Letter from the Editor: language industry

The Language Industry: it’s a term we can’t escape but exactly what does it mean? I’ve started to wonder to what extent practitioners are really a part of it. And if we are, what role do we have – lead, supporting cast or bit players?

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To prime my brain I typed a few appropriate words into a search engine, and .21 seconds later had 5.4 million hyperlinks queuing up on my screen. Five hours later I had managed to look at only a small proportion of them, but I found myself exhausted; it was past midnight and sleep beckoned.

I had jotted down notes and bookmarked pages for review, hardly enough to be called serious research, more a personal reflection. Here are some of the general impressions that have stayed with me.

- The vast majority of the results were for companies.
- There is a plethora of national and international language industry associations, which tend to be of and for companies.
- Size is greatly admired as can be seen by widespread mention of rankings of language service providers (LSPs), fanfare of mergers and acquisitions, comments that further consolidation is needed, etc.
- The industry has been doing very well even during the ongoing economic crisis, and growth prospects are said to be good.
- The global market for language services is large, estimated at more than $31 billion. \[1\]
- Scant attention seems to be paid to practitioners, to such an extent that I started trying to find mention of them, targeting pages that sounded promising. I didn’t find much.
- Many LSPs mention “our team” (of translators or interpreters), but it’s time wasted to try to find out more, such as who the members of that team are. Others refer to “our network”, vague but rather more honest in my opinion.
- Growing competition and downward pressure on prices comes up now and again, and the incomes of translators and interpreters seem to be suffering, which would seem to indicate oversupply.
- Yet there are complaints about a shortage of qualified professionals. As this Common Sense Advisory post says, “Translation and interpreting professionals are rarely recognised, let alone compensated, at levels that match the critical role they play in facilitating global business.”

The overall impression I came away with is that practitioners, the very water the industry has floated on until now, have come to be taken for granted. They seem to be mere cogs in the machine, replaceable and ultimately doomed to disappear when a new model comes out. If they want to survive, some say, they will have adapt, which seems to mean becoming something else and/or getting used to lower levels of remuneration. The times are indeed changing.

While preparing my Language in the News column, I had come across Industrious. Yes. Industry? Maybe Not by Jost Zetzsche. It didn’t answer my questions, but it was interesting to follow another person’s thoughts.

After a short consideration of the various players, he says: “Considering all this, can we really talk about one ‘industry,’ or are we more a hodge-podge of small groups or individuals who are trying to carve out niches for ourselves in answer to some specific, as yet unfulfilled needs?” And when addressing the “strange role” of technology, he writes: “Technology also has the potential to shape some sections of the market in interesting ways, for instance by giving translation clients direct access to single-language vendors or individual translators while providing all the quality assurance and file management that the translation agency does today (keyword: disintermediation).”

Disintermediation merits attention, but it is the use of the word “vendor” that leads me in a different direction. Although it is often used interchangeably with “contractor”, as legal terms they are a bit different.

Vendor is used to refer to someone who sells something, most often real property, or under a general understanding of the word, things. A contractor (independent contractor) is simply a person who enters into a contract to do something (and perhaps not do something else). The term is often equated to freelancer, though the later is specifically self-employed individual while the former is not. As for employee, the word hardly needs definition but the key difference is that an employee does not control what will be done and how, while a freelancer does. \[2\]

Many interpreters, myself included, do not care for the term vendor. I have found that when intermediaries or organisations try to make a vendor of me, too many strings are attached, e.g. requirements to maintain a rate for a specified period of time (as if I were selling goods I could stockpile), or to accept their work and travel conditions as if I were not a free economic agent. But in my field every job is different, from subject and preparation time needed to hours of work. I prefer to maintain my right to quote a fee taking
Independent contractor bothers me less as a term, but the same problems I mention above pop up. One such contract I saw stressed that no direct contact with the client would be allowed, even at a meeting. In my opinion, when such obligations go too far, they hinder team performance and even the feeling of working as a team.

Of course both terms are used to avoid an employer/employee relationship and the obligations that go with it. But I find it curious that many an organisation will say that one must accept certain rules (e.g. for travel or per diem) because they apply to employees!

Some freelancers don’t wish to be considered employees, while other see advantages in the possibility. It should be noted that the status of “temporary staff” also exists: interpreters working for the UN under our collectively bargained agreement are classified as such for the duration of a contract and derive benefits from it.

The key to all of this, of course, is cost. Companies who outsource work do not have to cover payroll taxes, health insurance, pension contributions, etc. They may treat their vendor/contractor like an employee, dictating hours, place of work and workplace rules, but they resist meeting the obligations attached to such a relationship.

We freelancers often fail to take into account that we must absorb all those costs and should incorporate them into what we charge. Sometimes we are so fearful of losing a “client” that we end up losing money instead.

All this makes me sympathetic to the concerns being expressed by a growing number of freelancers regarding the negative effects of omnipresent intermediation in both the public and private spheres, poor working conditions, relentless pressure to work more for less, ever shorter deadlines, lack of transparency… in sum, of an erosion in the amount of control we as individuals exercise over our work, and we as a body of practitioners have over our profession (a word too often absent in the discourse).

We should ask ourselves if we are witnessing a creeping de-professionalization. The time has come to examine the role we play in the industry and the nature of the paradigm itself.

This Issue

Remote Interpreting Rides Again by Sergio Viaggio: “Recently I came across an article in Le Soir announcing that the University of Mons had come up with a new video interpreting system, and saying that unlike past attempts, this one really works. Let’s take a look behind the PR and see what we really have here.”

Please Mind the Gap: Defending English Against “Passive” Translation by Wendell Ricketts: “Let me begin with a simple statement, one guaranteed to have any group of translators howling at each other within minutes: Translators can be defined as professional (by which I mean, among many other things, that they are entitled to charge money for what they do) solely and exclusively if they work from their second (or other) language into their native one.”

Confessions of a Conference Interpreter by Michelle Hof: “I would love to start this article with the words ‘Hi, my name’s Michelle and I’m a conference interpreter,’ but I’m afraid that would prompt readers to want to start patting me on the back consolingly and proffering tissues. Although, come to think of it, maybe adopting a ‘True Confessions’ tone in this article is not such a bad idea, since it would fit quite nicely with the topic I plan to address: professional identity as seen by a conference interpreter.”

Die Unvermeidlichen (The Unavoidables) by Julia Böhm: “Following a performance of Kathrin Röggla’s play in Mannheim on 14th May, Angela Drösser, PR officer of AIIC Germany, in cooperation with the conference interpreting section of the German Association of Interpreters and Translators, organised a discussion on the topics explored in the drama.”

Language in the News by Luigi Luccarelli: “Books in translation and videos about translation, podcasts on language and articles about interpreting, plus AIIC voices in the social media await just a click away.”

Articles reflect the views of the author(s) and should not be taken to represent the official position of AIIC.

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[2] Government authorities do pay attention to these distinctions. Recently the Federal Court of Australia ruled against an agency, saying that interpreters that had been treated as independent contractor should have been treated as employees. You can read about it in this media release. The US Internal Revenue Service posts information online: see Independent Contractor (Self-Employed) or Employee?

Recommended citation format:
