

INTERVIEWS WITH TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS
ИНТЕРВЬЮ С ПЕРЕВОДЧИКАМИ

Henry Liu

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Translators and interpreters have to deal with information related to various domains of human activities. In your opinion, besides linguistic disciplines, what courses should be added to the curriculum to improve translators' training and have them better prepared for a career?

I have been known to be an advocate of multidisciplinary or at least interdisciplinary approach¹, not just in translation studies and educating of the next generation of translators, it would come as no surprise that I strongly believe in courses beyond our primary profession. This is not just a philosophical standpoint. There is increasing evidence to support interdisciplinary approach in learning (Guardian 2018) and future employment (Hanusek 2017).

There are plenty of treatises on the history of translation studies like Mona Baker's Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies. But my simple man's version of the evolution of translator and interpreter training and education is in four movements: (1) Babel to 1945; (2) subspecialisation-postgraduate; (3) specialisation-undergraduate; (4) post-MT, which is where we are now.

¹ Liu, H. 2017. "Transcending boundaries — Towards a multidisciplinary, multimodal, multi-centric approach to translation, interpreting and terminology education". Keynote Paper presented at the TISP6/AIETI8 Conference: Superando limites en TISP/ Beyond Limits in PSIT, University of Alcalá, Alcalá. 6th—8th March. http://tisp2017.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/6TISP-Libro_abstracts-def.pdf <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/jan/24/the-university-of-the-future-will-be-interdisciplinary>.

Hanushek, E.A., Ludger Woessmann Lei Zhang. 2017. "General Education, Vocational Education and Labor-Market outcomes over the Life Cycle", *Journal of Human Resources*, 52 (1) 49—88.

During this long period of history of the first movement², there were few dedicated training or research programmes on translation, interpreting or terminology. So how were translators and interpreters trained then? They were often talented bilinguals / polyglots or pseudo-bilinguals / polyglots trained in another profession or linguists thrust into such tasks.

Institutionalisation of translator and interpreter training programmes were modern inventions (c.f. Рум's opening keynote in XXI FIT World Congress 2017) and in the second movement, the dominant theme was postgraduate programme as linguists were cultivated into translators and interpreters as an extension of "*la formation*", or in other words, making translation and interpreting an increasingly aspect of applied linguistics.

The third movement began circa 1980 with the astronomical rise of degrees and even diplomas at undergraduate level, often attached to or running simultaneously with foreign language programmes.

This as yet unfinished symphony reaches a point of inflection. One of the assumptions underlying the trajectory thus far has been that users or consumers of translation and interpreting services demand professionals with more robust training and better knowledge and skills of translation and interpreting, often at the expense of other studies. I would challenge that.

So what does society demand of us? In an imaginary job interview, a graduate candidate with excellent credential in translation and/or interpreting may well be asked "What special skills you can bring to this organisation?" If the answer were "My excellent translation skills". The imaginary silence would ensue. Why? Because in the eyes of the society, translation and to a lesser degree interpreting, are substitution exercises, or selection exercise if they are generous.

Unfortunately increasingly, I would be asked to review legal translations from colleagues who are no doubt excellent translators, but no lawyers would ever write like them. In other words, their translation is just as "foreign" to the lawyer as its original foreign language version. I strongly believe in the need to appear authentic. A medical interpreter at an international oncology conference ought to come across like an fellow oncologist over the ear piece. Same for translators. I have often been heard giving advice to budding patent translators to sneak into lectures at their faculty of science and technology to learn their "*patois*" or dialect.

For the undecided, what should they do? I would sneak into creative writing class if I were a budding translator and into acting school if I were a budding interpreter. Why? One of the key skills which will also make us stand out from the ever improving (but never be perfect, I must add) machines is our ability to write and to speak. Writing and oratory skills are increasingly rare in the human population, let alone the-machine-augmented universe.

And whether one's aspiration is in the government or the corporate world, basic training in communications put one's future in good stead. This is purely based on the difference in remuneration between a communications executive and a senior translator

² Marie Lebert's blog <https://marielebert.wordpress.com/2016/11/02/translation/>;
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/marisagarcia/2018/07/27/a-perfect-storm-pilot-shortage-threatens-global-aviation-even-private-jets/#1dc2eff91549>.

or interpreter. I am certainly not the first person to point out the irony that many translators and interpreters however skilled in our profession fail to meet the communication needs of our clients.

What we must not forget is that the Russian education system has the distinct advantage with its longer degree and broader and rounder education in giving your graduates an increasing rare opportunity in future proofing themselves than your Western counterparts.

Bearing in mind, I am no pedagogist. But I hope this shows the many and varied ways we could advance this symphonic narrative, à la Deryk Cooke or Franz Xaver Süssmayr, in the age of Machine-augmented language services.

What aspects of the translators' job do you value most?

I feel very lucky, in general as well as with my professional career.

As an individual translator-interpreter, it is of immense privilege to be the voice, whether it is of a victim of a crime or a start-up projecting abroad or a government department or even the government. My work often involves very important and nuanced content with serious and longterm consequences. And I am delighted that I am often collaborating with other professionals to achieve the desired communications outcome.

As a "*Vereinsmensch*" running professional association locally, nationally and internationally, what I value the most is working with many experienced colleagues and dedicated individuals to bring concrete improvement to the profession, whether it is in the form of visibility, or governance or collaborating with external parties to refine and bring in best practices. What is often seen as symbolic, like the recognition of September 30 as International Translation Day by the United Nations, or the historical collaboration with our sign language interpreting counterpart, brings enormous benefits and opportunities if given the right attention and cultivation.

As an orator at events, what I value the most is my ongoing umbilical contact with colleagues and the wider profession around the world whilst hopefully bring new insights from the world outside of translation and interpreting, learning about local variation of practice and challenges constantly reminded that our profession is not a one-size-fits all, not to impose dominant values, and my by now trademark visits to local translation and interpreting schools to meet our future generation and find out what stimulates and worries them.

How did development of information technologies change translators' work? Which of them do you consider particularly useful and which would you be willing to discard?

This is another profound question the exploration of which can be a stand-alone paper if not a treatise!

In my professional practice, as a legal and diplomatic translator-interpreter, the impact of information technology, positive or otherwise, has been relatively minor in comparison with other specialities of our profession. And I have made it my mission to be as informed as possible during my FIT Presidency. This is because of my innate curiosity as well as my belief that I have to be very well informed before I can made any public comment, regardless of whether my comments are positive or otherwise.

What I have found is that the diversity and heterogeneity of language services information technologies had the same gestation as most other technologies — devoid

of input from the general target users. This is of course multifactorial. As Jost Zoetsche and I have spoken publicly on a number of occasions, there is large proportion of translators who are techno-phobs. (for interpreters, *vide infra*). This necessarily means that translators felt they have been deprived of their professional autonomy.

This is further compounded by the fact that the vast majority of gain technology has afforded to the translation process has been transferred to those who are not translators. These are the more commonly known deep seat objections against information technologies.

What is lesser known is the social perception that accompanies mechanisation and automation. Not only does the public now see translation as a free transaction through GoogleTranslate® amongst others, thereby devaluing the translation as well as the professionals who provide translation services, it has also created if not cemented a false perception that there is no future in this profession. This cannot be further from the truth. If anything information technologies have opened new opportunities and demands in professional-led and mediated translation.

I have to fight back my allergic reaction in uttering the last sentence. I have been highlighting the semantically tautological expression of “human translation” in the last few years. What information technology provides is not translation. It is word or expression match. This is but one of the aspects of our profession. But I digress.

This has altered the landscape of translation and interpreting in a profound and fundamental way, it has discouraged some of the most talented from pursuing a very rewarding and expanding career, the same way as the transition from the Soviet regime to democracy has, from what I understand, discouraged young talents from pursuing the performing arts which you were the world leader.

The second fundamental shift was the distraction of government and funding decision makers away from the seemingly much more resource intensive professional training towards the “free” machines. This of course has further exacerbated the global shortage in professional translators and interpreters at the highest level, something I hear all the time when I visited institutions which cannot function with language services of the highest quality.

Finally, we must also be cognisant of the underlying mechanism of information technologies — that they are inherently derivative and not generative and never creative. What I mean is that terminology management, the most basic form of information technologies, is totally dependent on past generation of translators. So any future scientific or humanistic development cannot rely on these technologies. It also means that rather than promoting and celebrating diversities, information technologies smooth them out and thereby magnifying the influence of the dominant voice.

Please do not from this infer that I am a Luddite. I embrace technology as much as anyone else, just after some evaluation of its implications.

And the same for translation information technologies. Gone are the days when translators are usually found in libraries around the world, thanks to Google and other search engines as well as excellent databases like IATE. Similarly the consistency across very large documents now often translated by many professionals has been easier to achieve.

But what would I discard? None. Every translator has different approach and practice and therefore different needs. What is totally useless for one translator may

be a lifesaver for another. But this does pose challenges to developers and those who need to provide interface between systems.

You noticed I have only been speaking about translators. For those interested in information technologies for interpreters, I would invite you to read my paper in last year's FITISPos Journal (http://www3.uah.es/fitispos_ij/OJS/ojs-2.4.5/index.php/fitispos/article/view/162).

As I have often said, surgical robots have not and will not replace surgeons, likewise, there is an insatiable demand of pilots (c.f. Forbes 2018), because the world would not accept this type of risk, whereas the proportion of translation performed without the supervision of professionals continues to climb astronomically. For more on the intersection of technology and translation, see my analogy with driverless cars at the 2018 ITD Lecture, also my invited lecture at MSLU in 2018. What needs changing is the paradigm of power relationship. And this is beyond the reach of individual translators, university faculties or translation agencies. Which is why a strong professional organisation is critical.

What aspects of your work do you consider to be most difficult and demanding?

I am guessing you are after a technical answer!

Whenever I asked students what do they find the most difficult in, say legal translation, they invariably answer terminology. It never ceases to amuse and puzzle me at the consistency, remembering that we are now in the era of information overload. Everyone can find "an equivalent term" at the touch of our smartphone with Internet access. Absolutely, how appropriate the term identified is highly variable and hence my earlier comment about our profession. But term matching is a small part of what we do, as a professional, and surely increasingly easier.

As a diplomatic interpreter, one of the more difficult scenarios would be "motor-mouth" officials reading scripts and then breaking into obscure poetry. But then life would be so dull if this never happens.

But putting my other hat on, as former FIT President, one of the more challenging parts of my work was dealing with colleagues with entrenched ideas of entitlement and utter reluctance to improve or negotiate change. Again, like the earlier caricatured official, thankfully this is not common.

As to what I see as the most challenging part of the work for budding translators and interpreters? Without a doubt, the challenge to maintain standards whilst remuneration is dropping. As I said earlier, much cultivation and investment are needed to be a top translator and likewise an interpreter. In the increasingly Uberised language service market, it becomes all the more difficult to come up with the upfront investment to specialise. No, I am not worried about the future return; but I am worried about this barrier preventing perfectly talented graduates with simple means unable to advance their career. This needs to change.

Could you give an example of a translation failure, the most challenging or the most amusing professional situation you have encountered?

I am sure you know that translators, and certainly interpreters, are full of amusing anecdotes, granted, perhaps that not everyone can deliver these with impact!

What I have selected however is not the most amusing or spectacular, but it does highlight what we have been talking about in the last little while.

At a very high level lunch function, where every fine detail is triple checked, I spotted the following:

“this beautiful Sauvignon Blanc typifies the lime-rich terroir with crisp but rich flavour of nectarine, apricot and lime”.

『这款美丽的长相思是富含石灰的风土，具有清脆而浓郁的油桃，杏和石灰风味。』

here lime appears twice with different meanings. But it is very difficult to spot such an error in a perfectly idiomatic sentence. Which I would argue is a mistake a human, let alone a professional, would never make. One could argue that Machine Translation has generated a new career — post-editor, but there is much difference between post-editor as fact checker and post editor help rendering discourse human-like. And both tasks are increasingly difficult but not increasingly remunerated.

What tips would you like to give to beginning translators?

It may all sound rather overwhelming and sometimes even disparaging. There are so many gadgets and apps giving an impression language barriers are but a historical remnant à la Babel. But nothing is further from the truth. After much effort, my Russian remains basic and no technology can change that!

Social media and technologies in general however dazzling and powerful also cannot rival or replace the power of genuine human connection, which our professions are so integral of. Extending from that, it is central for budding translators and interpreters to recognise the importance of solidarity. A cohesive professional association can make huge impact. So join your local, regional and national professional association and be active. Rather, be proactive, in ensuring it be fit for purpose and bring concrete benefits to practitioners.

My dear friend, and renowned Slovene pianist of contemporary classical music Nina Prešiček once said, “If you take no risks, there is no possibility of discovering something new”.

But taking risk does not equate being recklessness. One must take risks with a strong foundation. Which is why it is so important to be bold and imaginative, but only once we have attained unshakeably solid core skills. Only then can one free ourselves from the shackles of the original text (see <http://www.cultusjournal.com/index.php/archive/22-issue-2017-volume-10>).

And for the more ambitious, I would tell them to disregard the boundaries of our profession. Translation and interpreting encompass as wide and as diverse as human endeavours. We know many translators and interpreters are now diplomats, ambassadors and senior officials of international bodies, being part of history on the other side, like dragoman of the Ottoman Empire. Which is why I firmly believe that translation and interpreting studies will be the new literacy of global citizens and will increasingly be one of the key tools in the toolboxes of any aspiring executives of global or transnational organisations and corporations.