

For a sociology of translator training

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A talk given at the inaugural conference of the World Interpreter and Translator Training Association, Guangzhou, China, November 19, 2016.

Version 1.1. May 2017

Abstract. Translator training first depends on specific local circumstances, primarily the distribution of languages and the intensity (frequency and invested social effort) of information flows between languages. The conceptual space thus opened allows us to map each training situation in terms of local objectives, questioning ideologies of universal best practices. It is proposed that, with this wider social view, translator trainers should not neglect the role of translation within foreign-language learning, and they should accept the social responsibility of training people for short-term work in minority languages. The need for such training is clear from the many situations where, especially thanks to free online technologies, whole sections of society *think* they can translate, while whole generations of language teachers think they know, with equal aplomb, that translation does not concern them. Finally, perhaps paradoxically, the conceptual mapping of training situations can identify instances where we should be training for an international professional community, with its own pressing demands for certification.

1 Why a sociological approach?

International cooperation in translator training is much needed and is always welcome. We all benefit from the experiences of others; we all have our favorite tricks that we are sometimes willing to share. There is, however, a basic question to be formulated and repeated in most such circumstances, at least to plant an implicit doubt: To what extent are there *best practices* that can be disseminated?

It is common enough in all kinds of education to invent a timeline that leads from benightedness to enlightenment: what we did in the past was bad, what we do now is much better, and so we are on the road to perfection. Language education, especially, is full of invented historical linearity, as one approach or another gains adepts with an enthusiasm worthy of football fans: transmission in the past, collaboration in the future; structure in the past, communication in the future; grammar translation in the past, collaborative communicative translation in the future, perhaps?

Anyone wary of reductive binarisms should take heed and pause to reflect on an obverse model: translator training, like all education, is contextual, situated, grounded, embedded, or whatever other methodological word one might use to represent practical aspects of the social. There are always specific collectivities involved in the production, dissemination, and use of the information subject to translation, just as there are other specific collectivities to be found in the groups that pay to be trained, are paid to give training, and are certainly paid for organizing the paying. That is, to the extent that

groups of people are involved, the social infiltrates every aspect of the activity, from the economic to the cognitive.

Hence the possibility of a sociological approach of some kind (not a turn, since we are not sheep, just an approach). Here it is not my purpose to evoke any heroic sociologist as supplier of truth, or to crunch any numbers from surveys, interviews and demography, the machines of sociology. My aim is merely to open a conceptual space for reflection on relativity. I propose that a sociology of translator training can be modeled along two intersecting axes: one for the distribution of languages, the other for the intensity of information flows. Ideally, if all goes well, once you locate your position on the resulting grid, you might start deciding how to train your translators (and interpreters as well, since at this level of abstraction there is not a great difference).

And so to the first axis.

2 Distributions of languages

Imagine, if you will, a community where everyone learns at least three languages, to some degree. Something like this happens in the more traditional indigenous communities in the very north of Australia. For example, a community of some 450 people on the island of Warruri can use five different languages, with widespread receptive competence in each (Singer and Harris 2016). In such a community, no internal translating should be needed. Or rather, everyone can translate themselves, or translate each other, all the time – everyone is a potential translator. Let us call this the “everyone can translate” model, for want of a technical term.

Now imagine a community where everyone learns just the one language, and those speaking any foreign languages are regarded with suspicion. This might concern cases such as classical Sparta (according to Herodotus 450-420 BCE/1914: Book 7), West Africa in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Smith 1989: 15, 19-20, 25), or the *Oranda tsuji* in Japan (Cullen 2003: 60ff.). In Sparta, a special family lineage, with their own demi-god, was charged with communication with other foreign powers; in West Africa, the professional interpreters-cum-negotiators tended to be literate Muslims; in Japan from 1641, the interpreters of Dutch inherited their positions and lived in confinement, lest the nation be contaminated by too much foreign information. Let us call this the “professionals only” model, for the sake of descriptive transparency.

The distinction between these two models maps partly onto the way new mediators are recruited. If the distribution of languages is wide and with a plurality of languages, then internal or domestic recruitment is possible: you train members of your own society. If not, you seek outsiders, either by employing unattached professionals (as in the examples above) or by capturing outsiders (as the Spanish tended to do in their conquests). This in turn creates different problematics of trust: you tend to trust your own kind, mistrust mediators from the outside, and enact rules and measures to control the difference.

Almost all societies are between these two extremes: the distribution of languages is such that a greater or smaller proportion of the population is able to translate themselves, and correspondingly greater or smaller groups of marked professionals are required. This can be complicated by the way the distribution operates in the two or more societies usually concerned in translation flows, but the basic logic remains the same.

The extreme mix of these two models is when online language technologies allow everyone in a monolingual society to *think* they can all translate. Less radical mixes are prevalent when, for example, the “everyone can translate” model comes under pressure from a sudden influx of new language demands, due to migration or changing trade patterns, or to internal regulations about who can communicate with whom – in

fact there are translating intermediaries on the multilingual island of Warruri. Similarly, the “professionals only” model is seriously challenged when a restricted language becomes a lingua franca, as might be the case of English or Chinese. When all primary school children in China start learning English, one day they will theoretically all be able to translate, to some degree. But when, for instance, the Chinese government wants to impress the world right now, then highly professional translators are needed, with extreme selection processes, in addition to all the other levels of competence and trust that still retain their social functions. Opera singers have to be selected and paid well, but many other kinds of singers are listened to and appreciated, and all of us can enjoy singing badly. Translation has no reason to be different.

3 Intensities of information flows

If there is no demand to send or receive information, then there need be no demand for translation, no matter how propitious the distribution of languages. On the other hand, if there is constant demand for information, then there may be intensive translation activities, even despite an unpropitious distribution of languages. These factors oblige us to recognize the pertinence of a second axis, specifically for information flows.

By “intensity” of flow, I mean the *frequency* (how much information over a period of time) and the *degree of social effort* invested in the information (how much the mediators are paid, how much value is invested in their selection and of course in their training). Both these factors are heavily influenced by the available communication and translation technologies, which give this axis a marked historicity. “Intensity” is thus a composite variable, the most powerful component of which I presume to be technology.

The intensities of information flows are pertinent for three main reasons.

First, most translation flows tend to be short-term and marked by extreme variations. The historical graphs jump up and down, in quite a fractal way (the jumps are visible on both the small scale and the large scale). That is, many (though not all) demands for translation tend to be short-lived and subject to change. This is why communities of mediators tend to be highly flexible: it should be no surprise that, overall, the professional translation community in Europe and elsewhere is currently about 60% part-time (translation and interpreting are mixed with teaching, editing, writing, and much else) and 74% freelance (there are relatively few in-house translation departments) (Pym et al. 2012).

Second, there are language pairs where the information flows are strong and constant over time. In those situations, it becomes more cost-efficient for communication participants to learn languages than to rely on mediators. That is, the very intensity of the information flows works against the social demand for translators. So one cannot bank on reproducing an extensive group of professional translators for generation after generation, unless there are particular high-risk circumstances that are repeated. This is why the axis of information flows has significant effects on the axis of language distribution, and vice versa, and both inform the social need for translator training.

Third, the relative degree of social investment affects not just who is trained, but also who does the training. In low-frequency information flows, where the occasional translation carries out a phatic communication function (“Are you still there?”, says one culture to the other), the intercultural community is likely to be very small and training tends to be offered by a handful of experts. This is the case, for example, in NAATI examinations in Australia, where some of the languages of lesser diffusion have such small communities that there may be only one recognized expert, who is perhaps setting exams for the others with that specific language combination. On the other hand, in a

language pair where everyone translates, the social investment may not be in translator training at all: the language teachers will be the ones training the translators, as a side effect of the way they use translation in the foreign-language class. This might be the case of the European nineteenth century, where there were few other ways of learning how to translate.

A prime example of the way these axes interact can be seen in the growth of English as an international lingua franca. The more people learn English, the more widespread translation activities with English become, and the less social effort is put into training the broad range of translators. Tian (2014) compares English novels translated into Chinese in the 1950s with the same novels translated in the 1990s, and finds that the later translations are lower in quality. Similarly, Fallada (2001) compares Spanish restaurant menus translated in the 1970s with those translated in the 1990s, and finds that the general quality has decreased. This is not because there is no translator training in China or Spain; it is rather because the information flows from English are so intense that the training cannot keep up with the demand, everyone learns a bit of English, and whole new generations *think* they know how to translate. One could imagine that the quality might eventually decrease further to the point where no one will trust the translations, everyone will learn English, and everyone will effectively be translating for themselves, perhaps badly but happily.

Once you open the conceptual space of these two axes, the tasks of translator training become highly situational. Whenever someone tells you how translators should be trained, or what a model program or class should look like, the first thing you should think is this: Well, it depends....

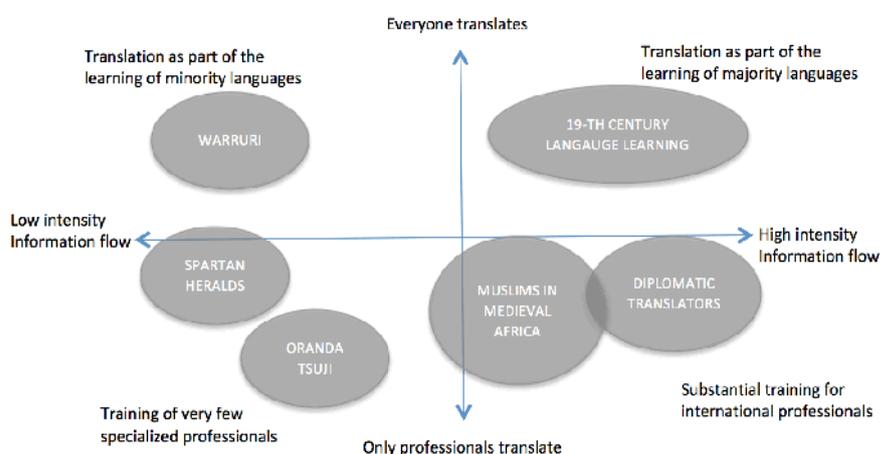
Now we can start to say what it might depend on: the distribution of languages and the intensity of information flows. And then a whole lot more, of course, but we have at least marked out a territory and started to think in social terms.

4 Mapping where you are

Once you have these two axes as rough dimensions, it is theoretically possible to map where you are, and hopefully where you want to go. This will never be an exact science, but it can be an instructive intellectual exercise.

Figure 1 is my attempt to map the few cases I have mentioned here, along with a space for the “diplomatic translators” who were trained on a more institutional basis from the nineteenth century, mainly between national languages and French, the diplomatic lingua franca of the day. The two axes should be clear enough in terms of the explanations given above. In each of the four corners I have suggested the sort of training activity one would expect to take place there, if indeed there is any training at all (in the top-left quadrant, especially, one would expect the transfer operations to be absorbed into general language acquisition). I have then positioned the case studies as best I can, at least to the closest quadrant.

Fig. 1 Attempt to map basic translator-training situations



The first lesson to be learned from this exercise is that, in the top half of the space, translator training might be expected to be a part of language learning, and only in the bottom half should we expect to find separate programs for training translators, and indeed a separate academic discipline for research on translations. Whatever the imaginary barriers between our disciplines, the logics of languages and information flows suggest that too narrow a focus on just one kind of training is going to hide about half of what is going on: the hard-won independence of translation studies may not be a good thing. I will return to this below.

5 What this means

Looking at translator training from this perspective, I see two main things we might not need, and three that we could need.

5.1. The non-transferability of best practices

The training methods you apply for long-term stable information flows between dominant languages clearly cannot be the same as those you use for short-term contact with lesser-used languages. Europe has been discovering this in recent years: it trained translators in the major colonial European (and occasionally Asian) languages, but not in the numerous languages from Africa and the wider Middle East that have been entering in the form of refugees and asylum seekers. Something similar might be happening around the fringes of China. The training system, geared for long-term conversations between national elites, was radically unprepared for the new challenges.

This same message can be applied across the board. What works between the major languages of Europe with pen and paper need not work between asymmetrically related languages in Asia with electronic media. In each particular training situation, for each particular language pair, for each technological generation, we need to think anew.

(There is a petty self-serving concern in Western Translation Studies that we need to import non-Western perspectives. That binarism is banal: what we need to do is think from the ground, in each new case, in each new situation, with little regard for what is East, West, North, or South.)

5.2. *The perils of abstraction*

One convenient way of avoiding the problems of specificity is to offer abstractions instead of teaching: offer students theories, research seminars, ethics, technologies, and several other flavors of “language-neutral” courses, instead of training sessions that are specific to a given language pair. This is bound to happen in any training program to some extent, but when the proportion of language-pair-specific courses drops below about 20%, then I suggest something different is afoot.

There are some ten one-year Masters programs in the United Kingdom that are members of the European Masters in Translation network. Their average minimum proportion of language-specific teaching contact credits is about 15% of the total credits in the Masters. So it seems that some of these programs (certainly not all!) are getting students with many different language pairs together in the one classroom, teaching them all the same thing (except for the 20% or less of the time spent with language-specific tutors), then sending them out into the world as qualified translators (and sometimes interpreters). What is going on here? I suspect that international students are paying a lot of money to be in the United Kingdom in order to improve their English and learn something *about* translation. That is a good thing, but it is not translator training: it is dressed-up over-priced language learning. It is happening now, and it is concealed under a huge cloak of abstraction: since it is much cheaper for an institution to teach language-neutral content (all languages together in the one place), there is a lucrative institutional demand for theorization at all language-neutral levels. Of course, this would be fine if the world really needed more translation theorists.

5.3 *The need to rethink the role of translation in language teaching*

Since language teaching interacts with translation in several tricky and sometimes quite perverse ways, we cannot afford to exclude it from our vision.

In a situations where everyone is in a position to translate for themselves, there is no guarantee they are going to do a good job of it, or that they are in any way aware of the range of solutions that a professional translator can call on. In particular, the creation of situations where everyone *thinks* they can translate, basically through free online machine translation, creates an urgent social need for training in how to use those technologies (the basics of postediting), when to trust them, and more especially when *not* to trust them. That training can be called translator training, but a lot of it could also be called language teaching, since the technologies can also be used as language-teaching tools.

For about a century, translation activities have been wrongly excluded from foreign-language classrooms, both by the ideologies of translation as an independent discipline (on the side of translation studies) and by immersion or “communicative” ideologies of language acquisition (in language education). This seems not to have happened so much in China (Pym et al. 2013), but there is still a dearth of attention to the pedagogical virtues of translation.

A key idea here, enshrined in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) but perhaps not elsewhere, is that translation is part of a wider skill-set called “mediation” (alongside interpreting, gisting, and otherwise getting a message across in a foreign language). More important, this mediation is recognized as the fifth language skill (after speaking, listening, writing and reading), as a properly communicative activity in its own right. Translation is thus something that all language learners might want to do with the languages they have learned; it is something that students are doing anyway in each act of transitory mental

translation; it is a useful resource to be integrated into the language-teaching classroom, alongside many other forms of spoken and written activity. If this is to be done in any measured and substantial way, then a lot of language teachers have to discover the intricacies and creative potential of translation; they would benefit from seeing it as a truly communicative activity, rather than as a correctional check on language acquisition.

For too long translation scholars and translation teachers have pretended to live in splendid isolation from language teaching. It is time we corrected our erroneous institutional politics in this regard. It is time we started talking with language educationalists, and they with us.

5.4. The need for social recognition of translators at different levels, with different kinds of skills

Once you are aware of the various distributions and intensities, it becomes clear that translation is occurring at many different levels and for many different reasons. It is no longer enough to focus simply on the highest-level experts, as if the rest did not matter or could not benefit from training.

We should recognize that there are many different levels of translation performance: what is good enough on the time-pressured immigrant frontier is not good enough for state treaties, and what is done for state treaties simply cannot be done on the immigrant frontier, for want of time and social investment.

In practice, this means developing more very short-term courses for those who are on the front line and are otherwise untrained in translation skills. And then attention is needed to the many mid-level training programs that can be used to upgrade the translation skills of the many professionals who are not employed as full-time translators but carry out occasional translations nevertheless. They, too, should fall within our purview.

5.5. The need for an international system of professional certification of translators

In the above grid, the axis of language distribution reminds us that translators can be recruited either domestically or from the outside. The extreme mobilities of globalization, however, suggest that even that division is no longer stable, since translators move from society to society, and they can sell their services online in many different societies. Once trained, mediators are not tied to the initial distribution of languages and translation flows. Especially in the larger languages with the more intense flows, successful professionals tend to work as members of a professional intercultural community.

Recognition of this international dimension could threaten to pull down the entire edifice of everything I have said so far. If training is always tied to local demands and constraints, how can we be training for what would appear to be a truly international job market? Surely the global contradicts the local? (My thanks to Doug Robinson for suggesting that I might have shot myself in the foot here.)

The answer concerns quantities. On my reckoning, there is the equivalent of some 333,000 full-time translator and interpreters in the world who declare this as their profession in tax returns and the like (see Pym et al. 2012: 133). Those are the people susceptible to work on an international market – it is not a huge number. Yet the number of people who have received or are receiving some training in translation is greater, probably much greater (if you include all the translation that is or should be used in foreign-language programs). The practice of translation is much wider than the

high-end global market, and the social demands are much greater in ethical importance. The localism persists because we should be training for the many different levels and types of needs; the international professional community persists as a relatively small social group, certainly exercising allure but not providing sufficient basis for universal best practices.

Within that restrictive frame, one of the consequences of high-end mobility is the need to harmonize the many ways in which the quality of translators is signaled to those who pay for that quality. This can involve the mutual recognition of academic qualifications, but the more substantial challenge is probably to have mutual recognition of exam-based professional certification systems.

This has been attempted in Europe with the TransCert project. There have also been associated initiatives from the United States, notably through the efforts of Professor Alan Melby. All those initiatives have so far run aground on the rocky shores where industry meets academia, where there is amazingly little mutual trust.

So one of the things I would like to see a world association of translator trainers work towards is a system for the international recognition of professional certification systems – at least for the elite of the profession. If Europe and the United States have been unable to achieve this, then perhaps the initiative has to come from another part of the world, beginning from China and Australia. Why not?

6. Several ways forward

Since the conceptual space of translator training is vast and complex, there is more than one way to solve problems and move forward.

I have suggested that the first thing any trainer should do is look at where they are in local terms, on their specific part of the language-distribution and information-flow axes. Once you know where you are, what kind of people you are training, and what specific kind of activity you are training them for, then you can look around and borrow models and ideas from anywhere you like.

A second suggestion is that one should resist the temptation to aim for the high end of the translation market only, as if all your graduates were going to get there, and as if there were not other social uses of translation that can benefit from training.

Third, as a continuation of this call to basic social responsibility, I have suggested that we would take an active interest in the uses of translation in foreign-language teaching, since that is where most students are gaining their knowledge of translation (often along with grossly reductive translation concepts, if not outright prejudice).

And fourth, as a possible way forward for the more international community of professional translators, I have proposed that we take active positions in favor of international certification, starting at whatever level proves most convenient.

The common point of departure for all these avenues is basic awareness that translator training is not just one thing. It evolves in human contexts, in relation to specific human demands, aspirations, and technologies. It should not be reduced to timeless principles and technicalities. And there is urgent work to be done, on both the local and international levels.

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