

Market-based arguments against the market as a direct factor in the training of translators

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I want to consider the market demand for translators and translations as a possible determinant on the way translators should be trained. I shall first look at several general factors of the western European market as found in Spain, particularly with respect to processes of specialization, then a few mediatory political and cultural factors, and finally I shall try to project the resulting market profile onto our teaching institutions. However, despite this one-way methodology, my main arguments will be against any strong direct relationship between market demands and the training of translators.

I should perhaps note that I have worked, off and on, as a professional translator in Spain since 1981, mainly in the fields of economics and sociology, and that I have been involved in the training of translators since 1987, first in Barcelona and more recently in the Canary Islands, which belong to Spain. Most of my observations are thus drawn from personal experience, although I hold a totally unrelated doctorate in sociology.

1. The consequences of technology

As in many fields, the market for written translations is ultimately determined by the available technology. This has never been truer than in the age of personal computers, modems, faxes and translator-specific software and support tools. Combinations and improvements of word processing and communications technology will no doubt continue, but we can be fairly sure that the major twentieth-century revolution has already taken place. The next twenty or so years will most probably be spent sorting out the consequences of that revolution and further integrating partial MT. From this outlook, there are several obvious consequences for professional translation:

1.1. The professional translator must physically possess this basic technology, not only for relations with physically distant clients and for accelerating outputs but also for accessing larger-scale technology (basically data banks of various kinds). If they have not made this giant step, they will not be professional translators for long. But the equipment is cheap enough to be owned individually, and the know-how is not inhuman.

1.2. Contemporary communications technology means that the labour market for translators is no longer dictated by material distance. The market is increasingly decentralized, becoming national and international rather than local. Living in the Canary Islands I have spent the past few years working for clients three or four thousand kilometres away from me. The only real constraint on distance is the cost of telephone calls in Europe, and this can be expected to fall in the coming years.

1.3. The services offered by translators are inevitably extending into other areas. Most obviously, the production of electronic texts means that we are doing a good deal of what was once called revision, typesetting, formatting and layout work. Properly equipped translators may also carry out straight terminology work, editing and text production, especially when they have access to data or skills not available in what would otherwise be the source language. For example, some years ago a translator was employed to render a Spanish publisher's catalogue into English for the Frankfurt Book Fair. Nowadays he doesn't translate it, he writes and publishes it, going through the Spanish publicity copy and selecting what is likely to be of interest, and then going to Frankfurt to represent the firm. He is still a translator, but he now offers a rather more complete service. I think this will be the general tendency, both for freelance translators and small service companies.

1.4. Correspondingly, there is a move away from in-house translation departments as once found in large companies. The most successful alternatives are small companies in the service sector which offer general language services within an extremely flexible framework, allowing teamwork on the diversified tasks outlined above. These companies may or may not have related branches in different cities; they may or may not be agencies relaying work to independent translators. A striking example of this can be seen in the English translation services for the Barcelona Olympic Games, which went through three stages in the space of four years. The services were originally supposed to be provided by a university translation school, but it was then considered more efficient to set up a centralized in-house team. However, what would happen to the translators after the Games? How could they develop the flexibility needed for continued survival? In the end, the translators themselves set up an independent agency which did the bulk of the Olympic work at the same time as it diversified and thus ensured reasonably long-term employment. The straight translations carried out by such companies or agencies are often combined with service activities like publication, graphic arts, publicity, research work and company representation, depending on the individual backgrounds of the translators and the extent to which they are able to invest in technology.

I think the market trend for the coming years can fairly be described in terms of these four factors: the imperatives of communications technology, a geographically

decentralized labour market, combination with associated services, and the development of highly flexible service-sector companies or agencies.

2. The demand for specialized translation

The technological factors determining this market structure also have a more indirect influence on the *kinds* of texts we have to translate, since technology is also changing the outlooks and requirements of our clients. We are witnessing constant increases not only in the rate of change in highly technological areas but also in the degree of intercultural contact in these domains, to say nothing of the sheer quantities of texts produced. This is creating a major intercultural stratification of discourses, cutting across what were once relatively homogeneous language communities and producing enormous quantities of texts and terminologies that are fairly remote from anything like common everyday language. I want to call this general phenomenon "specialization", although the term is clearly shorthand for a complex configuration of tendencies. As might be expected, specialization has several effects on the demand for translations:

2.1. Since the international and linguistic distribution of specialized-text production is very unequal, these changes are taking place in a very asymmetric way. Information flows have quite different directions on different levels. For example, Spain's entry in the EEC meant that the country's agriculture has had to be significantly restructured and modernized, requiring the translation of all kinds of regulations, technical manuals and market information, mostly from English. However, this inward flow has also created a demand for sociological studies of how EEC policies are working in Spain, and these studies have to be translated *into* English. So whilst the regulations and technical texts go one way, the sociology goes the other. In this way, specific languages compound general specialization. The translator's decision to become professionally competent in a particular target language thus also implies accepting certain restrictions on fields of specialization (this is particularly clear in the cases of limited-diffusion languages like Catalan and Basque).

2.2. Despite increasing specialization, it would be wrong to predict an indefinite increase in the amount of translating to be done in specialized areas, just as it would be conceptually inept to see translation as an integral part of technology transfers. This is because as the initial demand for translations increases in a given area, it approaches a point where language-learning policies become more profitable or cost-effective. For example, the demand for American computer technology in Spain in the 1980s had roughly the following consequences: translators could not keep up with the initial demand and translations always lagged far behind the developments; the market value of good technical translations shot up - giving rise to several of the small service-sector companies describe above -; untrained translators who knew nothing about computers briefly entered the market; the general quality of translations plummeted and the

Spanish language consequently failed to establish fixed terminologies for many areas of the new technology. In the midst of the mess, the users and sellers of this technology were forced to upgrade their English, entirely bypassing translational mediation. Much the same process can be seen in other specific areas like the introduction of a futures market in Spain. Indeed, the tendency away from generalized translation has affected most specialized fields: all Spanish scientists read English and a good many publish directly in English as well. They do not need translators; they need English teachers able to correct their syntax. The result is that in many highly specialized fields translation only really enters at a moment of popularization or divulgation, well after the actual technology transfer.

2.3. Although specialization has partly assisted the development of small service-sector translation companies, it does not necessarily require the employment of highly trained specialists in the fields concerned. In fact, given the acceleration of changes, flexibility and adaptability are greater market values than is limited in-depth knowledge. Experts in rocket-engineering translation might still get jobs with Euromissile, but they would be of limited value in the general translation market in Spain. And even within Euromissile they would probably be financially much better off working as engineers rather than as translators. So the rationality of having specialist translators is in fact very limited.

2.4. Given this limitation, translators increasingly work in teams or at least in conjunction with others. This usually involves seeking the advice and cooperation of internal or external experts, often the clients themselves. Examples here could be anything from correcting a Spanish scientist's paper written in faltering English (but with all the correct terminology), to participating as an active member of research teams, combining properly translational skills with the more general use of foreign languages for investigation work. More mundanely, this tendency means that a good translator is not someone who knows a lot, but someone who has the skills and contacts to find specific information when necessary.

2.5. I should also note here, almost in passing, that the above factors are having an influence on the more traditional sector of part-time freelance translators who work on the fringes of both in-house and service-sector companies. The need for flexibility means that this mode of operation is still very much in existence, although there is an almost natural tendency for individual translators to cooperate with each other, giving advice, exchanging information and distributing work, all of which is made very easy by modems. Although these kinds of informal arrangements may approach those of the service-sector company, there is a very real frontier between the two sectors: freelance networks or "letterbox" arrangements are usually too small in extension to attract major clients, and yet small enough to offer certain advantages like tax evasion. The factors noted above are restricting this freelance sector in two main ways: on the one hand,

specialization and rising client expectations are throwing amateur translators out of the market (as in the case of computer technology in the 1980s), and on the other, the freelance workers who stay in the market tend to counter their inferior work conditions, either by putting their rates very high and keeping just a few very professional clients, or by branching out into other skills that eventually take them away from translation, becoming international company representatives, editors, publishers, publicists and, inevitably, teachers of translation. It has become traditional to complain about the limited social recognition of translators, together with outcries about rates of pay, impossible deadlines and the health hazards of looking at a computer screen all day. But I think the market itself is reacting to these problems, first by isolating professionally adequate translators and putting a fairly high price on their products, and second by allowing these translators to switch over to more lucrative or prestigious associated professions. The inadequate translators might hang around in the unemployment limbo for a while, but soon they too tend to find alternative positions using foreign languages, ranging from bilingual secretaries to the bad scholars who turn out to be brilliant businessmen. Either way, good or bad, I suspect that very few professional translators remain translators throughout the whole of their employment history.

I have touched on four further factors that help profile the translation market in specialized fields: asymmetric information flows mean that the effects of specialization are compounded by restrictions to certain target languages; the demand for translations is not subject to unlimited expansion but will tend to give way to language-learning policies; flexibility is thus more valuable than in-depth knowledge in one particular field; specialized problems are most likely to be solved through teamwork arrangements; and even specialist translators are not likely to remain translators for their whole employment history.

3. A free market for translations?

So far I have more or less assumed that the market for translations is rationally structured in terms of technology and its consequences, including the basic logics of supply and demand and international information flows. But it is naïve to pretend that human rationality simply has to be deciphered from technology. Our markets are constantly being redressed in terms of criteria involving social and cultural desirability. This leads to several quite specific considerations:

3.1. Although technology might appear to be the dominant factor, the European demand for translations is more likely to be a consequence of the development of major trading blocks. This primarily concerns the EEC, but the underlying logic ensues from the wider reorganization of the world economy on this level. The death of the nation-state as an economic frame has given rise to belated efforts to achieve political and cultural

integration, and this in turn has led to translation being adopted as a viable communication policy, often contrary to criteria of cost-effectiveness. There can be little doubt that the EEC would operate more efficiently if its communications policy accepted the use of just one international language, but social and cultural factors mean that a purely English-speaking administration would very probably be rejected by non-English-speaking Europeans. The EEC is thus obliged to have nine official languages, providing employment for numerous translators. Similarly, for purely cultural reasons, the Barcelona Olympics were obliged to adopt four official languages - Catalan, English, French and Spanish -, creating a demand for translation that had no cost-effective relationship to Barcelona's sociolinguistic status as a bilingual city. Translation is thus often a cultural policy option that cannot be deduced from strict market logics.

3.2. For similar reasons, most literary translation is subsidized in one form or another. It is even possible to talk about export-oriented cultures which give grants for translations of their texts into foreign languages (Spain, Canada, Australia), whilst others subsidize import-oriented translations into their own language (France) and still others seek international importance and domestic status by promoting translations in both directions (Catalonia). There are also many less direct modes of subsidy, including the employment of literary translators as academics. Literary translation cannot be structured in terms of a free market economy. Nor, indeed, can the arts in Europe in general.

So we find that strict economic rationalities are contradicted by sociocultural priorities in the broad areas of language policy and literary translation. In both these fields, the effect of sociocultural priorities is artificially to increase the demand for translators. The result is of course a lot of unread or under-read translations, as well as a certain ideological dissociation of the translator from hard thought about how to make markets work.

4. How to train translators

The main thrust of my argument is by no means original. As is stated in the programme of the ESIT in Paris, the purpose of translator training should be "to produce not translators who are specialists, but specialists in translation". That is, we should be teaching translation as a general set of communication skills that our students can then apply and adapt to the changing demands of future markets, and indeed to changing professions. These skills should include obvious things like the use of word-processors, basic research procedures, a few ideas about public relations and marketing, and a bit of accountancy thrown in for good measure. As a general aim, having these areas packed into the frame of "general communication skills" would seem to fit in with the various factors we have seen above, since the main lesson to be learnt from the market is that

we really cannot learn many immediately applicable lessons from the market. The best we can do is encourage flexibility and watch out for change. But if this general vision has long been appreciated, it is reasonable to expect that the changes we have listed above should already be having some more specific influence on the training of translators, and that still others should correspond to general desiderata for the planning of new training programmes. But these influences are not without paradoxical relationships to a direct reading of the market.

4.1. Perhaps the most obvious paradox here is the way language-specific compounding of specialization tends to force translators to develop competence in several target languages, precisely as a means of diversifying against excessive specialization. For example, a translator specialized in rendering computer technology from Catalan into English would be in such a narrow market as to remain mostly unemployed. Or again, a translator who has specialized in the translation of computer technology into Catalan is in a far more fragile market position than one who can render the same technology into Catalan and Castilian. The greater the specialization of the market, the greater the translator's interest in diversifying their competence. Particularly, combined with the desirability of team work and active relationships with clients, this often means that two-way competence is required, at least with respect to oral communication.

4.2. The market factors listed above clearly have little to do with purely linguistic or literary problems, so it was only to be expected that traditional philological training would eventually become unable to supply the skills needed by the market. The first reaction to this inadequacy was the development of highly specialized programmes for training interpreters. But the more recent and more interesting reaction, dating from the beginning of the 1980s, is the orientation of general translator training away from linguistic models and towards theories that incorporate clients, specific-purpose demands and quite radical translational modifications, viewing translation as the production of a new text rather than the reproduction of an old text. I see this whole field as having been opened up by Justa Holz-Mänttari, although the followers of Hans Vermeer at Heidelberg and elsewhere have certainly done more to promote it, perhaps too belligerently, under the name of *Skopostheorie*, which simply means that one translates for a specific target-side purpose, whilst the French theorist Daniel Gouadec has made far more practical statements of the same position. There can be little doubt that this block of theory provides the most appropriate principles for thinking about how to attain some kind of adequacy to market demands. In practical terms, this means using exercises like the translation of the one text in different ways for different client instructions, or problem-solving on the basis of actual case studies incorporating various factors like client, reader, time and restricted information sources (I explain my problems to the class and try to see if they can solve them for me). But on the theoretical level, the kind of ideas and models produced here are generally quite

arcanelly specialized in their own right, paradoxically distancing translation theory from any slavish demand-and-supply relationship that education might be supposed to have with the market. In fact, the incorporation of market factors into our theories makes us better able to critically distance ourselves from immediate market demands.

4.3. Beyond general theories and procedures, however, translator training must try to address the specific phenomenon of specialization. Are we to train translators for a specific market sector, or should we simply make everyone to a bit of everything and then throw them into the water to see if they can swim? This is a major question in countries like Spain, where there is now a stable unemployment rate of about 15%, rising to some 22% in the Canary Islands and particularly affecting first-job seekers. It might be impossible to predict exact future changes, but it is just as impossible to remain indifferent to the labour market that our students have to confront. A bit of local history might help us appreciate this problem. When the Las Palmas translation school was set up four years ago, it was meant to specialize in commerce and tourism, since the island's economy depends on a huge port and a lot of tourists. It was even planned that the translation school would be associated with a school of tourism and that teachers would work closely with a school of business studies, both within the same university. But none of these plans have been followed through. This failed linkage was due to inevitable political reasons, but also to one apparently very good practical reason: Las Palmas has practically no demand for new translators in either of these sectors, since the port traffic is not significantly affected by specialization phenomena (it has not been expanding in recent years) and the tourist sector has generally adopted a policy of foreign-language learning. Of course, all my students can find local employment as teachers of English, but virtually none of them can work locally as full-time translators. So the idea of specializing in local sectors, which might look quite logical at first sight, is defeated by the economics of alternative policies, as well as by the more obvious principle that the labour market for translation is not local. It was wrong to seek long-term solutions in a narrow insular context.

4.4. Nevertheless, I think the valid solution here would have been for the translation school to specialize some of its teaching in local sectors and to collaborate closely with the schools of tourism and business studies. That is, we had the right solution but we didn't know it at the time. The reasons for this have nothing to do with any direct read-off from the market situation, since the above factors should make it clear that there can be no direct read-off anyway. My reasoning is simply that the teaching of techniques for working within a specialized markets requires very developed case studies as examples, with the appropriate backgrounding and contact with experts. The elements for such examples are most easily found in local areas of specialization, whether or not these areas constitute a real labour market for translators. And as they work in one specialized area, students should ideally learn how to learn about further areas. Training

for specialization thus requires the integration of specialized fields as actual content material, but not necessarily at any level beyond that of elaborate samples from a far more complex world.

4.5. The need for varied experience of specialized markets should be dealt with through extensive student exchange programmes, which are also the most appropriate way of ensuring adequate levels of linguistic competence and basic survival skills which cannot be taught in the classroom situation. The extreme importance of exchange programmes has only recently been recognized and they are still very badly organized, especially insofar as they could be related to market criteria. It is commonly thought that the development of exchanges requires a standardization of evaluation criteria and the imposition of pan-European study programmes and even individual courses, including modes of specialization. But we might as well believe that the setting up of a trading block means that everyone in that block has to produce and consume the same things in the same way. This is obviously wrong: the trading block exists so that each region can specialize in its areas of greatest cost-effectiveness, just as extensive student exchange programmes should encourage individual translation schools to associate with locally specialized sectors, quite independently of the actual labour market for translators. This means that a German translation student with a particular interest in tourism might choose an exchange in Las Palmas, whilst a Canarian student interested in engineering would certainly be far better off spending some time in a German translation school. Exchange programmes should thus enable individual schools to play to their strengths, although the end result should be a student who has at least experienced specialized markets in two or three areas and in two or three countries.

4.6. A further criterion affecting the use of specialization and exchange programmes must be awareness that most of our students are not likely to become full-time professional translators (interpreter training is usually different in this sense) and that those that do find such employment are likely to change to an associated professional area in the course of their career (this is generally true of both interpreters and written translators). An adequate training programme should thus not focus too exclusively on the merely technical aspects of translation, nor too readily assume that the worlds of clients and readers are only for clients and readers. On the contrary, extended exposure to quite high degrees of specialization in real-life situations should be considered highly desirable, even beyond the level of case-study examples. Further, institutional mechanisms should be created so that interested students can combine a degree in translation with formal training in associated professions, including double degrees if so desired. It should be remembered that the market for translators is not the only market interested in our students, nor is it usually the most lucrative or fulfilling.

I have suggested six ways in which market developments are or should be affecting the training of translators, each of them dependent on slightly paradoxical relations

between education and market demands. Briefly, these arguments propose that market factors require translators to work in several target languages or at least to have two-way oral competence so as to counter excessive specialization; these factors are causally related to quite esoteric and distanced purpose-based parameters of translation theory; they stop us from trying to supply strictly local labour markets; they force us to use areas of specialization as examples and indeed to diversify our translation schools, especially in conjunction with student exchange programmes; and they should encourage us to offer students as wide a vision as possible of their future areas of employment, not just as translators but as everything that could be associated with the wonderful German term *Sprachmittler*.

In all, I think I have put forward six market-based arguments against slavishly training translators for immediate market demands, even when those market demands are paradoxically useful as areas of specialization. Most of this is only good common sense: after all, in times of uncertainty, a certain degree of diversification is the best policy. But there are also quite ideological reasons for my distrust of strict market rationality. As we have seen, many of our students do not become long-term full-time translators. But they do not just disappear. One way or another they enter a vague intercultural community, a group of professions whose work it is to promote and carry out relations between different cultures. This community is of extreme importance now, at a time of very volatile and often conflictual international relations. Cultural intermediaries require more than technical expertise; they require a few of the ideals of a general humanistic education, able to transcend the outlook of their cultures and professions of origin. That is why I am afraid that our training in Spain is in danger of becoming too specific; I am afraid we are churning out too many technicians and not enough real thinkers. Ideally, I want my students not just to find work in the market and earn money as cultural intermediaries of one kind or another, but eventually to improve the intercultural relations they are engaged in, which means having a few ideas about improving the market itself.