

The making of a professional translator

Emmanuel Margetic

When consumers encounter localization, they often hone in on the translation, and how bad or good it is. Thus, though translators are only one link in the localization chain, they are a crucial part of the localization process, and becoming one should not be undertaken lightly.

Almost every industry has three types of people: true professionals, incompetent professionals and frauds. Translation is one of the most obvious examples of an industry containing all these types. Although frauds are intending to deceive others, many people in the “incompetent professionals” category of translation are deceiving themselves and end up there accidentally. This happens as a result of a widespread misperception of what is necessary to be able to make a career out of translation and actually be a true professional.

Many bilingual individuals consider working as professional translators because they think, “Since I’m bilingual, I have the skills to translate.” This seems logical to those unfamiliar with the profession, but those who know the industry realize there is much more involved in translating than just being able to speak and understand two languages. Becoming a professional translator involves passion for languages and culture, education in linguistics and technology, and expertise in the subject and type of document being translated.

First, the road to becoming a true professional in the field of translation requires a passion for linguistics and culture, and a strong desire to master a foreign language. While many people in the world learn a second language, few of them really fall in love with the language they are learning. Those who do are often the ones who want to make translation a career.

Passion is required because translation, when done correctly, can be a tedious and time-consuming job. As Spanish transla-

tor Christina Ott put it, “Translation is not for people who love the outdoors.” Her comment refers to the long hours sitting in front of a computer focusing on the subtle differences in syntax and semantics that translation projects often require. Such tasks are fascinating to language lovers. They love the culture and the words and are excited by the challenge of preserving and translating them correctly from one language to another.

Even if translators focus mostly on the linguistic tasks of a localization project, they need to understand how their project fits into the larger localization process. That process requires them to have a knowledge of the people and culture and an understanding of what vital, technical information those people need or are about to learn. Knowing those things will allow them to go one step beyond simply transferring information from one language to another; they will be able to naturally phrase their translations in a way that will optimize the reception of the message by the target audience.

Next, it takes hard work to really master a foreign language. The ability to speak proficiently and communicate well with native speakers takes a great deal of time and effort for most people, especially those who have not been exposed to that language as a child. Yet, the ability to translate goes much further than knowing how to articulate an idea in two different languages. Besides language, translation involves knowledge of culture, software and subject matter. Since all of these elements are continually changing, if professional translators desire to do their best, they must be constantly learning.

Depending on the quality needed and the expectations of the clients, someone who is proficient in two languages may be able to get translation work and provide clients with a passable translation. The limitations of this approach, however, will be quickly realized. Experts in the field and clients with experience (which often includes the clients with big translation budgets) know a real professional from someone who has not had any formal training.

One of the best ways to receive formal training is through a college education. Fortunately for aspiring translators, many schools have linguistics programs that fine-tune linguistic skills and expose students to translation software.

The translation industry is currently caught in a debate between machine and human translation. Translation providers



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like Google are already making rough translations possible at the click of a button. Yet, these services often lead to a very poor quality translation. The accuracy and judgment required for successful business translations will always require a person.

Human translators, however, are turning to translation software in order to make their work more efficient and accurate, particularly across multiple projects. Such software enables translators to save time on repeated text and use the best possible terminology for a given project based on the target audience. It also helps translators maintain consistent formatting between projects. It's the combination of human translators and software that will dominate the next generation of translation.

Translation companies are aware of this too. Because they are interested in gaining quality employees, some translation service providers are partnering with schools to prime the pump. For example, MultiLing Corporation had developed its own translation software, Fortis, and was thus able to invest in future translators by providing licenses of it to the nearby Brigham Young University (BYU) linguistics programs. Such partnerships between translation vendors and educational institutions highlight the need for bilinguals to advance their formal training in translation software. Those tools add authenticity to the students' curriculum and facilitate their exposure to tools they will be using in the industry.

Alan Melby, professor of linguistics at BYU, commented on the need for potential translators to be proficient in such technology: "These days, you'd be hard-pressed to find a translator who doesn't use technology to improve their productivity and consistency." A bilingual trying to become a professional translator without fine-tuning language skills and competency in the use of translation software tools is like someone trying to become a scuba diver without learning how to use a mouthpiece or knowing how to swim with flippers.

Finally, for translators to be a real asset to an employer or a future employer, they need to have an area of expertise and an understanding of the unique requirements for specific document types. With more than enough well-trained translators available to do

the work, translators can set themselves apart from the crowd by having not only the necessary knowledge with regard to language and technology, but also an area of expertise and experience with specific types of documents. This expertise and experience can be gained both in college and on the job. If someone knows two languages and how to translate them but does not have experience in translating technical documents in a specific area, they will lose that translation work to someone who does.

The need for translation is growing in today's international environment, and the range of translation subjects and types is vast. For example, a company that manufactures electrical equipment may need training materials, patents, shipping orders and instruction manuals translated into another language. A translator with knowledge of electrical terminology and processes would be particularly valuable in ensuring the quality of those translated documents. A chemical company may need the same types of translations, only it would involve a completely different expertise to understand the subject and terminology. Although a translator with expertise in the technical area being translated will be able to translate many different document types, a translator who has also been trained in translating specific document types would be even more valuable to an employer.

One area that illustrates clearly the need for experience with specific types of documents is patent translation. Patents utilize such unique, non-colloquial language that the linguistic nuances required to adequately protect a company's intellectual property would be

totally overlooked even by someone with an understanding of the patent's subject.

While it may seem overwhelming to gain these additional proficiencies, they can be acquired and maintained through education, experience and continual learning. A professional translator will always be researching to stay up-to-date and knowledgeable about what he or she is translating.

There is one type of knowledge that is extremely hard to learn and that a truly professional translator or localizer would never profess to have, and that is a complete knowledge and understanding of a second culture. Even completely immersing oneself in another culture will not always give a person sufficient understanding to make the best judgments about which terms to use in a given situation.

Cultures are engrained into rising generations from birth. History, legends, government, geography, slang and idioms are just a few of the things that natives of a culture learn from childhood, but which foreigners may never fully understand. For this reason, most translation agencies or potential clients won't even consider hiring translators unless they are working from a second language into their native language.

All of these factors play into who gets the work in the translation industry. Professional translators will always have work because they have a deeper, more specialized knowledge than any of the other less-competent translators around them, and clients have a way of finding the best qualified translators to do their work. Because professional translators are just following their passion, that works out well for everyone. **M**

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+ Web site localisation.
+ Technical and general translation.
+ Interpreting.
+ Third-party translation review.
+ Style guide creation.
+ Desktop publishing.
+ Linguistic advisory.
+ Terminology and document management.
+ Technical writing.
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