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CULTUS

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TRANSCREATION AND THE PROFESSIONS

2014, Volume 7

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Introduction

David Katan

Uncertainty in the Translation professions: time to transcreate?

This issue focusses on two principal areas: uncertainties in the translation profession and transcreation; with transcreation being tentatively suggested (see Katan, forthcoming) as a possible solution to this uncertainty. The uncertainties themselves are legion, first and foremost because it still remains to be shown that translation is indeed a profession (Katan 2011). Many of the classic signs of a profession are not yet in place, and may well never will be, such as: an accepted school (or schools) of theory and practice; a national register of certified practitioners; national laws regulating the practice and safeguarding clients from malpractice, and so on. Also, clearly a sign of a profession is the increased payment given to those who are more qualified, along with public recognition of the worth of a professional translator's creative abilities – which translators do not appear to have (e.g. Katan 2011: 149). We know for a fact that certification and legislation is unlikely to make a significant impact in the near future, partly because in the handful of areas where there is some form of regulation, there has been no discernable difference to translator status (Katan 2012), and also because (based on anecdotal evidence only) successful translators themselves are not keen on certification, as this would reduce their own individually gained status.

The crucial importance of translation has often been made clear, and lies at the heart of the Union of the 24 (and counting) languages that are safeguarded through the European Commission's translation service, and repeatedly vouched for.¹ But it was only in 2007 that the EU itself, moved 'translation' out of its grouping with 'secretarial activities'. This economic

¹ In 1993 at a conference of literary translators Umberto Eco said "The language of Europe is Translation" (Buekenhout and Vonck, 2012 : 9) and this phrase has since been used by many at the EU to emphasise the importance of translation, such as the president of the EU, Romano Prodi on May 1st 2004 at the Interpreters' School, Trieste (personal comment); reiterated in 2010 during the Belgian presidency (<http://www.eutrio.be/language-europe-translation>)

grouping clearly labelled translation as a form of copying, at the same level as secretarial work, transcribing and typing, along with “envelope addressing, stuffing, sealing and mailing” (in Katan 2004: 2).

However, translation theory (and specialized academic training) has developed at a pace. Also, the traditional claim that translators are underpaid is being, at least questioned, by new figures becoming available from a 2nd global survey regarding the status of the translator.² Partial results (169 respondents) of the global survey of freelance translators shows that most earn more than the national average, with a peak of nearly 50% earning up to twice the national average, and then just under 5% earning up to five times the national average.³ Though this is good news, the same translators (as Declercq notes in this issue) are not convinced that the future is healthy.⁴

Why this is so, what is going on, and who actually is involved, when text is produced in a second language— especially the creative part (hence ‘transcreation’) - is the subject of both this current issue of *Cultus* and *Cultus* 8. We will start by focusing on what was referred to as “the elephant in the room” at a recent *Translating Europe Forum*.⁵

The first elephant: automatic translation

Google Translate is already, for free and in real-time, translating more than human translators are. Though the quality is uneven, it is often “good enough”. And, as we go to press, Skype announces “the first phase of the Skype Translator preview program. [...] Skype Translator will open up endless possibilities for people around the world to connect, communicate and collaborate; people will no longer be hindered by geography and language.”⁶ So, now, officially, the much discussed automatic interpreter

² The survey was organized, and results analysed, following that of the first survey, available at download2.hermes.asb.dk/archive/download/Hermes-42-7-katan_net.pdf, and update (Katan 2011).

³ This figure includes 10% with less than 1 year’s experience and over 20% with 20 years’ experience. The larger group results of 418 (those who translate and interpret) show a very slight shift to higher earnings, with 45% at twice the national average and just under 10% with up to 5 times the national average.

⁴ Of the 432 respondents (translators and interpreters) 51% were unsure as to whether there would be more or fewer jobs by the year 2025, and 30% who were convinced that there be at least a loss.

⁵ http://europa.eu/newsroom/calendar/events/2014/09/18-translating-europe_en.htm

⁶ <http://blogs.skype.com/2014/12/15/skype-translator-preview-an-exciting-journey-to-a-new-chapter-in-communication/>

extensively tested by the US (Zbib et al 2014) mainly for military use in Afghanistan and Iraq is now freely available for all 24/7.

Only months before this announcement, at the *Translating Europe Forum*, a (not so tongue-in-cheek) date was given for the year in which the plug could be pulled out of translation training - and translation as a profession. Mikael Johansson, from the European Commission's translation department, said "Imagine a field of wheat. Somewhere in the background you hear a noise: it's a farmer with a big harvester who just cuts down the wheat, six-meter rows at a time. In 2027 we will have reached the end of the field."⁷

Both Jeremy Munday and Yves Gambier (in this issue) agree that machine translation is revolutionizing the market – though they are confident that translation studies (and translators) will be guiding the machines. It is mainly a question of highlighting “that a patient undergoing robotic-assisted surgery would need a highly competent and creative surgeon behind the robot”. However Declercq (in this issue) points to what he sees as a yawning – and ever increasing gap between translation training, professional translators and the reality in the market. He also underlines the existence of a further elephant, in his section on “Free and open worlds”, which Gambier (this issue) also points to in his juxtaposition of crowd and cloud. Interestingly, the global survey mentioned earlier so far has few respondents who see this as a major threat. In fact ‘machine translation’ comes in at 4th place (14%, 60 replies) as the major threat, compared to nearly a quarter (24%, 101 replies) who agree that price dumping is the number one threat to the profession.

The second elephant: Crowd Sourcing amateurs

The second major issue affecting professional translators is the use of social media, which prides itself in encouraging interaction rather than passive reception; and is also geared to creating virtual communities and networks. This new area was exploited by the fansubbing groups who collaborated to translate Japanese *manga* cartoons (originally adding their own subtitles to videotape) in the late 1980s. These fan communities now race to provide the first (and best) subtitled translations of favourite foreign TV programmes, using much more sophisticated but user-friendly cloud-based software. In Italy, for example, as Casarini (2014: 88) relates,

⁷ Push technology: why online translation may be Googling interpreters out of a job. <http://www.dw.de/push-technology-why-online-translation-may-be-googling-interpreters-out-of-a-job/a-17979947>

there is intense competition to produce subtitles between ItaSA (Italian Subs Addicted, www.italiansubs.net) and Subsfactory (www.subsfactory.it). ItaSA boasts over 400,000 active members and offers subtitles for 730 shows, while the more recent Subsfactory provides subtitles for 296 shows. Though the professionals tend to distance themselves from the amateurs, and their amateur ways, both Munday (this issue) and Casarini (2014) point to the fact that they are now also learning from the amateurs' more creative ways. Indeed, what transpires is that the quality genuinely improves through the 'wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki 2004):

the fan community pools its knowledge because no single fan can know everything necessary to fully appreciate the series. [...] Collective intelligence expands a community's productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise. (Jenkins 2006: 139 in Casarini 2014: 52)

The major social platforms were not slow to capitalize on this phenomenon (Declercq: this issue, Katan: forthcoming), which leads us to elephant number 3.

The third elephant: creative non-translator translators

There are 3 distinct groups here (professionals, amateurs and volunteers). Partial results⁸ from the 2nd global survey show professionals to perceive the threat to their profession (along with price-dumping) as coming principally from the unqualified amateur 'cowboys' (23%), and then (19%) by the 'professional others' (those who are specialists in the area with some knowledge of the language). The volunteers come 7th, last in the list with 3%.

However different the potential threats, they all highlight the same basic issue at the heart of what makes a translation professional a professional: fidelity to the text, perceived by the majority of professionals as one of the two most basic defining feature of professionalism⁹ (see also Katan, 2011, forthcoming). As noted in Munday and Gambier (this issue), non-professional translators are allowed, if not encouraged, to be creative - while professionals are not. This is not an area that professionals are

⁸ 421 replies from a mixed translator/interpreter group.

⁹ Out of 478 replies, 61% agreed both that 'professionalism' involves "accuracy and fidelity to the source text" and that the "target text reads like an original text".

interested in pursuing, but which plays perfectly into the hand of Declercq's utilitarian approach to translation - mainly due to the fact that the very thrust of machine translation and the rise of 'translational cyborgs' (to quote Munday's citation of Cronin) must necessarily be based on meaning evincible from the text (rather than the context), and on some form of robot- friendly predictability.

As Jing Fang's article in this issue shows, when given freedom, translators can and do intervene on the text, adding their own understanding of the context to provide a final new language version. However, more often than perhaps we would like to admit, the translator does not. And, the dangers are plainly spelled out in Dávila-Montes and Orero's article (this issue), where they show very clearly how much is potentially lost when a translator accounts only for the text. They give the example of audio dubbing. The end-user will only have access to the audio channel (a close transposition or translation of the written, with some additional text for extra sounds, tone of voice and general visual description). Clearly a great deal of information, ideas and meaning will be implicit in the detail of the visual along with a strong aesthetic dimension.

In the film analysed, *The Devil Wears Prada*, the translator/audio-describer did not 'translate' the context, leaving the blind spectators literally in the dark as to when, where and on whom *Prada* and other fashion symbols were visible on the screen – except when explicitly commented on in the text. As far as translation theory is concerned, this form of audio-description follows a pre-cultural turn approach. Susan Bassnett's (1980/2002: 23) seminal book, which heralded a new approach to translation warned that:

In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril.

Unfortunately, this element, of accounting for the context, still goes against what is considered professional for the profession. Even more worryingly, this gap is being filled more than adequately by other professionals, amateurs and volunteers (see Katan: forthcoming). In the latter two cases, the 'translators' are not fettered with professional guidelines, while in the former case the professional translator is often employed to provide a 'faithful translation', which is then treated as a first draft before the more creative changes are made by other non-translation professionals.

Serenella Zanotti (this issue), for example, discusses what she calls the genetic approach, whereby film scripts metamorphose from (in this case) English into the final audio script heard in Italian. The translator is part of the process, but as she concludes, “in dubbing the translator may well be left out of the creational part of the process”. Indeed, the translator is but the first stage in the process, encouraged through pressures on time and money on the one hand and professional constraints on the other to provide a fairly close translation of the original. The translation then leaves the translator’s control, and is adapted by a series of other people directed by the “dialogue adapter”, who then takes the credit for the translation.

But things can get even more extreme where, though translation is clearly the key to understanding, there is no professional translator to be seen. Denise Filmer (this issue), for example, investigates how foreign news is often ‘translated’, using the specific example of the translation of Berlusconi’s (infamous) words. The people responsible for the authenticity of the translations, which created diplomatic concern well beyond Italy’s borders, was left to what Filmer calls “journalators”, journalists with a spattering of the language who use a do-it-yourself approach, phone a friend, or if necessary have “an assistant”. What is potentially worrying about this approach is that non-professional translators have more credibility than professional translators. In this particular case, diplomatic protocol was bound to be breached however Berlusconi was translated; his outbursts are expected to be “beyond the pale” (in Filmer) and offend.

In other cases, such as the Iranian president’s inflammatory statement, echoing Ayatollah Khomeini’s belief: “Israel must be wiped off the map”, the outburst has much more serious consequences. According to Arash Norouzi (2007), Ahmadinejad’s exact words in Farsi were: “Imam ghoft een rezhim-e ishghalgar-e qods bayad az safheh-ye ruzgar mahv shavad”, and can be literally translated as: Imam (Khomeini) ghoft (said) een (this) rezhim-e (regime) ishghalgar-e (occupying) qods (Jerusalem) bayad (must) az safheh-ye ruzgar (from page of time) mahv shavad (vanish from). Or rather: “The Imam said this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time”. There is no allusion to the annihilation of state of Israel, and be destruction the Jewish state, but to the current Israeli government. And, equally clearly, there was certainly no professional translator in charge.

We will probably never know who was responsible for the translation, but more to the point, as Norouzi continues: “Though the [Iranian

Republic News Agency] wording was inaccurate and misleading, the media assumed it was true, and besides, it made great copy”.

Finally, in this issue, Cristina Caimotto illustrates an even more extreme case of creative translation in the media, where ‘translation’ isn’t even mentioned. This is the case of political jokes, of satire, which were first coined and told in the States by well-known American comedians referring the American situation, and then ‘stolen’, relocalised and retold by Daniele Lutazzi a well-known Italian satirist. There was much controversy of his use of satire, which is seen to be much more destabilizing in a high power distance country such as Italy. Consequently, Lutazzi paid a high price for his translations, and has effectively been removed from the main TV channels. But not once in the controversy regarding copyright and plagiarism was translation discussed.

So, we have the case whereby, already translators are sidelined, and their already fragile habitus is being encroached on by machines, cloud and crowd sourcing and finally by professional-others who take the responsibility and the credit for what might be called “translation”. Hence, we are reliably told “translators” will either disappear by the year 2025 (Katan: forthcoming) or 2027.

Transcreation

As hinted earlier, and discussed in Gambier and Munday (this issue) this term has been suggested as a way forward to a more certain future for this beleaguered profession. Leibniz in 1676 (in McCaffery 2001, fn. 24, p. 241) was the first to outline a theory of change based on transcreation: “the body *E* is somehow extinguished and annihilated in [place] *B* and actually created anew and resuscitated in [place] *D*, which can be called, in new and most happy terminology, *transcreation*”, which McCaffery (*ibid.*: 42) calls “the ability to constantly move and shift perception”. Cook (2008: 456) further explains how Leibniz used ‘transcreation’ to reconcile the fact that though God can create and destroy, He cannot change the essence of substance. Hence transcreation was “a certain middle way between creation and an entire pre-existence” (Leibniz in Cook, *ibid.*). This ‘certain middle way’ between faithful reproduction based on the pre-existent source text and totally new creation is taken up again by Coleridge (1839: 88) while reflecting on a “Commentary” on the 1st Epistle of St. Peter. In this reflection Coleridge considers his own reading of the epistle in English: “it is not the Scripture that I am reading. Not the qualities merely, but the root of the qualities is transcreated”. Again it is the essence of the

substance that is retained.

Coleridge's quotation is recorded by the OED, which lists "transcreate" as a verb, though only as a 'nonce-word', and defines it as: "to create by or in the way of transmission". Again both ideas of (1) faithful transmission and (2) creation are retained. After Coleridge the term has been used both in the literary and the commercial field – for very similar reasons.

In the poetic field, transcreation often refers to intersemiotic translation, where one literary form is reinterpreted in another (e.g. written text to music; visual art to poetry). Fred Wah, for example, Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate, quotes Coleridge's use of the term to describe his transcreation of Indian rock pictograms in British Columbia into poems, which then illustrate the photographs of the rock drawings. As one reviewer (Cowan 1976:10) notes: "A whole chapter of our recorded history previously unintelligible (to visual illiterates like me) is here revealed by Wah as vivid, human and touching".

More or less in the same time period, transcreation has been popularised (especially in India) by Purushottam Lal, once again to focus on not only the importance of the source text, but on the translator's need to "edit, reconcile, and transmute" (Lal 1957/1964: 5). More recently the term has been taken up by the more commercial end of the language provision industry. And this is where Daniel Pedersen (this issue) takes up the story. His discussion shows how important the term is becoming in the field, and how close it follows recent developments in translation theory – as heralded by Bassnett.

So, we find that almost paradoxically, the language provision industry, which has been sidelining human translators to spearhead the premium, on-demand automatic one-click language solutions (as clearly illustrated by Declerk) is also reinventing translation and the translator by taking up 'transcreation' (rather than localisation or copy writing which do not require a translator's trained understanding of the source text). In the words of Gene Schriver, CEO of machine-driven GLOBO Language Solutions: "In transcreation, translators aim to produce a conversion [...] since it is an inherently creative process, a machine cannot touch it. Nor can anyone argue that it is a commodity or that anyone else could do the same job".

So, here we actually have a key player in the industry talking about translators and translation, according them a future-proof professional status, and doing what Munday (this issue) asked for, someone to

“highlight that a patient undergoing robotic-assisted surgery would need a highly competent and creative surgeon behind the robot”.

However, as mentioned elsewhere (Katan: forthcoming) it is more than likely that the translators’ own high uncertainty avoidance is the main factor preventing the translator from clawing control of the final product and of the machines. The least that we can hope for is, to quote Pedersen’s (this issue) final words taken from Schäffner (2012), that this discussion on transcreation “contribute to raising awareness of the complexity of processes and encourage rethinking the more traditional views”.

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