

Globalization and Segmented Language Services

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Globalization is not really global. Only in restricted areas of professional and economic activity is the increase in cross-cultural communication leading to major qualitative changes. International English works in many workplaces, but by no means most of them; it invades our computers, our music, our investments, but not our hearts, our kitchens, our bedrooms. And even in the restricted and sensitive field of language services, globalization is not the only game in town. Or better, its effect is not always globalizing. Instead of making everything the same, the undoubted increase in communications is, I suggest, producing a more segmented market for language services. Let me describe just three of those segments, such as I see them developing and separating around me.

First, at the most numerous bottom end of the market (bottom because numerous), countless poorly paid translation jobs are 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. Fatally, the remuneration for this broad underclass is usually just enough to keep them studying. People working in this segment tend to conceptualize their task as transferring information from territorial culture to territorial culture, language system to language system, since the effects of any really globalizing profession are as good as invisible. There is a simpler world, in tune with most of the simple models used to teach translation: A to B, and nothing in between.

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, including the ones who teach translation. This reasonably comfortable second group is 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?). If asked, most people here would either see themselves as mediating between territorial cultures or, increasingly, as providing services so that readers may understand and participate in specialized fields. That is, the effects of globalized specialization may be recognized, but since the translators are generalists or freelancers who provide services in a number of fields, they would tend not to see themselves as actually being affected or carried away from more primal cultural allegiances. A and B are still separate, and perhaps culturally richer because of it.

Third, there is a growing top-pay demand for highly competent language professionals, often two-way, in fields such as information technology, economics, marketing, and the general run of multinational business. This demand mostly goes beyond restricted conceptions of translation; it would have more to do with notions such as the 'intercultural management assistant' or 'consultant', the 'language-services provider' or 'information broker', with what has more modestly been termed the 'multitasking translator', or perhaps even with a conscious extension of the IT term 'localization'. In all

these areas, professionals are called upon to do more than just translate. 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. The growth of this 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 little question of unionism or collective action. This is fundamentally where people are paid for what they can 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. The providers of language services in this segment would tend not to confuse their professional activity with belonging to a territorial culture; their specialized knowledge would formally make them participative members of a professional caste: in between A and B, there is now something else, something like a set of globalized professions, or even what I would like to call 'intercultures'. But we are not here to coin terms.

Why mention the development of these three market segments? Well, first, they seem to be growing further apart, so we might expect translators' associations to be somewhat stretched by the process. Second, the lines of demarcation would seem not to reflect anything quite as neat as 'literary' vs 'non-literary' translation, which opposition might belong to a by-gone age. Third, and most importantly, our training programmes are doing very little to address these changes.

In Spain, where I try to translate and teach, the general quality of everyday pragmatic translations at the bottom end of the market, those for the tourist industry or whatever, is just as bad or even worse than it was thirty years ago. At the same time, the growing top-end of the labour market remains inadequately supplied with appropriately skilled professionals. And in our all-comfortable middle, scarcely a feather is ruffled.