

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION IN DIGITALIZED TRANSLATION PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper is intended as a brief overview of the most recent challenges in teaching translation, from the perspective of the ever-increasing need for professional communication in this field in a digitalized environment seen both as a workplace and a place of business. The paper advocates the introduction of the interpersonal, intercultural, communicational, and negotiating skills in parallel with the teaching of translation as a purely linguistic matter and with introducing the more technical aspects of the profession, such as CAT tools, terminological database search or compiling, machine translation, etc.

Introduction

In the last few years, especially after the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital professional communication has become increasingly relevant. In the translators' case, the process of digitalization had already been a reality long before many other professional categories had to join them and become used to completing their tasks from a “digital workplace” which was, more often than not, their own domestic environment. Nonetheless, changes occurred for this category too, which is the reason why this paper attempts to investigate some of the most recent consequences of digitalization for translators, with the aim to shed light on both the practical, tangible changes in their everyday work practices and the more subtle consequences for their professional identity.

With the ever-changing aspects of translation as both product and process, in the context of its becoming increasingly automated and digitalized, the IT tools supporting it (i.e. automated translation software, machine translation, CAT tools, translation memories, etc.) are more effective by the day, traditional translators, who have been taught and trained to work alone, to type each and every word, to look into three dictionaries before settling for the most appropriate meaning, are now faced with a genuine ‘digital revolution’. If, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the advent of the digital age “not yet had the effect of reorienting the profession of translators” (Séguinot 2007: 186), at present, translation as a professional activity can no longer be carried out outside the digital world.

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Translation companies will not even look at a translator who would deliver the product of his or her work in days or weeks instead of hours; avoiding translators' online discussion groups and associations is less and less an option for the translator who wants to stay up to date and be assigned translation tasks, contract negotiation techniques are compulsory, and the lack of technological know-how has become a professional impairment. Consequently, academic programs specializing in translation (Applied Modern Languages, Translation and Interpreting Studies, etc.) have to adjust their syllabi and include elements of professional communication applicable in the digital world of today.

How does digitalization affect/improve translators' work?

In a recent study, Jansen (2017) concludes that the myth of the translator as a lone wolf is no longer valid. In a survey of 150 Scandinavian literary translators, he found that professional communication via digital fora was rated as highly important and that translators welcomed cooperation and collegial support. Mossop (2006) found that the development of electronic resources is connected to increased demands for speed in translation work, and to a changed focus: from the creation of translations to retrieval of text from repositories and collective translation memories. Today's translators need to know how to work within corporate translation management (CTM) systems that, at the same time, support and alienate the (wo)man behind the task, favour faster delivery of products and discourage creativity, leading towards the regard of translation as an office work of (simply) combining and rearranging sentences and segments already at hand.

Adjusting to translation technology, which, according to Bowker, refers to "different types of technology used in human translation, machine translation, and computer-aided translation, covering the general tools used in computing, such as word processors and electronic resources, and the specific tools used in translating, such as corpus-analysis tools and terminology management systems" (2002: 5–9) is no longer optional. Long gone are the romantic days of translation, and the translation market is ruthless with the old-fashioned meticulous and thorough practitioners, the ones who would spend days in a row to identify the most suitable meaning, the most appropriate equivalence, etc.

Various studies on the effects of information resources on translators' everyday work, show the widespread use of search engines and online dictionaries and good knowledge of other digital resources. In a recent study, "Translation in transit: what changes does digital information bring into translation work?" (2019), Åse Kristine Tveit and Katriina Byström investigate the consequences of digitalization for Norwegian translators, employing a survey with 236 respondents. The main themes they identify are efficiency at work, quality of work, professional contact and working conditions. Since their findings are relevant for the present discussion, they will be briefly acknowledged by quoting a few anonymous responses to their survey, while adding several commentaries valid for our present-day situation. It should not come as a surprise that Romania lags a little bit behind, as in any other area, and that a 2008 study has just started to prove its relevance in the local translation market.

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In what concerns the **efficiency of work**, Tveit and Byström's respondents referred to time-saving, simplicity of searching information and a broad range of available information sources, although some (older) translators specified that the paper-based dictionaries may be more comprehensive. However, the general idea is that "work gets done faster. Things may be looked up and searched for at once. Earlier on, you had to go to the library and find — not always good — solutions". There is, however, a certain amount of frustration that employers ask for quicker and quicker delivery, as they too know that the work takes less time.

For **work quality**, the most important aspects seem to be quality control, greatly enhanced by the existence of large and comprehensive terminological databases – as is IATE, for instance - and online dictionaries. A necessary addition is an ever-increasing presence of more and more accurate spelling and grammar checking systems, like Grammarly. Another highly relevant and useful aspect noted by the study is the possibility of acquiring cross-cultural competences much more easily than before:

Digitalization has made not only dictionaries but also a broad range of sources in different languages easily accessible. Of equal importance is that digitalization has made it easy [...] to stay updated on cultures and languages in faraway countries, even when you cannot travel there physically — you may read newspapers, follow TV and radio and observe informal language in use on social media. Various cultural/historical/political references may also be easier to find out about, if you for instance find a reference to an old movie, you can quickly find a clip from it on YouTube (Tveit and Byström 2019)

As for the third focal point of the study, **professional contact**, the two scholars draw the conclusion that the preferred online forum is Facebook (or it has been so for at least ten years), while Twitter is less preferred, certainly due to the small number of characters allowed per comment. Respondents consider that

Discussing with colleagues over the Internet is a great advantage. People are very, very good responders. There is a steady group of people out there who are active in giving a response, these people are very knowledgeable, well-intentioned, and do genuinely want to help others. (Tveit and Byström 2019)

The digital information, resources and communication fora have influenced the entire way of working, instead of just making individual aspects of the translation process easier:

Quicker and in some cases safer access to sources and information. Easier to deliver and to get jobs. Much simpler to cooperate with copy editors, proofreaders and employers. (Tveit and Byström 2019)

Lastly, the **changes in working conditions** are accounted for both positively and negatively. The main advantage of being a professional translator in the digital world is the fact that one can work basically from anywhere in the world as long as one has an active internet connection. The job market has also expanded due to digitalization. It is not unusual today to

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work for, say, American or Asian companies or customers, all the more that digitalization has also given translators the possibility to access various virtual ‘bank accounts’ which enable payments sent and received in a matter of seconds (PayPal, Wise, Revolut, to name only a few). As a drawback, respondents have mentioned the fact that the relationship with the employers (editors, translation companies) is much less personal than it used to be when in-person meetings used to be the norm:

Digitalization of communication with employers has led to greater distance — one works for people one does not know, in another way than in the past. (Tveit and Byström 2019)

Two intermediary conclusions can be drawn at this point, a negative and a positive one. Let us start with the negative if only to be able to continue on a positive note. It seems that the role of being an active mediator has altered to a more passive role of instrumentally replacing words in one language with words in another language. The latter (positive) conclusion concerns the increased collegiality brought upon the translator communities by the social media tools.

What about the young and the inexperienced?

More often than not, young graduates of B.A. and M.A. translation programs find themselves at a loss when it comes to finding jobs due to the fact that, as in many other fields, translation companies and/or publishers and editors will rarely have the availability and patience to deal with inexperienced collaborators, whose training and the unavoidable “rookie mistakes” they make will lead to extra-time and effort.

A good set of means for overcoming this hindrance is that which refers to integrating CAT tools in a translation-oriented study program but, before even attempting to do so, students must be taught how to master a significant number of other digital skills. Gambier, head expert of the European Master’s in Translation (EMT), lists a few:

being able to effectively use search engines, corpus analysis tools and term extractors for information mining; knowing how to produce and prepare a translation in different file formats and for different technical media; understanding the possibilities and limits of machine translation; and being able to learn and adapt to new and emerging tools (Gambier 2009: 6–7).

In an extensive chapter published in the influential *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Technology*, Lynne Bowker, one of the pioneers in the field, posits the logical question which inquires when all this technology should be introduced to students. “On the one hand, students will benefit from the opportunity to practice realistic work habits by using such tools early and often, but on the other hand, they need a certain amount of translation experience to avoid becoming naive users of technology” (Bowker 2015: 98).

From my personal teaching practice, I wholeheartedly agree with the point that

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students tend to trust the technology and the internet blindly, as they most often than not lack the experience to critically analyze the output they receive from an online MT tool – which is, usually, their ‘go-to’ technology. It would be ineffectual and even damaging to steer students away from technology on such grounds, which is why a better idea seems to be that of helping them learn how to use it. “The tutorials and exercises could be accompanied by a series of questions for reflection on key points about the tools (e.g., user reactions to a tool and its use, comparisons to other similar tools he or she may have used, advantages and disadvantages compared to a manual approach and/or to using other tools, situations in which the tool might be useful)” (Bowker 2015: 99).

What needs more emphasis is, however, the fact that translation is not a singularly linguistic experience or enterprise. The chart below, quoted from the expert group of the European Master’s in Translation (EMT) refers to the six dimensions that a multilingual communication professional (translators and interpreters included) must possess:



(Gambier 2009: 5)

One could easily remark that the translation service provision is at the center and that all the other competences – linguistic, technological, thematic, intercultural and info-mining – converge towards it. A translator, no matter how skilled or even talented may be, cannot succeed in a fairly crowded market without the ability to follow market requirements, negotiate, advertise his or her work and services, comply with instructions, abide by

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deadlines, work in a team, should the necessity arise (e.g., in large projects is usual that a translation company shares chunks of texts among more translators, who need to ensure uniformity). The sociolinguistic dimension, which applies both to service provision and the intercultural competence, is relevant for dealing with cultural differences, handling language variations and registers and identifying the appropriate rules of interaction. It can also be trained, alongside all the above, in a practical course in professional communication for students in Applied Modern Languages or Translation and Interpreting Studies.

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