

## **Training Translators and European Unification: A Model of the Market**

(A talk presented to the European Commission's Translation Service 'Theory Meets Practice' forum, 12-14 April 2000)

Anthony Pym

Universitat Rovira i Virgili

Spain

### **Theory meets Practice?**

It is with great pleasure that I am participating, in and through this paper, in a 'Theory Meets Practice' seminar organised by the European Commission's Translation Service. But I must start by confessing a few slight problems:

First, what side of the meeting am I supposed to be on? I have been a professional translator for some 13 years, and I've never let a bit of fancy theory interfere with the financial and social necessities of that activity. Further, as a professional translator, I am well aware that a certain measure of theorising—the production and discarding of hypotheses—is a part of any translation process. So I would hope that theory is meeting practice whenever we actually translate (which is why, by the way, much good theory is regarded as mere 'common sense' by many of the professionals who take the time to listen to it).

Second, more importantly: I'm not quite sure this meeting is or should be a simple two-sided affair. On the one hand, admittedly, so-called theorists like myself tend to inhabit universities or similar educational institutions that, for better or for worse, adopt a certain distance with respect to the world; we indulge in the pleasure of knocking around ideas and are thus, if you must, 'theory'. On the other hand, you, as the world's largest ever translation bureau, are engaged in rather more of the hands-on practice side of life than is my particular want at the moment. But then, beyond us both, there is surely yet another world. Is not commerce, business, money, rapidly outflanking all our combined

efforts? Are not our very terms of reference, not to mention our comparative rates of pay, lagging sadly behind the world of the ‘intercultural management assistant’, the ‘language service provider’, the ‘localizer’, or more benignly, the ‘multi-tasking translator’. In domains such as information technology, cross-cultural marketing and international consulting, translators are regularly being called upon to do rather more than what we do. And they are being paid more.

Theory should indeed meet practice. But we should both also be meeting new-economy commerce.

My topic today is training. A few years ago this would have involved answering a simple question: How can we, as academics, train translators so that they may best work for you, the main institutional employers? Now, though, the question is significantly richer: How can we, you and I, as purveyors and retainers of certain very human cultural values, train translators so that their lives may be rich, in all possible senses?

Je m’explique.

### **A Three-Segment Model of the Labour Market**

I propose that the general process known as globalisation has led to an increasingly segmented market structure for language services.

First, at the most numerous bottom end of the labour market (bottom because numerous), increasingly massive tourism and the freer movement of labour within Europe means there are countless poorly paid translation jobs being carried out by students, recent graduates, friends-of-friends-of-clients, or variously incompetent or indifferent part-timers, who may or may not have university training in the language concerned, as translators or otherwise. The remuneration of this broad underclass is usually just enough to keep them studying.

A second segment would then comprise many contracted literary translators, established freelancers, salaried language professionals in non-technical fields, part-time conference interpreters, bilingual secretaries to middle-management and above, and tenured academic staff like myself. EU staff translators would perhaps be at the upper end of this range. This reasonably comfortable second group is still the kind of

professional location for which most teachers feel they should be preparing their students, perhaps because it is the niche of tenured teachers themselves (could anyone hope to go higher?).

Third, as mentioned, there is a growing top-pay demand for highly competent language professionals, often two-way, in globalising fields such as information technology, economics, marketing, and the general run of multinational business. This demand often goes beyond restricted conceptions of translation in the sense that its professionals are called upon to do more than just translate. More telling, they can be paid two to four times the comfortable salaries earned by tenured teachers of translation; they know what time they start work, they do not know when they will finish; they work nights and weekends; they can afford luxury goods that they have little time to use. If relatively long-term employment can still be found in segment two, this segment three offers few guarantees and demands great flexibility. The growth of the sector has been so fast, the power structures so dynamic and fragmentary, and the salaries so high, that there are relatively few official regulations in force, and no question of unionism or collective action. This is fundamentally where people are paid for what they can do—or what they can quickly learn to do—, and not particularly for where they have come from, what kind of university degree they have, or what social structures are around to protect them.

Now, from segment to segment the very nature of translation, and the professional identity of translators, varies significantly. Further, the variance would appear to have something to do with what we might call the dimension of the culture concerned. Here the general dimension ‘territorial’ (as in ‘territorial cultures’) will refer to the kind of belonging associated with geopolitical space, as in the French culture that is supposed to belong in France, the German culture of Germany, and so on. In the intersections or overlaps of territorial cultures, I humbly ask you to recognise something else, another kind of belonging that is properly ‘intercultural’, in the sense that it has more to do with certain professions than with any geopolitical space. So we have territorial cultures (minimally A and B) and professional interculturalities (in the overlaps of A and B). Our three market segments map onto this model in quite interesting ways.

People working in segment 1 tend to conceptualise their task as transferring information from territorial culture to territorial culture, or language system to language

system, since this is what they have intuited or have been taught to regard as the essence of translation. They are very much the product of regional or national education systems; their ideas on translation tend to coincide with the defence of those systems. More worrying, this segment may actually coincide with a certain de-professionalisation of translation. In everyday areas such as the translation of restaurant menus, the fact that all students now know a bit about foreign languages means that clients tend to rely on friends-of-friends rather than professionals. In some cases—most notably Spain, where there are currently some 27 universities involved in some form of translator training, with almost 7,000 students—, the over-supply of translation graduates might be flooding this segment 1 and thus actually be contributing to a fall in professional standards.

Most people in segment 2—the comfortable-salary people—would either see themselves as mediating between territorial cultures or, increasingly, as providing services so that readers may understand and participate in specialised professional cultures. This might involve cross-cultural professional groups like medical researchers, economists, or sections of multinational companies, where the constraints on translation are strictly internal to the group rather than a matter of simply bridging across different languages or cultures. Such might indeed be the frame for much internal translating within the EU institutions. Training in this case tends not to be carried out very effectively by regional or national educational institutions, whose ideas and priorities are often marked by regional or national concerns. Translators tend to learn much of their craft—and huge amounts of specialised terminology—on the job, either by bluffing and winging their way through initial assignments or, if they are lucky, by attending training programmes organised by employing institutions. Most translators at this level nevertheless remain generalists, largely thanks to the trend to set up small agencies and networked freelancers rather than rely on in-house translation departments. Thus, to the extent that they provide services in a number of fields, translators in this segment 2 would tend not to see themselves as actual members of the groups for which they are translating.

In segment 3, the providers of language services would tend not to confuse their professional activity with belonging to a territorial culture; their specialised knowledge

would formally make them participative members of a professional intercultural.<sup>1</sup> One might think here of software localizers who have made the step from merely replacing natural-language strings to actually participating in the engineering and marketing of localized versions. The translator thus becomes part of a team, with the same cultural and professional status as other members of the team. This obviously requires a rather different kind of training than what we are currently offering in most training programmes; some of the most useful training is currently being carried out in IT departments (notably in Ireland) that have taken an interest in language problems. Segment 3 does not, I suggest, correspond to the mind-set that is being encouraged by the dominant ideas on translation as a necessary means to protect languages and cultures. However, thanks in no small measure to the highly commercial location of this segment 3, the ideas on translation developed here may radically contradict and perhaps progressively influence those held at level 1. This primarily concerns the limits and appropriateness of NANS translation (no addition, no subtraction), which is now rarely a constraint in segment 3.

### **Ontogenetic and phylogenetic trends**

Part of the interest of this three-segment model is that it represents a certain progressive pattern, with a few strange contradictions. On the one hand, there is an obvious ontogenetic progression as students go from national institutions (segment 1) to a sense of professional identity (segment 2) from which ideas on translation may then tend toward highly specialised rewriting (segment 3). In neo-functionalist terms, the supranational cultural group thus created can accrue effective power to the point where it

---

<sup>1</sup> To illustrate these hypothetical attitudes, here we might imagine Spanish translators approaching a specialised medical textbook in English. Translators professionally placed in segment 1 would say they were working from English into Spanish so that people in Spain will understand medicine and the Spanish language will remain active in this field (even when the translators produce so many mistakes that it would be better for all concerned if the Spanish language remained inactive). In segment 2, translators might say they are providing services to an international profession some of whose members do not (yet) know English well enough to follow the textbook; the translators would probably consult with medical specialists. In segment 3, on the other hand, the translators might call themselves a functional part of the medical profession, making knowledge available both within the profession and, to the extent that the text is pedagogical, to those on the outside; they themselves would probably have some (short-term) training in medicine.

is more than the sum of its parts. In effect, just as the European Court has gained enough power to rule against its constitutive nation-states—or the monster challenges its makers—, translators who reach segment 3 can turn against their former schoolmasters and tell them what translation ‘really is’.

However, if we look at recent history for some kind of phylogenetic insight, what we find is not quite as clear. What should we make, for example, of the following observations on the origins of conference interpreting at the end of the Second World War?:

The interpreters tended to come from the same restricted social background as the politicians and diplomats and government officials they interpreted for [...]. This was a strongly Eurocentric and conservative professional caste, with a virtual monopoly on conference interpreting. (Gentile et al. 1996: 8)

We might say the interpreters were still unprofessional, friends-of-friends (in fact usually family members), and thus in segment 1. But the exclusivist consequences of those beginnings, and the near magical status quickly promoted by the profession of conference interpreting, is probably closer to segment 3; this was a narrow professional culture. Of course, as interpreting was progressively taught, entry to the profession became more meritocratic, staff positions were created, some kind of segment 2 was established. And more recently, with the massive expansion of translation schools and moves to bridge the gap to hitherto unprofessionalised activities such as liaison interpreting, the wider labour market has potentially taken on some segment 1 features. The inverted progression is admittedly too neat. Yet it might help explain some of the tensions involved.

A wider historical pattern can be seen in the geographical distribution of European translation schools (here plotting the corpus presented in Caminade and Pym 1995). Up to about 1975 the maps show a marked concentration in the centre of western Europe, in Benelux, along the French-German border regions, Switzerland and northern Italy. Maps of where AIIC members live give a strikingly similar distribution. Was this some kind of professional middle Europe, the geopolitical band where money was to be made from moves between cultures? Whatever the case, the massive growth in translation schools since 1975, spurred on by greater attention to vocational training in national university

systems, has all but hidden that apparent middle ground. Translator training is increasingly configured in national and regional terms. Geopolitically, it would appear to have moved from segment 3 to somewhere near segment 1.

Given the opposed directions of these ontogenetic and phylogenetic trends, we might expect to find some tension between the various institutions involved. And that is indeed what we find. A certain supranational segment-2 organisation of the profession was hypostatised in the 1950s and 1960s through the AIIC and the CIUTI, which continue to exert some sort of control over the prestige value of segment-2 profession. However, in a situation where the ‘officially approved’ translator-training institutions (those of the CIUTI or approved by the AIIC) number less than a tenth of the world’s ostensible training centres (Caminade and Pym list 268 institutions), it is to be doubted that any such control can be maintained on a long-term basis. The corresponding supranational professional culture, if indeed it exists, is thus logically threatened both from below (the saturation of segment 1) and from above (the AIIC and the CIUTI have little to say to segment-3 dynamics). The centre, I suggest, will not hold.

### **Where are we now?**

Where would the European Commission’s Translation Service stand in this three-tiered model? Although its self-image, in the publicity at least, is currently that of a ‘multilingual community’ (European Commission 1999), it is not clear whether that community’s networks link just the translators (segment 2) or whether they extend to the whole society of European bureaucrats (segment 3). Are translators present in a purely auxiliary service role, as yet another of the ‘nurturing’ professions (segment 2), or are they members of the wider professional society as such (segment 3)?

Staff translators located in the European institutions should, in theory, eventually develop a form of professional collective identity to the point where they are seriously distanced from the languages and cultures they theoretically went there to defend. This most obviously involves certain linguistic interferences and the adoption of ‘eurospeak’. But it may also concern rather more profound things like ultimate cultural allegiance:

When the crunch comes, do you decide in terms of your country or your profession? Such questions can only await answers.

More to the point, given the tensions between various levels of training institutions, what role might EU institutions play in the development of translator training? Not surprisingly, supranational institutions in general tend not to trust endemic national training programmes for translators. This can be seen on several levels. For example, the Translation Service has its own traineeship programme; its recruitment system does not require any external qualification in Translation or Interpreting (in fact, quite legitimately, the preference is often for someone trained in a non-linguistic field of specialisation). With respect to interpreting, the more pronounced shortage of properly qualified professionals has probably been behind a change of approach. The SCIC abandoned its in-house training activities in favour of co-operation with a few selected academic institutions. In 1998 it provided 'experienced interpreter trainers' to some 27 university programmes; it provided subsidies to some 14 universities so that an 'EU dimension' could be added to existing courses; seven training institutions are now involved alongside the SCIC in a European Masters in Conference Interpreting.

The SCIC's decision to co-operate with existing training programmes should be viewed positively. After all, if good professionals are hard to find, it is logical to create an elitist *esprit de corps*, to set in place the conditions for the future training of professionals, and to take steps to counter the proliferation of poorly trained sub-professionals. The EU has had to create a professional caste of segment-2 interpreters, and it needs to ensure appropriate conditions for the controlled reproduction of that caste.

Yet one should not underestimate the effect of selecting just a handful of the 140 or so translator-training institutions in western Europe. This must inevitably create not just a necessary image of elitism but also the impression that the EU is the source of all knowledge in this field. If and when the same EU institutions become actively involved in programmes to train *teachers* of interpreting, they could eventually exercise indirect control over the training of interpreters in the whole of Europe.

For various reasons such illusions are unlikely to dominate the general field of translator training: firstly because there may be a shortage of interpreters but not of translators, secondly because, as I have argued, the top end of the market is being led by

business and not by government institutions of any order. The rest of Europe is likely to find diminishing grounds for supposing that EU translation practices are any kind of model for all translation practices.

### **Teaching More than Translation**

A few years ago I argued, in a paper called 'Translation as a Transaction Cost' (1995b) and elsewhere (1997), that the resources invested in translation should not exceed the mutual benefits to result from the communication situation concerned. Just as two people tend not to waste time and energy talking to each other if there is no good to come of it for both of them (and pleasant gossip can give worthwhile results), so we should not translate unless it is going to help the cause of cross-cultural co-operation (which requires both information and gossip). That argument has been unfairly misrepresented as ignoring the symbolic values of translation; it has been seen as an intrusion of brute commerce into the otherwise noble domain of culture. Indeed Koskinen (2000) wants to question the entire schema by positing that EU translations have what she terms an 'existential value', a value that they gain merely by existing, without having to be read or to communicate anything, since that very existence manifests (to whom?) the rights of the target language involved.

Now, that kind of value does indeed merit respect, as must the legal bases of EU translation practices. Yet the logic of co-operation means that the *value* of symbolic language use can, in some circumstances, be reduced; it is not absolute. Exactly how much are we prepared to pay for the protection of linguistic rights?

If and when we can ask that kind of question, we have effectively taken a big step from segment 2 to segment 3. A certain ethics of balanced social effects has started to grease our minds, and our training programmes might slowly change accordingly.

### **Problems for Future Training**

We thus present a model of a structurally fragmented market that is in some ways the logical consequence of globalisation. This model suggests that, behind all our pretence to

professional certainly, translation is not just one thing. What we make of translation depends very much on the segment in which we find ourselves. Incursions into the field of training thus require more than a few glances over our shoulders.

I nevertheless believe that there is much that can and should be done, if and when a few humble suggestions can be considered. For example:

*1. General theories should be relativised.*

No one has any absolute truth in this field. Even the most generalist kind of theory—such might be the claims of *Handlungstheorie* and *Skopostheorie*—can prove irrelevant in the realm of EU in-house equivalence, just as EU ‘best practices’ (the term is used in the SCIC training project) may be far from best in a range of segment 3 activities. Training must increasingly be aimed at market segments, and the EU cannot be seen as the dominant or even the most prestigious employer.

*2. National priorities must be recognised*

Since most European education systems are still national, the problems of translator training still depend very much on a series of national situations. This is too easily forgotten. Yet it is important for at least two reasons: first, because different national cultures have different ideas about what a translation is, and those differences must to some extent be recognised as functionally valid; second, there are still quite real cultural values at stake. In a typically incisive aside, Dollerup notes the possible consequences for countries with no solid background in translator training: ‘Greece and Portugal lost—and are still losing—the linguistic battle which is also ultimately a battle for political power in the EU, in their own classrooms’ (1996: 310). Investment in translator training is thus still a legitimate national concern and will not easily be spirited away from national hands.

### 3. *We must train translators to do more than translate*

The basic lesson from the top end of the market would seem to be that some kind of social efficiency will get us in the end. We can promote NANS translation as an ethical ideal and even a legal necessity, yet the big non-bureaucratic money is moving away from that. It is no longer enough to train specialist translators/interpreters (as the old Seleskovitch motto put it); our graduates must be prepared to do more than translate, and to learn more than translation. To argue otherwise is to pretend that our students can aspire to be no better than ourselves.

There are thus good reasons why academics (theorists, if you must) and EU experts (practitioners, if you will) might mistrust each other in this field, as indeed we tend to do. Yet there are even better reasons why both parties should try to learn from what is happening in the wider market for language services.

### **References**

- Caminade, Monique and Anthony Pym. 1995. *Les Formations en traduction et interprétation. Essai de recensement mondial* (Special issue of *Traduire*). Paris: Société Française des Traducteurs.
- Dollerup, Cay. 1996. 'Language Work at the European Union'. Marilyn Gaddis Rose, ed. *Translation Horizons. Beyond the Boundaries of Translation Spectrum* (Translation Perspectives 9). Binghamton: Center for Research in Translation, State University of New York at Binghamton. 297-314.
- European Commission. 1999. *A multilingual community at work. The European Commission's Translation Service*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Gentile, Adolfo, et al. 1996. *Liaison Interpreting: A Handbook*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press.
- Koskinen, Kaisa. 2000. 'Institutional Illusions. Translating in the EU Commission'. *The Translator* 6/1. 49-65.