2 Internal knowledge: the translator’s view

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IN THIS CHAPTER: While translators must meet the needs of translation users in order to make a living, it is also important for them to integrate those needs into a translator-oriented perspective on the work, seeing the reliability that users demand in the larger context of professional pride (including also involvement in the profession and ethics); seeing the timeliness users want in terms of enhanced income, requiring speed (various technological tools) but also connected to project management and raising the status of the profession; and insisting on the importance of actually enjoying the work.

Who are translators?

What does it take to be a translator or interpreter? What kind of person would even want to, let alone be able to, sit at a computer or in court day after day turning words and phrases in one language into words and phrases in another? Isn’t this an awfully tedious and unrewarding profession?

It can be. For many people it is. Some people who love it initially get tired of it, burn out on it, and move on to other endeavors. Others can only do it on the side, a few hours a day or a week or even a month: they are writers or teachers or editors by day, but for an hour every evening, or for an afternoon one or two Saturdays a month, they translate, sometimes for money, sometimes for fun, mostly (one hopes) for both. If a really big job comes along and the timing and money are right, they will spend a whole week translating, eight to ten hours a day; but at the end of that week they feel completely drained and are ready to go back to their regular work.

Other people, possibly even the majority (though to my knowledge there are no statistics on this), translate full time — and don’t burn out. How do they do it? What skills do they possess that makes it possible for them to “become” doctors, lawyers, engineers, poets, business executives, even if only briefly and on the computer screen? Are they talented actors who feel comfortable shifting from role to role? How do they know so much about specialized vocabularies? Are they walking dictionaries and encyclopedias? Are they whizzes at Trivial Pursuit?

These are the questions we’ll be exploring throughout the book; but briefly, yes, translators and (especially) interpreters do all have something of the actor in them, the mimic, the impersonator, and they do develop remarkable recall skills that will enable them to remember a word (often in a foreign language) that they have heard.
only once. Translators and interpreters are voracious and omnivorous readers, people who are typically in the middle of four books at once, in several languages, fiction and nonfiction, technical and humanistic subjects, anything and everything.

They are hungry for real-world experience as well, through travel, living abroad for extended periods, learning foreign languages and cultures, and above all paying attention to how people use language all around them: the plumber, the kids’ teachers, the convenience-store clerk, the doctor, the bartender, friends and colleagues from this or that region or social class, and so on. Translation is often called a profession of second choice: many translators were first professionals in other fields, sometimes several other fields in succession, and only turned to translation when they lost or quit those jobs or moved to a country where they were unable to practice them; as translators they often mediate between former colleagues in two or more different language communities. Any gathering of translators is certain to be a diverse group, not only because well over half of the people there will be from different countries, and almost all will have lived abroad, and all will shift effortlessly in conversation from language to language, but because by necessity translators and interpreters carry a wealth of different “selves” or “personalities” around inside them, ready to be reconstructed on the computer screen whenever a new text arrives, or out into the airwaves whenever a new speaker steps up to the podium. A crowd of translators always seems much bigger than the actual bodies present.

My father worked for the international area of a major Brazilian bank. As a consequence, I lived in 8 countries and 10 cities between the ages of 1 and 19. My parents learned the languages of the places we lived in “on location.” My father never wanted us (my 3 brothers and I) to study in American or French schools (which can be found anywhere), but instead forced us to learn and study in the language of the place. My parents encouraged travel and language studies, and since I was 14, I traveled alone throughout Europe. I learned the 3Rs in Spanish, did high school in Italian and Portuguese. In Luxembourg, I studied at the European School in three languages at the same time (French, English, and Italian) and spoke Portuguese at home. Italian used to be choice for girlfriends:-)

The outcome: I speak Portuguese, English, Spanish, Italian, and French and translate from one into the other.

I have always worked with the set of languages I learned in my youth. I have started learning Russian, but I didn’t like my teacher’s accent. For the future, I plan to study Chinese (I have a brother who lives in Taiwan and a nephew who speaks it fluently).

Renato Beninatto
But then there are non-translators who share many of these same characteristics: diplomats, language teachers, world travelers . . . What special skills make a well-traveled, well-read language lover a translator? Not surprisingly, perhaps, the primary characteristics of a good translator are similar to the expectations translation users have for the ideal translation: a good translator is reliable and fast, and will work for the going rate. From an internal point of view, however, the expectations for translation are rather different than they look from the outside. For the translator, reliability is important mainly as a source of professional pride, which also includes elements that are of little or no significance to translation users; speed is important mainly as a source of increased income, which can be enhanced through other channels as well; and it is extremely important, perhaps even most important of all, that the translator enjoy the work, a factor that is of little significance to outsiders. Let’s consider these three “internal” requirements in order: professional pride, income, and enjoyment.

Professional pride

From the user’s point of view, it is essential to be able to rely on translation – not only on the text, but on the translator as well, and generally on the entire translation process. Because this is important to the people who pay the bills, it will be important to the translator as well; the pragmatic considerations of keeping your job (for in-house people) or continuing to get offered jobs (for freelancers) will mandate a willingness to satisfy an employer’s or client’s needs.

But for the translator or interpreter a higher consideration than money or continued employability is professional pride, professional integrity, professional self-esteem. We all want to feel that the job we are doing is important, that we do it well, and that the people we do it for appreciate our work. Most people, in fact, would rather take professional pride in a job that pays less than get rich doing things they don’t believe in. Despite the high value placed on making a lot of money (and certainly it would be nice!), a high salary gives little pleasure without pride in the work.

The areas in and through which translators typically take professional pride are reliability, involvement in the profession, and ethics.

Reliability

As we saw in Chapter 1, reliability in translation is largely a matter of meeting the user’s needs: translating the texts the user needs translated, in the way the user wants them translated, by the user’s deadline. The demands placed on the translator by the attempt to be reliable from the user’s point of view are sometimes impossible; sometimes disruptive to the translator’s private life; sometimes morally repugnant; often physically and mentally exhausting. If the demands are at all possible, however, in many or even most cases the translator’s desire to take professional pride in
reliability will override these other considerations, and s/he will stay up all night
doing a rush job, cancel a pleasant evening outing with a friend, or translate a text
reliably that s/he finds morally or politically loathsome.

Professional pride in reliability is the main reason we will spend hours hunting
down a single term. What is our pay for that time? Virtually nothing. But it feels
enormously important to get it right: to find exactly the right term, the right spelling,
the right phrasing, the right register. Not just because the client expects it; also
because if you didn’t do it right, your professional pride and job satisfaction would
be diminished.

Involvement in the profession

It is a matter of little or no concern to translation users, but of great importance to
translators, what translator associations or unions we belong to, what translator
conferences we go to, what courses we take in the field, how we network with other
translators in our region and language pair(s). These “involvements” sometimes help
translators translate better, which is important for users and thus for the pride we
take in reliability. More crucially, however, they help us feel better about being
translators; they enhance our professional self-esteem, which will often sustain
us emotionally through boring and repetitive and low-paid jobs. Reading about
translation, talking about translation with other translators, discussing problems
and solutions related to linguistic transfer, user demands, nonpayment, and the like,
taking classes on translation, attending translator conferences, keeping up with
technological developments in the field, buying and learning to use new software
and hardware – all this gives us the strong sense that we are are not isolated under-
paid flunkies but professionals surrounded by other professionals who share our
concerns. Involvement in the translation profession may even give us the intellectual
tools and professional courage to stand up to unreasonable demands, to educate
clients and employers rather than submit meekly and seethe inwardly.

Involvement in the profession helps us realize that translation users need us as
much as we need them: they have the money we need; we have the skills they need.
And we will sell those skills to them, not abjectly, submissively, wholly on their
terms, but from a position of professional confidence and strength.

Ethics

The professional ethics of translation have traditionally been defined very narrowly:
it is unethical for the translator to distort the meaning of the source text. As we
have seen, this conception of translator ethics is far too narrow even from the user’s
point of view: there are many cases when the translator is explicitly asked to “distort”
the meaning of the source text in specific ways, as when adapting a text for tele-
vision, a children’s book, or an advertising campaign.
From the translator’s internal point of view, the ethics of translation are more complicated still. What is the translator to do, for example, when asked to translate a text that s/he finds offensive? Or, to put that differently, how does the translator proceed when professional ethics (loyalty to the person paying for the translation) clash with personal ethics (one’s own political and moral beliefs)? What does the feminist translator do when asked to translate a blatantly sexist text? What does the liberal translator do when asked to translate a neo-Nazi text? What does the environmentalist translator do when asked to translate an advertising campaign for an environmentally irresponsible chemical company?

As long as thinking about translation has been entirely dominated by an external (non-translator) point of view, these have been non-questions – questions that have not been asked, indeed that have been unaskable. The translator translates whatever texts s/he is asked to translate, and does so in a way that satisfies the translation user’s needs. The translator has no personal point of view that has any relevance at all to the act of translation.

From an internal point of view, however, these questions must be asked. Translators are human beings, with opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Translators who are regularly required to translate texts that they find abhorrent may be able to suppress their revulsion for a few weeks, or months, possibly even years; but they will not be able to continue suppressing those negative feelings forever. Translators, like all professionals, want to take pride in what they do; if a serious clash between their personal ethics and an externally defined professional ethics makes it difficult or impossible to feel that pride, they will eventually be forced to make dramatic decisions about where and under what conditions they want to work.

And so increasingly translators are beginning to explore new avenues by which to reconcile their ethics as human beings with their work as translators. The Quebecoise feminist translator Susanne Lotbinière-Harwood (1991), for example, tells us that she no longer translates works by men: the pressure is too great to adopt a male voice, and she refuses to be coopted. In her literary translations of works by women she works very hard to help them create a woman-centered language in the target culture as well. In *The Subversive Scribe* Suzanne Jill Levine (1992/2009) tells us that in her translations of flagrantly sexist Latin American male authors, she works – often with the approval and even collaboration of the authors themselves – to subvert their sexism.

This broader “internal” definition of translator ethics is highly controversial. For many translators it is unthinkable to do anything that might harm the interests of the person or group that is paying for the translation (the translation “commissioner” or “initiator”). For other translators, the thought of being rendered utterly powerless to make ethical decisions based on personal commitments or belief structures is equally abhorrent; it feels to some like the Nürnberg “ethics” of the SS, the claim that “we were just obeying orders.” When the translator’s private ethics clash
substantially with the interests of the commissioner, to what extent can the translator afford to live by those ethics and still go on earning a living? And on the other hand, to what extent can the translator afford to compromise with those ethics and still go on taking professional pride in his or her work?

A British translator living in Brazil who is very active in local and international environmentalist groups is called by an agency with an ongoing job, translating into English everything published in Brazil on smoking. Every week a packet of photocopies arrives, almost all of it based on scientific research in Brazil and elsewhere on the harmful effects of smoking. As a fervent nonsmoker and opponent of the tobacco industry, she is pleased to be translating these texts. The texts are also relatively easy, many of them are slight variations on a single press release, and the money is good.

Gradually, however, ethical doubts begin to gnaw at her. Who in the English-speaking world is so interested in what Brazilians write about smoking, and so rich, as to pay her all this money to have it all in English? And surely this person or group isn’t just interested in Brazil; surely she is one of hundreds of translators around the world, one in each country, hired by a local agency to translate everything written on smoking in their countries as well. Who could the ultimate user be but one of the large tobacco companies in the United States or England? She starts paying closer attention, and by reading between the lines is finally able to determine that the commission comes from the biggest tobacco company in the world, one responsible for the destruction of thousands of acres of the Amazon rainforest for the drying of tobacco leaves, a neocolonialist enterprise that has disrupted not only the ecosystem of the rain forest but the economy of the Amazonian Indians. Gradually her ethical doubts turn into distaste for her work: she is essentially helping the largest tobacco company in the world spy on the opposition.

One week, then, a sixty-page booklet comes to her, written by a Brazilian anti-tobacco activist group. It is well researched and wonderfully written; it is a joy to translate. It ends on a plea for support, detailing several ways in which the tobacco industry has undermined its work. Suddenly she realizes what she has to do: she has to give her translation of this booklet, paid for by the tobacco industry, to this group that is fighting this rather lucrative source of her income. Not only would that help them disseminate their research to the English-speaking world; sales of the booklet would provide them with a much-needed source of funding.

So she calls the group, and sets up a meeting; worried about the legality of her action, she also asks their lawyer to determine what if any legal risks she and
they might be taking, and be present at the meeting. When at the meeting she is reassured that it is perfectly legal for her to give them the translation, she hands over the diskette and leaves.

No legal action is ever taken against her, but she never gets another packet in the mail from the agency; that source of income dries up entirely, and instantly. It seems likely that the tobacco company has a spy in the anti-tobacco group, because she is cut off immediately, the same week, perhaps even the same day – not, for instance, months later when the booklet is published in English.

An American translator working in-house at a large translation agency was regularly assigned to translate a single client’s advertisements that she felt strongly were demeaning toward women. She worked hard to suppress her resistance to translating these texts as long as she was able, but then could stand it no longer, and went to talk to her boss about being relieved from that assignment. He was sympathetic to her request, in principle, but said that he couldn’t spare anyone else in that language pair, and asked her to keep doing those jobs for another six months; then they would reassess the situation.

After another month, the translator found that she simply could not do it any longer. She went on the job market and found another job with a smaller agency, making less money, but doing work that she could believe in, and is much happier now.

Income

Professionals do their work because they enjoy it, because they take pride in it – and also, of course, to earn a living. Professional translators translate for money. And most professional translators (like most professionals of any field) feel that they don’t make enough money, and would like to make more. There are at least three ways to do this, two of them short-term strategies, the third long-term: translate faster (especially but not exclusively if you are a freelancer); create your own agency and farm translation jobs out to other freelancers (take a cut for project management); and (the long-term strategy) work to educate clients and the general public about the importance of translation, so that money managers will be more willing to pay premium fees for translation.
**Speed**

Speed and income are not directly related for all translators. They are for freelancers. The situation is somewhat more complex than this, but basically the faster a freelancer translates, the more money s/he makes. (Obviously, this requires a large volume of incoming jobs; if, having done a job quickly, you have no other work to do, translating faster will not increase your income.)

For in-house translators the links between speed and money are considerably less obvious. Most in-house translators are expected to translate fast, so that employability, and thus income, is complexly related to translation speed. Translation speed is enforced in a variety of unofficial ways, mostly through phone calls and visits from engineers, editors, bosses, and other irate people who want their job done instantly and can’t understand why you haven’t done it yet. Some in-house translators, however, do translations for other companies in a larger concern, and submit records of billable hours to their company’s bookkeeping department; in these cases monthly targets may be set (200 billable hours per month, invoices worth three times your monthly income, etc.) and translators who exceed those targets may be given bonuses. Some translation agencies also set such targets for their in-house people.

A translator’s translating speed is controlled by a number of factors:

1. typing speed
2. the level of text difficulty
3. familiarity with this sort of text
4. technological support
5. personal preferences or style
6. job stress, general mental state

(1–3) should be obvious: the faster one types, the faster one will (potentially) be able to translate; the harder and less familiar the text, the slower it will be to translate. I will return to (4) in the next section. (6) is also relatively straightforward: if you work under great pressure, with minimum reward or praise, your general state of mind may begin to erode your motivation, which may in turn slow you down.

(5) is perhaps less obvious. Who would “prefer” to translate slowly? Don’t all translators want to translate as rapidly as possible? After all, isn’t that what our clients want?

The first thing to remember is that not everyone translates for clients. There is no financial motivation for rapid translation when one translates for fun. The second is that not all clients need a translation next week. The acquisitions editor at a university press who has commissioned a literary or scholarly translation may want it done quickly, for example, but “quickly” may mean in six months rather than a year, or one year rather than two.
And the third thing to remember is that not everyone is willing or able to force personal preferences into conformity with market demands. Some people just do prefer to translate slowly, taking their time, savoring each word and phrase, working on a single paragraph for an hour, perfecting each sentence before moving on to the next. Such people will probably never make a living as freelancers; but not all translators are freelancers, and not all translators need to make a living at it. People with day jobs, high-earning spouses, or family money can afford to translate just as slowly as they please. Many literary translators are academics who teach and do research for a salary and translate in their free time, often for little or no money, out of sheer love for the original text; in such situations rapid-fire translation may even feel vaguely sacrilegious.

There can be no doubt, however, that in most areas of professional translation, speed is a major virtue. I once heard a freelancer tell a gathering of student translators, “If you’re fast, go freelance; if you’re slow, get an in-house job.” But translation divisions in large corporations are not havens for slow translators either. The instruction would be more realistic like this: “If you’re fast, get an in-house job; if you’re really fast, so your fingers are a blur on the keyboard, go freelance. If you’re slow, get a day job and translate in the evenings.”

Above all, work to increase your speed. How? The simplest step is to improve your typing skills. If you’re not using all ten fingers, teach yourself to, or take a typing class at a community college or other adult education institute. If you’re using all ten fingers but looking at the keyboard rather than the screen while you type, train yourself to type without looking at the keys. Take time out from translating to practice typing faster.

The other factors governing translating speed are harder to change. The speed with which you process difficult vocabulary and syntactic structures depends partly on practice and experience. The more you translate, the more well-trodden synaptic pathways are laid in your brain from the source to the target language, so that the translating of certain source-language structures begins to work like a macro on the computer: zip, the target-language equivalent practically leaps through your fingers to the screen. Partly also it depends on subliminal reconstruction skills that we will be exploring in the rest of the book.

The hardest thing to change is a personal preference for slow translation. Translating faster than feels comfortable increases stress, decreases enjoyment (for which see below), and speeds up translator burnout. It is therefore more beneficial to let translating speeds increase slowly, and as naturally as possible, growing out of practice and experience rather than a determination to translate as fast as possible right now.

In addition, with translating speed as with other things, variety is the spice of life. Even the fastest translators cannot comfortably translate at top speed all day, all week, all month, year-round. In this sense it is fortunate, in fact, that research, networking, and editing slow the translator down; for most translators a
“broken” or varied rhythm is preferable to the high stress of marathon top-speed translating.

You translate at top speed for an hour or two, and the phone rings; it is an agency offering you a job. You go back to your translation while they email it to you, then stop again to look at the new job over and call back to say yes or no. Another hour or two of high-speed translating and a first draft of the morning job is done; but there are eight or ten words that you didn’t find in your dictionaries, so you get on the phone, email, or social-networking site (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), trying to find someone who knows. Phone calls get immediate answers; email messages and social-networking sites take time. While you’re waiting, you pick up the new translation job, start glancing through it, and before you know it (some sort of automatism clicks in) you’re translating it, top speed. An hour later your email inbox beeps; it’s an email from a friend overseas who has found some of your words. You stop translating to look through the email. You’re unsure about one of the words, so you get back on email and send out a message over a translator mailing list, asking other subscribers whether this seems right to them; back in your home computer, you jump over to the morning translation and make the other changes. You notice you’re hungry, so you upload the new job to your iPad and go into the kitchen to make a quick lunch, which you eat while looking over the file. Then back to the afternoon translation, top speed. You find a good stopping place and check your email; nothing for you, but there’s a debate going on about a group of words you know something about, so you type out a message and send it. Then you edit the morning translation for a while, a boring job that has to be done some time; and back to the afternoon translation.

And all this keeps you from burning out on your own translating speed. Interruptions may cut into your earnings; but they may also prolong your professional life (and your sanity).

Translators need dictionaries, obviously – both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. You will not find a professional translator who doesn’t rely heavily on them – even though you will also find that they use dictionaries far less than beginning translators. Professional translators typically use dictionaries when:

1. They’ve never seen the word in the source language and have no idea what it means.
2. They know the word in the source language well enough to know generally what it means, but without the kind of semantic specificity that they need to translate it accurately.
3. They know the word in the source language but for the moment can’t think of its target-language equivalent.
4. They know the word in the source language and can list 5–10 possible target-language equivalents, but can’t settle on a single one that captures the most important semantic features of the source word.
As one gains experience and expertise in translation, one tends to move downward on that list (1>4): novice translators tend to need dictionaries more for (1–2), professional translators more for (3–4); but professional translators never move entirely away from (1–2). And that is a good thing: without lexical surprises, translation would quickly become boring!

Some professional translators love their traditional print dictionaries, and even find that flipping through the pages itself reminds them of the word they’ve gone looking for, before they reach the relevant page; but increasingly professional translators do dictionary work electronically, either online or on CDs bought and stored on one’s own computer. Not only is it faster; since their work is mostly done digitally on the computer screen anyway, using an electronic dictionary allows them to integrate dictionary work with translating and editing work far more seamlessly than they could if they were constantly turning away from the screen and picking up a book.

Electronic dictionaries have many other advantages as well, including vast storage capacities, flexible search options, and the ability to integrate with other software programs. Thus the user can look for instances of a search word as it appears in a headword list, or in definitions of other words. A search can be conducted for words that match the search word exactly, or that merely start with the same characters, etc. It is also a simple matter to copy and paste a word from an electronic dictionary directly into a document currently open in the translator’s word-processing program. It is even possible to configure some electronic dictionaries so that if a translator has a source text open on her computer, the text is automatically scanned for words that appear in the dictionary, and the translator’s attention is then drawn to the relevant dictionary entries.

This can be taken one step further, and target-language equivalents for source-language words can be automatically pasted into the source text, providing a kind of “pre-translation,” usually of highly specialized words or phrases in a source text. Whether or not this is ultimately useful, of course, depends on how appropriate the dictionary is for the text currently being translated. If the subject fields covered by the dictionary and the source text do not match, or if client-specific terminology that is not listed in an off-the-shelf dictionary has to be used in the translation, then automatic dictionary look-up is likely to be more of a hindrance than a help. In general, given the wide range of choices that open up any time a translator has to translate even very technical terms (choices that arise because one-to-one equivalence across languages happens only in the rarest of cases, and polysemy and synonymy are rife even in technical fields) automatic look-up and replacement of source-language words or terms with their target-language equivalents are likely to be useful in only very constrained environments, where bespoke term lists have been prepared for individual translation projects or clients, and/or where translators are required to use particular terms in the target language.

If we move from a position where an off-the-shelf electronic dictionary suffices for our needs to one in which a bespoke term list has to be created and used for a
particular job or client, then we move into the realm of terminology management. Instead of merely retrieving lexical data from an already existing resource, we now need to create the resource, which involves making decisions about what data we will record (just the term and its target-language equivalent? a definition? perhaps some examples of usage?) and how we will record them (in a word-processed document? in a spreadsheet? in a database?). Probably the most sophisticated solution for storing, displaying, and retrieving terminological data is found in the terminology management system (TMS). TMSs allow users to create their own terminological resources – or “termbases” – to specify which data categories they will contain, and how they will appear to the user. They typically integrate with other software used by translators, most notably word-processing programs and translation-memory systems (see below), allowing the kind of automatic dictionary look-up (also known as automatic term recognition) described above. A variety of TMSs are available on the market, and to ensure that termbases created with one TMS can be used with another TMS (in other words, to ensure that the resource is independent of the tool) a standard exchange format has been developed for terminological data. It is known as TBX (Term Base eXchange).1

Another tool that can be used in conjunction with a TMS is the term-extraction tool. Term-extraction tools are used to extract potential terms from electronic text. Once the status of such extracted-term candidates has been verified by a user, the confirmed terms can normally be uploaded into an existing termbase in the appropriate format and with very little effort. Term-extraction tools are normally based on either linguistic or statistical methods. A linguistics-based term-extraction tool extracts strings that match a given linguistic pattern. The string “computer screen” would match the pattern `<noun><noun>`, for example. This kind of term extraction requires the electronic text to first be marked up with part-of-speech information, and the patterns that one looks for are usually language-specific: terms in French, for example, might commonly follow the pattern `<noun> <preposition> <noun>`.

Statistical term extraction, on the other hand, is language-independent, and does not require the electronic text to be pre-processed. It involves extracting from the corpus of electronic text any strings of (one, two, three . . . n) words that occur more frequently than a given threshold. Thus one might search for all strings of two words that co-occur at least ten times in a given text or corpus of texts.

Whichever technique is used, term-extraction tools need to be carefully calibrated by their users, so that they do not return too much “noise” (non-terms like “wide variety”) or too much “silence” (caused by a failure to return good terms like “relative humidity”). Users also need to know how to use “stop lists,” that is,

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1 TBX was developed by the now defunct Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA). It has since been revised and republished by the International Organization for Standardization as ISO standard 30042:2008.
lists of words (usually function words like “the,” “and,” “of”) that they do not wish
to consider as forming part of a candidate term. Despite the challenges associated
with term-extraction tools, some freelance translators claim that they are useful
for producing glossaries either for their own use, or for their clients. In fact, the
production of unsolicited glossaries as a goodwill gesture to existing clients, or as
an initiative to develop contacts with new clients, is a well-known strategy in the
translation business (see, for example, Durban 2010). Such gestures are, of course,
likely to be more appreciated by clients who do not already produce their own
glossaries. Larger translation clients are more likely to develop their own termbases
or term lists and to circulate these to freelancers either directly or else through the
intermediary of a language-service provider.

The technology that has been associated most with translators since the mid-
1990s is the translation-memory system. A translation memory is basically a
repository of previously completed translations stored alongside their corresponding
source texts. The source texts and translations in question may be stored as full
texts, or they may be broken up into smaller segments. The simple idea behind
translation memories is that if a translator encounters a sentence s/he has already
translated, then s/he does not need to translate that sentence again, or even recall
how she translated the sentence last time; s/he merely needs to access the solution
s/he has already stored in her or his translation memory. S/he can then reuse the
solution as it is or edit it to suit the new context. (A third option is to ignore the
solution already in memory and translate from scratch.) In theory the translation
will get done faster and will be more consistent than might otherwise be the case.
It might also be cheaper, if the translator passes productivity gains on to the client
(and often the translator is obliged to do so).

A translation memory is thus a set of data – a resource – and a translation-
memory tool is required to manage that resource. Translation-memory tools allow
users to create translation memories: maybe one for each subject field a translator
works in, or one for each of her clients. The tool also enables the translator to add
to those memories “interactively,” as s/he goes about the normal business of
translating. In interactive mode the system works as follows: the translation-memory
tool first segments the source text, which must already be in electronic form, into
easily recognizable units such as sentences, headings, cells in tables, items in bulleted
lists, etc.2 The tool then provides an editing environment in which source-text
segments are presented one by one to the translator, who types his or her translation
for that segment into a dedicated area on his or her screen. When the translator has
finished typing in her translation, the source and target segments are saved to
memory as a single “translation unit.”

2 These units are easy to recognize as they are delimited in many languages by, for example, sen-
tence-ending punctuation and trailing white spaces, line breaks, tabs, etc.
For translators who are just starting out on their careers, the proliferation of translation-memory tools on the market, coupled with the vast number of functions some of them offer and the controversies surrounding their use, can lead to confusion, and it can be difficult to work out whether one should invest time and money in purchasing and learning to use a translation-memory tool, and if so, which one. It is very difficult to provide a generally applicable answer to these questions, as so much depends on the market in which a translator intends to work. Some language pairs have more of a need for “generalist” translators who can tackle a wide variety of text types and work for a wide variety of clients; such translators may not see much repetition in the texts they translate, and if even their regular clients do not have large volumes of text to translate, then they might not be required to use translation-memory tools anyway. These translators may quite happily get by without a translation-memory tool. Likewise, if a translator is working in a market where there has been little penetration of such tools, then her competitors are unlikely to be offering clients translation-memory services, and so there is less pressure on her to do so. She might, however, decide that it is precisely the adoption of translation-memory technology that will give her the edge in her market. In other markets translators might find that by not using a translation-memory tool they restrict the amount of work they can bid for.

But while it is easy to say that translators use translation-memory tools because the market obliges them to do so, some research suggests otherwise. Lagoudaki’s (2006) frequently quoted translation-memory survey found, for example, that 71 percent of the more than 700 respondents who used translation-memory technology did so primarily out of personal choice. Most translators using translation-memory tools voluntarily did so to save time, to ensure consistency in their use of terminology, and to improve overall quality. It seems that most of the translators Lagoudaki surveyed accept translation memory as a useful, standard tool of the trade.

Which tool they use is another question: for many years the tool known as Trados Translator’s Workbench was the market leader. Trados was acquired by SDL International in 2005 and its name lives on in SDL’s most recent TEnT, SDL Trados Studio 2011. Other well-known translation-memory tools include Déjà Vu marketed by ATRIL (the current version is Déjà Vu X2), Wordfast, Kilgray’s MemoQ, Star’s Transit (current version: Transit NXT) and MultiCorpora’s MultiTrans (current version: MultiTrans Prism). Most tools offer the same basic functionality, although some offer what they call “advanced leveraging translation memory,” which means that they can look for matches at sub-segment level, among other things. Tools may differ in price, in the kind of technical support available, and in the file formats they support, and the best way for translators to find out which tool might suit them is to consult with other translators, in person or online. For many translators free open-source translation-memory tools like OmegaT are attractive; other translators may choose to access a translation-memory tool using a SaaS (Software-as-a-Service)
model. In the latter case, exemplified by Lionbridge’s Translation Workspace,\(^3\) rather than buy a licence to install and use a TEnT at their own premises, users pay a subscription to store and access their translation memories and other linguistic assets remotely (or “in the cloud”), and to use tools that are also hosted remotely. The SaaS model is marketed as a way of cutting upfront licensing costs and alleviating burdens caused by local translation-memory maintenance and software updates.

Some translation-memory tools use already familiar programs like Microsoft Word as their editing environment. Others use proprietary interfaces that often allow the user to decide how source and target segments are displayed; typically a tabular layout is selected, with the segmented source text displayed in one column, and the emerging target text in another. For texts created using markup languages like XML and HTML (the language used to format and display web pages), the environment can be adapted to either show or hide tags whose contents should not normally be translated (for example tags that indicate what language a web page is written in, or who the publisher is), and, more significantly, tags that should not be changed by the translator can be “protected.” Many interfaces also allow numbers and other “placeables” (entities that do not need to be translated; rather they can simply be placed in the target text) to be copied automatically into the target text, thus saving time and avoiding errors. And the fact that a translation-memory tool moves systematically through a source text, segment by segment, means that it is difficult for a translator to skip a segment. (Even if the translator did manage to miss a segment the tool would probably alert him or her to the omission.)

One of the greatest advantages of using a translation-memory tool is, however, that these tools typically support multiple-file formats. A translator can receive a file created using a software program (for example, a desktop publishing system) that is not installed on her computer, or that she does not even know how to use: if her translation-memory tool supports that format then it will use one of its in-built “filters” to convert the external file into a format it can process. The translator then translates the file using the normal interface provided by her translation-memory tool. When the translation is complete, the translator exports the translated file to the original format, ideally without losing any formatting or other information.

One of the tools some professional translators are increasingly beginning to use to increase their speed is Google Translate (http://translate.google.com/), an online Statistical Machine Translation (SMT) system whose reliability has improved to the point where some translators, in some language pairs, find it cost-effective to create a first draft with Google Translate (GT) and then edit it into professional form.

SMT means specifically that GT does not “parse” texts syntactically, according to phrase-structure rules; rather it outputs what it deems to be the most probable translation of a sentence, based on statistics it has “learned” from existing, human translations, and often looking at strings of just a few words at a time. This means that sometimes (for example, when the system doesn’t have enough data to make a complex statistical analysis, or when the word order differs significantly between the two languages in question), GT produces gibberish, or simply transfers words it does not know in the source language unchanged into the target language.

It is usually enough for translators who want to use GT for initial drafting to know nothing at all about SMT – for them to assume, for example, that GT is the screen face of a rather poorly trained or a sometimes sloppy human translator. And the discussion that follows will be based on that (factually incorrect, but strategically useful) assumption. It is, however, also helpful for translators to know that the more texts that are fed into GT, the better it becomes at producing useful rough-draft translations – so that they will remember to use the system whenever they can!

Novice translators should also be strongly warned against trusting GT to produce a submittable draft; machine translation is not well enough developed for that. Post-editing is nearly always required. The issue is whether the rough draft GT creates for you is good enough that editing it is not more time-consuming than creating that rough draft yourself.

For example, running these German instructions for people submitting letters of recommendation to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation through Google Translate (GT) yields this English rendition:

**Fragenkatalog**

für Referenzgutachter/innen
für Anträge auf Forschungsstipendien


Fragen, auf die Sie in Ihrer Stellungnahme eingehen sollten:

1. Seit wann kennen Sie die Bewerberin/den Bewerber, in welcher Funktion ist sie/er Ihnen bekannt und wie intensiv haben Sie zusammengearbeitet?
2. Wie beurteilen Sie das wissenschaftliche Potential der Bewerberin/des Bewerbers? Welche Karriereperspektiven sehen Sie für sie/ihn?
3. Haben Sie gemeinsame wissenschaftliche Publikationen verfasst?
   - Falls ja, wie hoch war der Eigenanteil der Bewerberin/des Bewerbers an den Publikationen?
   - Falls nein, wie bewerten Sie die Qualität der Publikationen der Bewerberin/des Bewerbers?
4. Gibt es aus Ihrer Sicht weitere Gesichtspunkte, die für die Entscheidung über den Stipendienantrag der Bewerberin/des Bewerbers von Relevanz sind?

Nur bei Anträgen von erfahrenen Wissenschaftlerinnen/Wissenschaftlern zu beantworten:

5. Ist bereits ein eigenständiges wissenschaftliches Profil der Bewerberin/des Bewerbers erkennbar?

(used with permission)

**Questionnaire**

For expert / inside
For applications for research grants

Please include your full name, title, position, and your institution (with city and country) and the name of the candidate / the candidate, to give you your opinion.

Please sign your comments by stating the date. Your opinion will be submitted to the independent expert reviewers / evaluators, and the relevant selection committee and thus flows directly into the evaluation and application of a decision. We therefore ask you to draft your comments in English or German. We thank you for your cooperation in advance.

Questions to which you should enter your opinion:

1st Since when have you known the applicant / candidate, in what capacity is she/ he have known you and how hard you worked?
Obviously, there are some problems there. GT (imagined as a “weak” human translator) doesn’t recognize that the “inclusive” (feminine/masculine) usage die Bewerberin / der Bewerber needs only a single English translation (“the candidate,” not “the candidate / the candidate”). GT has also made some glaring syntactic errors, for example rendering the participial adjective bekannt (“known”) as the present perfect “have known,” and the unmistakably present perfect wie intensiv haben Sie zusammengearbeitet (“how intensively have you worked together”) as the simple past “how hard you worked.” In (5), even a literal translation of Ist bereits ein eigenständiges wissenschaftliches Profil der Bewerberin / des Bewerbers erkennbar? as “Is already an independent scientific profile of the candidate recognizable?” would have been far closer to an idiomatic English sentence like “Is an original scholarly profile already evident in the candidate’s work?” than GT’s mystifying decision – mystifying for a human translator, that is – to make the sentence declarative and then tack a question mark on the end.

It’s less mystifying, of course, if you know that GT works with “windows” of a few words at a time and builds statistical models of how they’re translated. It’s very likely that strings with “ist x y z” will be translated as declaratives (cf. “heute ist Oma zu Hause,” today Oma is at home), and if a candidate translation that happens to be a declarative is also a very likely sentence in English (“Grandma is at home today”), then GT will go for it, even if the sentence has a question mark at the end.

But these are very minor problems, very easily fixed. Even the professional translator may well decide that it saves considerable time (and therefore money) to run German source texts through GT and then post-edit the results.
The situation is different with highly inflected (source) languages, like Finnish:

Työryhmäraportissa on selvitetty määräaikaisen sopimuksen solmimisedellytyksiä sekä kansallisen että Suomea sitovan kansainvälisen säännelyn näkökulmasta. Määräaikaiselle työopimukseille asetettuja vaatimuksia on tarkasteltu työopimuslain säännöksen esittäen ja säännöksestä syntynneen oikeuskäytännön perusteella.

(http://www.mol.fi/mol/fi/99_pdf/fi/06_tyoministerio/06_julkaisut/10_muut/maaraiak_tyosuhteet_tyor07.pdf)

The Working Group report has determined a fixed-term contract solmimisedellytyksiä both the national and the Finnish point of view, a binding international regulation. Fixed-term contract requirements, muslain employment contract provision, the legislative history and case law arising from the provision.

(Google Translate, August 3, 2011)

Here the heavily inflected Finnish syntax has proved too much for GT:

*Työryhmäraportissa*: the inessive suffix -ssa means “in,” thus “in the working group report”; GT doesn’t recognize the suffix, and so ignores it.

*on selvitetty*: this is a present perfect passive (“has been outlined”); GT reads it as a present perfect indicative (“has determined”).

*määräaikaisen sopimuksen solmimisedellytyksiä*: in addition to not being able to unpack solmimisedellytyksiä (conditions for signing something) and so leaving it untranslated, GT fails to recognize that määräaikaisen sopimuksen is in the genitive case, and so translates it as “a fixed-term contract” (rather than “[conditions for signing] a fixed-term contract”).

*seksi kansallisen että Suomea sitovan kansainvälisen sääntelyn näkökulmasta*: GT misses both the repeated genitive -n on kansallisen ja Suomea sitovan kansainvälisen sääntelyn (“of national and Finland-binding international regulation”) and the elative -sta on näkökulmasta (“from the perspective [of]”), and so renders the clause incoherently as “both the national and the Finnish point of view, a binding international regulation”.

*Määräaikaiselle työopimukselle*: GT misses the allative -lle on both the adjective and the noun here (“for fixed-term contracts”), and so renders the noun phrase as if it were in the nominative in Finnish: “Fixed-term contract.”

*asetettuja vaatimuksia*: GT doesn’t recognize that asetettuja is a passive participial form that takes the allative -lle (“set for”), and so simply adds “requirements” to “fixed-term contract.”

*on tarkasteltu*: again, GT misses the present perfect passive (“have been examined”) here, and simply leaves it out.
työsopimuslain säännöksen esitöiden ja säännöksestä syntyeneen oikeuskäytänön perusteella: GT misses the genitive -n on every one of those words (except ja “and” and perusteella “on the basis of”), and so is unable to parse the syntax, and “solves” the problem by omitting “on the basis of,” abandoning the noun phrase “the legislative history and case law arising from the provision” to syntactic limbo.

Here is a professional-quality human translation of that same passage:

The working group report outlines the conditions for the signing of a fixed-term contract from the perspectives of both Finnish law and international law that is binding upon Finland. The report explores the requirements set for fixed-term employment contracts on the basis of both the legislative history behind the Employment Contract Act and the case law that has emerged out of it.

What is striking about the errors made by GT, however, is that Finnish syntax is highly regular, and the inflected case endings are clearly and consistently marked. Anyone who reads Finnish competently should recognize, say, that:

• on selvitetty and on tarkasteltu are present perfect passives;
• asetettuja is a passive participial adjective that takes (and follows) the allative -lle, so that, registering asetettuja, this hypothetical human translator would look immediately before that word for a noun phrase in the allative;
• as in English, näkökulmasta (from the perspective of) and perusteella (on the basis of) take the genitive, but unlike in English, follow the genitive noun phrases they modify.

It would be relatively easy to program a syntactically oriented Finnish>English MT program to see kansainvälisen sääntelyn näkökulmasta and parse that as X (genitive -n) Y (genitive -n) Z (relative -sta), and so recognize that the basis syntax in English must be “from the Z of XY.” Then the lexicon would provide translations for X, Y, and Z: “from the perspective of international regulation.” But GT doesn’t work that way. It doesn’t parse syntax. It makes “educated” guesses based on statistical analyses of the texts in its database. Highly inflected languages like Finnish require far more data before GT will come up with accurate probabilities.

What this almost certainly means for GT in fact is that, as more users throw Finnish>English translation jobs at the system, it will gradually be “trained” statistically to handle these patterns better, and that readers of this third edition of Becoming a Translator will in a few years protest that GT does recognize these things – which is to say that this section of the book should soon become outdated, and will need to be rewritten substantially for the fourth edition.

Even apart from that likely future, too, it should be noted that the syntactic dropouts in the GT version are only a significant problem for the user who has no
idea what the Finnish says. If the Googler with no Finnish wants to figure out roughly what the passage is about, the GT translation is adequate; if s/he wants to figure out roughly what it says about fixed-term contract legislation, s/he is bound to be disappointed. For the Finnish>English translator who is using GT as a quick means of generating a rough draft, none of this is a problem. It is quite simple for someone who reads Finnish well to recognize where GT went wrong. Also, many of the lexical solutions GT offers are excellent (especially “legislative history” for säännöksen esitöiden, literally “the preworks of the provision,” and “case law” for oikeuskäytännön, literally “legal practice”), and the inaccurate lexical solutions (“determine” for selvittää) are easy enough to fix.

Given the extent of the syntactic dropouts, however, it would have been considerably more time-consuming to edit GT’s FI>EN output into coherent (let alone professional-quality) English than it would have been, say, with its GE>EN output on the Humboldt Foundation instructions; and the real issue the professional translator must ask in connection with GT is whether the program actually does save time for his or her language pair.

There are also some ethical issues involved with the use of Google Translate. For example, may a translator bound by confidentiality legally and ethically upload the source text to GT? And, particularly for users of Google Translator Toolkit, there is the question of who owns a translation produced by, or recycled through, GT. A translator who reuses translations made available through such services may assume that the translations in question have been shared by their rightful owner, but the translator cannot be sure that this is the case; nor can s/he acknowledge the individuals whose work s/he reuses. These and other ethical issues that arise in the context of sharing translation resources are discussed by Drugan and Babych (2010).

Just as translators have to ensure that their own use of MT is ethical, they may also wish to ensure that they do not collude with unethical uses of the technology by other parties. There is some anecdotal evidence of translators receiving machine-translated output from agencies with a request to “revise” the target text, as if it had actually been written by a human translator. Given the potentially significant differences between human and machine translation, translators should be careful that they do not unwittingly take on what are effectively post-editing jobs disguised as revision jobs. Not only would this mean going along with dishonest (or simply inept) practices on the agency’s side, it might also mean that the translator is not sufficiently remunerated for the effort it takes to get machine-translated text to the required level of quality. Online translator forums like ProZ.com can give useful guidance on these matters.

4 Translation memory tools are commonly sold as part of a suite of tools that includes the kind of programs discussed above (terminology management systems, alignment tools, QA checkers, etc), leading many commentators to use the more holistic term ‘Translation Environment Tools’ (or TEEnTs) to designate these commercial products.
Project management

Another effective way to increase your income is to create your own agency: farm out some of your work to other freelancers and take a cut of the fee for project management, including interfacing with the client, editing, desktop publishing, etc.

Most agency-owners do not, in fact, immediately begin earning more money than they did as freelancers; building up a substantial clientele takes time, often years. A successful agency-owner may earn three or four times what a freelancer earns; but that sort of success only comes after many years of just getting by, struggling to make payroll (and sometimes earning less than you did before), and dealing with all the added headaches of complicated bookkeeping, difficult clients, unreliable freelancers, insurance, etc.

There is, of course, much more to be said on the subject of creating your own agency; but perhaps a textbook on “becoming a translator” is not the place to say it.

Raising the status of the profession

This long-range goal is equally difficult to deal with in a textbook of this sort, but it should not be forgotten in discussions of enhancing the translator’s income. Some business consultants become millionaires by providing corporate services that are not substantially different from the services provided by translators. Other business consultants are paid virtually nothing. The difference lies in the general perception of the relative value of the services offered. The higher the value placed on the service, the more money a company will be willing to budget for it. Many small companies (and even some large ones) value translation so little that they are not willing to pay anything for it, and do it themselves; others grudgingly admit that they need outside help, but are unwilling to pay the going rate, so they hire anyone they can find who is willing to do the work for almost nothing. One of the desired outcomes of the work done by translator associations and unions, translator training programs, and translation scholars to raise the general awareness of translation and its importance to society is, in fact, to raise translator income.

Enjoyment

One would think that burnout rates would be high among translators. The job is not only underpaid and undervalued by society, it involves long hours spent alone with uninspiring texts working under the stress of short deadlines. One would think, in fact, that most translators would burn out on the job after about three weeks. And maybe some do. That most don’t, that one meets freelance translators who are still content in their jobs after thirty years, says something about the operation of the greatest motivator of all: they enjoy their work. They must – for what else would sustain them? Not the fame and fortune; not the immortal brilliance of the
texts they translate. It must be that somehow they find a sustaining pleasure in the work itself.

In what, precisely? And why? Is it a matter of personal style: some people just happen to love translating, others don’t? Or are there ways to teach oneself to find enhanced enjoyment in translation?

Not all translators enjoy every aspect of the work; fortunately, the field is diverse enough to allow individuals to minimize their displeasure. Some translators dislike dealing with clients, and so tend to gravitate toward work with agencies, which are staffed by other translators who understand the difficulties translators face. Some translators go stir-crazy all alone at home, and long for adult company: they tend to get in-house jobs, in translation divisions of large corporations or translation agencies or elsewhere, so that they are surrounded by other people, who help relieve the tedium with social interaction. Some translators get tired of translating all day: they take breaks to write poetry, or attend a class at the local college, or go for a swim, or find other sources of income to pursue every third hour of the day, or every other day of the week. Some translators get tired of the repetitiveness of their jobs, translating the same kind of text day in, day out: they develop other areas of specialization, actively seek out different kinds of texts, perhaps try their hand at translating poetry or drama.

Still, no matter how one diversifies one’s professional life, translating (like most jobs) involves a good deal of repetitive drudgery that will simply never go away. And the bottom line to that is: if you can’t learn to enjoy even the drudgery, you won’t last long in the profession. There is both drudgery and pleasure to be found in reliability, in painstaking research into the right word, in brain-wracking attempts to recall a word that you know you’ve heard, in working on a translation until it feels just right. There is both drudgery and pleasure to be found in speed, in translating as fast as you can go, so that the keyboard hums. There is both drudgery and pleasure to be found in taking it slowly, staring dreamily at (and through) the source text, letting your mind roam, rolling target-language words and phrases around on your tongue. There are ways of making a mind-numbingly boring text come alive in your imagination, of turning technical documentation into epic poems, weather reports into songs.

In fact in some sense it is not too much to say that the translator’s most important skill is the ability to learn to enjoy everything about the job. This is not the translator’s most important skill from the user’s point of view, certainly: the user wants a reliable text rapidly and cheaply, and if a translator provides it while hating every minute of the work, so be it. If as a result of hating the work the translator burns out, so be that too. There are plenty of translators in the world; if one burns out and quits the profession, ten others will be clamoring for the privilege to take his or her place.

But it is the most important skill for the translators themselves. Yes, the ability to produce reliable texts is essential; yes, speed is important. But a fast and reliable
translator who hates the work, or who is bored with it, feels it is a waste of time, will not last long in the profession — and what good are speed and reliability to the ex-translator? “Boy, I used to be fast.” Pleasure in the work will motivate a mediocre translator to enhance her or his reliability and speed; boredom or distaste in the work will make even a highly competent translator sloppy and unreliable.

Conclusion

In some sense this textbook is an attempt to teach translators to enjoy their work more — to drill not specific translation or vocabulary skills but what we might call “pre-translation” skills, attitudinal skills that (should) precede and undergird every “verbal” or “linguistic” approach to a text: intrinsic motivation, openness, receptivity, a desire to constantly be growing and changing and learning new things, a commitment to the profession, and a delight in words, images, intellectual challenges, and people.

In fact the fundamental assumptions underlying the book’s approach to translation might be summed up in the following list of axioms:

1. Translation is more about people than about words.
2. Translation is more about the jobs people do and the way they see their world than it is about registers or sign systems.
3. Translation is more about the creative imagination than it is about rule-governed text analysis.
4. The translator is more like an actor or a musician (a performer) than like a tape recorder.
5. The translator, even of highly technical texts, is more like a poet or a novelist than like a machine-translation system.

Which is not to say that translation is not about words, or phrases, or registers, or sign systems. Clearly those things are important in translation. It is to say rather that it is more productive for the translator to think of such abstractions in larger human contexts, as a part of what people do and say.

Nor is it to say that human translation is utterly unlike the operation of a tape recorder or machine-translation system. Those analogies can be usefully drawn. It is merely to say that machine analogies may be counterproductive for the translator in her or his work, which to be enjoyable must be not mechanical but richly human.

Machine analogies fuel formal, systematic thought; they do not succor the translator, alone in a room with a computer and a text, as do more vibrant and imaginative analogies from the world of artistic performance or other humanistic endeavors.

Is this, then, a book of panaceas, a book of pretty lies for translators to use in the rather pathetic pretense that their work is really more interesting than it seems?
No. It is a book about how translators actually view their work; how translating actually feels to successful professionals in the field.

Besides, it is not that thinking about translation in more human terms, more artistic and imaginative terms, simply makes the work seem more interesting. Such is the power of the human imagination that it actually makes it become more interesting. Imagine yourself bored and you quickly become bored. Imagine yourself a machine with no feelings, a computer processing inert words, and you quickly begin to feel dead, inert, lifeless. Imagine yourself in a movie or a play (or an actual use situation) with other users of the machine whose technical documentation you’re translating, all of you using the machine, walking around it, picking it up, pushing buttons and flipping levers, and you begin to feel more alive.

*The structure of flow.* The autotelic [self-rewarding] experience is described in very similar terms regardless of its context . . . Artists, athletes, composers, dancers, scientists, and people from all walks of life, when they describe how it feels when they are doing something that is worth doing for its own sake, use terms that are interchangeable in the minutest details. This unanimity suggests that order in consciousness produces a very specific experiential state, so desirable that one wishes to replicate it as often as possible. To this state we have given the name of “flow,” using a term that many respondents used in their interviews to explain what the optimal experience felt like.

*Challenges and skills.* The universal precondition for flow is that a person should perceive that there is something for him or her to do, and that he or she is capable of doing it. In other words, optimal experience requires a balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills a person brings to it. The “challenge” includes any opportunity for action that humans are able to respond to: the vastness of the sea, the possibility of rhyming words, concluding a business deal, or winning the friendship of another person are all classic challenges that set many flow experiences in motion. But any possibility for action to which a skill corresponds can produce an autotelic experience.

It is this feature that makes flow such a dynamic force in evolution. For every activity might engender it, but at the same time no activity can sustain it for long unless both the challenges and the skills become more complex . . . For example, a tennis player who enjoys the game will want to reproduce the state of enjoyment by playing as much as possible. But the more such individuals play, the more their skills improve. Now if they continue to play against opponents of the same level as before, they will be bored. This always happens when skills surpass challenges. To return in flow and replicate the enjoyment they desire, they will have to find stronger opposition.
To remain in flow, one must increase the complexity of the activity by developing new skills and taking on new challenges. This holds just as true for enjoying business, for playing the piano, or for enjoying one’s marriage, as for the game of tennis. Heraclitus’s dictum about not being able to step in the same stream twice holds especially true for flow. This inner dynamic of the optimal experience is what drives the self to higher and higher levels of complexity. It is because of this spiraling complexity that people describe flow as a process of “discovering something new,” whether they are shepherds telling how they enjoy caring for their flocks, mothers telling how they enjoy playing with their children, or artists, describing the enjoyment of painting. Flow forces people to stretch themselves, to always take on another challenge, to improve on their abilities.


Hi Lantrans,

How would you like a story like this?

A translator sent me his resume and a sample translation (I didn’t order him anything – just asked him to send me one of the translations he had already done – that’s an important point).

I answered him pointing out some mistakes in his sample and the fact that he didn’t comply with my request to name his CV file with his last name. I wrote him: do you know how many files named resume.doc I receive every day?

His answer was: Do you know how many sample translations I have to do searching for a job? I simply don’t have time to polish them. Surely, I will be more accurate working on a real job as I won’t then waste my time searching for an assignment.

Isn’t he charming?

Natalie Shahova

* * * * *

I’m sure he can get a job at McDonald’s . . .

Kirk McElhearn

* * * *
Another thing many people sending you unsolicited material don’t think about is that you might not have a secretary sitting there who has nothing better to do than to sift through the crap that arrives.

Reminds me of the days not too long ago when I was receiving unsolicited ***handwritten*** applications almost every day in the mail because we happen to be in the Yellow Pages. Don’t people know that an application gives them the chance to show their word processing capabilities? Who did they think is going to teach them that? Did they think there is someone here to type their translations?

One young woman really took the cake when she called up, complaining that I hadn’t responded to her unsolicited application. When I told her I just didn’t have the time, she demanded that I mail her stuff back to her. (It was the usual application containing all sorts of certificates and transcripts.) I told her I wasn’t going to shell out the equivalent of $1.50 for something I didn’t ask for and that if she wanted it she was free to come and pick it up. She never took me up on my offer.

Amy Bryant

* * * * *

Reason is probably that not too long ago, maybe 10–15 years back, handwritten was the form to be used for job applications. Probably employers imagined learning something from the graphology. Mind you, that was at the time when I might have sent out job applications, but my hand was so lousy even back then, so preferred to buy my first “computer” in 1983 or so. (I only sent out a job application once, a decade later, in mint-condition layout of course. Didn’t get the job as a multilingual press person for some biotech center here in Vienna, and am *soooo* happy about that now.)

look Ma, no hands!

Werner Richter

* * * * *

As head of Human Resources for Laconner Medical Center (and head of everything else there except providing medical care), I required job applicants to submit typed applications – which had to be flawless; I wouldn’t interview a nurse whose
cover letter was ridden with typos/spelling errors. But I also had a form for them to fill out by hand when they arrived for the interview, which included a section that required a few sentences to be strung together. That way I got to see their handwriting – and whether or not they could spell, write, etc.

That said, when my son was home at Christmas it amazed me when he said he was about the only person with a laptop computer in the entire translation program; that exams were to be handwritten (he doesn’t have a prayer there – the son and grandson of physicians, his handwriting has never been particularly legible), and that people actually said they “refused” to have anything to do with computers.

The program does offer a course in technology (TRADOS, of course), and some Internet stuff (Erik has a bit of an advantage there), though one teacher told him to use dictionaries because you can’t trust anything you find on the net . . . he’s on some committee, stirring up trouble, recommending that everyone use computers for everything . . .

Makes you wonder,
Susan Larsson

* * * * *

Werner:

> Reason is probably that not too long ago, maybe 10–15 years back,
> handwritten was the form to be used for job applications.
> Probably employers imagined learning something from the graphology.

I realize that but this was happening as recently as 1–2 years ago. By then the institute for applied linguistics at the local university (Saarland University in Saarbrücken, Germany) was offering word processing (and the rest of the Office family members) and translation memory training. Granted, these courses were optional but I would have thought students would have gotten the message that these things are an absolute must if they want to make it in the real world.

A year ago I attended an informal TRADOS seminar organized by a colleague. It was conducted in the institute’s computer
Discussion

1. Should translators be willing to do any kind of text-processing requested, such as editing, summarizing, annotating, desktop publishing? Or should translators be allowed to stick to translating? Explore the borderlines or gray areas between translating and doing something else; discuss the ways in which those gray areas are different for different people.

2. When and how is it ethical or professional to improve a badly written source text in translation? Are there limits to the improvements that the translator can ethically make? (Tightening up sentence structure; combining or splitting up sentences; rearranging sentences; rearranging paragraphs . . .) Is there a limit to the improvements a translator should make without calling the client or agency for approval? A reliable translator is someone who on the one hand doesn’t make unauthorized changes – but who on the other hand doesn’t pester the client or agency with queries about every minute little detail. Where should the line of “reliability” be drawn?

3. Read the following satire on the freelance translator, originally posted on a ProZ.com site but quickly removed.

room. I about dropped my teeth when I saw all the TM software installed on those machines (at least 5–6 programs in all).

Amy Bryant

* * * *

Well over 10 years ago, a teacher at McGill University was telling translation students he would not accept handwritten assignments and that since they intended to eventually earn money as translators, they should start acting as professionals right then. He also recommended that they do their first draft on the computer, NOT do everything by hand and then transcribe their final text.

Michelle Asselin
(Lantra-L, February 1–3, 2002)
Mario Abbicci (abbicci)

Italy

Getting rich fast applying low rates!

The background
Honours degree in Archaeology at University of Rome, 1999, I passed my Greats with a dissertation on “The Ruins of Intelligence and the Rests of Idiocy in the Modern World, Especially among Professionals”. PhD in Gardening, dissertation with Sir Edward Mumford Blase on “The Giardini all’Italiana and The Figure of Labyrinth: Is That an Attitude or What?“.

Full time professional freelance translator and reviewer since 2000. Actually, I started translating for money in 1987. Yes I was fifteen but I was full of promise, yet dad’s spending money was not enough to buy cigarettes, filthy magazines and holy smoke. Furthermore, my Auntie Gina said I was doing it very well. She was deaf and blind, but loved me very much. I started studying to acquire a position in society, yet my interest in learning and widening my knowledge was very limited and I didn’t give a shit about it all, but I wanted an easy income with the least possible effort. My studies were mnemonic and I just can’t remember that much of it, but the method seemed to work and I feel like recommending it strongly to the generations to come. Next step: you know, in European countries there’s not much chance to work without effort and competence, so I jumped at the Internet and started as a localizer.

The areas of specialisation
In line with my educational background my areas of specialisation are Information Technology, Software, Hardware, Technical/Industry, Medical/Pharmacy, Legal, Scriptures. I have ample experience in these sectors and I can quickly provide strictly unfounded references.

The experience
I have been a native Italian freelance translator/reviewer/editor/proofreader since 2000.

In May 2001 I set up a team with three reliable colleagues, cooperating to provide high quality results wasting little time. Let me introduce you to Mr. Jonathan Babelfish, Mrs. Gloria Altavista, Dr. Gianni Chiudoz and Dr. Juan Do Cojococo. They are very flexible and fanciful professionals and always really pluck an unexpected solution out of a source text. Please note that they’re collaborating with most of the professionals on this site and they represent in many cases the only reference their translations are built upon.
The references
References of company and agency contacts that have assigned the above-mentioned projects to me are available upon request and referees are kept in total ignorance. We can also provide you with our up-to-date resumes, just ask and we make it up instantly.

Please also note that we are available to perform paid translation tests not exceeding 75 words of source text and only if you can assure us total anonymity. In fact, we still do not understand why you customers and agencies persist in forcing translators to perform free tests, whereas you should pay for this from now on, neither do we agree on the test practice itself which is plainly contrary to the entrepreneurial principle that quality doesn’t need prove.

The methods
First, I accept a text about an argument I’ve never heard of. Then I perform an extensive query on-line using Boolean smooth operators and an excellent abuse of the KudoZ system on ProZ site, eventually choosing the least reliable and most fancy solution. If this still doesn’t help, I ask the customer to postpone the deadline asserting that the material is very challenging for a satisfying linguistic solution and I am currently involved in a fine-tuning phase.

We are always keeping ourselves up to date and are continuously involved in professional research and upgrades. We do not miss a line of the most known and crowded newsgroups and mailing lists. We do prefer Langit to Lantra because of the aseptic environment of the first. While politics are not allowed there, you can enjoy packs of rowdy translators insulting each other about rates, wordcounts, and clients, with a peculiar social attitude that poor Aristotle was wrong to consider “political”. As a result one can improve their professionalism learning how to breed suspicion about an agency they have failed a test for, how to set up new translators guilds, how to quote jewels of funny deja-vu social theory in native German while they hardly speak a correct Italian, without any intervention of the local moderators, strictly committed to preserve the Subject syntax correctness.

The policies
Our official rates are fairly rigid, based upon the material complexity, though not low. We need you to understand the reasons of these policies. We are forced to act this way in the presence of our honourable colleagues. But we are willing to grossly knock rates down in private bids or if you contact us directly.

Our rates are based upon gobbledygook accounting methods and we use the Cartella, the Canna and the Pertica as translation unit measures, according to Editto de lo Merchante which dates back to 1312, Patavia. For your convenience,
(a) Who do you think wrote the satire? If it was an agency person, what do you think his or her motivations were in writing it? If it was a freelancer, what could his or her motivations have been? What other possible job experiences can you imagine that would have led someone to write a satire like this?

(b) Based on Mario’s education, what would you say the author believes is an appropriate or useful education for the translator? What is wrong with this particular educational background? What is the bit about being fifteen and translating to make money for cigarettes and filthy magazines trying to say? What does it mean to say “my studies were mnemonic and I just can’t remember that much of it”?

(c) What does this mean: “Next step: you know, in European countries there’s not much chance to work without effort and competence, so I jumped at the Internet and started as a localizer”?

(d) What is the problem with the translator’s references in “areas of specialisation,” “experience,” and “references”? What does it mean for references to be “unfounded”? What should they be? What does it mean to say: “Please note that they’re collaborating with most of the professionals on this site and they represent in many cases the only reference their translations are built upon”? Why is it a problem if referees are “kept in total ignorance”?

(e) The four professionals with whom Mario teamed up in 2001 (he says there are three) represent online translation help: Babelfish is the automatic translation program on Altavista, a major search engine; Chiudoz probably refers to KudoZ, the points you can accrue on http://www.proz.com by
answering language queries. Why is it a bad thing for this author that Mario relies on these online resources? If the fact that he formed this team in 2001 (and posted this website in 2002) is taken to be satirical, what is wrong with having started so recently?

(f) The second paragraph of the section on “references” is about free tests. What is at issue here? What freelancer attitude is the author trying to satirize? (Note the grammatical error at the end of the last sentence: “. . . need prove.” Is this error a significant part of the satire? Rephrase Mario’s statement from a freelancer’s point of view without the satire, making the reluctance to take free tests a professionally respectable attitude.

(g) The sentence “As a result one can improve their professionalism learning how to breed suspicion about an agency they have failed a test for, how to set up new translators guilds, how to quote jewels of funny deja-vu social theory in native German while they hardly speak a correct Italian, without any intervention of the local moderators, strictly committed to preserve the Subject syntax correctness” is a satire on translator listservs like Langit (langit@list.cineca.it) and Lantra (lantra-l@segate.sunet.se). Comment on the three different assumptions underlying the satire:

(i) All translator listservs are dominated by freelancers who are suspicious of agencies. That suspicion is not based on agency incompetence or failure to pay, but on the freelancers’ own failures to pass the agency tests.
(ii) Translator listservs help freelancers organize into translator guilds.
(iii) Translator listservs help freelancers pretend to possess worthless knowledge and language skills.

(h) The lines “We are forced to act this way in the presence of our honourable colleagues. But we are willing to grossly knock rates down in private bids or if you contact us directly” deal with hypocrisy about dumping. What are the practices the author is satirizing, and why are they a problem?

(i) Why does the author satirize “gobbledygook accounting methods”? What are the financial realities behind this attack on how freelancers calculate their fees?

(j) Given the line “We are left-wingers but not morons, after all,” what political orientation would you say the author has, and why? What significance might political beliefs have for the translation marketplace?
Exercises

1. Set up a translating speed test. Translate first 10 words in five minutes; then 20 words in five minutes; then 30, 40, 50, and so on. Stick with the five-minute period each time, but add 10 more words. Try to pace yourself as you proceed through each text segment: when you do 10 words in five minutes, translate two words the first minute, two more the second, etc. When you are trying to do 100 words in five minutes, try to translate 20 words each minute. Pay attention to your “comfort zone” as the speed increases. How does it feel to translate slowly? Medium-speed? Fast? When the pace gets too fast for your comfort, stop. Discuss or reflect on what this test tells you about your attitudes toward translation speed.

2. Reflect on times in your studies or a previous career when you were close to burnout – when the stress levels seemed intolerable, when nothing in your work gave you pleasure. Feel again all those feelings. Now direct them to a translation task, for this class or another. Sit and stare at the source text, feeling the stress rising: it’s due tomorrow and you haven’t started working on it yet; it looks so boring that you want to scream; the person you’re doing it for (a client, your teacher) is going to hate your translation; you haven’t had time for yourself, time to put your feet up and laugh freely at some silly TV show, in months. Pay attention to your bodily responses: what do you feel?

3. Now shake your head and shoulders and relax; put all thought of deadlines and critiques out of your head. Give yourself ten minutes to do nothing; then look through the source text with an eye to doing the silliest translation you can imagine. Start doing the silly translation in your head; imagine a group of friends laughing together over the translation. Work with another person to come up with the funniest bad translation of the text, and laugh together while you work. Now imagine yourself doing the “straight” or serious translation – and compare your feelings about the task now with your feelings under stress.

Suggestions for further reading


*Translation practices explained*: Alcaraz and Hughes (2002), Austermühl (2001), Dias Cinta and Remael (2007), Gillies (2005), Kelly (2005), Mayoral Asensio (2003), Mikkelsen...

Note: Jost Zetzsche’s Tool Box Newsletter is a regularly updated source of news related to translation technology. See http://www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit/current.html.