The Translation Profession in Australia: Viability or Survivability?

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ABSTRACT

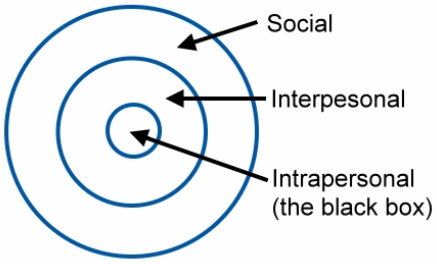
Australia has recently seen an upsurge in translation and interpreting activity on the back of successive waves of refugees and illegal immigrants from war-torn countries in the Middle East, Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, and South East Asia. Ensuing demands have resulted in a flourishing translation market and have turned translation into a lucrative business for many translation service providers, old and new. However, in an unregulated industry that is subject to seasonal fluctuation, most translation and interpreting work has been traditionally carried out by freelancers or "contractors" on behalf of these providers. In a fledgling profession still in the process of defining itself, sustainability and professional recognition become inseparably intertwined and the question of viability becomes a real one in an unstable market.

Translation is certainly a viable industry, as attested by the emergence of several new translation agencies and the sustainability of some of the old translation service providers around the country in the last decade. But is translation a viable profession? Given the current standards and practices that plague the second oldest profession[1] in human history, the answer must be no. Let me explain by touching upon some aspects of this ancient practice.

SOCIAL TRANSACTION

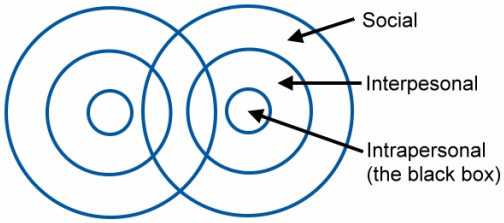
Peoples of the *so-called* Middle East have developed haggling into a social art form and bargaining into a social event. Driven by economic necessities and social interdependence, they have made haggling more than just "an interactive practice in which a shopper and seller produce a mutually created price for merchandise, each bringing judgments and values to bear in determining what an item is worth to them" (Hendon et al, 1996).

Let us consider haggling within the following socio-cultural transactional model of human interaction. Metaphorically, every individual has three concentric circles (or rings) of interaction: social, interpersonal and intra-personal (black box).



The social circle is where most general social interactions take place. Renting a house, talking to the school principal, buying a carton of milk from a cold store—are social transactions that take place in this circle. The interpersonal circle is where closer, more intimate and *less* transient interactions take place. Friendships, workplace relations etc, take place in this circle. The intrapersonal circle is the individual black box, where internal communication (silent soliloquy) takes place. It is here where the most intimate thoughts and darkest secrets are hidden.

When communicators, or actors engaged in the social transaction, enter each other's circles, the degree of overlap of these circles defines in a way the extent and level of communication, which mutually inclusively define the degree of overlap.



FROM INTERACTION TO TRANSACTION

Within this model, a social transaction begins with communication interaction that involves interplay of transactional power and role definition, and ends with a transaction; "a mutual exchange of information or influence based on negotiation and reciprocity" (O'Sullivan et al, 1994: 318).

Most human interactions take place at the periphery of the social circle. This is culturally driven. Try to buy a soft drink from a convenience store. Take it out of the fridge, and go to the counter to pay for it. Depending on where you are and who you are, the extent of interaction will be determined by how much the culture permits of such interaction and overlap. This will determine eye contact, verbal exchanges, proximity and other social features, governed by the principle of reciprocity. Even in large organizations, again depending on the culture, the

interaction will vary, in most settings confined to the immediate group. Hierarchy and positions play a crucial role.

To people in the West, haggling is something foreign that belongs to another time, place or race, since haggling is somewhat an *Orientalist* trait and often found in the Arab world, Turkey, Greece and, to a lesser extent, in Pacific Asia and Latin America. It is a cultural characteristic of developing countries. As Hendon et al (1996) observe, for many people in these places "the social aspect of making their purchases is at least as important as any economic gains that may accrue" (122).

CALLING THE SHOTS

In contrast, haggling in the West is restricted to certain situations, such as used car yard sales, Sunday markets, garage sales, vegetable markets, and the like. Even in these situations, the mechanisms and protocols are not quite the same. However, outside of these situations, haggling is frowned upon and is not generally considered a legitimate part of typical business dealings. Most commercial outlets have a fixed price policy in place. This stems from fair trading laws and regulations that are designed to ensure fair prices for goods and services. Discounts and special prices are usually controlled by the vendors through periodic sales for which people queue up in long files and to which they rush in a frenzied stampede as the store doors are opened to the public. Safe in the knowledge that they are not being *ripped off* during the year, they wait for that special occasion or end of season sale to get a bargain. This of course does not mean that bargaining of some kind does not take place. Is this your best price?

THE BIZARRE BAZAAR

Yet despite the vast cultural differences, and the importance of pricing to professional recognition, translation still follows the bazaar model of haggling of ancient times and the dickering of developing countries.

This model of bargaining, which consists of a series of formal sequential steps, is found in many parts of the Middle East. "It starts with a preliminary period of discussing issues that go well beyond the transaction that is contemplated; subsequently focuses on establishing a personal relationship often with endless rounds coffee and tea; finally the actual bargaining aimed at a compromise position commences. The parties engage in the fine art of haggling, sometimes simply for the fun of it" (Hendon et al, 1996:57).

Not only are prices the heart of the economic system as Eraut (1994) confirms, but they are also at the center of professional recognition. They contribute to defining the boundaries and job classification of the profession. However, no other profession, it seems, not even the first oldest, is known to use this model in the twenty-first century. Astonishingly, while they have been desperately trying to have their status recognized as professionals, translators still accept to be remunerated on a cents per word basis rather than on **time**, **effort** and **expertise**,

as true professionals of full-fledged, respected professions are normally rewarded. This vegetable market mentality has plagued the translation profession for centuries and is still largely responsible today for the mercenary nature of freelance work.

WORDS SHOULD BE WEIGHED, NOT COUNTED!

This outdated diminutive approach to translation, which has its roots in regarding translation as a corollary to general writing that requires basic word manipulation skills and to the idea of the scribe or wordsmith being "rewarded" for the number of words, is today stunting the professionalization process of the translation profession. The old Yiddish witty saying "*Words should be weighed, not counted!*" is perhaps the earliest documented comment on this sad state of affairs that remains with us to the present day.

Most professions incorporate essential tasks and activities into their charges and bill their clients for time, effort and expertise. Accountants for example, do not charge for calculating a balance sheet, rather for the activities involved from the time they pull the client's file out of the cabinet, the time they spend researching or talking on the phone to the client and other relevant persons, to the time they prepare the paperwork and invoice. The client is presented with an itemized bill.

In contrast, translators spend a great deal of time and effort talking to the agency (when permitted), researching, and making free-of-charge amendments and maintenance work on request. These so-called timewasters are unpaid work. Not only that, translation work that includes tables, graphics and other artwork, is not factored into the fees these agencies offer, nor are the various tasks that make up the translation production process: pre-translation, translation and post-translation tasks.

A unique translation practices study conducted in 1986 by Digital Equipment Corporation (Smith and Teldesley, 1986) showed the following timewasters in the translator's work.

Time Wasters	Frequency
Terminology research	77
Problems with original text	43
Typing	27
Formatting/artwork	20
Computer related tasks	20
Getting background information	16
Handling updates	8
Proofreading	6
Indexing	2

The situation today is not any different despite the technological advances and computer-aided translation and terminology management tools such as Trados, Déjà Vu, Transuite, Transit and SDLX, becoming more easily accessible and more efficient in some languages, taking away some of the drudgery of repetitive work. Terminology research and problems with the original text remain high on the list of timewasters.

A PROFESSION PERFORCE

The reason for this kind of backward practice and complaisance lies in the translators' lack of awareness of the correlation between the mode of remuneration and professional status on the one hand and their lack of any real clout in the marketplace on the other. While their fellow interpreters have been able to demonstrate some influence in the market forcing the industry to reconsider their work conditions, translators are still unable to exert the same kind of influence. A *Standards of Practice for Interpreters: An Environmental Scan* study conducted by Marjory Bancroft in March 2004, has concluded that "certainly going on strike sends a professional message" to the industry and society at large. The interpreters' industrial action in Victoria in 2003[2] drove the message home to the translation industry about the market value of interpreters.

However, by its nature, translation is a solitary, individualistic craft. Usually, translators work as freelancers, alone and mostly from home, with minimal contact with other translators. Furthermore, in the absence of language-specific translators associations, or language-specific interest groups in the main professional body of translators and interpreters (apart from online language forums), the sense of individualism is further reinforced and any organized action for whatever purpose is not forthcoming.

SWEATSHOP OR SAUNA?

For many practitioners, translation is not the profession of choice, rather a profession perforce. The majority of translators in Australia are migrants or second generation Australians of migrant parent. Most of these translators have

entered the profession because their overseas qualifications are not readily recognized, if ever, by the powers to be. Engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc have found it extremely difficult to find employment in their original areas of specialization, within traditionally demarcated, quota-based systems, and a stratified marketplace, and have found in translation a way to earn a living to avoid the dole queue. For these people translation begins as an interim solution to a problem and becomes a permanent vocation. Lack of professional training in translation standards and practices and harsh economic realities drive most of these practitioners to compete for translation jobs in a money-hungry industry that encourages cutthroat practices. In some languages, these practitioners have been willing to accept as low as three cents per word. The more words you translate, the more money you make. So how many words must one translate to earn a decent living?

Even at the current rate of $14-16 per 100 words offered by major agencies, translation cannot be a viable profession. The word count of most translation work is often too low to ensure an economically viable regular income. In an industry where a pet culture has taken hold of most business transactions, large jobs are normally given to a handful few favored "translators" routinely and systematically. Any surplus that those favorites cannot handle is passed over by the agencies or subcontracted by these pets, to other translators unbeknown to the commissioning agencies—and no one is any the wiser until dodgy transactions start to show in the often poor quality of translations. However, such exposure is very rare as no one really pays too much attention to translations churned out for the NESB[3] population.

The following table shows pre-tax earnings estimates of translators working nonstop five days a week, four weeks a months and fifty weeks per year. For the reasons already stated, such daily output is not realistic or sustainable throughout the week, month or year. It is subject to workload and productivity variations and lost time.

Daily word count @ $16 per 100 words	Daily income	Weekly income	Monthly income	Annual income (50 weeks)
1,000	$160	$800	$3,200	$40,000
3,000	$480	$2,400	$9,600	$120,000
4,000	$640	$3,200	$12,800	$160,000
6,000	$960	$4,800	$19,200	$240,000

Estimated pre-tax earnings

Freelance translators do not enjoy annual leave, sick leave or superannuation benefits.

THE BEEHIVE MODEL

In addition, some agencies treat translators with contempt and condescension. They are seen as the worker bees in a beehive—dispensable and replaceable. In the late eighties and mid nineties, fewer translators, interpreters and agencies existed and more work was available. Today, there is a large contingent of translators and interpreters and less work to go around. Consequently, many translators in both high and low demand languages have adopted a generalist approach to translation work; translating any work in any knowledge domain: from agriculture to Zen. Unlike their European and American counterparts, who could afford to specialize and micro-specialize in different streams, Australian translators, with few exceptions such as Japanese and Chinese, cannot afford to work exclusively in specific areas. It is not an economically viable option for instance to specialize solely in legal or medical translation. The competition is too high and the workload is too low.

Furthermore, while multi-specialization is a welcome development in the profession, specialist training and structured development programs for translators remain deficient. Where such programs are available, they are generally half-baked, micro-waved solutions that provide no more than scanty translations in context and hodgepodge lists of "specialized" terminology, provided either by professionals who are not usually aware of the specific needs of translators or by translation teachers who are not fully specialized.

In a study commissioned by Deakin University's Centre for Research and Development in Interpreting and Translating, Athansiadis and Turner (1994) showed that "all agencies found it difficult, due to a lack of training courses in the languages of lesser demand and in some cases because of a lack of testing, to recruit suitable applicants for these languages" (22), and revealed obvious dissatisfaction with the professional competence of translators and "a lack of I/T training was often evident in the conduct of I/T practitioners, who appeared to display a poor sense of ethics and weak I/T skills" (24). The study recommended expanding the I/T program to include community languages hitherto not served adequately. Notwithstanding, a sharp decline in the number of courses offered in I/T occurred in the nineties, due to cutbacks and rationalization policies, despite studies of this nature and consultations with community interest groups calling for more I/T training.

Renewed market demands towards the end of the nineties spurred certain educational institutions to resume I/T training courses. However, the ensuing mass production of accredited translators by TAFE and other translation and interpreting training providers in the last six years has caused a glut in the market. The commercialization and *productization* of these training courses tailored for the industry and not the profession has meant less and less work is available for everybody and more and more worker bees are available to the translation industry to pick and choose from. Consequently, the potential of developing a viable profession has been somewhat diminished.

WHY PAY THEM MORE IF WE CAN PAY THEM LESS?

The ensuing nimiety of translators has given the I/T industry a sense of power, creating an arrogant, dismissive and suspicious culture at the grassroots and all the way to the top at some of these agencies—heaven help those who are not submissive and compliant enough. These agencies regard translators as nothing more than worker bees and soldier ants, except for the privileged few. Translators working for these agencies do not feel valued and trusted. Patronizing approaches, telephone call filtering and screening techniques (the oldest trick in the book), elimination of face-to-face interactions, and technology-based practices such as online booking and automatic assignment and allocation of jobs with no or barely any consultation with the translators, are further pushing the translators outside the periphery of the social ring of communication described at the beginning of this article and obviously creating a sense of alienation, devaluation and exploitation.

Generally, first-line management is a problem area in Australia. Most managers are often not equipped to manage people and projects, and many managers rise from the ranks of front-line, *coal-face* employees and are often chosen for their technical skills rather than managerial competencies (Duffield, 1992). Most do not receive adequate on-the-job managerial training. Office politics, favoritism, sham interviews, bogus job ads, earmarking, "prearranged marriages", and back-door promotions and recruitment, reminiscent of condemned third-world country practices, play a crucial role in selecting and promoting managers and other employees.

Consequently, translation project management at these agencies is confined to basic job administration of booking translators in several languages, meting out the jobs to these translators and providing basic instructions, such as "please translate exactly per original", "as original layout", "Please keep the same format as the original and return by email as a PDF", "certification required", and so on. While the translators are seen as outsiders, they are also expected to have the ability to unravel the mysteries of defective text and cryptic documents produced by self-centered organizations that do not seem to have the slightest idea about translation work. Nonstandard acronyms and abbreviations, ambiguous references and substandard writing styles, which are all symptoms of shoddy work, are dumped on the translator who is expected to produce meaningful translations. It does not matter how experienced and resourceful a translator may be, such original defects are additional distractions and timewasters that go unnoticed by untrained job commissioners who lack basic project management skills.

While perhaps it is not the job of the originators of text to provide a clear glossary of terms, acronyms and abbreviations with the text, however substandard such practice may be, it is certainly the job of the agency commissioning the translators to provide such a glossary to ensure clarity and consistency within each document, and across languages. It is also the responsibility of the agency to provide clear essential translation specifications,

not just a one-liner instruction, to enable the translator to perform a relevant analysis within a Translation Development Life Cycle (TDLC). A TDLC would make a difference between basic job administration and professional project management.

Unfortunately, many agencies do not have the skills in or understanding of TDLC and translation development requirements. Their employees come from areas unrelated to translation and if they ever do, their exposure is largely limited to what they have acquired locally. That is why the bazaar model has been a convenient way of doing business despite the technological gadgetry these agencies now use. Similarly, most home-trained translators are equally unaware of these methods and techniques; they jump into the translation job without due planning and analysis, and they treat the translation process as an act of copy translating of the original text often without even reading the entire text first.

Moreover, vague and incomplete translation requirements, arbitrary price fixing that varies with the job and temperament of whoever is in charge, and amateurish quality assurance practices that are observed—are all symptoms of an industry gone awry! In its drive for "improving the standards of performance" of these foot soldiers, the industry may have unwittingly driven a nail into the coffin of the translation profession. Professional knowledge has not yet translated into streamlined professional practices and standards across the board.

SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE!

For some others, translation provides additional pocket money. Low-paid or part-time, casual or sessional bilingual teachers, social welfare workers, and other bilinguals do translation work to earn extra money and in most cases can afford to accept minimal workloads. However, for full-time translators, who have chosen or fallen into translation as a profession, relying on low workloads and solely on one agency for a decent level of translation work is not enough, and many translators register with several agencies and most of them combine translation and interpreting to supplement their income. With access to the Internet, some translators have turned to the international translation market for work— another aspect of globalization. More often, these endeavors are not successful and are fraught with problems—bad payers, con artists and shifty operators. In some cases, international work can be much more rewarding than local work. Time zone differences, lower exchange rates and the impressive range of languages make Australia an attractive destination for American and European international translation and other companies. However, Australian translators could not compete with the developing countries of the Middle East, Latin America and South East Asia, where labour is relatively cheaper and the currency lower.

Notwithstanding, a round-the-clock modus operandi is adopted, which is detrimental to health and life quality of these breadwinners and to the quality of their work. Given the seasonal fluctuation of most translation work, these translators are in peak times inundated with work from several agencies. Unable to cope with the sudden increase in the workload, they subcontract some of it to other translators. In some instances, the whole affair turns into a family venture, where the work is meted out to family members to do. Time permitting, the finished product may be submitted to proofreading and reviews. More often however, such is not the case.

It is said that interpreters[4] never reach retirement age or gracefully walk into the sunset. With translators, something has got to give eventually. So is translation a viable profession? So long as translation work remains freelance, performed as a stopgap measure, and controlled by an unregulated industry, translation will never be a profession.

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NOTES

[1] Some researchers argue that translation is the *third* oldest profession right after prostitution and spying. See *The Third Oldest Profession* by James Marcus. Amazon.com.

[2] See Butcher, S (2003). *Interpreters Want Action to Translate into More Pay*. The Age, Wednesday, April 2, 2003. www.theage.com.au.

[3] Non-English Speaking Background.

[4] Said of simultaneous conference interpreters.

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