Getting it right, forever? Deconstructing a professional discourse on the role of translators

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Anthony Pym
Intercultural Studies Group
Universitat Rovira i Virgili

Abstract: A widely distributed brochure provides a snapshot of several clear principles and guidelines to help clients work with translators. Some of those recommendations, however, seem to no longer apply to some sectors of the translation industry, thus subjecting the brochure to critical analysis. The discourse of the brochure is found to be marked by an unreasoned idealization of the individual translator, outdated opposition to L2 translation, mistrust of technology, disdain of academics, and a precarious construction of authority based on universalization of the author's personal experience. The certitude with which these principles are advanced can be contrasted with a pedagogy based on experiments and personal experience, where students are able to decide for themselves how best to find their way in a rapidly changing industry.

Translation. Getting it right is a 28-page brochure that gives very clear advice on how to purchase a translation. Addressed directly to prospective clients, it runs through a series of basic do's and don'ts, dispelling many misconceptions about translation being easy, automatic, word-for-word, or a mere application of bilingualism. It presents translators as being key players in the globalization of any company, and translation as a specialized service worth paying good money for.

Not surprisingly, the brochure has been promoted by a number of translator associations, since it basically argues the cause of their members. It was developed by Chris Durban for the UK Institute of Translation and Interpreting (in British English) and also distributed by the American Translators Association (ATA) (in American English). Both versions are currently dated 2011, although there is at least one previous ITI version dated 2001. The brochure is available online in Brazilian Portuguese, Catalan, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Iceland, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish, the translations having been promoted by translator associations in the respective countries. In all, the brochure might be seen as speaking on behalf of the more than 25,000 members of those associations. It is thus functioning as a professional discourse of considerable international importance.

The brochure is also of interest for the training of translators, since it deals with many of the questions they ask about the limits of their professional duties,

how to negotiate with clients, how to develop a business, and so on. I have been using versions of the brochure in my various Masters classes since 2001.

So what could possibly be wrong?

Not much, really. Many of the things presented in *Getting it right* are so basic, and so basically misunderstood by so many clients, that they have stood the test of time very well and still deserve to be repeated. When my MA students return from their work placements or internships, they report that some of the principles are indeed at work: clients call interpreting "translation," or they do not understand why anyone would revise a translation, and so on. A few other aspects, though, have perhaps not weathered so well: our students report that some of the brochure's ideas tend not to be operative in industry and need to be questioned and revised, especially in view of developments in translation technologies. And then, underlying the brochure's professional discourse, there is a strong anti-academic bias that places personal experience above empirical research, commercial success above comparative facts, and universal certitude above historical grounding. For these reasons, an academic translator-trainer like myself has every interest in picking at a few loose stitches, and to keep picking until the whole thing falls apart.

I will start unraveling the 2011 version in American English.

Who is speaking?

The brochure is entirely in the third person and in the universal present tense: this is a discourse that purports to be true for all translators in all countries at all times. It presents eternal truths, for which no empirical evidence is presented. That is, in strict terms, this is pure abstract theory. Then again, this is a theory that speaks on behalf of those 25,000 professional translators (and all others!), so it must be more than pure speculation, surely?

Let's see. Let us begin with the truth that "translation is written, whereas interpreting is spoken. Translators translate, interpreters interpret." There is indeed general professional consensus on this point, in many languages, just as there is widespread ignorance of this same distinction in just as many languages: non-professionals in all walks of life continue to call interpreters "translators," which is precisely why the point needs to be made. Things were not always like that, of course: when Leonardo Bruni wrote *De interpretatione recta* in about 1420, he was talking about *written* translation, and when international diplomats through the beginning of the twentieth century referred to "translators," they meant people who *both* wrote and spoke. So the distinction presented in the brochure is very historical, associated in time and place with the development of a very particular professionalism. In fact, it separates the space of that particular professionalism – where the distinction is clear – from an outside space, where common and past usages mess things up. To read the brochure is thus to pass from the outside space to the inside discourse. And if the inside is where you can "get it right," the outside must logically be where others "get it wrong." The rest of history, the space of non-professionals, and the third world of uninformed practice, all that is implicitly condemned to benighted error.

Yet even that simple distinction is not quite as clear as it seems. On the page prior to making this point, the brochure begins: "If you're not a linguist yourself, buying translations can be frustrating." So who is this "linguist"? In US usage, notably in the military, "linguists" are foreign-language experts in general, who may speak, write, and analyze information in foreign languages. So we have a term that covers a field of expertise that is potentially *wider* than that of the translator or interpreter, and which thereby covers the two. Further, by implicature, if you *are* a "linguist" you already know how to buy a translation, so you know what is in the brochure. We thus locate a space of expertise that is wider than the people called translators and interpreters, yet smaller than the assumed purgatory of perpetual error. This in-between space proves quite problematic to translate: in Catalan the brochure's reference to "linguists" becomes "language professionals" (here I back-translate); the German version goes for the paraphrase "if you only deal with foreign languages occasionally"; the French tautologically glosses the reference with "if you are not qualified to purchase a translation"(?), the Spanish simply omits it, and so on. This is a problematic space to translate, yet it is precisely the subject position from which the brochure is speaking.

This apparently pedantic point, in fact, leads to the major problem behind the brochure as a whole: Exactly who is speaking? And how can they be so sure of all these things? As I say, you just have to start picking at a few loose threads.

Several developments in the translation industry perturb this space of axiomatic expertise, even before we enter all the things that are said from within that space. First, technologies are messing up that crystalline distinction between the written and the spoken, translators and interpreters: with speech recognition software, translators speak (as in the automatic subtitles that appear on television screens as sports commentators speak), and with immediate electronic transcripts, interpreters work from written texts and have their words automatically converted into written texts. The difference that once seemed self-evident no longer is. And second, the advent of crowdsourcing recognizes that many people who are not professional translators nevertheless have significant expertise, which can be used in translation workflows. Are these people "linguists," "translators," or what? Again, the once obvious distinctions are no longer so clear. So much for the universal simple present.

Translators are experts in everything

The most remarkable thing about *Getting it right* is not particularly the written or spoken nature of what translators do; it is the very wide range of things in which the brochure presumes they are competent. The basic claim being made to clients is that they can use their translators' expertise in order to save money: this is when they are indeed getting it right, it seems, exchanging the knowledge in the brochure for a more efficient communication budget.

First, says the brochure, you the client should find out whether the text-to-be-translated really needs to be translated. And who can tell you this? Why, your translators, who thus implicitly become advisers, consultants, and perhaps pre-editors. Your translator can tell you what should *not* be translated, thereby what

should be translated, and indeed *how* the text should be reformulated. In fact, your translators know your business better than you do, says the brochure. They are, apparently, constantly "tracking your market"; they are really part of your "foreign-text team" (so who else is in the team, and where is it located?); they are the ones who know exactly what words are going to work best, since they are by definition "language-sensitive native speakers" (says the brochure) who always only work into their L1; they are thus "expert linguists" who are free from "contamination" by other languages, or so we learn.

These are all quite remarkable claims. I regularly ask my Masters students, when they have completed their internships, whether these features are in evidence in the companies they have visited. Most report that they are not. Very few language service providers allow translators to have direct contact with clients (clients can speak with the project manager, yes, but not the translators), logically in order to ensure that the client does not start up a direct contractual relationship with the good translators. Very few translators are regularly assigned to the same client, not just to counter the risk of elopement but also because delivery deadlines tend to be more important than who is doing the work. Remarkably few language decisions of the marketing kind are actually made by translators, who are mostly required to apply glossaries and respect translation memories, leaving the marketing decisions to the marketing teams (a true "foreign-text team" would be ideal, but such beasts are hard to find). And the configuration of market demands is such that these days enormous numbers of translators are working into L2 English, mostly from the smaller languages for which there are simply not enough L1 English-speakers to go around. On all these points, the parts of the market visited by my students (from Monterey, often with internships in Silicon Valley) has run well ahead of the particular image of expertise constructed in the brochure.

Fair enough, might say the author of the brochure, so the reports I receive are not those of the most advanced or ideal market configurations. But then, if not as universal as its universal presence tense, what kind of market is the brochure talking about? And could the most technologically advanced markets, such as those my students visit, really be expected to adopt the practices of the quaint artisanal world of the brochure? Or is the one professionalism somehow truly spread across the globe?

Translators need no technology

The brochure advises the client to "think international from the start," glossed as a simple imperative: "avoid culture-bound clichés." No one could argue with that, and the general precept seems to augur well for something like a localization process, with internationalization as its traditional first step. There are, indeed, other pieces of advice in the brochure that point to the need for localization, specifically in references to the local varieties of languages that may be required, and thus the need for translators with local expertise. But as for anything like the actual localization industry, there is none of it in sight.

In fact, much of what the client is told here goes *against* regular localization practice. The brochure still envisages a world where the client gives the text directly

to an individual translator, who works into just one language. No consideration is given to one-to-many projects, multilingual language-services providers, or ongoing translation maintenance projects (of the kind where a company is responsible for the ongoing updating of a multilingual website), for instance. Further, when the brochure recommends that the client finish the text before giving it to the translator, the workflow model is simply not of the kind that the largest projects require these days – there is no awareness of technology that can isolate and self-automate the updates. The alternative to technology here is a work process that sounds rather like restoring an old car from scratch, piece by piece, by hand: "Good translators strip down your sentences entirely before creating new ones in the target language."

In keeping with this rather quaint boutique model of the translation industry, we find quite blunt and massive resistance to translation technologies across the board: "Careful editing of machine output by skilled human translators is one option, although not all translators will accept such assignments." In other words, don't bother.

The problem with this is, first, the only translation technology recognized in the brochure appears to be free online machine translation, as if several generations of translation-memory software had not made a lasting and valuable contribution to the translation industry. And second, in many fields and languages the postediting of statistical machine translation is now more efficient and more consistent than translating from scratch, and all the more so in situations where companies have their own in-house MT systems with databases that can be kept product-specific and clean. These are the developments that are revolutionizing the translation industry, not just in terms of efficiency but also with respect to some of the taboos of yesteryear. Thanks to these technologies, translation into L2 can be both efficient and reliable, and non-translators can make valuable contributions in crowdsourced workflows.

If you are a young graduate anxious to find a place in the market, if you are running up the brick wall of clients who all require experience and none will give you experience, you might want to invest your efforts in precisely the technologies that the previous generation, the one of the brochure, does not want to know about. You might be interested in the possibility that there is more than one way of getting it right.

The author of *Getting it right* does not want to entertain these claims. Worse, she does not want you to find out about them: the current research risks casting too much doubt on too many apparently universal truths. So let's make sure everyone stays clear of it altogether. And how better to avoid research than to denigrate researchers?

Academics know nothing

One of the most peculiar pieces of advice in the brochure runs as follows:

Teachers, academics & students: at your own risk
For many companies faced with foreign-language texts, the first stop is the language department of a local school or university. While this may—

sometimes—work for inbound translation (i.e., when you want to find out what the other guys are up to), it is extremely risky for promotional texts. Teaching a foreign language is a demanding activity that requires a special set of skills. These are rarely the same as those needed to produce a smooth, stylish translation. (2011: 15)

The first piece of shoddy footwork here is that teachers, academics, and students are all placed in the same boat: getting a translation done by an academic is just as risky as getting it done by a student. And if there is no difference between teachers and students, the implicature is clearly that nothing of value is being taught or learned in any of the translator-training programs. The second remarkable thing is that something is indeed pictured as being learned: foreign languages only, it seems, and that particular set of skills obviously has nothing to do with translation, or so says the brochure. What is clearly elided here is not just the need for language competence in order to translate, but more worryingly the possible existence of any teachers, researchers, or students who might be able to teach and learn valid translation skills. There are more than 500 specialized translator-training institutions in the world[1] but they are all either invisible or miserably incompetent in the authorial eyes of *Getting it right*. The simpler implication is that academic institutions do not adequately train translators. Knowledge only comes with experience, perhaps, and academics by definition do not have the kind of experience required.

Despite this certitude, a survey of 305 translation scholars found that some 96 per cent of them had translated or interpreted "on a regular basis" (Torres-Simón and Pym 2016). No such evidence disturbs the brochure's certainty that none of them really knows how to translate.

Interestingly, the author of the brochure makes no claim to have received any specialized academic training in translation. She does mention in an interview that "[a]s part of [her] university course, [she] had a few classes in business and financial translation…", but that is all. She obviously felt no need to waste her time on anything academics might have to say.

A market of niches?

Although the author of *Getting it right* offers no systematic evidence for any of her claims (only academics need to do that), she does rely on anecdotes about "one company in France", and she more pointedly backs up some claims by pointing to her own company in Paris, specialized in financial translation. The specificity of this experience is actually recognized in the brochure, in the one universalist claim that does appear to be entirely justified:

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[1] The list of translator-training institutions at http://www.est-translationstudies.org/resources/tti/tti.htm named some 503 institutions in 2013, although this figure should certainly be higher, given the rate of growth in China, where some 10 new Masters in Translation and Interpreting programs are opened each year.

Translation is an industry of niche markets. Even the "for publication" category covers a broad spectrum of services and suppliers, commanding an equally wide range of prices. The team that did a perfect job on your software manuals is not necessarily the right one to translate your company's annual report. (2011: 26)

The logical problem here, of course, is that the experience gained in one niche cannot therefore be applied across the board. And yet this is precisely what the author of the brochure has done on every single page: there is no evidence except her personal success, and that success has been in just one niche among many.

This is not just a logical quandary. It has consequences for the many sectors of the localization industry that are ignored, for the many translator-training institutions that apparently should not exist, and indeed for the many variants in translation norms worldwide. For instance, as much as *Getting it right* assumes that correctness comes from using native-level target varieties that are close to the translation user, much technical translating into Asian languages accepts considerable interference from English, in accordance with norms that do not often prevail between European languages and that someone who is restricted to a Parisian financial niche would find hard to grasp. The practices we consider normal and best are often not at all universal. And to pretend that the whole world should be like in practice is not just wishful thinking: it is Eurocentric neo-colonialism.

Are we perhaps being too hard here? The author of *Getting it right* scarcely warrants kid gloves: she not infrequently resorts to not just undocumented anecdote but also gratuitous insult as her main discursive strategies. This can be seen in her agony aunt column called "Fire ant and worker bee," where advice is dispensed free to anyone who wants it, with no data and few attempts at reasoned argument. Instead we have imperatives, instructions, and colorful tirades against defenseless unknown opponents. For example, here is how we meet a translator who is apparently interested in defending the French language.

The representative of a partner association was an intense and terminally indignant tech translator who, rather than focus on the business at hand, indulged in long tirades on the history of the French language and its enemies. A latter-day and far less distinguished De Gaulle on amphetamines came to mind. (Fire Ant and Worker Bee 2011)

Here is a coherent argument against translators who complain about being offered low rates:

[...] we find translators who insist on getting upset about low-ballers a tad tiresome. (Fire Ant and Worker Bee 2011)

And then we learn how clients should deal with raw novice translators, who apparently should be fed special information to "freak out the superficial wannabe." (Fire Ant and Worker Bee 2015)

All these comments are a true delight to read, but their spluttering and blustering ultimately exist only to cover over the lack of anything except assumed expertise. What is truly remarkable is that associations totaling 25,000 members seem to have swallowed this discursive strategy wholesale.

So why so much certainty?

Why is Chris Durban so dead sure of everything she is saying? Why do professional translators seem keen to share in this amazing certainty, at least through their associations? In the case of Durban, financial success no doubt provides a guarantee of sorts: if she has made money, how could she be wrong? She probably also benefits from working in a field (finance) where there are relatively fixed concepts and terms, where it is remarkably possible to be right (and to tell when the others are wrong). And then, just as success begets success, the fact that her advice has been repeated in so many languages, by so many translator associations, further constructs the authority of each utterance: Surely so many people could not be wrong? Those three factors (financial success, being in the financial sector, and widespread acceptance) could explain the certainty. Of course, they provide no guarantee of truth.

I want to put forward a more general explanation for this same certainty. It runs like this: Of all possible modes of communication, translation is the one that I suggest is the most subject to *uncertainty*. This uncertainty occurs in the passage from one language system to another, at the points where there are usually multiple possible mapping operations available (even for some financial concepts) and few rules that could approach anything like a grammar. Translation also takes place at particular nodes in social networks where, in principle, the people paying for the product (the translation) cannot properly evaluate its quality (since they generally do not know the foreign language as well as the translator does). These tow features mean that the translational communication act has a special reliance on *trust*, on the good faith of someone who is speaking on someone else's behalf. After all, since the client cannot fully control the quality of the translation, the translator they are paying could always be operating in the interests of the other side. So translation, I propose, is one of those wild and wooly places where nothing is certain, neither linguistically nor socially.

Now, how is someone supposed to create a relation of special trust in a situation of special uncertainty? Precisely by creating an aura of certainty, and in some cultures this can be done loudly, abrasively, and repeatedly. This might help explain the gung-ho bravura of *Getting it right*, and perhaps the need felt by translators everywhere to cling onto any semblance of self-evident truth spoken by an accepted authority.

I hesitate to propose that this illusory certainty can be found in the discourse of all professional translators. But it might explain why many translators feel threatened by researchers, who not only ignore the self-evident truths experienced by professionals, but might collect data that could challenge the trust that many clients place in them. Academics, at your own risk, indeed.

So how should we train translators?

Getting it right presents a view of the translation industry that is based on a motivated idealization and generalization of the L1 technical expert who specializes in a high-profile sector in one location, without technology. That kind of translator no doubt exists, and will continue to exist, and will hopefully be highly paid. It does not follow, however, that no success will ever come to translators who work into L2, who use the full range of current technologies, who work with technical experts rather than track a particular industry for their clients, or who are anonymous members of large technical teams. No one can say that such people, and everyone else with just one or several of these traits, is in any way getting it wrong. What they might be doing, of course, is creating new niches in new markets, and in new creative ways.

The problem for today's translator-trainers is that we must work with significant doubt on most of these points. Whatever the dominant workflows and technologies are at the moment, we can be fairly sure that they will be quite different in five years' time, and possibly in a new technical sector or into another target language. The massive certitude of *Getting it right* – or indeed of our own professional experience in the translation market – simply cannot provide a sure and safe grounding for our training programs. In this situation, I suggest, the very format of our training has to move beyond the master-apprentice arrangements that have traditionally supported the passing on of sure knowledge.

One solution is to organize our classes as a series of practical experiments in which our students construct new knowledge for themselves. That is, the classroom becomes a space for testing and discussion, rather than the transfer of established knowledge. Students and young translators will have to discover for themselves how to get it right, very probably by first getting quite a few things wrong.

In short, applied empiricism can provide at least one alternative to the authority of experts, be they professional or indeed academic.

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