation industry is undergoing profound structural change. Although a global society and a global economy are now clearly emerging, many translators are having difficulty exploiting the opportunities these bring. Indeed, many see their livelihoods - or at least their margins - seriously threatened. Modern business and working methods, changing customer requirements and modern technology are making traditional translation paradigms untenable. This article takes a provocative look at the mindsets of translators and their employers, and identifies the skill sets needed for success, many of which have been pioneered in the localization industry.*

### **What is a translator?**

Part of the trouble about discussing translation is that we rarely know what we are talking about. At least three common - partially conflicting and/or overlapping - paradigms exist, making a discussion of the role of translation in practice difficult.

### **The unreliable secretary-cum-typewriter**

Dr. Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language - the one that immortalizes the lexicographer as a "harmless drudge" - defines a translator as "one that turns any thing into another language". As a former hack translator himself, rendering Latin literature into English, Johnson was probably writing with feeling. He also had the advantage of living at a time when the total body of Western knowledge was still small enough for an educated person to have a reasonable overview of all its branches.

Although this state of affairs is so far in the past as to be almost unthinkable, the view of translators held by many clients (and many traditional translation agencies) has remained remarkably similar. Translators are solitary animals, and their activity should consist of an almost effortless "reclotting" of any text on any subject ("just type this up into German" as a customer once told an ex-colleague). Failure to produce the goods during the desired (always incredibly short) time often leads to the resolution to get the secretary/boss's girlfriend/own girlfriend to do it next time. The unspoken assumption seems to be that since everyone speaks at least one language, everyone is automatically a language expert (a related phenomenon is the assignment of "problem" employees to the translation and documentation departments of software companies, on the basis that "those who can't do, translate the manuals").<sup>1</sup> Other basic assumptions related to this approach are the ideas that speed and price are the only arbiters; quality comes a poor third, if at all.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be said however, that such an approach is becoming increasingly rare as businesses reduce overheads and concentrate on core competences. Equally, product liability discussions and market share considerations are starting to have an effect, with (good) translation no longer being seen as merely "nice to have", or a necessary evil

This view is obviously linked to a fundamental misappreciation or ignorance of the role of communication and cognitive processes. Although it is a truism (at least among good translators) that you cannot translate what you do not understand, many clients paradoxically invest their otherwise lowly service providers with an almost God-like ability to appreciate all the nuances of a complex text automatically. In addition, this approach starts from or unconsciously reinforces a theory of translation in which the original text is paramount. This debate had already been running for centuries in Johnson's day<sup>2</sup>, but is now increasingly becoming academic in the face of modern communications theory, with its emphasis on sender and receiver, and modern business needs and customer orientation.

In many cases, the most important criterion is now equivalent effect, with the level at which this effect is defined being relatively abstract. To give two examples: a marketing brochure should produce the same positive reaction and willingness to purchase the product described in a different target audience, even though the arguments, examples and even layout may have been changed to suit local sensibilities. Equally, a localized financials package will be used in an equivalent situation, even though the interface and manuals are in a different language and the contents and functionality of the product itself may differ considerably, e.g. as a result of local legislation.

### **The translator as artist**

What is happening here is a redefinition - indeed a broadening - of the act of translation to include a creative authorial component on the part of the translator. Conceptually (but not in practice) this is not all too far removed from the emphasis on individual creative effort in translation held by supporters of a second definition. For this group, translation is an art, not a science, and let alone a business. For such people, indeed, the idea of a translation "industry" would probably be unacceptable in itself (unless perhaps in the Johnsonian sense of "diligence" and "assiduity"). The fundamental ideas behind the "translator as artist" camp are individual labour, intrinsic (as opposed to customer-oriented) style and quality, and a non-profit approach (both in theory and in practice) to translation. Staff translators are good, because "neutral", but freelancers are better, and all agencies are bad, because commercially oriented.

In this approach, great emphasis is laid on quality, but it is not the quality of reproducibility and repeatability, of "the right product in the right place at the right time and at the right price" that underlies the ISO 9000 series and total quality management movements. Translators as artists will consciously ignore deadlines to continue polishing a text, because for them the text has an intrinsic value, in its own right and as the product of their labours. They are in no way bothered by the fact that the archetype of this approach - literary translation - is often suboptimal, because underpaid (alternatively, it is done "on the side" by academics specialising in the authors concerned, or by willing enthusiasts).

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<sup>2</sup> See the historical discussion in Dedecius, Karl: "Vom Übersetzen", 1986 Frankfurt am Main

This is particularly interesting in that another hallmark of the translator as artist is a concern for professional competence as expressed in membership of professional bodies and academic qualifications. In countries in which undergraduate and postgraduate translation studies are well established, membership of professional bodies may well be weighted accordingly<sup>3</sup>. While professional competence is obviously the baseline for all translation activities, the relationship between qualifications and quality is often more subtle than this suggests, especially for technical translations where an understanding of the subject matter is vital. Equally, in my experience a degree in translation does not automatically rule out translators having a tin ear for their native language - an important point given the increasing expectations surrounding target text standards.

This point is all the more important in practice since translation - like sales - is a profession which is traditionally open to comers. In many countries, be they developed (like England or Germany) or developing, (like the Central European republics) anyone can call themselves a translator - and many frequently do.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, there are interesting parallels to be drawn with software programmers. Twenty years ago, these had all done something (or nothing) else beforehand, prided themselves on the creative and individual nature of their work (remember spaghetti code?), worked at the odd hours dictated by machine response times and their fancy, and had a healthy disregard for the "suits" who demanded finished products, budget discipline and (horror of horrors) teamwork. Today, economic necessity, formal training, industry maturity and cheap mips have produced a new breed of "software engineers" generating reusable, structured objects, using prefabricated frames and (at least in theory) committed to and measured by project deadlines and budgets.

Of course, programming/software engineering is a much more overtly technical discipline than translating, and the industry as a whole far less fragmented and infinitely more powerful - all incentives to change. In addition, the technophobia which is the hallmark of the traditional translator, and of the traditional freelance in particular, is missing. One classic example of this - perhaps the key one now that many translators have succumbed and bought computers - is machine translation.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on subjective creation and contents-based quality leads to the neglect of the potential benefits of machine translation - increased productivity and speed. Opponents commonly miss two points about MT: firstly, that it does not have to work perfectly, just

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the regular admissions procedure for the German professional association, the BDÜ, is heavily tailored towards candidates with German translation qualifications - candidates with foreign qualifications not recognized as equivalent, or with domain-specific qualifications have to apply to a special selection panel. Membership of the British association, the ITI, in contrast, is based on personal and work assessment, and on proof of experience in the field.

<sup>4</sup> For Central Europe, see the remarks by Arturo Quintero Arellanes and Stephan Duzs on translator numbers and backgrounds made during their presentations at the LISA Forum on Localization Quality Management for the Central European Markets, July 24, 1995, Vienna; for an example of a Western country see Verrinder, J. in Picken C. "The Translator's Handbook, 2nd Ed. 11989, London: "...it is probably true to say that only small proportion of people who translate for their living are actually salary-earning staff translators...It is probably equally true to say that a very high proportion of these people never planned to become career translators and never actually trained as such".

<sup>5</sup> One interesting recent illustration of this was the discussion on CompuServe's Flefo forum of the introduction of online MT services to CompuServe.

well enough, and secondly, that it is increasingly being used to meet needs unsatisfied by the traditional translation - and translator - spectrum.

This atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and doubt exists partly because the translation industry is so deeply fragmented that many players cannot see the wood for the trees. Many national translation associations are currently beset by generation gaps, organizational problems and battles over strategy (or the lack of it). Surprisingly, too, there is a general lack of cross-border and supranational activity in the profession (there are of course honourable exceptions, such as the LISA community). Within national frameworks, too, translation is fragmented - in Germany, for example, many literary translators are organized in the IG Medien (the media trades union) rather than in the BDÜ; equally, the specific requirements of localization - and its value as a forerunner for the profession as a whole - are not at all widely known to translators. Last but not least, this fragmentation is repeated across the increasingly artificial boundaries within the language industry as a whole - there is deep mutual ignorance, misunderstanding and even on occasion suspicion between translators and computational linguists, for example.

### **The translator as value-added service provider**

Despite these problems, there is a gradual introduction of economic discipline and more advanced technology into the profession, and hence the emergence of a third paradigm - that of the value-added service provider. In fact, in many cases this development is the attempt to make a virtue out of necessity, with failure to move in this direction being penalized. There are several reasons for this. Economic and political developments have led to a shift in workflows (away from "minor" European languages such as Italian, for example, and towards "exotic" ones such as Chinese and Japanese). Equally, English is widely established as a backbone language, with many non-native speakers now writing in it. While the volume of translation as a whole is increasing, that of translation into English is therefore stagnating<sup>6</sup>. Equally, the size of individual jobs and the tighter turnaround times require increased coordination of work by different individuals and hence project management skills (localization is a classic example of this). Finally, the increasing transparency of translation costs caused by the conversion of many in-house departments into cost or even profit centers has led to an increasing need for financial management and for sales and negotiation skills.

A 1983 study by a committee of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs concluded on the basis of a survey that internal translation services were among the most expensive service departments within enterprises, and therefore the most liable to be cut during economic set-backs<sup>7</sup>. Management concentration on "core competences" and a corresponding readiness to outsource non-core areas has since compounded this trend. Obviously, this process is not confined to translators, but is part of a much more general phenomenon. For example, the Ford automobile company used to make

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1990, quoted in Venuti, Lawrence: "Translation, Authorship, Copyright", in *The Translator* Volume 1, No. 1, 1995

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Zeumer, J.: "Effiziente Organisation von Sprachendiensten - Überlegungen zur Optimierung des Verhältnisses zwischen Aufwand und Erfolg" in: *Tagungsband der Internationalen Vereinigung Sprache und Wirtschaft*, 1985

its own steel, but now sources even vital parts from subcontractors<sup>8</sup>, while EDS has risen to worldwide prominence by outsourcing data centers. Given the low standing of translators mentioned earlier, though, the problem is particularly acute, and has triggered an ongoing search among staff translators for solutions<sup>9</sup>.

In-house departments would seem to have the most success where they are cast in the role of integrated providers of a wider range of "language services", which maximize the added value to their in-house customers<sup>10</sup>. Obviously, the great advantage they have against external suppliers is their company knowledge - an advantage which can be exploited in the form of internal consulting and marketing, and through the provision of customized services meeting the needs of their enterprise and of particular groups within it. Two examples of new types of services are corporate language and terminology concepts and language audits. Another major area is quality management, both in the context of ISO 9000 series certification and in relation to product liability legislation, which includes the translation of product documentation within its scope.

In addition, such departments may offer back-up operative services for emergencies, and services for certain categories of work. Generally speaking, though, the trend is towards liaising much more, and much more closely, than before with external suppliers (the buzzword here is the "integrated workbench"). This does not necessarily mean one-stop shopping from a single supplier, although it may do, depending on the particular skills, volumes and resources involved. What it definitely does mean, though, is a new concentration on "non-translation" activities - project management, quality assurance, budgeting and cost control, and interpersonal skills. In addition, there is a significant increase in the degree of in-house expertise and investment in technology - in itself part of a more general trend to office automation.

The same basic process can also be seen at work in the rise of a new breed of translation agencies offering more than mere envelope-changing. Some common value-added services are DTP and layout, typesetting and printing, localization, technical writing and copywriting, machine or computer-aided translation and terminology work. Above and beyond such additional services, though, there is once again an emphasis on modern, process-oriented management concepts, quality assurance and financial control.

Where can and do freelance translators fit into this picture? Those who do not wish to work for agencies have traditionally developed good relationships with a handful of direct customers - relationships that may well be threatened by the structural changes mentioned above. Competing on productivity and price alone is dangerous, since the bottom end of the market is being squeezed by new technologies and offshore human competition. In addition, the size and complexity of jobs today mean that the entry level in many areas is rising. To obtain any sort of work - be it from agencies or direct customers - in the localization area, for example, requires a high degree of computer

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in "The Economist", August 5 - 11, 1995, p.14 ("Walt Disney and the piper's tune")

<sup>9</sup> Cf. several meetings of the BDÜ's "Schwerter Kreis" of staff translators dedicated to developing strategies for identifying added value

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Fry, D.: "Interesting Times - The Threats and Opportunities Facing Staff Translators", ITI 8th International Conference & Exhibition, Edinburgh, 27-29 April 1995

literacy and equipment, and a high degree of professionalism about deadlines, terminology and stylistic register. Those who fail to meet these criteria are increasingly being sidelined. Since many translators - and particularly the generalists most threatened by these developments - are women with families working less than full time, the fall-out process is not as immediately visible as it would otherwise be. Nevertheless, it is still widespread and apparent enough to be a serious cause for concern in professional associations.<sup>11</sup>

Freelance translators who want to survive are therefore positioning themselves further up the quality chain - in the modern, process-oriented sense of the word. The old resistance to technology is slowly breaking down - according to the latest ITI statistics, all but three of the British freelance translators surveyed now have a computer, and 87% of full-time freelancers had a modem.<sup>12</sup> Equally, a show of hands at the last ITI Conference indicated that although very few translators used a terminology management system, a majority thought it probable that they would have one within the next five years. This is a remarkable statistic given the traditional status of terminology as something that translators do in their spare time. Allied to this is the fact that those freelancers are doing best who can demonstrate profound competence in selected subject fields - an area where agencies are traditionally weak. In such cases, a basic split in the market is appearing - high-volume, low-margin providers versus low-volume, (hopefully) high margin ones. High-volume, high-margin work is nice if you can get it (but rare), while the low-volume, low margin model means living increasingly poorly and dangerously. This having been said, the stakes for all variants are increasing, and margins will probably decrease in future with increased competition and computer power.

In this environment, the amateur and the generalist are endangered species - threatened by the pace of the profession, by the increasing complexity of the subject matter, by the rising economic stakes involved and by the sheer class of the new operations. While this may be no news to either the publishers or the vendors in LISA, who are characterized by a high degree of professionalism, it represents a radical change for translation as a whole. LISA members - and the profession as a whole - can only benefit from it.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. for example the discussion about the emergence/existence and desirability of a "superleague" of translators at the ITI Conference

<sup>12</sup> Gardham, J.: "Key Observations from the 1994 - 95 Rates and Salaries Survey", ITI 8th International Conference, *ibid.* The reason given for the sharp rise in modems was agency pressure