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Translation *plus* and the added value of the translator:

An interview

Rosa Newell and David Katan

DK: This issue of *Cultus* is focussing on the difference between those who say they “translate” and end up feeling underpaid, undervalued, and those who also “translate”, but feel that they are valued – and well rewarded for what they do. And I am investigating this area of translation *plus*, which seems to be a very profitable area in every sense of the term. There is also the question of “premium” in translation – but we will come to that later.

So, hello Rose Newell, welcome to *Cultus*. You have an impressive translation blog, *The Translator’s Teacup*, and your main website, where you market yourself as *English Rose Berlin*. It states that you offer translation, adaptation, copywriting and consultancy services.

RN: In my case, I’m a copywriter and translator, so the copywriting part is something completely beyond translation, to start with. A lot of what I do sits somewhere in the middle, so often when a client calls me, they might think that they’re asking for a translation, but they’re actually asking for copywriting, or I might think that they’re asking for a copywriting, but they’re actually asking for a translation, or something in the middle. My work is collaborative by nature. Part of that is working out with the client what the better solution would be.

Sometimes the client might have one idea about how to do it, but it’s not the right one, so discussion is required. This is a situation in which some translators might just do what they’re asked, but then they have problems thereafter.

I personally have as good as no issues with unhappy clients, but they’ve often had issues in the past. I wonder if that’s partly because these translators are not raising these issues right at the beginning. If I notice that the source text is weak, I say something, for example, “This works

grammatically, but this doesn't make sense to me", or, "I'm going to have to be more flexible here, some content changes will be necessary".

DK: These great examples are very much connected with advertising, marketing, and key selling points. It makes absolute sense to me that a translator would intervene and says: "Wait a minute, this isn't going to work". And I'm wondering to what extent is this strictly the role of a translator working in marketing?

RN: That's a good question. The majority of what I translate, although you may categorize it as IT or as high-end real estate, has got to do something with marketing – nearly always, in fact. See, even when the text is informative in nature, it's still going to have a message. Everything has a persuasive purpose, and I don't think this is limited to just marketing. Even a user manual has got to be clear, and you must think about the purpose of the text, its usability, so I'd say it's more generally about thinking about how the text will be used.

Take a social security or a tax form, you don't want the reader to say, "Oh no, this isn't clear, what are we talking about here"? As a user, your ability to interact with the tax authorities shouldn't be limited because you couldn't figure out how to use the form. Unfortunately, a lot of the texts that translators are given to translate are badly formulated in the first place: they need to communicate something, but they don't. Then it evolves into a downward spiral – the translation is inevitably bad, the translator gets the blame, and then the translator is unhappy. You know, "garbage in – garbage out". Things can get mangled if people aren't thinking about how the text will be used.

DK: That's an excellent example. What you are saying is that the translator should be proactive. You can say: "Hang on, this isn't as good as it could be, why don't we change it"? This is where you get the collaborative approach. But isn't this because you now have the experience and a certain status?

RN: It's not much about status, because I'm talking about new clients. They don't know me. They might have been impressed by my website or I might have been recommended, but I don't have any special status with them.

DK: Except they come to you because they have a pretty good idea of your work. In particular, I'm thinking of my students. They're young. It's a little

bit more difficult for them, particularly when the client doesn't know, or even care about the translation. These clients won't be aware of the effect of the words, or the mangling that can happen.

RN: I think the biggest issue is translators not asking questions and clarifying things. A lot of translators are working within agencies, and those agencies discourage translators from such interactions. Agencies are largely to blame for the impression that *Google* and *DeepL* can produce perfect translations. They are the ones giving their clients the idea that they can just insert the text somewhere, send it to the agency, and the translation will appear just like magic. The reason these agencies are struggling and lowering rates, and struggling to get their own clients, is because they're marketing and presenting themselves in exactly the same way as *Google* and *DeepL*.

One of my clients left me a review in which he specifically mentioned the fact that I ask questions. This was because I told him, "I've got some doubts about taking this particular job. I'm going to ask you questions, since it's stuff I know a bit about but not everything". He loved the process, and this shows that everything agencies are teaching freelance translators and their project managers to avoid is what certain clients are desperate for. He said how valuable it was that I could present him with a table of the translation – something people would never normally show to their client – alongside my comments and questions. The bilingual file allows them to easily review my comments and see how I addressed any content issues in English should they need to adapt the German. Often, I would correct the original German where appropriate, or I would say, "There's an issue in the German here". Sometimes I'll say, "I've done this differently in the English, but you need to fix this in the German", and so on. I truly get them engaged.

DK: This is a very good example, and in fact you wrote in 2018: "quality-driven translation buyers appreciate well-founded questions" so I presume that this is a case of a "quality-driven translation buyer". Maybe the ones you get are of that type, but speaking of the market in general, my feeling is they're a bit ignorant, in the sense of ignoring these things.

RN: You are always going to get some people who are quite sensitive, and you're always going to get people who are ignorant.

DK: As in "ignoring things", because they just don't know...

RN: Yes, but there are two sides: there are people who can be educated, but some people who can't be. Some people say, "You've just got to educate your clients". Well, you can't get blood out of a stone. For example, if you've got an independent author who is self-publishing their novel, they may want to get that translated. There won't be much blood in that stone.

Let's say it's a local artist, maybe, or a local restaurant, in a small village, and they want to have their menu in English. I could make a really good sales pitch and they might really want me, because I've been able to describe all the differences and they can see I'm the best person for that job. However, they're not going to hire the services of someone who is twenty times more expensive than what they can reasonably afford, meaning someone who generally works in and serves a different price category.

There are some people who will always be limited in the sense of what they can afford based on their own budget. You can't educate every client to enlarge their budget when they just don't have that flexibility, and it's a waste of time to try. Similarly, there are ignorant people who don't care about quality, and that's fine – I don't waste time educating people who can't be educated. At first, I might try, and I'll try to be crystal clear, but if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. Some nuts can't be cracked.

DK: On pricing, as far as I can see from your blog post in 2019, you do still look at the number of words or the number of characters, so is that your starting point, rather than "it's an artistic project and it takes what it takes"?

RN: It's about more than quantity-based rates. There are translators who just churn through the words, of course. If they're also able to translate well and fast, they might still be making the same money as me, but without engaging with the client. There's something I find a little bit misleading with this "premium translator" ideal: Am I worth more as a person just because I charge more? It doesn't even mean I'm earning more – I probably am – but it's not guaranteed. It's just not the case that if someone wants to make more money, they have to do exactly what this particular person is doing, because that's what a "premium translator" is. Find your own path, because that's the only thing that will work. Imitations are never as good as originals with differences.

So, to come back to your question, I use a mixture of pricing models. I use hourly rates when it's something that requires a lot of input from their side, and if the project is awkward, I switch to hourly rates. I generally use a mixture of the line rate and the word rate when calculating the overall fee, but I also change it a little based on each client. When I get a new client, I

often copy the part of my table that refers to a similar client with a similar text. For example, creative real estate marketing is priced higher than a lot of the IT texts, because it's far more demanding. On the other hand, high-end IT marketing, where you should account for the rewriting, is also priced quite highly or charged at an hourly rate. But then there are other cases where it's a much more basic, straightforward translation, which can be priced a little lower. I just mix and match it like that.

You see, this is where the positioning part comes into play. For example, with a recent client I explained that, based on my experience, it would make more sense to recommission the translation entirely, because reviewing it would only take much longer and would cost more. My hourly rate reflects what I actually earn in an hour, so reviewing just doesn't work out cheaper than a new translation very often.

DK: At the very beginning, you said you are a translator and copywriter, right? Now you mention reviewing, revising, and I'm wondering if you do those as well.

RN: I don't sell myself as offering those.

DK: Ok, but for somebody who wants to work in translation or wants to be valued - a translator *plus* - you still need to show yourself to be someone who can write copy and proofread? It seems now to be a fairly core part of the position you're in today. Could you be the same sort of translator you are if you just called yourself a translator and nothing else?

RN: I was. You can be an excellent translator without being a copywriter, absolutely. For example, my reviewer, she is not a copywriter, but she is a first-rate translator. What matters is that people hire me because I can explain my reasoning to clients well. I can show where the writing is bad, where a translation is bad. If a translator doesn't explain why they are doing what they do, it doesn't help.

DK: So, it's important to have the language to talk about and articulate what the problem is – that's a very good point.

RN: Yes

DK: Something you also mention in your blogs is the importance of working together with a reviewer, in a team (Newell 2018). From what I've

understood, you don't really think that a translator can be a good translator if they work on their own.

RN: That's because my definition of a good translation is something that is not static, you can't just get to a level and stay there. As linguists, we know that if we don't use the language, we get weaker in it. So, if you continually translate, but don't get reviewed, you are missing the interactive component. Then what you have learned will slowly fade away. This happens to in-house translators working in isolation, but also those working in an agency. If working in a team, they may be lucky enough to learn from each other, but that's a rare case, and they are still limited by the lack of specialisation in most agencies. For me, it helps to involve another writer or another reviewer, just to get different perspectives. The selling points my clients have often listed to be the reason they've chosen me are the attention to detail, the way I communicate, my IT background, and the technical skills relating to websites.

But soft skills play a big role, too, and any translator can work on that. So, communication skills, and just logic in general. Simply spotting when something is not quite right and saying something. These are skills and practices that all translators can and should develop.

DK: When you were talking about your skills and how you have a team yourself, I was just thinking: "you do the translation, there's a reviser, and there's a synergy between you". Would you translate in tandem, or do you, already?

RN: It's not efficient, because I'm a particularly fast translator.

DK: What about translation software?

RN: I use MemoQ, I find it easier as it separates things at the sentence level by default. If I work without it, I can get lost with where I am, but MemoQ keeps things nice and separated. It also makes it easier for me, when I'm checking my own work, to look out for mistakes and say: "Wait a minute, there's something missing there".

DK: And what about *Google Translate* or *DeepL*? Do you begin with a rough translation done by one of those?

RN: No, since there's not much value in it; it can throw you off, even. The rough translation is the one in my head, and I don't want to lose that –

which you will if you base your translation on the low-quality machine output. Sometimes there are certain phrases I'll look up, and I'll want to see how they are most commonly translated. I might also want to look and see if there are any other options on *Thesaurus.com*. I do use *DeepL* for phrases sometimes, but more the *Linguee* part.

DK: Now the real question is really this. I'm hearing quite a lot about "the premium translator", or "premium translation". These are terms that were new to me a year ago.

RN: They're established terms, but they are commonly misused.

DK: Do you know their genesis or how long have they been around?

RN: That's the question. The premium market, in general, is something that some people have been talking about for a long time. We have Chris Durban (2016), David Jemielity (2014), Canadian Grant Hamilton (2017), and Kevin Hendzel (2017), too. You see that those people are mostly American, and they're native English speakers, of course...

DK: We'll leave that subject aside for now...

RN: But you know what point I'm making. These are the kind of people who have spoken about the premium market.

DK: Do they just use the term, or do they take the discourse somewhere else?

RN: No, they might claim to have popularized it, but you can't invent a term like that, because it exists in economics. It comes from market theory, and it's talked about in every market. In economics, you always get different sections of the market and different providers serve different sections of market. If you want a good definition, I can recommend a good book: *Mastering services pricing*, by Kevin Doolan (2015).

DK: What I mean is the collocation, because you don't find a premium electrician, for example.

RN: No, you do find them. They just won't be the ones fixing your dodgy light switch.

DK: Ok! I didn't think of it that way.

RN: People don't talk about the premium market, or rather, the premium translations as such. If people talk about premium translators, they're talking nonsense. A person cannot be premium as such.

"Premium-market translator", maybe, because that's a translator who serves the premium market. I personally wouldn't like phrases like "Premium translation". "Premium quality" is better, but just because premium sounds upmarket. That book I mentioned (Doolan 2015), is written by a lawyer with an independent practice. He takes law firms as an example, showing how to justify high prices while at the same making your client happy. To be honest, it's an expensive book, but it's great. Would you trust it if it were cheap? Interestingly, he points out that at the top level, clients don't care at all about how nice you are, because they just want your expertise.

DK: When you say "nice", you mean it in what sense?

RN: I was referring to the soft service skills, like friendliness and responsiveness, when they are present without much else. You can be nice, and it might help, but the thing is that when clients want these top-tier providers, they want you, they want only you, and they'll follow you to a different law firm to get you. They'll bend their own terms in order to get you. That's a good position to be in.

DK: What interests me is the translation field.

RN: Then it is referring to translators who are going a bit further, who also have the guts to turn down the work that doesn't match them. This is also essentially what I was doing yesterday. I was being asked to review something that was poorer quality than the client probably knew. So I explained, and tried to educate them, while offering a quote for a full re-translation. But if that client then says, "I'm sorry, we really need to watch our budget, if you can just have a quick look at it that's fine", then I'll say no.

Or, I'll estimate the hours it'd take for a total rewrite, and my hourly rate isn't low, so that may prove the point. It's being willing to turn down work, being happier not working than working on something that stresses you out while you're still not being paid enough for it. One thing I will add is that serving the premium market is also about having the self-respect necessary to actually charge appropriate rates. That's a big part of it.

DK: We've already talked about the fact that this clearly works well when you've got a particular type of translation in marketing, or maybe in finance, but it's not going to be in all genres. Although honestly, I don't see any reason why it doesn't extend to a lot more fields. The area I'm interested in is tourism, which is where you've got some of the worst translations...

RN: With tourism, there often just isn't the budget. There are some fields where there is money all around, because there are big wins and losses to be made – finance is the classic example, and that's what a lot of the well-known premium-market translators are specialized in. Even in tourism, though, you'll still have a small premium market for elite services serving the ultra-rich. That's a specific and ultimately small, somewhat secretive niche. Think high-end private jets, large private islands. The stuff that costs real money with a high value per customer, I would imagine, or where a public-facing individual, e. g., a member of royalty, has a personal stake in how things are presented. There's a little bit of an overlap with class A luxury real estate, since the ultra-rich are more likely to buy the holiday villa they want for keeps.

When it comes to big investments, for example a brochure for real estate that is still in development, this is often all the client – often a foreign investor – will see before buying the apartment. The reason the client needs a translation in the first place is because there are foreign investors involved. This is also why we need to put a lot more effort when translating.

DK: Interesting. So, you are saying that there is a premium market to be found in every field?

RN: Well, the accessibility and size of that market will always vary. It may be quite hidden, given the nature of some end users. Your language combination will also play a role. These factors can make targeting the premium end of a given market impractical.

In principle, though, there is a premium version of almost every product and service. You only have to look at the existence of £840-a-roll gold wallpaper or Swarovski-encrusted toilet brush holders to know that. The key is to think hard about what any given client is looking for, and who they are selling to.

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