

Linking professional practice with translation training in a business-oriented setting: The Portuguese Association of Translation Companies example

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Abstract:

This paper is aimed at surveying the Portuguese translation market from the point of view of the translation services provider by presenting some of the conclusions of a research project focused on the universe of the Portuguese Association of Translation Companies (APET).

Based on some of the findings of an academic survey specially designed to outline the sociological profile of the associate members of the Portuguese Association of Translation Companies, this report aims to contextualise the translation industry both at a national (APET) and international level (EUATC), by characterising the sector and the background in which some of the most important translation agencies usually operate in Portugal.

Besides offering a brief overview of the language industry in Portugal, this survey provides new insights into market expectations (features, skills and competences, profiles, needs, constraints, requirements and working conditions, among others), and builds up a picture of the ideal translation services provider's profile, which may eventually lead to a redefinition of the way translators are trained according to professional standards by tailoring translation curricula to new business-oriented settings.

Background

Based on the perspective of training future translation professionals, the major goal of our study was to assess a specific context of translation practice, as it is lived and felt at a daily level of professional practice in terms of technical and specialised translation. We would then try to mediate the results obtained with the major training courses currently on offer in Portugal. Faced with the social-professional dynamics and mutability of a profession that has barely been studied

from a sociological perspective, and is so often undermined in terms of its context and socio-professional background, we have decided to search for the answer to the following questions, firstly: “What is it to translate today within a business-oriented context?”, and, secondly: “What are the most important skills and basic requirements for new translators entering a market that is increasingly more specialised, volatile and unique?”

According to Don Kiraly, we are now witnessing a sort of "whirlwind of change in the language market" (Kiraly, 2000: 2), and indeed, the way he subsequently compares the current professional *status quo* to an undeniable social void, whose characterisation or de-characterisation will imply "deep fundamental and decisive changes within the scope and nature of translation skills" (Kiraly, 2000: 19), gives us some legitimacy to centre our approach round the concept of the specific restructuring of professional translator training aimed at the essential collaborative and cooperative aspects of the translator's task.

Context

Within the scope of a specific training project on the undergraduate course of LEA (Applied Foreign Languages), from the University of Minho, the Department of English and North-American Studies (DEINA-ILCH), together with the cooperation of the Sociology Department of the Institute of Human Sciences (ICS) and the APET (Portuguese Association of Translation Companies) carried out a sociological survey on the profile of some of the major translation agencies operating in Portugal, under the following title: **The profile of translation companies in Portugal – A brief sociological survey.**

Based on the universe of study of some of the major translation companies currently operating in the Portuguese translation market, the said research project was carried out during the second semester of 2005. Its aim was to outline the model picture of a specific socio-professional universe yet to be explored, at the same time as contributing towards promoting a deep academic reflection on the industry's major features, needs and requirements. Besides offering a general overview of the current market needs, it is our hope that the survey findings will

enable university-level training to be geared towards and adapted to the constraints and demands of business-related domains.

General and specific objectives

Safeguarding from the outset the anonymous and confidential nature of the data from all the answers indicated, the study was aimed essentially at the people responsible for managing, supervising and running the selected translation companies, and was designed to meet several previously established objectives. In broad terms the survey that was carried out was based on the following general goals:

- 1 To outline the model picture of a socio-professional universe yet to be explored;
- 2 To contribute towards a profound academic reflection on the sector's most important features, needs, demands and requirements;
- 3 To offer a broad overview of the current market perspective;
- 4 To guide and adapt training at undergraduate level to the constraints and demands of business-oriented settings.

In fact, these broader goals actually broke down into the following specific goals:

1. To draw the prototypical profile of the translation agencies currently operating within the Portuguese market;
2. To outline the socio-professional profile of the major key-players and other parties involved in terms of human resources and staffing;
3. To identify the sector's basic needs and requirements;
4. To create a specific base typology of the services provided by companies;
5. To establish the size and nature of the translation services currently available on the market;
6. To identify the typical procedures and pattern behaviours within a specific frame of reference from the point of view of a business organisation;
7. To study the key work contexts and frameworks involving the supply of

translation services;

8. To analyse the basic organisation methodologies and management procedures;
9. To reflect upon the quality control procedures that are commonly adopted;
10. To analyse the relationship between the translation agencies, their clients and the people in their service;
11. To identify the essential profile skills of a translation service provider within a professional business-oriented setting;
12. To list the basic data regarding the technological resources currently available and used on the market;
13. To study current market trends and major market needs;
14. To explore the real expectations and inner motivations of the sector;
15. To detect the major types of behaviours and strategies for making services suitable for the market and how they are adapted in order to improve the services offered;
16. To identify future perspectives and trends designed to diversify and transform the sector.

Methodology

The task of writing the following research paper was based mainly on the quantitative analysis of data that was collected by means of a previously elaborated questionnaire, based on a series of closed questions. The preparation of the said questionnaire involved a multi-stage process before it was finalised in order to be submitted to the universe of study, namely the major translation companies operating in Portugal.

The working process began with the elaboration of a comprehensive list of translation companies that would ultimately satisfy the APET's eligibility requirements. In a second phase, it became clear that it would be essential to carry out a needs analysis of the sector, based on several surveys that have been conducted in other countries, namely the United Kingdom (the UK Market Research, conducted by the ATC, the British Association of Translation

Companies), the World Bank and Canada (Survey of the Canadian Translation Industry), in order to enable the elaboration of a sufficiently reliable and feasible final questionnaire with the support of the Sociology Department from the University of Minho. This prior analysis of the major coordinates and specific guidelines in terms of setting, background and context allowed us to produce a profile of the type of universe under assessment. It was therefore possible to draw up a set of specific topics and general goals which were then developed into concrete questions aimed at the analysis of specific variables. In total, we have worked with a set of 51 questions, divided into 13 major sections or thematic areas. Later on, a web link was created directing the respondent to the questionnaire that was available on-line at <http://ceh.ilch.uminho.pt/lea/Intro.htm>. Requests for participation in, publication of and response to the said study were sent by e-mail on 8th July, with a final deadline for submission of questionnaires and answers on August 8th, 2005.

Characterisation of the sample, framework and corpus selection criteria

Initially, the purpose of this survey was to study the major translation companies currently operating within the national market, from the perspective of the translation service provider, within the scope of the language industry. However, given the size of the market, the extraordinary multiplicity of the requests for translation services, the diversity of the supply and the specificity of the demand, together with the sector's instability and lack of control, as well as the usual conceptual/terminological mix-up typical of this field of activity, we have decided to focus our analysis on a much narrower, though much more controlled universe in terms of sample reliability. In formal terms, our decision was also influenced by the fact that it would be physically impossible to carry out, within the specific time frame foreseen for a training period of this kind (about 3 months), an in-depth and scientifically supported survey based on reliable and concrete data, beyond the usual constraints at the level of the resources and means available for its application in the field. On the other hand, and bearing in mind the fact that the APET showed an interest in supporting such a survey, we have decided to focus

our attention on two distinctive, but complementary, phases. First, we have focused our attention on the member companies of the APET which, despite being few in number, are subject to strict selection procedures during their application process, something that is worth mentioning, and that is of special interest to our investigation. And, secondly, we have extended our survey to other companies and translation agencies, whose dimension, scope and market intervention are widely known and highly reputed, either because they have been in the market sector for several years or because they have previously been APET members or are currently in the middle of some sort of application procedure to the said association.

Constraints

In fact, bearing in mind that the current number of APET associates does not exceed 15 companies, it was necessary to extend the number of respondents, in a later study, to increase the number of eligible candidates. We therefore sent the said questionnaire to other companies which, despite not being associate members of the APET, shared some sort of common ground in terms of profile, eligibility criteria and professional requirements, as previously mentioned. Therefore, the total number of companies surveyed increased to 28, 15 of which were in fact associate members of the APET. By opening the survey to other companies, our aim was to get a wider and much more diverse description of the profile of some of the major translation agencies currently operating in the market at a national level. It is worth mentioning that, of all the contacted companies, only one company outside the universe of the association of translation agencies managed to answer the survey. Globally, and despite several contacts, we have managed to get a total number of 12 answers from 12 companies, 11 of which belong to the APET, whereas only 1 does not belong to the said association.

It is also worth referring that, although we are aware of the terminological distinction between company, agency and translation bureau, as well as the major difficulties involved in setting up a formal and functionally credible corpus, in the

course of this paper we will use the term “translation company” as used by the universe of the APET to describe a set of companies which, according to the association’s by-laws, meet the associate aims and the respective statutory conditions of entry.

However, this terminological debate leads us to the conclusion that there is clearly a need to redefine the whole concept of translation company, agency or bureau, especially in the light of the new directives stipulated within the scope of the recently approved Translation Services standard EN 15038. Indeed, one of the major reference documents for our study was in fact the said European Standard for Translation Services, recently approved in May 2006, and whose implementation will ultimately affect the concept of professional practice and translation training. As an example, the new EN 15038 standard contains several items of special interest for the profession and its academic approach, as well as for the future professional which include, for instance, the whole redefinition of the concept of translator or translation agency/company/bureau, namely due to the introduction of the concept of TSP or *Translation Service Provider*, which is: "a person or organisation supplying the client with the agreed translation services". It also establishes the distinction between “translation service provider” (TSP) and “translator”¹, the latter considered as yet another link in a long chain of service provision. However, for the purpose of this study, and as objective criteria for selecting the companies, we have chosen the conditions of entry established by the APET in Article 7 of its By-laws (Conditions of Entry)² as preferential requirements for organising our corpus of study.

Data analysis and discussion

The following is a list of the major components and variables of analysis that we consider to be of specific interest in order to assess, reflect upon and contextualise the professional training of translators. We also believe that, although the data is scarce and could become de-contextualised, since it is part of a much

¹ Source: European Standard En 15038 (May 2006).

² Source: APET Website, By-laws section, available in electronic format at <http://www.ape-trad.pt/estatutos.htm> Accessed 17 February 2006)

wider and systematic study, it will allow us to rebuild and outline a certain typology of the major key-features that define the practice of some of the most important translation companies in Portugal.

We will now give a short list, followed by its respective discussion, of the data obtained in terms of the areas involved in the scope of our survey: human resources; major fields or domains of activity; services provided; quality management; necessary skills and requirements for selecting a good translator; hiring and outsourcing policies / procedures; language pairs; additional services; most requested areas and fields of knowledge; customer relations; future trends; the importance of skills in terms of the profile of the future translation service provider; need to expand certain areas of training.

Conclusions

1) Human Resources

All the companies have a fixed and stable management or administrative structure. However, they are generally small in size and are run by a few people, often linked by family ties. In fact, the number of people that constitute the so-called hard core of these companies varies between two and ten, whose tasks include management and administration, often in addition to translation and proof-reading (linguistic and technical), and even including computer and secretarial tasks. However, these employees are not the only ones responsible for production. In fact, these companies are not only involved in in-house translation since subcontracting is also an option to which they resort on a regular basis, by establishing more flexible contacts or through outsourcing procedures. The latter type of employee is therefore encompassed by the legal regime of service providers, whereas the former have contracts under more rigid contractual regimes.

The average age of the professionals that work inside these companies is 35 and there is a predominance of the female sex in terms of occupation and professional practice. Only in tasks connected with the so-called more technical areas do men exceed the number of women in these companies.

2) Major fields or domains of activity

The fields that were cited as being most requested were Informatics, Economics, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, Pharmacy, Law and the Automotive Industry. However, from a more general point of view, it is worth stressing the crucial importance of legal translation, followed by the Automotive Industry, Informatics, Economics and Medicine.

3) Services Provided

From the results obtained, we came to the conclusion that all the companies surveyed actually do translation and certification of official documents, which seems to corroborate the previous findings, in which legal translation was seen as highly important. Other important services provided are interpretation and the areas of software engineering, secretarial work and audio/video document transcription.

4) Quality management and skills preferred when selecting future translators

The skills that receive the greatest attention from the contracting companies are linguistic, writing and translation skills. However, the so-called research skills, cultural knowledge and the capacity for self-criticism are also an added-value for the potential employee. Some of the people that answered the survey considered it important to have a good level of general and technical knowledge in the specialised areas under scrutiny, to be demanding of oneself, and to have a special taste and/or flair for translation.

The most common strategy used for finding new employees is analysis of the CVs that are usually sent to the companies by prospective translators. Third-party recommendation is also a recurrent method, as well as, though to a lesser extent, job recruitment from universities and the Internet. After this stage, i.e., specifically during the process of selection and recruitment, many companies do prefer to carry out a practical test designed for selecting potential employees, assessing the potential translator's output as well as his/her capacity to solve any

obstacles that may arise.

Generally speaking, and according to the companies that were contacted during this survey, the ability to integrate the current translation market comes, on the one hand, from experience in terms of translation practice - the more experienced you are the more easily you can get into the business – and, on the other hand, through the mastery and knowledge of the various computer-aided translation software tools. It is also important to understand the technological resources that are available to facilitate translation practice, together with a capacity to demonstrate excellent knowledge in terms of linguistic, cultural and technical skills in one or more foreign languages. On the other hand, the respondents stressed the importance of having some kind of university level degree in translation, for instance, or even in one specific specialised field, namely Medicine or Law. Finally, it is important to note that most companies that answered the survey stressed the need for the future translator to demonstrate other important skills such as professional skills, social skills, cultural skills and linguistic skills, in tune with market demands, gained throughout his/her academic training and conveyed during the course of his/her personal career path.

As to the importance of the stages involved in the translation process in order to achieve a high quality end-product, it is worth mentioning that all the steps considered (namely, pre-translation, translation and post-translation, according to Daniel Gouadec's traditional model), are mentioned by the companies as valid, essential and useful for the production process. In fact, in a later question, all the companies included the translator and the reviewer, as the most important people involved in the application of the above-mentioned three stages (research, translation and review), in order to assure the quality of the end-product. According to the results, as a general rule, the other people responsible for the task of applying quality control procedures are the quality manager and the project manager.

5) Outsourcing

Outsourcing is a common practice chosen by all the translation agencies

surveyed. One of the most important reasons for this choice has to do with the absence of qualified staff within the company (at both a linguistic and technical level) that are able to respond to clients' expectations. On the other hand, this situation has to do with a kind of constant and frequent practice that has been institutionalised over the years in the translation market, resulting from a specific legal background in Portugal that, on the one hand, fosters the hiring of external workers and therefore decreases the so-called cost of employability, and on the other hand, allows for much more flexibility, autonomy, freedom and mobility in terms of human resources. Thus, the reason why so many people answered that they usually resort to subcontracting is for obvious management reasons.

Knowing that one of the most important goals of these companies is quality itself, all the companies do actually try to support their freelance staff by always or nearly always providing them with support material, which may vary from glossaries and translation notes to the translation software itself. In addition to this, all the companies stated that they always or nearly always perform a specific internal review of all the material translated by the freelancers.

The in-house proof-reader and the quality manager working inside the company are the main people responsible for quality control as well as for checking the reliability of translations done by external translators.

6) Additional Services

When asked about the kind of additional services they were used to providing, all the companies stated going to notary offices, which is quite understandable since all of them stated that they normally did translation and certification of official documents. Furthermore, legal translation was once again one of the most sought after areas in this field. In terms of additional services, many companies also mentioned the issue regarding urgency rates and their connection with the lack of public awareness of the field of translation, something that contributes to adding an entirely new constraint in terms of this rate being charged as an extra "product" provided. Finally, another issue of important debate for the translation companies has to do with the type of proofreading done by

specialists. Bearing in mind the utmost respect for the strictest and most rigorous standards in terms of technical and linguistic accuracy, the purpose of this choice within these companies' policies generally has to do with favouring proofreading done by specialists in each of the specific areas, in accordance with the diversity and range of clients' requests and demands.

7) Customer relations

All the companies that took part in this survey usually create tailor-made glossaries, at least for the most regular customers with whom these companies maintain a solid and strong business relationship based on loyalty and fidelity. Thanks to this approach, the companies are, in fact, providing a more customised service that is better in quality since it enables them to organise, run, manage and more easily personalise the type of terminology that they normally use with each client.

In order to obtain new clients, all the companies usually gather information about future business opportunities by talking to third-party colleagues and peers, by browsing the Internet or by looking up possible contacts in the Yellow Pages and other general or specialised directories. Following this selection procedure, the business contacts are usually made over the phone or via Internet / email, although other means may be used, depending quite often on geographic location. The same thing happens with the kind of strategy used to provide professional follow-up. In fact, the companies try to accompany their clients throughout all the stages of the translation process, by drawing a customised profile of the clients, by identifying their needs, requirements and demands and ultimately by trying to diagnose their demands and preferences so as to be able to solve these problems and create some sort of solid and long-lasting business relationship. Usually, clients consider speed and technical and linguistic accuracy as imperative for the service to be provided. These requirements go hand in hand with such important and complementary values as quality, ethics, professionalism and efficiency. Ultimately, we can say that all clients want a high-quality service together with high quality in the way in which the service and product are provided. The former means

being able to meet the deadlines required as well as being able to provide a first-class quality service in terms of technical and linguistic accuracy and precision, that is, all that was previously agreed and requested by the clients. As to the latter, this expresses the way in which the product provided actually fits and is adapted to the client's own reality, whether it modifies this reality or if, on the other hand, it fails to meet all the previously agreed requirements.

One last word to say that each and every company has its own unique idea of the client it prefers and the type of markets in which it would rather work. Among these, preference is given to international and privately-owned companies. In this case, the privately-owned sector is generally the most common kind of client for these companies.

8) Future Perspectives

The answer to the question about the areas of knowledge that will be most requested in the future, and ranked in terms of their importance and impact, produced the field of Informatics as the first option³, immediately followed by Law. Some of the other areas cited as being of potential interest for the industry were New Technologies, Medical Technology, the Internet, Economics, Engineering and Localisation. As future potential domains of interest for the industry, it is worth mentioning the emergence of areas connected to Management, the Automotive Industry and Information Technologies. We also obtained answers indicating a slight interest in such disparate areas of specialisation as Community Affairs, Tourism, Medicine, Marketing and Publicity and Industry-related issues, namely: Electronic Engineering, Techno-industrial Engineering, Biology, Pharmacy and Research.

In terms of language pairs, no major changes to the current panorama are foreseeable in the future. English, German, French and Spanish are, and will be, the most common language combinations on the market, although there may be a

³ This growing interest in Informatics is strongly and intimately connected with the growing impact of the so-called Localisation Industry within the context of the Language Industry / Engineering (software and contents).

slight increase in terms of market demand for such languages as Chinese and the languages of the new EU member states, namely those of Eastern Europe. In fact, as to the major working languages that might be most requested in the near future, English is still the uncontested market leader, followed by Spanish, Chinese and some of the languages from the new enlarged Europe and, to a lesser extent, German and French.

9) The importance of skills in the profile of the future translator

Another area on which we have decided to focus our attention has to do with the evolution evident in terms of the skills of the future translator. By analysing the data gathered, we must conclude that it will be necessary to strengthen the above-mentioned skills, whilst at the same time focusing on much more polyvalence and flexibility in the kind of training provided in order to strengthen new areas. Considering the proposed comments, and although these skills have been discussed for some time now, the truth is that it is of the utmost importance to provide university-level training that is adapted to and consistent with the demands that are faced by future translators. As stated by the respondents, most recent graduates still have to learn the basic technical and professional skills in tune with the kind of job they are expected to produce, as well as the kind of skills that are considered absolutely essential, after they have entered the labour market, or by undergoing further training offered within an employment context. The findings of this survey suggest that there is an absolute need to focus, on the one hand, on some sort of technical specialisation and, on the other, on the development of certain skills that would enable the translator to be easily integrated into work teams, as well as to cope with different settings that are mainly characterised by such features as project management and quality evaluation and control. As far as training is concerned, it is worth mentioning the focus placed on the area of information technology as well as translation-aiding tools or computer-assisted translation (CAT). Finally, and according to the universe studied, the future of training must include integrated and functional management of all the steps of a specific translation project, from the moment the text is received until the finished

product is handed to the client, all the necessary administrative procedures, entrepreneurship and client/company contacts, among others. It also seems important to stress other types of skills, in addition to those mentioned above, which, despite having less impact, may reveal future areas of interest as far as training is concerned. These include the ability to deal with the various instruments and tools available, the ability to search, investigate and carry out research, as well as availability, self-training and refresher training, good sense, ethics and self-critique.

Some brief findings and future opportunities for integrating training

In general terms, within the scope of this redefinition of the market, we should like to make some brief final remarks about the results that were obtained in order to get some insights that might be considered useful in the training of future translators geared towards and influenced by specific professional and business-oriented contexts which may eventually produce concrete effects in the elaboration of future study plans. First of all, we have the ubiquitous, omnipresent and transversal nature of translation in the world today. More and more translation is being done and there is an increasing need for multilingual communication. The production, management and circulation of information are growing daily, as is the volume, amount, intensity, depth and specificity of the major requests for translation. On the one hand, and considering the international context in which the whole professional translation activity actually takes place and is currently developed, one of the major findings concerns the considerable depth and reach of the market. In other words, in the face of the designs and constraints of globalisation, the translation agencies engaged in providing translation services in the field of the so-called language industry or, according to the recently approved translation services standard, these new "TSPs" or "Translation Service Providers" will ultimately be faced with a wide array of requests which, on the one hand, are rooted in more diverse supply and, on the other, in more specific demand. Nevertheless, the intense effects of globalisation on the language industry, responsible for the dissemination of information on a global scale, do actually pose

new threats and present new challenges to all the companies engaged in the production and provision of multilingual services. The need to mutate and adapt to a market that is also increasingly voluble, volatile and dynamic therefore calls for some specific strategies designed to reset and redefine the whole concept of business goals, namely at the level of variety or exclusiveness of the type of language pairs provided, the specialisation of themes and fields of work and, finally, in terms of provision of additional services, all included within a perspective of rendering the most complete range of integrated and multimodal services. At the same time, and contrary to the whole market deregulation and professional fragmentation, we are gradually witnessing an increase in the levels of expectations and rigour, as well as the growing emergence, and even imposition from the outside, of standards and regulations concerning quality and productivity that are increasingly standardised and formatted. This will eventually lead to the redefinition of the concept of professionalism as applied to translation.

Therefore, and in the face of this new configuration of the translator's profile and function, it seems important that the kind of training provided should be as polyvalent and versatile as possible, as well as sufficiently multifaceted, integrated and multimodal. It should also be geared towards the so-called new satellite-professions or extensions of the task of the translator and conveniently open and available so as to solve the equation problem posed by the specialist/generalist. Quoting Cauer, and subverting his rather famous *dictum*, the type of training offered should be as general as possible, and as specialised as necessary. If our goal is to train the kind of individual that Christiane Nord calls the "functional translator" (Nord, 2005: 210 and 211), i.e., a professional translator, characterised by the awareness that translation today is used in the most varied communications and situations, thus requiring a special flair for articulating professional knowledge with the most suitable social norms and technical-functional skills, it is possible that just one type of training that is both balanced and diversified, as well as compatible with the new personal and professional demands faced by the translator, can meet the most diverse market requirements, where the individual himself is confronted with the specific dynamics of project management, human resources management,

materials management and, above all, an entirely new dynamic geared towards sociability and the application of a specific *savoir-faire*. In this sense, a multi and interdisciplinary approach seems to be a wise option in order to provide the trainee with a series of strategies and solutions that will eventually allow him to easily integrate and adapt himself to the new working contexts with which he is constantly faced, characterised by a vast array of language combinations, thematic and conceptual specialisation as well as technological diversification and complexity. Basically, a more human interactive and pro-active kind of training focused on the individual as a person, whilst at the same time professionally oriented and focused on such crucial values as quality of service, ethics and deontology. This is, we believe, the kind of approach that will be capable of regaining a new technical culture of the craft, while implying the specific knowledge of what to do and how to be that is deeply rooted in specialised contexts marked by social and human interaction.

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