Market inefficiencies in the language services sector

Structural factors affect both quality and price. Translator and interpreter pay may be determined less by top performance than by the lowest rate of pay that the market will bear while guaranteeing a

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Before I go into the substance of this essay, which admittedly is somewhat pessimistic, I think it is important to reflect on the fact that translation and interpreting are beautiful professions. They require a very high skill level. They enable communication that would otherwise not take place, and they are a sine qua non of our globalized age.

The translation and interpretation industry is growing at a rapid pace. Since the unanimous verdict seems to be that the need for linguists is growing exponentially, you would think that we could easily command rates that would cover our expenses and more. Yet there seems to be a trend towards rate reduction. My own experience has been that at times I have had to struggle to make a living. Does this mean that our clients are bluffing us and hoping that we will just go along with lower rates even though we are more in demand than ever? That they hope we are paying more attention to the interminable financial crisis than to statistics that reveal that we are in one of the biggest growth industries?

The quality conundrum

To be fair, another factor that bears on rates is a significant quality issue for both interpretation and translations. I focus mainly on translations in this essay, since they form the core of my business. I have often edited the translations of others, as I am sure most readers have. I imagine your experience has been similar to mine. Sometimes the translations are good, and sometimes they are masterpieces. Yet, I have found that it is rare that a translation does not have significant errors. In addition, when lawyers or friends have approached me for translations, I have often referred them to translation agencies, while maintaining the responsibility for the final product. The translations that I get back from the various translation agencies that I have tried are almost always unacceptable.

Everyone makes mistakes on occasion, including me. My learning curve when I entered the profession was steep and I am always striving to better my skill. But I am talking about grammar and style issues in addition to major errors that cause a divergence in meaning between the source and target languages. In my experience, such errors are more the rule than the exception. They almost always appear to be more a matter of sloppiness than lack of skill, but it is not always easy to discern the genesis of the error.

Meanwhile, nobody seems to be proclaiming that quality work is the slam-dunk to success in the
field. The articles that abound in the *ATA Chronicle, The Gotham Translator*, and other professional communications in the USA about marketing, technology, specialization, networking, and many other intangible elements of success attest to this. So the question arises: how can it be that it is so hard to survive as a competent translator while so many of our colleagues are cutting corners to the extreme detriment of the end client? Some of the translators and interpreters who are not consistently producing quality work are entry-level linguists. Some of them, in turn, will be tomorrow’s stars. Yet some will only stay on the market temporarily while still forming a force to be reckoned with. Since the constant influx of new linguists at least keeps pace with those who choose other career options or go under, competent and reliable translators and interpreters experience fierce competition from those who produce unreliable work, however transient their presence on the market.

**That elusive key to success**

I would never advise any colleague to cut corners on quality and I would also never do it myself, since the outcome is highly unpredictable and potentially disastrous. Yet quality is not necessarily the decisive criterion for success in this industry. Sometimes quality is imperative and those who can deliver it will prevail. Sometimes, however, what will prevail is whatever will be tolerated.

This of course gives rise to the question of what would happen if quality were to be the norm. Would this mean that more money would be made? Would the end client make more money? Would translators and interpreters make more money? Would agencies make more money? Would the world be a more prosperous place?

Machine translation will have an effect similar to the work of unreliable translators on the market. Just recently, two consecutive editions of the *ATA Chronicle* featured prominent articles on the topic. The consensus seems to be moving towards the idea that this technology will displace some of us out of the industry. The debate seems to be centered on the idea of whether a machine translation can produce a competent product. But I believe that the real issue is whether clients will actually put up with the work that a machine translator does. Even if a machine can never completely make us obsolete, the proliferation of machine translation over time (ostensibly accompanied by post-editing) will depress rates for translations that a machine cannot do. This is because there will always be some question about whether a translator needs to perform the task or a machine will suffice.

**The structure of the T&I industry affects quality and rates**

There are certain issues that explain why quality is often not the norm. One, of course, is the fact that if a translator goes over a text multiple times to eliminate defects, he or she will make less money, at least in the short term. Another factor is the lack of education that our society provides for the language professions. And as for the education that exists: is it worth it to pay many thousands of dollars and go into debt to enter a profession in which struggle for survival is the norm?

Another factor affecting quality is the ability to control quality. An agency or an end client will have limited resources to do so. It seems apparent to me that an end client or an agency will not always have people who can thoroughly and reliably check the quality of every translation, comparing it to the original. This would require copious linguistic knowledge in many languages and specialized knowledge about whatever the subject matter. And there needs to be quality control of the quality control itself.

On the other hand, incompetent quality control can have the opposite effect. Two or three times in my career, an editor has been unduly harsh in his or her criticism of my work. For instance, one time an editor made extensive changes to my text that overwhelmingly consisted of synonyms of the terminology that I had used simply because he or she was not familiar with my correct terminology.
In a couple of cases, the editor actually added errors. I pointed out the new errors to my client but, since I did not want to be a bad sport, I did not make a big deal of the overzealous editing. That was a bad call on my part, since this severe critique of my work seemed to drastically lower me in the esteem of the agency in question. They subsequently offered me less work and less attractive work.

So I would say that the industry is not structured in such a way that quality will prevail. In fact, I would say that the payment translators and interpreters receive will be determined less by the quality of their work than by the lowest rate of pay that the market will bear while guaranteeing a tolerable level of quality and quantity of translations.

**In conclusion**

I do not doubt the merits of the claims about the importance of marketing, social media, using new technologies, etc. But I think we should not lose sight of the big picture, the structural factors that make or break success. My hope is that dialogue and debate about every factor of success will foster access to and expansion of the relatively small segment of the market that does pay very well. Also, translators and interpreters should take heart and be less hard on themselves. It probably is not your fault if you are not rich. We are entrepreneurs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 44 percent of all new businesses survive beyond four years. [i] Staying in business for four years is already a major achievement.

Paradoxically, the fact remains that society needs us more and more. The importance of our role grows by the day. I personally find it exciting to be part of this dramatically changing landscape. I hope that the New York Circle of Translators and other professional associations can be the agents of change for the better.


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