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Specialised technical translation: Global Village requirements and regional opportunities

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Abstract. Specialised translation is going through major changes as demand is growing for high quality translation that is terminologically accurate and performed at the level of native speakers. At the same time, economic globalisation creates a complex mix of various types of cultures within professional communication, which also exerts influence on the translation process. The increasingly diverse market requirements change the competency profile of specialised translators, but the actual needs may be seen differently by different market actors. This paper looks at the current requirements and challenges in the area of specialised language services, with a particular focus on the technical fields. It discusses translator competencies as seen by translation practitioners and theorists, clients and end users, as well as translation companies. Comparisons are made on the basis of surveys of the target groups and an analysis of the websites of translation agencies. Drawing on the findings of the study, the authors make recommendations on how translator training should be adapted to incorporate the requirements of the global market.

1. Introduction

The training of translators for specialised areas is facing increasingly stringent requirements in the current environment of active cross-cultural interactions, international economic and political cooperation, growing number of professional contacts, as well as the ongoing reform of higher education. All this encourages educators to improve translation didactics and develop new, more effective teaching methods complying with the current professional standards and the European language portfolio criteria. Yet, despite the introduction of common standards and criteria, active exchange of knowledge and practical expertise between translation scholars and practitioners, there are significant differences in the translator's professional profile formed by the academic curricular and the desired profile shaped by the needs of actual market actors. Expectations from professional translators are very high as the quality of translation products has a direct impact on the company's overall performance and even people's lives, as in the case of medical or technical translation – for example, translation of clinical trial protocols or safety manuals. Importantly, a high proportion of vacancies on the modern international market for language services are those in the sphere of industry-specific translation, technology-related areas, so a large number of today's graduates from translation departments will end up in these areas [1,2,3].

Technical translation, which takes the dominant position on the market of today, includes translation of highly specialised documents and localisation of websites and software. The changing character of requirements to modern translators, as compared with the past, stems, among other factors, from the changing character of clients. These include: clients (1) – private clients who are not the end users of the translated texts; and clients (2) – large translation companies who act as intermediaries for clients (1). As Abdallah [4] points out, clients (2) commission large volumes of translation, expect fast execution and try to save on fees for the actual translators. They are less concerned about the quality of the end product, as opposed to clients (1). It means that translators have



to constantly shift between the different professional requirements imposed by different market participants. The following section will discuss the current landscape for professional communication in the globalising world, and the competencies that are expected from translators in specialized professional discourses.

2. Results and Discussion

The existing body of literature on specialised translation is fairly large. Yet, the modern translation studies do not offer a dedicated theoretical framework for industry-specific or technical translation as a separate area in its own right. For example, the Dictionary of Translation Studies [5] recognises the existence of area restricted theories of translation, which are defined as partial theories limited to specific languages and/or cultures under consideration, but there are no entries dedicated to specialised translation as a subdivision of translation studies. At the same time, the high concentration of translation activity in this particular area requires a comprehensive theoretical framework to address the emerging issues. The competency profile of an industry-specific translator is one of the many points of disagreement that call for more detailed research.

It should be noted that translation scholars generally project a very positive image of specialised translators describing them as experts in specific subject areas [6, 7]. However, if one looks carefully at any professional standard – for example, the German DIN EN 82079-1 – it becomes clear that developers ascribe to translators only the communicative competence, and not that of an expert, as opposed to the related profession of a technical editor.

According to Sandrini [8], industry-specific translators must have the combination of the following competences:

- procedural competence to produce pragmatically adequate translations based on the Scopus theory principles;
- competence to create specialised texts that are terminologically correct and linguistically adequate;
- subject matter competence (knowledge of a specific subject area);
- translation competence (knowledge of the theory and practice of translation);
- language competence;
- general cultural competence;
- special cultural competence, which comprises knowledge of those features of industries that are unique to a particular culture/country.

The importance of the last two components should not be underestimated. Globalisation in various areas of professional activity results in the creation of an industry-specific internal culture, in which the participants share a system of knowledge, perceptions and information exchange methods. One of the crucial elements of such a uniform culture is industry terminology. On the one hand, international standardisation of terminology is facilitated by the relatively large body of specialised vocabulary with one-to-one equivalents in the majority of contacting languages. Furthermore, as Novikova et al. suggest, technical terms of the globally important professional areas (such as economy, politics, advertisement, cinema, sport, tourism, etc.) originate from one source language – English, the major language of international communication [9]. However, in a lot of industries, such as oil production for example, regional, national and transnational companies have to comply with different standards and might use terms that are unique to their countries or regions. It means that translators should be able to apply their knowledge of the global and country-specific professional cultures and choose the appropriate translation strategies, tactics and techniques to ensure smooth communication between the international partners.

Some scholars discuss the competence of specialised translators with a focus on personality aspects. Thus, Gavrilenko [10] argues that “the personality component of the professional competence of an industry-specific translator comprises professionally relevant personal qualities affecting the basic parameters of an effective translation process (productivity, precision, adequacy, reliability, etc.). These qualities are the prerequisites for the professional activity of a translator; they are improved

and polished first during the training and further in the course of practical work”. Gavrilenko also notes that these personal qualities should be combined with specific types of knowledge:

- subject-related knowledge in certain fields of science and technology;
- communicative competence in the native and foreign languages;
- discourse competence in specific subject areas in the native language;
- sociocultural competence regarding communication in specific industries in the translator’s home country;
- knowledge of IT, skills in computer-based information and terminology search;
- ability to interact with specialists from the related sectors [8].

We support Gavrilenko’s view that subject-related knowledge is of paramount importance for a translator. The same opinion is expressed by a translation practitioner with an engineering background, Israel Shalyt, who maintains that language proficiency and proper dictionaries are not sufficient to produce a really good translation of a technical text. A translator must also: “1) understand the meaning of the source text (which is not always expressed explicitly and often has to be deciphered by surmising); 2) be able to expound ideas in accordance with the conventions that have developed in the given subject area” [11].

The expert knowledge of the subject matter at a level comparable to that of a specialist is rather an ideal which can rarely be found in real life, except for in-house translators who work for one and the same company for years. Without challenging the above views on the competency profile of industry-specific translators, we still have to admit that this perspective is mostly supported by translation theorists and practitioners.

The question is how far these views are similar or different from those held by employers and real economy actors. In this respect, Canfora [12] cites interesting findings of two different surveys. The first one is an online survey conducted by Britta Görs in February 2012 among technical editors regarding their expectations from technical translators, in which 90% of the respondents pointed out that translators must possess expertise knowledge of the subject area [13]. Importance of specialised knowledge was also highlighted by respondents of another survey carried out by tekome.V., involving 222 specialists of procurement and technical documentation departments [14]. Canfora provides a summary table of the respondents’ replies:

Table 1. Expectations of potential clients: from standard to high quality translation.

	Not important	Standard translation	Quality translation	High quality translation
Translation by a non-native translator	22.2 %	37.9 %	34.8 %	5.1 %
Correct spelling up to 95%	5.4 %	46.0 %	34.7 %	13.9 %
Completeness of translation up to 95%	8.0 %	46.0 %	32.0 %	14.0 %
Correct grammar – up to 95%	5.5 %	42.5 %	38.0 %	14.0 %
Translator’s self-check	5.2 %	28.8 %	46.2 %	19.8 %
Final formatting	21.7 %	15.6 %	38.2 %	24.5 %
Localisation	8.5 %	22.3 %	42.7 %	26.5 %
Use of style reference books	6.9 %	19.9 %	46.3 %	26.9 %
Correct word order	0 %	23.1 %	49.5 %	27.4 %
Correlation of content between ST and TT	8.0 %	17.0 %	45.8 %	29.2 %
Stylistic adequacy at the level of a native speaker	4.2 %	19.5 %	44.2 %	32.1 %
Use of specialised vocabulary/terminology	0 %	18.1 %	45.1 %	36.7 %
Translator’s expertise in the subject area	5.6	15.3	41.4	37.7

Correct spelling up to 100%	2.3	13.1	46.5	38.
Correct grammar up to 100%	1.9	13	47	38.1
Translation by a native translator	4.2	15.5	41.9	38.6
Terminology consistency	0	11.1	49,5	39,5
Terminology correctness	0	14,5	43,9	41,6
Review by an industry expert	8.4	9.3	39.5	42.8
Completeness of translation up to 100%	0.5	16.4	40.2	43.0
Final review by a native speaker	9.9	11.7	30.0	48.4

The surveys suggest that if potential end users expect a standard translation, they focus primarily on linguistic correctness and completeness of translation. If clients expect a quality translation, their requirements will cover practically all the above parameters, with a focus on the subject-related adequacy of the translated text. Expectations from a high-quality translation will include 100% linguistic and, especially, terminological correctness, which also implies high subject-related competence of the translator.

It can be concluded, therefore, that the market of language services expects translators to have extensive knowledge of the subject area and precision in using industry-specific terminology. The second most important parameter emerging from the surveys is linguistic competence, while all other competencies (skills in using TM-systems and machine-based translation, project management, work experience, cross-cultural competence, personal qualities, etc.) are viewed by potential text recipients as less relevant.

These findings are supported by another study conducted by Chinese scholars [15], who surveyed three target groups in their country – translation practitioners, specialists from various industries, and educators – to understand which skills and competencies are needed by technical translators. Interestingly, the Chinese respondents came up with answers similar to those discussed above. Specialised knowledge featured large in their comments, and other important competencies included a good command of the target language and advanced skills in using the computer for translation purposes. Much focus was also placed on translators' personal qualities, such as "initiative, self-discipline, ability to work independently and under pressure, responsibility", and ability to learn fast. As in the two surveys cited above, the respondents did not give a high priority to cultural competence.

Let us now look at the requirements to specialised translators set by translation companies. As part of this study, we analysed the websites of several categories of translation agencies specialising in technical translation: large transnational companies, large national companies and regional companies. On their home pages, translation agencies generally emphasise that their staff includes professional translators, native speakers, specialists with an in-depth knowledge of specific industries. Yet, the list of requirements to specialised translators rarely includes subject-related knowledge. To give an example, Transtech, a large Russian national company, lists the following job responsibilities and requirements for candidates applying for technical translation positions:

Responsibilities:

- Translation of technical texts in the area of military technology (air defense) from Russian into Arabic;
- Ensuring terminology consistency;
- Comparative check against the company glossaries.

Requirements:

- High level of proficiency in the Arabic and Russian languages;
- Minimum 3 years of experience of written technical translation;
- Confident computer user;
- Excellent typing skills;
- Knowledge of SDL Trados Studio is an advantage (if the candidate has no skills in Trados, they will be provided with training and technical support);

- Teamwork skills, high sense of responsibility, high productivity;
- The interview stage will include a mandatory test.

Regional translation agencies are even less demanding. For example, here is the list of general requirements to applicants set by the Unit translation agency:

- Minimum 5 years of relevant work experience;
- High level of language competence;
- High sense of responsibility, accuracy and scrupulousness;
- Advanced user of MS Office;
- Skills in using CAT software;
- Availability for feedback.

As for transnational companies, they rarely detail their requirements to job applicants on their home pages. Normally, they limit these to very general comments concerning high-level professional skills in the sphere of technical translation that they expect to see in the candidates.

This short overview of translation companies leads to a conclusion that their expectations from translators focus primarily on language competence and work experience, as well as skills in machine translation and computer-assisted translation. The emphasis on the latter parameter is understandable as translation agencies demand very high speed of translation, and one of the most effective ways to accelerate the translation process is the use of MT and CAT software [16, 17].

3. Conclusion

This study has revealed that participants in professional communication, including in the area of specialised translation, may hold different perspectives regarding fundamental requirements to professional competence, and these differences should be taken into account both in translation practice and translation training at the university level. Let us compare professional competence profiles as they are seen by practicing translators, end users and translation agencies acting as intermediaries [18].

<i>Translator</i>	<i>Client/End User</i>	<i>Translation Company</i>
Procedural competence	Subject area competence	Language competence
Subject area competence	Native speaker language competence	Instrumental competence
Cultural competence	Other	Localisation skills
Instrumental competence		Subject area competence
Communicative competence		Other
Language competence		
Other		

Industry-specific translators recognise the need to constantly enhance their knowledge of the subject area they specialise in. End users expect to receive the quality of the translated text and terminology accuracy that can only be provided by a highly-skilled professional. Translation companies, in their turn, try to attract clients by promising to render top quality services of specialised translation and boasting to have highly-qualified translators with expertise in specific industries. Their requirements to job applicants focus mainly on language and instrumental competences (skills in using state-of-the-art TM systems and other CAT software) [19].

There is no doubt that subject-related knowledge is critical for performing specialised translation, independently or in a team as part of a large translation project. However, other important factors, such as cultural differences, should not be overlooked. Professional communication takes place at a juncture of various cultural fields: national culture, transnational culture, industry-specific culture, the culture of a specific enterprise/company. It would be impossible to deny that intensification of international contacts results in the gradual elimination of cultural boundaries and facilitates terminology standardisation. However, cultural differences are still important, and translation process still involves a cultural transfer, in which translators should balance the requirements of the

globalising language services industry and the actual practices that are in place in the contact cultures. An important role in building general and special cultural competences belongs to translation training institutions [20].

Teaching professionally oriented translation should be based on the trainer's personal translation experience, creativity, and a careful choice of the teaching material. Classroom work should provide a learning environment that reflects real-life professional situations, which can be achieved, for example, through using authentic technical texts. Other factors to consider include the emergence of new types of translation services, involving complex technical documentation with blue prints and descriptions of technological developments. These new market realities call for a review of didactic models for teaching specialised translation and increase the role of practitioners in the teaching process.

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