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編集部宛の投稿は以下のフォームからお送りください。
みなさまの投稿をお待ちしております。

【編集部宛メールフォーム】

特集3 Professional evolution

2010/03/25

Professional evolution

城雲図・勉 (Ben Jones) : 翻訳者 英国翻訳通訳協会 (ITI) 上級会員

Some years ago, at an Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) training course, a colleague began a session on the theme “What makes a successful interpreter?” by asking everyone to write down their own definition. I thought it was self-evident ? a good interpreter is one who helps people communicate successfully ? and was surprised to hear the variety of answers that emerged. Some focused on the nitty-gritty (e.g. ‘subscribing to journals in one’s specialist field, in both languages, to remain abreast of current topics and terminology’), while others mentioned ethical aspects such as strict neutrality (although this provoked some discussion, as some business clients treasure interpreters who provide off-the-record feedback on non-verbal indicators and cultural issues, and I know people who have been employed as ‘spies’ required to conceal their understanding of the other language).



More surprising, however, was the session leader’s own contention that a successful interpreter is “one who earns enough to enjoy plenty of leisure”. I had never considered my profession as a translator/interpreter in this light ? it was just something I did because I found it intellectually stimulating and emotionally rewarding. The fact that it also paid the bills was a bonus.

Debate about the nature of professionalism has become a key issue in the translation/interpreting industry. The UK has long had a central body representing translators & interpreters, the ITI, and a separate National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI). Such organizations have worked hard to ensure that their accreditation schemes and code of conduct are recognized and respected, and that members have access to continuing professional development (CPD). However, both have recently been affected by incidents where the professionalism of individual members and even the governing councils have been questioned, resulting in expensive lawsuits and several resignations. Full details have not been made public, but the fundamental issues appear to have been criticism of a colleague’s credentials and performance, and the hiring of unqualified interpreters.

What does ‘professional’ mean in practice? The term “profession” originally referred to the clergy, lawyers, doctors and arguably soldiers, who had to demonstrate competence and swear an oath imposing ethical standards such as truthfulness and confidentiality. Over time it came to include several other disciplines governed by national associations and licences, such as architects or librarians, and the scope continues to expand: the UK-based Association for Project Management (APM), representing over 18,000 members, has recently applied for a Royal Charter in recognition of their status as professionals.

The languages industry in Britain has also been moving in this direction, with a new qualification ‘Chartered Linguist’, but the number who have taken up the new scheme is still under 20 (compared with over 100,000 each for chartered accountants and chartered engineers) so its general recognition is poor. In contrast, there are well-established programmes for “sworn” or “state-authorized” translators/interpreters in many other countries, with the current list of *Traductores-Interpretes Jurados* in Spain stretching to 460 pages.

The designation ‘sworn translator’ is not used in the UK ? possibly due to a preference for industry self-regulation over state supervision ? but until Chartered Linguist gains wider acceptance, membership of the ITI is a *de facto* equivalent enabling translators to certify translations of official documents such as birth/marriage/divorce/death certificates.

On the employers' side too, despite the differing views in each member country on the desirability of central regulation, there is now a European quality standard, EN 15038, designed to codify the various steps of a translation process and thereby ensure greater consistency. It has only been adopted by a few agencies so far, but the fact that the European Union – the world's largest consumer of translation and interpreting services – has begun including it within tender specifications implies that companies operating in this domain will find it indispensable in the future. A similar framework in America, ASTM F2575-06, is more of a guideline than a set of prescriptive rules.

Adoption of the new systems in the UK may have been slow because the tangible benefits are unclear to many who have been translating successfully for decades. Will Chartered Linguists earn more? Will EN 15038 win us more clients? There are no guarantees. Both certainly imply more paperwork and greater expenditure – EN 15038 for example stipulates that translations must be reviewed and/or revised by a second person.

At the same time, there are doubts as to whether the practice of translation is really comparable with other 'professions': as Translation Journal said back in 2006, "unlike medicine, law, and accounting, translation does not depend on a well-defined body of knowledge". Some also fear that the emphasis on CPD within other professions has created an industry of training courses catering for the perceived need, with a captive market but few concrete benefits.

Yet nobody can deny that our industry is changing. Just as the internet has revolutionized the work of individual translators researching terminology or specialist areas, the globalization it has enabled is transforming the marketplace. Linguists from developing countries can now compete on a level playing field with those from industrialized nations, and this is forcing prices downwards. Some international translation agencies acquire greater purchasing power by buying out smaller operators, and then ask their freelancers to cut rates even as they announce record profits.

At one extreme, crowdsourcing makes it possible to complete huge projects such as the localization of Facebook's interface into over 60 languages much faster and more cheaply than would have been conceivable a decade ago – and surprisingly, to an equal or even higher level of quality. The old paradigm of "fast, cheap, or good: choose any two" no longer seems to apply.

Meanwhile, rapid advances in machine translation mean that even as we mock the ungrammatical nonsense Google Translate and its competitors occasionally produce, it is often deemed 'good enough' by companies who used to be our clients. Rising Sun Communications, a London company focusing on the translation of Japanese biochemical documents, report that most clients who previously paid for complete patents now use MT first and only buy a human translation of limited portions once they are confident that the content is relevant. They have adapted to this shift in the market by developing their own targeted MT system.

Specialization does appear to be the secret. No great secret, perhaps, as translators and interpreters have always been advised to choose a field and specialize in it. However, in the past some saw this as an option, a way of ensuring that one could work quickly and accurately without recourse to dictionaries or other reference material. The difference now is that those who formerly earned a living from a diverse range of subjects are increasingly facing competition from generalists world-wide, with ex-pats and even non-native speakers offering acceptable quality at bargain prices.

Just as lawyers and doctors have long concentrated their training and subsequent practice on select, specialist areas, so will the professional translators of the future. It is likely that accreditation from a single, nationally recognized body will be required, not merely to differentiate oneself from others, but increasingly due to client-side criteria. In the other professions, one-off qualifications such as a degree are regarded as less important than those which need to be maintained, involving CPD for example, and this is already built into the UK's Chartered Linguist syllabus. Indeed, even ordinary members of the ITI are urged to maintain CPD records, and those applying for the higher level of Fellow have to demonstrate both past CPD and an ongoing commitment. The ITI's Bulletin and its ICE website list numerous courses in every area of the globe, although unlike the ATA in America, individual activities are not allocated set 'CE' (continuing education) points – members simply provide evidence of e.g. seminars attended or the time spent on research for a specific assignment. China's CATTI also requires participants to attend centrally organized courses and re-register every three years.

Those who do not choose the route of becoming specialized, accredited translators run the risk of becoming low-paid production line workers, whose only hope of a reasonable income will come from high speed, assisted by new software tools (including translation memories, voice recognition and possibly groupware). In the same way, countries which do not have a single organization to represent all translators/interpreters, to encourage and if need be enforce professionalism amongst members while educating clients about the advantages of well-trained language service providers, risk falling behind in the global market.

I recently bumped into the session leader at that ITI course. He now spends more time enjoying tennis than interpreting, which may show that by his standards he is a success. When tested against the APM's five criteria for professionalism ? breadth of knowledge, depth of competence, qualifications, accountability and ongoing commitment ? he passes, on all except the last. I cannot say his approach is unusual or out-dated. Yet as society has changed, the definition of professional has evolved, and I sense that its current implications need to be carefully considered by all who seek or claim the title 'professional translator'.

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