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TRANSLATION AS A PROFESSION

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to ask a fundamental question about the place of the translator (and interpreter) in society. Why is it that translators have such a low status when, without their skill as bilingual facilitators of information exchange across cultures, the world as we know it could not have come into being nor continue to exist? The answer to the question is, we suggest, deceptively simple but the implications profound. The word —translator— means radically different and, indeed, incompatible things to the translator and the user of the translation. Given that, it is no surprise that the relations between the two should be typified by misunderstanding and dissatisfaction and that the situation cannot be expected to improve until translators take action to present themselves in a more favourable light. How can this be done? By nothing short of a complete restructuring of the mental self image translators have of themselves so as to make clear what they really are and not what others think they are. This will entail, at the very least, reorienting the thinking and practice of translators away from focusing on the manipulation of text towards the nature of translation as a social and commercial activity and the redefinition of the translator’s role as that of a bilingual service provider satisfying the communicative needs of a client in a manner which reflects high ethical standards and international good practice.

Key words: market; mental models; profession; service provider; translator

The organisation of the paper

The discussion that follows will be organized around seven distinct but interlinked questions:

• What is translation?
• What is a translator?
• What is the nature of the translation market?
• Is the translator a worker or a professional?
• How do translators and their clients perceive each other?
• Is the translator a professional craftsman?
• What can be done to improve the situation?
Translation

The standard, traditional definition of translation, which has become axiomatic amongst translators and students of translation studies, derives from Dubois 40 years ago:

Translation is the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences (Dubois 1973: 246).  

The wording is particularly salient to our interests in that a good third of the two dozen lexical items it contains are problematic: —expression, —language, —target, —source, —preserve, —equivalence, —semantic, —stylistic.

What, in this definition, do these words mean? The issue might appear to be of purely academic interest but, it should be recognized that the terms carry with them some significant practical implications in the form of assumptions whose acceptance has profoundly influenced (and still influences) the way translators are perceived by their clients and by the community in general.

Look, just to take a single example, at the way, —target calls to mind a ballistic process with direct hits, near misses etc. terms which suggest degrees of accuracy and, maybe, a perfect translation: the equivalent of the bull’s eye!

However, ballistic or not, it is clear that translation is a three-stage process with a tangible input (the —source text) and output (the —target text) and an intangible process in between which, somehow, converts Text A into Text B (as in figure 1 below)

38 RTB’s translation of French original.
39 as indeed it is, being a major point of departure in Translation Studies: the principled attempt to describe, understand and explain the phenomenon of translation.
Fig. 1

![Three stages in Translation](image)

The — somehow — begs the key question here. The process takes place in the mind of the translator and is a closed — black box! to which, unlike the texts themselves, we have no direct access. Warren Weaver (1989) puts his finger on this when he says:

> If someone asks me how I translate, I am hard put to find an answer. I can describe the physical process: I make a very rapid first draft, put it aside for a while, then go over it at a painfully slow pace, pencil – and eraser – in hand. But that is all outside. Inside the job is infinitely complex... (Weaver 1989: 117-118)

What is needed is a far more sophisticated psycholinguistic model of the mental processing involved (see Bell 1991: 43-60 on this) and an expansion of the three simple stages illustrated above in fig 1.

What is missing from the model, as it stands, is the crucial, iterative stage of **editing**, both before the actual translating starts (as careful reading and pre-editing of the input/source text) and once it has been translated (as a series of drafts of the output/target text), as in fig 2 below:
But, while building in —editing! may well go some way to completing the linguistic actions which need to take place, it by no means rounds off the whole process. So far, we have been profoundly influenced by Dubois’ definition into looking at translation as a purely linguistic process in which context (participants and settings) plays, at best, a small place in the decision making.

However, we are all aware that the process does not begin and end with the source and target texts. The translator certainly has a responsibility for the text but also to the client but translation would be unnecessary unless it were in the service of intercultural communication. It is, by definition, a context-sensitive social activity for which we need a model that includes the role of the client: from the commissioning of the translation (and the transmission of the source text to the translator) to the reception of the finished translation (the target text). Fig 3 below factors the client in.
What is a translator?

Presumably, unless we take the story of Babel literally, human communities have always been separated by the lack a common means of communication: different languages and different cultures. For hundreds of thousands of years, communication between otherwise isolated individuals and groups would have been dependent on skilled bilingual mediators who, before the historically very recent invention of writing, would, necessarily, have been interpreters: translators of spoken language.

Attitudes to these facilitators have ranged from the very negative, through the more neutral, to the extremely positive: translator as traitor (Étienne Dolet: 1509-1546 who got executed for it)\(^4\), as faceless slave (see Nabokov 1975: 9-10), as indispensible civil servant (the Ottoman

\(^4\)http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/DIO_DRO/DOLET ETIENNE_1509_1546_.html

\(^4\)http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/entry/Ypsilant

\(^5\)en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome

\(^6\)www.lics-certification.org

\(^7\)The long standing image of the translator/interpreter as a conduit/bridge/transformer/even modem!
Dragoman, Alexander Ypsilantis: 1792–1828)\(^41\), as gentleman dilettante (Alexander Fraser Tytler: 1747-1813), even, at the extreme end of the scale from Dolet, as saint (St. Jerome: 347-419/420 CE who got canonized for it)\(^42\).

In recent years, more pragmatic or bizarre views have emerged: translator as cross cultural mediator (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990), a multitasking expert service provider\(^43\), but also as an inanimate object or machine\(^44\), even a futuristic mutated fish (the Babel Fish: Adams 2002)\(^45\).

The stated purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons for the low status and prestige of the translator, neatly epitomized by the following anecdote:

The other day I called my doctor for an appointment, and the first date available was a month later. Tell one of our clients it will have to wait a week and it will probably hang up on you. If I had an emergency, my doctor would tell me to look for help in a hospital: they all have emergency rooms these days. We cannot do that: as far as our clients are concerned, we are the emergency room. (Nogueira 1998)

Additional goals for this paper follow from the initial question: to explain the present unsatisfactory situation in which translators find themselves by exploring the nature of translation as a process and as a commercial service, and the relationships between translator and client; and suggest some ways in which the situation might be improved to the mutual benefit of both parties - translator and client – and, ultimately, humanity as a whole.

How can we explain why the situation is as it is? One answer may lie in the fact that, in striking contrast with, for example, doctors, accountants, even plumbers and electricians, few translators possess specific qualifications as translators and even fewer are able to offer quality assurance backed up by internationally recognized certification which would, at the very least, guarantee minimum standards of service and adherence to agreed principles of good practice (see Corsellis 1995 on the provision of legal interpreting in the UK).

\(^8\) babelfish.com.yahoo
The market

The act of translation is a response to a stated need. In the simplest terms, there is a problem: someone has a text written in a language (s)he cannot understand or needs to send a text in another language and needs help.

There are several solutions to this problem.

1. Use translation software to translate individual texts\(^{46}\) or web translation software bundled with packages such as Google Chrome, for example, which automatically offers to translate pages in languages the user cannot read. This option is not yet available for interpreting but may be a reality in the future (see Bell 2007b on this)

2. Find a bilingual who uses the two languages
   a) in their day to day interactions or
   b) as part of their work: a Bilingual Practitioner e.g. a doctor, lawyer, tour guide… or
   c) as their main occupation: a Language Service Provider (LSP) e.g. a foreign language teacher, translator, interpreter. (see Bell 2000 for further discussion on the distinction).

It is with the last pair in this third group - Language Service Providers (LSPs), particularly Translation Service Providers (TSPs) - and the frequent inability of clients to distinguish between LSPs that we are most concerned in this paper.

The issue here is whether translation should be regarded as industry, commerce or service.

On this, Nogueira (op cit) makes a helpful distinction:

Translation is a service business, not an industry or commerce. The basic difference between industry, commerce and services lies in inventories [i.e. stocks]. Industrial establishments keep at least two kinds of inventory: raw materials and finished goods. Commercial establishments keep only finished goods inventories. Service establishments, however, keep no inventories.

Translation is a special case of this in which the seller (the TSP) provides the buyer (the client) with a service (a translation) in exchange for financial or other reward and, to the extent that translators charge for the translations they provide, they are participants in a

\(^{46}\) Such as GoogleTranslate: translate.google.com
market: a system which permits the participants – buyers/customers and traders/sellers - to engage in the process of buying, selling and trading goods and services.

The role of the TSP is to provide translations which are —fit for purpose‖ (i.e. appropriate and timely) and, over the longer term, consistent. The role of the client is to provide the TSP with an adequate brief concerning the parameters of the translation – the language/variety required for the target text; stylistic conventions (font, pitch, line spacing etc) the use to which it is to be put, the end users, length, etc - including an agreed delivery date and payment details.

Anyone who provides goods or services is, in terms of Common Law\textsuperscript{47}, accountable to the purchaser of the goods and services for their quality and this accountability is explicit in both Contract Law\textsuperscript{48} and Tort\textsuperscript{49}. The client – and the public at large – has the right to be protected from incompetent or dishonest individuals claiming to be providing a particular service and to be assured that the provider is qualified to supply the service offered (i.e. is accredited or certified in some recognised way) and can be trusted to do so according to publicly known standards (i.e. is bound by some established code of conduct). This implies some form of regulation - built up by the profession itself (bottom up) or imposed from —above‖ by institutions outside the profession (top down) - but, as TSPs are well aware, the translation market is essentially unregulated.

\textbf{Workers and Professionals.}

It is undeniable that translation is a service but what, we may ask, is the social and commercial status of the translator? Is the translator a —worker‖ or a —professional‖? Participants in commercial transactions can be ranged along a continuum with —workers‖ (we are using the term as a generic to include non-professionals (in the sense of not being members of professional associations) of all kinds, including tradesmen and craftsmen) at one extreme and professionals (also of different kinds) at the other.

The term —professional‖ is, itself, problematic. There is/are several readings:

1. Someone who is —employed full time as a…‖ (e.g. professional footballer) in contrast with an —amateur‖ who engages in the activity part time and, quite possibly, for free. Many of

\textsuperscript{47} http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/English+common+law
\textsuperscript{48} http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/contract+law
\textsuperscript{49} http://dictionary.law.com/Default.aspx?selected=2137
those in need of translation/interpreting services tend to assume that the service will be provided free, as a charity. Further, many of those engaged in translation— for an hour in the evening, or for an afternoon one or two Saturdays a month, they translate, sometimes for money, sometimes for fun, mostly for both (Robinson, 2008: 23).

2. Someone who engages in the market in a way which conforms to recognized commercial and ethical norms.

3. Someone who conducts themselves in a way which conforms to recognized commercial and ethical norms and, most importantly, those agreed by an association of which (s)he is a member.

The crucial distinction here is between individual and institutional professionalism. It is clear that an individual worker can be professional (i.e. displaying good business practice and behaving in a way which conforms to recognized commercial and ethical norms) without being a member of a professional organization but, that said, the discussion which follows will focus on the concept of professionalism in this third sense.

Workers and professionals can be distinguished on a number of parameters: the nature of the activity in which they engage; the age at which they begin work; the type and duration of training/education they receive and the type of award they receive at the end of it.

The fundamental distinction between the two groups is that the worker — makes or — does something, while the professional is described not as doing medicine or the law, for example, but practicing it.

The worker enters the trade or craft as a school leaver; receives varying amounts of skills oriented training; follows an externally devised skills oriented curriculum delivered through learning by doing and/or observing, leading to a final and externally accredited award, ranging from nationally and/or internationally recognized technical and vocational qualifications (in the UK, National Certificates and Diplomas and City-and-Guilds awards etc) to, at the end of the scale, none at all.

There is no mandatory follow up training, though there may be voluntary updating programmes available and as a result, the — trained — worker possesses varying and
unpredictable levels of skill and competence and, since training is not mandatory, anyone can set up shop as an electrician, plumber etc. The job title is, in other words, not a protected one.

The member of one of the mature professions – medicine, the Law, education etc - enters the profession as a university graduate; receives a lengthy period of knowledge oriented postgraduate education (we may note the term ‘education’ here, rather than ‘training’), delivered through an internally devised, academically peer validated curriculum which stresses learning by study and mentoring, culminating in an internally accredited award which carries with it the obligation of on-going professional development.

As a result, the —qualified professional will possess publicly known qualifications which assure skill and competence ranging from a minimal base level to the excellent. Many professions require their members to take advanced courses and to renew their practice certificates and, thereby, their protected titles, annually.

The worker may belong to a trades union which negotiates pay and conditions on his/her behalf but does not impose standards on the member who is only required to do a ‘good job’ that reaches standards that satisfy the customer. The professional, on the other hand, will belong to a professional association which, in addition to negotiating pay and conditions, imposes accountability beyond the legal minimum to which the client is statutorily entitled. The professional has, in other words, a —duty of care in relation to the client and the profession expects and requires a higher standard of care from someone who is recognized as a qualified professional than someone who is not.

The relationship between the —buyer and the —seller itself is also expressed in different terms. The worker will talk about —customersl and refer to fellow workers as —matesl. The professional will talk of —clientsl (or —patientsl in the medical profession) and —colleaguesl. Ideally, too, professions promote collegiality rather than unconstrained competition and freely bind themselves to the codes of practice of their professional associations.50

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50 Codes of ethics and principles of good practice can be found in the documentation of all the national and international associations and councils e.g. AIIC, ATA, FIT, IoL, NAATI.
Mental models

The Client and TSP share a common goal, participate in the same event (the commissioning and receipt of the translation) and can list the —brute facts (Searle 1969: 7) observable in the event. However, they diverge in their interpretation of the —brute facts — i.e. on the —institutional facts — and, therefore, —make sensel of the event differently. In other words, their —mental models are not congruent and, therefore, their expectations for the event and their own behaviour and that of the other participants in the event are also at variance.

Both parties assume that their own mental model of the situation is shared and, therefore, behave in ways congruent with that assumption. Add to this the limited knowledge each side has of the other and the marginalized position of the bilingual — an individual who belongs to two speech communities and is therefore perceived as not belonging fully to either — and we have the systemic ingredients for frequent stereotyping and major breakdowns in communication.

Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2002) make the point very clearly when they say:

Social interaction, or meaningful communication, presupposes common ways of processing information among the people interacting … The mutual dependence of the actors is due to the fact that together they constitute a connected system of meanings: a shared definition of a situation by a group… An absolute condition for meaningful interaction …is the existence of mutual expectations. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2002: 20).

Incompatible mental models

It is clear that the TSP and the Client have different mental models of the process and the place each has in it. If we wish to move forward to a more satisfactory relationship between the two, it seems essential to try to spell out just what it is that the two sides have in common and what they do not share.

Mental models: the Client

The Client’s view of translation is that 1) it can involve speaking or writing (maybe even signing, if the client has encountered deaf people), 2) —interpreting! and —interpretational! are alternative terms for the translation of speech, 3) translation consists of taking words (written
or spoken) in one language and replacing them with words in another, and 4) it is a simple automatic semi-instantaneous mechanical process.

Hence, the Client assumes that 1) anyone who speaks (or claims to speak) two languages can translate between them, and 2) anyone who can translate can interpret (and probably teach the language as well).

We might label this the —naïve language user fallacy—which would hold that 1) every word and every sentence in a language has a single, precise, unchanging meaning, 2) every word and every sentence has a single, precise, unchanging equivalent in every other language and, hence, 3) translation is a simple mechanical process of lexical replacement at word level.

**Mental models: the translator**

The translator knows that 1) words (and their combinations) are polysemic and have both primary and secondary meanings, 2) sentences contain multiple layers of meaning, many of which are implicit and have to be inferred from the text, 3) there are no 100% synonyms within any language and so there cannot be synonyms between languages and 4) translation is a staggeringly complex process involving selecting between competing options for matching stretches of one language with stretches of another in a way which is congruent in terms of both form and function.

**The professional craftsman**

In our search for an appropriate role model for the translator, we seem to have reached the point where —professional appears to be too high a goal and —worker—not high enough. The TSP seems to be located somewhere between the established professional (e.g. the doctor or lawyer) and the craftsman, including (though not at the end of the scale) such craftsmen as plumbers certified as members of the Confederation for the Registration of Gas Installers).

We need to consider whether translators are Pseudo-, Para- or Proto-professionals (Bell 2000) or whether the TSP is, perhaps, a professional craftsman. Maybe we can go a little further and

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51 The politically correct term is —craftworker

52 CORGI created in the UK in 1970 http://www.corgi-direct.com/
ask if we can find a service provider whose defining characteristics co-occur sufficiently with those of the TSP to act as a role model for the translator?

What we are going to suggest may, at first, appear bizarre but the answer we are looking for might well be the **bespoke tailor**.

The term "bespoke" refers, traditionally, to custom or tailor-made clothing but, in recent years, the term has been applied to information technology, and to custom services or products⁵³, and so, surely to translation?

In tailoring terms, _bespoke_ means to design clothing from a blank canvas, the client adding his/her own individual choice of styling to those of the skilled cutter. The cutter will work in tandem with the client's waistcoat maker, coat maker and trousers maker, adjusting the pattern at the various stages of making thus creating the perfect paper pattern. (see Henry Poole & Co. Saville Row on this.)⁵⁴

Let us consider what the tailor and the translator have in common. Both, after all, contract with a customer/client to provide a service which is realized as a tangible product (the suit and the translation respectively).

**The suit**

The contrast, in tailoring, is between the ready to wear and the made to measure (bespoke) garment. The ready to wear suit is 1) off the peg, 2) made in factories, 3) sold in clothes shops, 4) relatively cheap, 5) immediately available (the shop carries stock) but 6) low in quality and a poor fit.

The made-to-measure, bespoke suit (equivalent to haute couture in women’s clothes) is 1) not in stock, 2) a unique creation, 3) made and sold by master tailors in their own workshops, 4) relatively expensive, and 5) requires many fittings to achieve the perfect fit.

⁵³ See [http://www.techopedia.com/definition/6184/bespoke-software](http://www.techopedia.com/definition/6184/bespoke-software)
The translation

The equivalent contrast in translation is between the ready to use (on file) translation such as a stored template for an official document and one designed for a specific client and purpose. The ready to use translation is 1) off the peg (on file), 2) duplicated: cut and pasted from stock 3) made in translation —factoriesl (almost certainly totally dependent on free translation software) and sold in photocopying shops (this is certainly the case in Indonesia and many other developing countries), 4) very cheap, 5) almost instantly available but 6) low in quality and suitability.

The made-to-measure, bespoke translation 1) is not in stock, 2) is a unique creation, 3) is made and sold by master translators on their own premises (who make considered judgments on the use of IT in the process), 4) is relatively expensive, and 5) requires many revisions, in collaboration with client, to achieve the optimal product, 6) is high in quality and suitability.

It is the clients' prerogative to decide what they want. If they are happy with cheap clothes or junk food or 'cheap and dirty' translations, there is plenty available. If they want bespoke clothing or cordon bleu cooking or top quality translations, they have to come to a professional tailor or chef or translator and pay what is appropriate. Robinson (ibid) puts it very bluntly:

The closer one attempts to perfect quality, the more the translation will cost and the longer it will take (adding cost and time).

The shorter the time span allowed for the translation, the more it will cost and the harder it will guarantee reliability (charge for rush fee, or a group of translators will cost more and may introduce terminological inconsistencies).

The less one is willing to pay, the harder it will be to ensure reliability and to protect against costly delay. (Robinson, 2008:17-18)

We might, at this point, add a further similarity between the master tailor and the TSP. Both tend to be small enterprises, typically one person enterprises – OPEs (see www.lics-certification.org on the term): individuals or two or three individuals working together - in what is, in effect, a cottage industry.

However, the successful TSP differs from the Master Tailor in the way each uses IT. The TSP,
in contrast with the Master Tailor, stands out as very reliant on the sophisticated use of IT, both for ensuring the efficiency and accuracy of the translation process itself and for communication with the client, making the enterprise an archetypical instance of what Toffler (1980) more than 30 years ago christened an —electronic cottage industry!

The future

Rather than just sit and bemoan our lot, we might recognize that the power to improve the situation is in our own hands and that, worldwide, translators and interpreters have begun to take action. It seems that, on the basis of the development of other professions (Tseng 1992)\textsuperscript{55}, we can move from unregulated industry or craft to regulated profession by progressing through three key stages:

1. the consolidation of the proto-professional group into a body which shares common aspirations for the delivery and development of the service; this is signalled, in particular, by a concern for training.
2. the establishment of a professional association with a consensus on ethical and academic standards which controls entry into and continuance in the profession.
3. the protection of the autonomy of the profession through the continual monitoring of entry requirements and standards of practice and through campaigns to raise public awareness of the role of the profession in society.

Paralleling this, we would expect a progressive realignment of the participants' mental models and a growing consensus among TSPs on their role model for regulation and accountability. Naturally, if these prerequisites are applied to the needs of the emerging translation-interpreting profession, several additional steps will need to be taken but this is not the place to spell them out in detail.

Finally, it seems important to assert that translators and interpreters should seize the opportunity to take the lead in these developments, finding ways of setting standards, reaching agreement on quality and devising mechanisms for assuring that practitioners abide by those standards. These are the first steps on the road towards becoming a genuine

\textsuperscript{55}The process of professionalisation is conveniently summarised in Pöchhacker 2004 page 87.
profession but they involve grasping the nettle of regulation and accepting that unless TSPs impose a regime of self-regulation (through, for example, voluntary self regulation certification such as that provided by LICS: EN 15038), others will make themselves the regulators and, as a result, reassert the perception of translators as, at best, an unappreciated (even exploited) ancillary, para-professional support group (see Bell 2007a on top-down regulation).

A final suggestion
There is ample evidence that lexical manipulation can be and is used to mold and change social attitudes, as advertising copywriters and politicians know well (see Van Dijk 1998 for a comprehensive overview). So why don’t we all agree to make a start by telling all our clients that, unlike the cheap, fast and inaccurate translations from the corner shop, our translations are all custom made; tailor made; made to measure; bespoke; top quality, an excellent fit, attractive to look at, and comfortable and easy to use.

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56 www.lics-certification.org

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Illustration 1

THE BABEL FISH IS SMALL, YELLOW, LEECHLIKE, AND PROBABLY THE ODDEST THING IN THE UNIVERSE. IT FEEDS ON BRAIN WAVE ENERGY, ABSORBING ALL