

Product or Performance? Theory, Practice, Management and Quality Control of Translation

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My presentation is based on very little evidence. What evidence there is, is anecdotal and limited to my experience as a Japanese translator in Melbourne, in the eighties and nineties.

Biographical sketch. Total time lived in Japan: two and a half years. Total time spent in formal study of Japanese: two weeks. Time spent in formal study of translation and interpreting: nil. Time elapsed since first ever interpreting job: fourteen years. Time since level three accreditation [required for court interpreting] : six years. Time since translation became full time occupation: four years. Time since I started taking it seriously: three years.

Approximately three years ago I translated at a court case involving five Japanese nationals charged with importation of 14kg of a prohibited substance, and this experience seemed to be designed by God to educate Chris Poole. A better set of circumstances to show all the things that can go wrong in the world of translation would be hard to imagine.

I intend to be critical of many things in today's talk and when I am I beg that you retain the words "there but for the grace of God go I". Before and since that court case I have learnt a great deal about how translators can be ignorant, remiss and incompetent, by being that translator, so forgive me if I sound like a reformed smoker.

This is not the time or the place to go into the details of what went wrong at the court case, or of the many other things I've seen in the past fourteen years. Suffice to say that the experience compelled me to reconsider my occupation as a translator, (and by the way, when I say "translator" I mean both spoken and written word. I'll deal with that aberration a bit later in my talk) and by extension to examine the industry as a whole. Amongst other things, it has driven me, for the sake of my own business, to develop my own theory of language, theory of translation, my own standard procedures manual that covers every aspect I can think of in translation, and in passing, to work on a problem close to the heart of

this conference: how are competent translators to be trained and produced? Basically I had to tidy up the quality in my own backyard, and then, having seen the large gap that exists between accrediting people and guaranteeing the quality of a product, I had to start training in order to meet the growing demands on my business.

In examining the industry as a whole I discovered what I think is a systemic problem. It is summarised in the title of my paper today. I would like to expand on it in this way.

The central thesis of my talk today is that [set out as the ohp]

the translation industry in Australia,

insofar as it is conceived by those involved in its research, development, promotion, the training and accreditation of its practitioners, and the articulation of its meaning, value, values and aspirations for the benefit of greater society,

have unadvisedly used the individual, and the subjective experience and innate skill of the individual

as their point of departure.

To make this ridiculously long sentence clearer, I will spell out the opposite.

The translation industry has placed the individual practitioner at the centre of their consideration, and arranged all quality control measures around them. This is in sharp contrast to the industries that supply almost all of the products and services by which we are surrounded. Industry in general starts with the definition of an adequate product or service, and then within the constraints of economic viability, does whatever is necessary to deliver that product or service.

I feel that, broadly speaking there are three reasons for the problem I have described to be the case.

The first reason stems from the nature of the industry in Australia, in that it consists primarily of community interpreting. This in turn reflects the fact that large section of our society speak languages other than English, and that in their various dealings with public institutions such as the courts and hospitals they will not be treated fairly unless the language barriers are removed and they can conduct their business there with as many of the advantages as possible that an English speaker would enjoy.

The demand for interpreting services to deliver these advantages has grown very quickly in Australia in the past thirty years, and for a long time was supplied on an ad hoc basis.

To explain the reasons for this we need to look at where and when Australia is. Multilinguality is not a common academic achievement, nor are we able to acquire it as a natural function of being close to other countries. If someone speaks a second language in Australia it's because they're either immigrants, or some bizarre academic high achiever. It's hard to say which group has been the more despised in Australia's history.

Such attitudes are unusual on this planet: most people live on continents, full of other people, and I think bilinguality is probably the norm rather than the exception for humans in general. Maybe even more common than literacy.

Into this environment we must introduce another factor, whose respective genealogy I can only guess at but I'm sure it's not unique to Australia. This is the commonly held view, by regular folk, that if you speak two languages you are translator.

This is roughly equivalent to alleging that anyone with two hands is a concert pianist. I believe this accounts more than any other factor for the retarded development of the translation industry in Australia, and probably elsewhere. It's a natural view to find in people and it has been allowed to flourish in the environment I describe here.

In this environment, the many people who immigrated to Australia and then acquired English, or their children, were the obvious and perhaps even the only group of people from which translators could be harvested. The courts, for example, were obliged to do this in lieu of any other option, and did so under duress, because of the prevailing suspicion that all such translators were sister-in-laws of the accused and therefore not to be trusted. (Although I acknowledge the real problems described in the talk before mine with regard to small ethnic communities). The courts had to be shown, with great patience, that even given the best intentions and the highest levels of honesty and integrity, that there might be more to competent translation than simply being the bilingual cleaner who happened to be outside the court at the time. I was amused to hear yesterday that this story has currency across the Tasman [in New Zealand] as well.

My reading of the work that NAATI [National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters] does could be described in this context as a rearguard action. Damage control in the face of these sort of historical facts and prejudices. Their brief seems to have been: "start with the people, this unruly, self-taught and suspect group of ethnics, and somehow whip them into shape. Take them as the given population of translators and supplement their existing

work practices and culture with numerous codes of ethics and liberal use of the word ‘professional’”.

It was interesting to hear Adolfo [Chairman of NAATI] speak today about the pressure to keep testing. When I sat for my NAATI exam, it was only the choice I had because I was too busy working as a translator to do a course.

I would like to speak briefly about terminology, as a possible window onto the second reason for this to be the state of affairs. There prevails at the moment a terminological convention of using the word “interpreter” for someone who translates the spoken word and “translator” for the written word.

Several years ago I heard Nick Pappas, the then Chief Magistrate of Victoria say he preferred the word “translator” to “interpreter” because he felt the latter implied twisting the meaning of the translated speech. I looked it up in the OED and found that he’s right. Not only can the word “interpreter” imply putting one’s own construction on something, it is also obsolete in the context of translation. Furthermore, neither the verb “translate” nor the noun “translator” are in any way limited to the written word. In short, it is a pure colloquialism. (I was happy to hear Adolfo talking of the “confused public” trying to deal with this convention.)

Now, language can change, and is changing all the time. But this is a cliché that we of all people should dispense with in order to deal with more meaningful questions like how, when, and most of all, why does language change?

Sometimes new words are invented because our understanding of the world around us has increased to the point where new concepts demand a new name and old ones more refined description. I applaud this kind of progress.

Unfortunately it is the least common. More often it is large number of new words adopted or imported or invented by a whole generation or socio-economic group for no other reason than to make themselves easily distinguished from another, usually adjacent generation or socio-economic group.

This causes me dismay.

Then there is the glamourising of speech that is perceived as old and lacklustre with flash new buzzwords. Proper education would keep this at bay, but more often we see ignorance encouraging it.

The colloquial use of “interpreter/translator” we must live with. I’ve got in on my cards and in the yellow pages. One can’t argue with the market. But how do we analyse this development in the language? I feel that it may have something to do with my contention today.

Interpreting is the high profile public face of translation. They are participants, they are travelling down the critical path with all the VIPs, they are helping to create the event. They are the opinionated, confident public speakers. They are in fact the performers. Some may say the prima donnas.

There is even a culture of defining oneself as being “cut out for either interpreting or translating”, which I’ve heard reinforced at this conference several times. The brash, outgoing person makes a good interpreter, the quiet, studious type: a good translator. And yet do we divide ourselves up in our Mother tongue that way? We are all literate. We have to be. We speak, read and write. Do we cut out the one or the other? Is that an issue in our day to day lives? It is even institutionalised, where some colleges are happy to clearly divide the training of students into two streams! Perhaps the convention has grown so that interpreters can clearly distinguish themselves from those nerds who sit at their computer all day. But both of these views have the individual firmly in their sights.

There is a tendency to take this solo performance of the interpreter as a valid model of the process of translation. Extending this image to cover the entire industry is a grave error that demands redress.

Interpreting is translation. It is the carriage of meaning, according to criteria of function, content and style, and many other criteria, from one language to another. but it is translation under the most extremely adverse conditions.

The public perception of translation, such as it is, is founded on this anthropomorphic and emotive image. I say anthropomorphic because it confuses the person with the product.

If the lot of translators, and those who train them, is to be improved, then it will surely be a function of the understanding that can be instilled in the minds of the populace by advocates of the translation industry. I would argue however that this view of the solo performance is a fatal impediment to both self-awareness and broadly cultivated understanding.

It has been my experience in trying to come to grips with the problems of quality control in translation that our point of departure should be the definition of ideal circumstances: all the things that one would require to complete the perfect translation, and then to assess all practical experience in terms of what degree of compromise is necessary. How far short of the ideal do we fall? What is lacking? Of course interpreting is going to be the most drastic compromise of all. But there is no way one will be able to comprehensively arrive at a complete understanding of the restrictions an interpreter suffers, let alone start to develop protocols to palliate these restrictions, unless one starts at the definition of adequacy and then work up to the compromise.

The third reason. In a country where the only bilingual people are ethnic, it is somehow amazing that a skippy, like me, can speak two languages, and they are told this repeatedly. They are even told this by their clients when they find themselves working as translators. Their clients seem to rejoice in discarding for the moment all the expectations they would normally have of value for money, and praising this bilingual young whippersnapper. This tends to puff one up. (Till three years ago.)

Similarly those people whose career started out with two languages spoke in the home by their parents from other countries, spend a large part of their lives, before they enter working life, regarding their bilinguality as part of their personal heritage. A big part of their personalities. For years they walk around with two languages, unconsciously taking for granted the fact that, to paraphrase Goethe, their ideas have two skins. And skin's a pretty sensitive thing. Bilinguality begins for them, as an expression of their individuality, a distinguishing mark of them as members of their community and family, with all the expectations of treatment that is equitable with all other community members. And taking, as one does, criticism of these things personally.

Then, when all these habits are well entrenched this person becomes a translator for a living. Conceptually, what they have always done as part of being themselves, must now be done in order to deliver a product, and suddenly personal heritage ought to count for nothing. It is now simply a product.

Think of a product. Plumbing. Pipes still leaking, plumber doesn't get paid. Does he take it personally? No! he doesn't even expect to get paid, no matter how hard he's worked, until they stop leaking. Black and white. No argument. Strict accountability. No one cares how long he's being working, or where he learnt all that clever stuff with the spanners and so on. No one gives a damn. It's just a product.

I suggest that if the translation market, regarded translation as a product, the same way they regard soap powder, or a meal at a restaurant, or a new set of tyres, I think that we as translators would suddenly have a hard time making a living.

To restate my theme today, thinking of translation as a product is a big ask. It doesn't happen. People from both of those backgrounds find it very difficult to switch from personal heritage to product. I would go on to say that the persistence of these problems is a major obstacle to the industry maturing to the same level of accountability as, say, the plumbing industry.

In examining what I saw as being wrong with the industry I was driven to map out in logical order a more useful description of what it is that we do and how we should do it. I would like to explain that now.

Rather than start with the individuals involved, and arranging all the considerations of theory and practice and quality and accountability thereabouts, I suggest that a more rational way to approach the problem is to start with the product:

- There is such a thing as translation. The conversion of a speech or text from one language to another.
- There are criteria by which this process can be judged in a qualitative sense.
- There is a level of quality that, within sensible economic boundaries, a person should be entitled to expect in exchange for payment.
- There are certain minimum conditions within which translation of an adequate quality can take place.
- These conditions can be defined.
- They may, in part, consist of specifiable tasks, the competent execution of which will depend on certain skills which may quite often be found in individuals who have the right training and experience.

On the point of payment, in most community translation the person is a faceless bureaucrat who pays via several middle men and an agency. This fact should not be allowed to obscure the primacy of customer satisfaction that governs any transaction of money for product. In the very wide variety of work I've been lucky enough to experience as a Japanese translator I have come to see the distinctions between community and business interpreting as irrelevant. It doesn't matter if the customer is the Immigration Review Tribunal or a Japanese film crew, ripping them off means the same thing.

This might be an appropriate time to comment further on this topic. I wonder whether it is important to categorise translators as all, like "legal interpreter", "technical translator". Translation is an immense, fascinating, complex theoretical world. I think it can stand on its own two feet. I can't see the usefulness of classifying ourselves by reference to what our clients do. A plumber doesn't call himself a "medical plumber" if the house he's in is owned by a doctor.

So I have set out this model, from which we might go on to establish terms and concepts, and then expectations and plans.

You noticed, I hope, that I didn't mention people until the very end of the model, and even then only as some of the pieces that make up the whole jigsaw. This I suggest is a more rational way of seeing the activity of translation, that amongst other things forces us to see the importance of bilingualism recede pleasingly into the background, surrendering prominence to the many other considerations that I am convinced are necessary for the provision of an adequate level of quality in translation.

I would like to leave this here, as a sawn-off and self-indulgent description of the translation industry. I have ideas about what to do about it but I'd like to approach them from a slightly different angle.

I have so far observed that the problem of the provision of adequate service and quality control in translation has been approached by the various relevant bodies from premises that I think are not altogether appropriate. These bodies are responsible or have great influence over the training and accreditation of translators. You may have the impression that I am criticising them.

I am. But I am far more critical of my own entry into the industry. It is patently not acceptable for someone to accept money on the grounds that they are a translator when in fact they are simply bilingual. Yet I did this for many years, and had a ball. I call it the cowboy method. The problem remains as I see it, of how to overcome the problem inherent in each of these routes to produce competent translators.

I have tried a third way. For many years I have had more enquiries than I could fit in and was keen to expand, but after the court case I felt that in order to guarantee quality I had to circle the wagons so to speak, and only entertain such work as could be competed in an environment within my total control. And so I was resolved to employ and train people.

The first person I employed was a graduate of Deakin. She came to me as a work experience student, just when my business was experiencing rapid growth. This is the end of her second year with me. In that time I also had several other people work for me for short periods of time or on a casual basis.

The conditions under which I employ people are:

- I guarantee regular income,
- I assume their total ignorance of the theory and practice of translation regardless of their qualifications or accreditation, and
- I train them.

I'd like to give a short description of this training.

There is the day to day guidance that I provide in terms of how we carry out translation work and run the business.

There is time set aside occasionally where we discuss theoretical matters and these discussions are very helpful to me in the ongoing development of my theory in writing.

Most important of all I have people accompany me to jobs simply as observers. This is at my cost. It gives them a risk free opportunity to experience a wide variety of work and the many different demands that may be made of them. On occasion we have had the ideal situation of them observing for several days,

then taking over with me observing for a couple of days, and then me leaving them to finish the job.

This is also a multiple benefit for my business. It pleases clients no end to order one translator and get an extra one for free. And of perhaps even greater benefit to me is that the presence of another translator is the best kind of quality control. More than once I and my clients have been indebted to one of my “trainees” for their interrupting and correcting some mistake I’ve made in a meeting.

(I’d like to pause here and observe that any one who found that scenario difficult to endure would be guilty of being more concerned with the performance than the product. When I get that cheque in the mail, I don’t care how much egg I’ve got on my face, my only professional concern should be that everything was translated correctly. Not, that it was necessarily translated by me.)

Training people in this way I think is the most effective solution to the problems encountered in both routes to translatorhood: the cowboy trail and the institution stream. Accountability for the work of my staff rests with my company, and I provide immediate backup should there be a problem with their ability to meet the demands of the job.

The staff have periods of intense, hands-on instruction, in the many skills and disciplines that I have learned over the years are important in the delivery of the competent translation, that I see are not taught at university and not tested for by NAATI.

As a way of touching on several areas in my training I’d like to cover some of the more prominent issues. They are: ethics, mechanism for ensuring accountability, client education and the minimum conditions.

My point of departure is, as I have said, the product. The fact that we are involved in a transaction of money for goods. Without any fancy codes of ethics specifically for translators there are already several ethical demands made of the protagonists in such a relationship. Each party to a contract has rights, obligations, and a duty of care. All these things are obvious, and we take them for granted in any other transaction, where the smooth progress through the stages of request, provision, verification of goods, any payment map out the stages of such a contract.

But what’s wrong with this picture? Several pages back I used the expression “customer satisfaction”. Did anyone wonder about the circularity of such a concept? It seems to assume a perfect world where not only can our clients tell if they got what they paid for but are competent to judge! The first major problem for translators, is that the raw materials of their trade, language itself, is the very thing that customers would normally use to verify the goods they had just purchased.

To me, all translation ethics begin here. This fact offers us a sweeping view of the ethical terrain we must negotiate. Down there among the hills and valleys are the relatively trivial ethical matters: confidentiality, “neither adding to nor taking away”, refusing work beyond your accredited level. Don’t need to be a rocket scientist to work those out. But this is a whole world, and our primary task as masters of it, is to define what it is to be a competent translator, and to vigilantly strive toward that standard, all the time aware that our clients may never really know.

This is the most basic issue for a translator, (I should say any translator that works for me). Most of my instruction refers to this concept.

We are obliged to go further than any other type of service provider in establishing a mechanism by which our client can verify to their satisfaction that they have received what they paid for, and we must go further again, to be seen to be doing so.

These mechanisms do exist, I have devoted quite a bit of time to developing them. They are important for several reasons. Most of them obvious. To the extent that they work, they obviate that noble and solitary trek through the ethical wilderness I just described. In other words it keeps us honest. It also creates a great rapport with and confidence in the translator. Before anything goes wrong, it also serves as a strong foundation of client education, or what we call the management of client expectations.

Part of such a mechanism is the unqualified willingness of my office, to have its work independently checked. We go to lengths to ensure this can take place, and we make it plain that we do so.

I mentioned earlier the definition of the minimum conditions within which the production of written translation can be reasonably expected. I have done that in the following way:

There are three roles. Two experienced translators and a manager. The two translators must be native speakers of source and target languages respectively, and must possess a number of other attributes which I haven’t time to list here but which include a disposition to and enjoyment of writing in their own language, that predates their choice of career. I wear two hats in my office.

In this environment, the common training exercise is the regular exhortation to clearly, confidently and cogently, explain every decision they have made in the context itself and in a way that does not depend on a familiarity with the B language. We must effectively give eyesight to our blind clients.

I've cannibalised the talks of yesterday's presenters and I might add at this point for the benefit of Mary Vasilikakos, whose talk yesterday kept me thinking till late last night, that this is one way in which I have built theory into the practice of translation. It is a daily, almost traumatically regular activity. I "curiously engage the emotions" of my staff at every opportunity. I demand immediate and articulate explanation of why this word and not that.

I was agitated to hear people at Mary's presentation musing about whether theory was necessary for professional training. It's absolutely essential for professional practice! We must do our work mindful that at any point our customer may rightly enquire of the quality of our product, (because we have successfully trained him or her to do so), and that we must be able to meet this request to their satisfaction, as is their right and our duty according to the contract.

The definition that I reserve, with contempt, for the merely bilingual masquerading as a translator, is someone who, when asked about a particular expression can only answer "I dunno, that's just the way you say it".

I'm not encouraging bunfights, I'm simply setting out the worst case scenario for which complete preparation must be made if we are to be accountable as the providers of products and services. In my office this is the bottom line.

We are happy, and able to go to the bottom line. It is a bittersweet pleasure to admit that twice in the past two years we've fallen beneath the bottom line and had to fork out a couple of thousand dollars to reprint a translation in which one word was found to be mistranslated.

I find this sort of accountability wanting in the industry at the moment.

I feel as if I have come here very critical, and with no real solutions. I'm very lucky I speak Japanese. By exposing me to such a wide variety of work it has facilitated the adjustment in my eyes of such untenable distinctions as business versus community translation, and interpreter versus translator. It has also clarified the conceptual gap between product and performance.

I feel the current system of accreditation is a mechanism overly contingent upon our immediate history, of necessity it must treat individual people as the subjects of the verbs "train" and "accredit", but it has left a gap between the performance of those subjects, and a product the public can trust.

I have also found that neither book larnin' nor the frontier spirit are effective or acceptable substitutes for a long, wide and colourful slice of unstructured life, in the creation of a competent and confident translator. I believe I have taken steps, with my apprentice method, to remedy these problems in my own business.

If my ideas have any broader usefulness perhaps it is in the logical geography I have mapped out, that my help translators redefine their brief. And my approach to employment and training may help in some way to promote what I heard Helen Tebble call "mentor training".

Incomplete though it is, if it helps, I'll not have wasted my time, and I thank you for listening.

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