

"Category Errors"

The Idea of Value in the Australian Translation and Interpreting Industry

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For those who don't know me I'm a very lucky person. I'm a bloke, a live in a very diverse and yet secure country, I speak read and write two high demand languages, skills which I acquired through absolutely no conscious plan or effort. But most of all I happened to join AUSIT just as Moreno was coming out of hibernation.

The mailing list and website have been fantastic initiatives and I thank Moreno and Ilke and Silke for their incredible efforts. Amongst other thing it gives a person like me, and everyone, a much clearer view of what is going on. I think I can see that in AUSIT with the mailing list things are now happening every ten minutes instead of every six months. In the manner of all internet mailing lists views can be offered frankly and spontaneously without even worrying about spelling or getting dressed. I won't bang on about what a wonderful tool the internet is. What I would like to do is go over some of the issues that have come up since I started participating in this forum.
(Please bear in mind that for brevity's sake I will use the word "translate" to refer to both translation and interpreting.)

There have been very interesting discussions on quality, ethics, testing, how to deal with difficult clients, how to deal with difficult translators, how make more people join AUSIT and so on.

What I see is a group of people drawing closer to the problem of context.

Why Context? You all know how important contextual information is when translating. A linguistic act, whether it is an utterance or a sentence generally has the function of modifying, by relatively small degree, the cumulative effort of everything that has gone before.

The effectiveness of a particular sentence will be governed by its context. If I seek to make a statement I must preface it, and lead up to it. I am creating a context, and if I have done a good job, the final sentences, the point of what I am saying is easy to understand. Perhaps not agree with, but if you choose to disagree you have been provided with the background and the basis of what it is you disagree with and you know and can say why you disagree.

If I have taken the trouble to provide a good context and spell out the basic concepts, then I also am well equipped with all the necessary information to argue my case. And the argument between us will be one founded on shared knowledge, and useful concepts. Useful in that they make my statements intelligible, and useful to those who disagree with my conclusions, because if they can demonstrate that the basis of my argument is incorrect then the whole argument will fall to the ground.

The alternative is to conduct the argument, not knowing why, and sometimes not actually knowing if we disagree with one another, at cross purposes, uniformed,

reacting from fear and ignorance, confronted with something we don't understand and therefore grasping for concepts with which we can construct an argument, for or against, and finding only the abused and discarded prejudices and distortion of people not fit to punctuate our discussion let alone support it. Working without context.

I use these very many building analogies, "basis", "foundation", "construct" and so on advisedly. To build a house, or a context, you must put one thing on top of another. This must happen in a particular order and they must be joined together carefully. It takes time. Laying the ground works is the messiest, the hardest, the most drawn-out and yet the most important stage of all. If you get that right the rest of the house will turn out the way you want in all the important areas: stable, plumb, true, straight and so on. You need a good foundation. You need a good context, to get a good result.

When I read the mailing list posts, what I see is a group of people trying to argue a case. A lot of the discussion is argument between them (and I don't mean "argument" as in fight. I mean the logical presentation, comparison and testing of ideas). But the overall effect is a group of people working through issues so that they may then argue the same issues to a wider audience.

Which I will call for the sake of convenience, our "market".

We, translators, are trying to argue a case, to our market. And that case is the one for our value. We are trying to argue that we are valuable, why we are valuable and that we should be treated as though we are valuable.

We've been doing this for a long time, and we are no where near where we should be for all that effort. The result of that it is very common to find translators a very cynical bunch of people. They start to sound like the extreme Left. As though it is the good fight that they know will never be won. This leads to self-righteous irony being the basis of all discussion, this leads to being regarded as a bunch of wankers.

Well before that happens I would like the opportunity to point out where this may in part be our fault.

I say we have failed to provide enough context. We have failed to equip our market with the basic concepts that they need to make sense of what we are saying. Just as we become frustrated with clients who don't provide us with the background framework required to understand the thing we're meant to be translating, we have failed in exactly the same way.

When we speak they listen, but to make sense of what we are saying they turn in desperation to concepts that have been standing around and getting in the way for hundreds of years. Together they are an awful doppelganger of historical myths and misnomers.

"Just turn up on the day and translate."

"Please translate the nuance rather than literally"

"Please translate literally"

"My daughter's doing Italian so we're going to get her to interpret at the meeting."

"But I always interpret for my Mother when she's in hospital!"

“I know someone who will do it for nothing.”
“\$40 an hour just to sit there and talk? Outrageous!”

I have to say that one of the best (or worst) examples of this I found in the NAATI news. They published what amounted to unpaid ad for some MT product where the verb “translate” was used throughout even in sentences that observed that the “translation” required further human intervention before became intelligible. What does the word “translate” mean then? Is something translated if it is a string of words from another language?

When the body whose responsibility it is to lend some definition to the work of translators uses the verb “translate” willy-nilly to refer to a text that is entirely unusable, am I nitpicking over terminology?

“I’m sure these words are from another language. Oh well, it must be translated!”

says the monolingual client. This has been going on for years. If you’re not like that, if you do consistently good, thorough work, that you can and will defend as a matter of professional pride then you must hate this. The world is full of people paying out money for what they call translation because they’ve never been taught what “translation” is.

Each one of these statements or questions are founded on premises which are intellectually bankrupt. The concepts on which comments like this are based, excuse people from thinking, because they are well worn, and in this comfort zone of historically sanctioned and mutual agreed ignorance people know they will not be challenged. They’ll get home quicker.

I challenge each one, And I think it should be one of the roles of AUSIT to not only challenge these as an organisation, but to offer us, its members every assistance as we challenge them, and indeed to make people think, and make them think our way. In a way that serves our greater task of arguing the case.

There are a number of very broad issues that are being discussed on the list, and they are moving toward the resolution of a good context, within which I believe we will be able to argue our case more effectively.

These are the respective roles of AUSIT and NAATI, and the relationship between them. The characterisation of service provision and of the market, and the relationship in turn between those elements. Currently there’s a lot of very interesting discussion between the members of AUSIT regarding all of these things and still a fair bit of confusion. Sometime people think NAATI should be educating the public. NAATI has sounded like it wants to get involved in education candidates. Lots of people think that AUSIT should be marketing.

There’s disagreement on many things but they are all being worked out gradually. This is what I call working towards a context, or building the foundations of a house. They will be good foundations when the house we have built is straight and true and plumb. In other words when an immigration officer, or policeman or doctor, or lawyer or business person, meets a translator and asks them about the profession, or raises some query or

problem, the answers they get will start to be consistent. They will find that all translators are working from something bigger than themselves. There's an association, there's lively debate about current issues, there's ongoing development, and most of all there is a significant body of basic concepts, that they will realise **they** need to know, in order to understand **us**, and before they can comment on translation. If every practitioner they meet sounds as though they are referring to the same philosophy and the same heritage and the same theory, perhaps they will stop thinking "Oh you're just here because your parents were wogs." We will then have a professional identity. We might then be a profession.

Tonight I would like to present an argument concerning just one element of this. And that is how AUSIT categorises its membership.

To change this would be a big change involving a vote to change the constitution. That change should occur is not unusual. Stepping back from the impact that change may have on our personal lives, it is easy to see that the translation industry is still at its early developmental stage and that it is right and proper that things change from one situation to better situations. The world is changing very rapidly and amongst other things it is learning about the importance of translation, as are practitioners themselves learning rapidly how best translation should take place.

It is interesting to note that the public construction of translation is difficult in each country according to what place translators have had in their history. I can offer some comments on the situation in Japan which I learnt at a talk recently.

Translators were regarded very highly due to the automatic Confucian respect for anyone who sits at a desk with books in front of them. They were then even more highly respected when Japan finally opened their doors to the outside world and translators were seen as the gatekeepers of all the Western wisdom on modern government, cuisine and music. Interpreters on the other hand were regarded as a necessary evil, used to negotiate with the small number of Dutch and Portuguese who had been trading in a couple of controlled ports from centuries earlier. Simultaneous interpreting literally rocketed to public recognition and acclaim when a TV producer decided to show images of the interpreters translating the radio transmissions during the landing on the moon. On the other hand "liaison" interpreters first came to the attention of the Japanese public during the Expo in Osaka in 1970 when hundreds of volunteer interpreter/guides were recruited to help all the visiting foreigners. The effect of this is that astonishingly, if you are not a simultaneous interpreter, or a trained tour guide who interprets (another respectable occupation) you are actually called a "volunteer", they have imported the English word for this purpose, and most police investigations are still conducted through unpaid interpreters!

When I said earlier on that I was a lucky bloke I have to say that in relation to this highly specific question of how public perception of translation is molded by historical events, I'm very lucky to be in Australia. Firstly because we have very little historical baggage, so we started from scratch. Then we had a relatively rapid throwing together of more nationalities than you could poke a stick at, and the place is secure and relaxed enough for us to turn our eye (eventually) to the question of how to solve all the resulting language problems. And although many people have said that we in turn have our expectations disproportionately coloured by community interpreting, I don't know that A.

that's so bad, and B. that it is true. We actually have an enormous range of experiences awaiting the practicing translator in Australia and when they all get home and tell each other what they did today, it might be a basis of a fairly objective view of translation. Here's my attempt.

Things get translated for three reasons: love, money and social justice.

1. In love there is no accountability.
2. Translating for money in the free market we can let the buyer beware.
3. The administration of Social Justice starts from the assumption that everyone hates everyone, and although we pay for it, you can't go out and buy it, because that wouldn't be just.

Now of course we could talk all night about our experiences in literary translation, or in business translation, but I must focus on the third area because this is where there is a pre-existing obligation between the State, organisations like NAATI and AUSIT and the public. This is where we cannot simply let things look after themselves, because people may be at risk and we as a nation ostensibly care about people.

Even though not everyone always works in this last area, as long as there is the possibility that we might, and as long as the Nation of Australia purports to maintain certain standards of humanitarian conduct, then there will always be people who must get a satisfactory result from a translator, and who cannot pick and choose their service provider until they get it right. This is where there is an obligation on the part of the state to test and accredit practitioners. This then contributes to a situation where people may be confident that although the arrangements are out of their hands, the quality of the service will be satisfactory.

I don't believe that this is yet the case. Because several other important elements are missing. One important one is that translation does not pay enough. The entire industry is subject to economic restraints that for example prevent good practitioners from becoming better practitioners because they must supplement their translation income with other time-consuming work. Or simply by dictating the type of people who end up translating, and molding the attitudes of the middle men who manage it (or fail to manage it).

This is a problem that has serious implications for everyone who depends on translators, and therefore should be a matter for concern purely on ethical grounds.

The reason it does not pay enough is because the people who pay for it do not understand it, because it is a difficult thing to understand, and the only people who could explain it, us, have so far failed to do so. This is not a criticism. It is simply a function of where we are in history. The criticism would arise however if, as a group we failed to understand this and failed to take action to remedy the situation.

The action we must take is the development of a context which these issues can be discussed meaningfully. Currently this is not the case. When people cast around for concepts to help them understand translation they will often find themselves at AUSIT's doorstep (including our new website). At this point it is critical that whatever concepts they find there are such that they help US with our ongoing task of educating THEM. These concepts will become the context of general principles within which specific issues might be meaningfully discussed.

[***] Our current scheme of membership categories was designed with other things in mind. We have defined potential members in terms of what they are to us, and what the “burden” of joining might be for them. Although these things are also important, it is inward-looking to give them high priority. And apart from the question of fees (discussed below) there has been very little attempt to attach to each of these categories expectations that might also help a customer understand how a practitioner moves from amateur to professional, or defines their level of expertise and responsibility, or justifies level of remuneration. In short the system is useless to the very people on whose understanding we depend for the financial support to develop our profession: our market.

Our highest priority in designing this system should be to answer those questions that the public and our market have: “What is a translator?” and “Is it a profession?”

[overhead]

Practicing Member

- Has been a Member (see below)
- Translation is primary source of income and activity
- Must demonstrate continuing activity in order to retain membership
- Is subject to review by AUSIT in response to customer complaint and can lose membership as consequence
- Must participate in mentor / intern system, as a mentor.
- Must assist with market research undertaken by AUSIT

Member

- Has NAATI professional level accreditation
- Must achieve practicing member status with fixed period of time
- Must log a certain amount of work in that time
- Must participate in mentor / intern system (as intern)
- Must assist with market research undertaken by AUSIT

Associate member

- Anyone interested
- They can watch and get inspired

Strategic Partner

- Incorporated body, whether school, agency or government department.
- Is subject to review by AUSIT in response to customer, practitioner or student complaint and can lose membership as a consequence
- Must assist in mentor / intern system
- Must assist with market research undertaken by AUSIT
- Must pay a lot

[end overhead]

1. Practicing Member

With that as our guide there is one big category of member that we must establish and promote with the utmost confidence. That is the qualified, experienced, accountable, practicing member. These people exist and it is solely due to their conduct as paid translators that we have the remotest claim on the word “profession”. These people must be distinguished in the eyes of the public and the way in which it is proposed to do this is with the practicing member category. The public must be guided to the person who will solve their problem. A person who will answer their phone every time it rings,

will manage relationships responsibly, provide an adequate level of service, and when it isn't adequate will work until a resolution is found that is satisfactory to all concerned. These are attributes much harder to acquire than NAATI accreditation or a pass mark at a course. Although these last two things are probably necessary, it is only after the hardening brought about by years of experience that a person of such stature is created. If this sounds elitist to anyone please pause and ask if you would like these very same rules waived in the case of your family doctor, or lawyer, or any profession on whom you depend. No one would, and it is nobody's fault but our own that we have failed to set the bar high enough amongst ourselves. Is it any wonder the public thinks we are only a step up from students and their bilingual friends? We need to raise the bar and we need to understand that it is everybody's interests to do so.

2. Member

For the very reason that this level of ability cannot be attained in a course, all prospective practicing members need time to accumulate experience. It is proper that those with NAATI qualifications and the desire to become translators are given a period of time in which to accumulate experience, preferably in close collaboration with more experienced practitioners and responsible agencies. (It is crucial that members understand that integrated into this proposed new system are plans to promote and facilitate a system of mentorship appropriate to this activity.) During this period of time translation will not be their sole source of income. Their phone may not be manned during business hours. They may in fact be accredited but have no interest in doing it full time. If you have ever been annoyed at a doctor smirking at the mention of the "profession" of translation ask yourself would you go to someone who did medicine as a hobby? This is a crucial distinction and we must make it for our market after we understand it ourselves.

3. Associate

AUSIT must give thought to its future growth. This category would allow anyone with an interest, perhaps those studying and planning to sit for NAATI exams, perhaps individuals from regular users of translation services, to sit in and listen and learn from the vigorous exchange of ideas and opinions that AUSIT represents. We should let anyone enter this category and we should offer as much encouragement and information as possible so that they may become practitioners or at least well-educated.

4. Strategic Partners

It is argued here that we need this category on the grounds that any type of membership in AUSIT should be a thing of pride. Corporations, whether agencies, educational institutions or large users of TI services can do things that individuals can't, both good and bad. They are therefore fit and unique subjects for ethical review. Secondly, education and the raising of public awareness is quite clearly an important part of AUSIT's role. We must be active rather than reactive, and therefore we must judge outright whether any body that enjoys any sort of public profile and voice on translation is with us or against us. Those that we think are sending the right message are in, those that aren't are out.

Furthermore if AUSIT says that they also have a responsibility to assist with the development of the profession through, for example, participation in mentorship programs, and by being shining examples of translation management and training then I think at that point they would have that obligation.

AUSIT's attitude should not be one of "will they be kind enough to join?", rather the corporations should worry about whether they will be good enough to get in.

Corporations have considerable influence on the public perception of translation, on the economics of translation, on the quality of people entering the profession and on the expectations of all stakeholders. In recognition of this influence it is fit and proper that they be members and that this is seen as a good thing. But we should be setting the rules and this is our opportunity to do so.

These arguments are purely matters of principle. There are many issues arising out of them that are matters of degree: different fees payable per category; number of words translated or days interpreted to quality as practicing etc. These need not be determined here and no particular case is being argued. Rather it is appropriate that they are debated at length involving as many different languages and (current) levels of membership as possible.

Naturally these are languages that due to low demand might preclude practicing status for the most eminently qualified and experienced people. The rules will have to be different for some languages accordingly.

The setting of fees will also involve consideration of what AUSIT hopes to achieve and what it will cost, but no particular price is being argued here. It is important though that members do not look for some direct return on investment by joining AUSIT. AUSIT is not a milk bar. Doctors don't pay for their cars and holidays by joining the AMA. They pay for them by being good doctors, and the role of the AMA is to work to create an environment where this is possible. Where people can tell the difference between a good and a bad doctor, by getting rid of the bad ones and defending the good ones, by setting standards and precedents, by assisting those who enter the profession to have realistic expectations, and by lobbying those in power to base their exercise of that power on good information.

I want a professional association that does all those things and I'm prepared to pay for it. It will present to the public a cogent and most of all useful basis on which we can all go forth as individual practitioners and explain our case as translators.

To sum up.

- Our case is that translation is a very valuable thing and that translators provide a very valuable service.
- Although I am not arguing this in detail tonight I believe there is considerable justification for significantly higher levels of remuneration for translation in general, based on; the investment in the development of skills that practitioners have made; on the demands of the actual work; on the scarcity of the skill set; on the costs to both public and private purse of not having things properly translated and so on.
- You could force people to pay those rates, but I disagree with those politics.
- In the case of translation I believe in a free market and that therefore each practitioner ought to argue their own case.
- They have to be able to.
- At the moment they're not.
- AUSIT's role should be to ensure that they can. Through networking, CPD, mentorship, the ebulletin and so on.
- With AUSIT we represent ourselves both to ourselves and the public. And we should be confident that when anyone looks at this blurry mass of people all somehow associated with translation, that the mass resolves into these four critically distinct groups.
- And when they ask of us "what is a translator?" that our answers are all based, amongst many other things, on this well-constructed perception of the profession.

Footnote.

At the beginning of the talk Sarina introduced me as the owner of an “agency” which I immediately corrected. There are many things that make my company different to an agency but the critical one is highly relevant to this discussion so I have added it here.

Currently the gatekeepers of the bulk of the work in this industry are the agencies. They are all constrained by the structure of Australian taxation law to avoid any possibility of having their subcontractors deemed “employees”. One of the tests is whether the person works under instruction. Agencies cannot instruct their subcontractors. (This is not criticism; I actually feel sorry for them). Therefore their hands are completely tied in matters of developing what their company might plan as a unique and value-added product. Therefore they are left with NAATI accreditation, our code of ethics and nothing else with which to distinguish themselves in the market place. Therefore the only way left to them by which they may compete with one another is price. The cheapest tender wins. The public is left thinking that translation is mechanical, and the practitioners get paid peanuts. The agencies are forced to stop dead ANY professional development that might take place between two or more people, in the manner that we are doing here, for fear of having to pay super and workcover. In a more expanded version this has been the subject of other talks I have given and I will be happy to make these available at some point in the future, but for the time being I implore people to consider how this situation has completely shackled the development of our profession.