Training Language Service Providers: Local Knowledge in Institutional Contexts

Anthony Pym
Intercultural Studies Group
Universitat Rovira i Virgili
Tarragona, Spain

We might once have talked immediately about translators. Yet translators these days are called upon to do far more than translate; they move between tasks; they mix professions in the course of their careers. The hyperonym 'language service provider' is simply meant to recognize that diversity, placing translator training within the context of a more complex and technological age. This could mean thinking in terms of a list, or of professional things-that-people do: translation, yes, but also revision, terminology mining, terminology management, multilingual document management, project management, cultural consulting, interpreting of all kinds (since oral tasks surround the written), relations with clients, and perhaps the odd thought about the ways our communication cultures should be headed (call it 'policy'). We can, however, also approach the object top-down, from general ideas about these tasks, from ideas about the professional intercultures within which all these things are done. Thought about training, I submit, should involve such a vision, seeing the tasks as one, and thereby helping to create a professional identity that still largely fails to recognize itself. My various points, along with a few paradoxes, will be formulated from this perspective.

Best practices or local knowledge?

A common approach in seminars on training issues, and indeed in a long-term Thematic Network project on the need to train translation teachers, is to identify a series of 'best practices'. You find out what the best people do, then you reproduce it. A classic case might be the dissemination of Seleskovitch doctrine in the training of interpreters. More recent examples can be found in terminology and especially localization, where 'best practices' tend to coincide with a discourse of 'industry standards'. For each domain and sub-domain, we hunt around the world to find the most prestigious experts, then we reproduce what they do. Alternatively, if we are setting up a comprehensive training program, we might look for the most renowned program in the world, then copy it. This is certainly one way to train language service providers. But it is not the only way to think about what we are doing.

There are several problems with the idea of 'best practices'. Most obviously, it sets up enlightened centres and dependent peripheries, in the image of a colonial world that we are supposed to have overcome some time ago. More seriously, it tends to privilege the centres that have been established the longest. Those centres have accumulated prestige over decades, often without regard for the rapid market changes that make the same institutions the *least* appropriate to meet current demands.

Even more fundamentally, the 'best practices' approach implicitly assumes there is just one way of doing things well, no matter where we are located in time and space. As such, the idea contradicts something that language service providers are supposed to know: namely, that practices change from location to location, in accordance with myriad local conditions. We know this from the very fundamental terms of our own metalanguage. The term 'translation' means different things when translated into different languages; a concept like 'public-service interpreting' has lavatory connotations when rendered into Spanish; in some locales 'community interpreting' is still confused with interpreting for the European Communities; and something like the German 'Translationswissenschaft' is decidedly unhappy as an English 'translation science'. Not only do our metalanguages vary, but our practices themselves vary from place to place, context to context. If that were not so, there would be little need for anything but translation as a banal word-replacement exercise. Why then, if we know these things in our own field of enquiry, do we not see the same diversity operating legitimately on the level of training?

The alternative to a 'best practices' approach is not simply to bury one's head in traditionalist sand. Confronted with training problems, we should quite obviously look around to see what solutions have been found elsewhere, and with what results. But what we should not assume is that those solutions are easily transferred from one locale to another. Just as we adapt texts to new situations, so we must be prepared to adapt curricula and methodologies. Instead of 'best practices', such adaptation requires something akin to what anthropologists call 'local knowledge', an intimate awareness of what is required in each time and place. This would be a flexible kind of knowledge built up over time, constantly open to experimentation and modification. At once primitive and postmodern, local knowledge might help counter the centralism of established experts.

What's in a school?

What might local knowledge involve? First, perhaps, the awareness that we are working in a training environment, in a school of some kind, with needs and constraints that may be quite different from the professional world in which our trainees will later have to work. For as much as prospective employers (the EU Translation Service, for example) tell us what kind of skills they demand of our students, their requirements and our requirements will often differ, and legitimately so. The reason is simple: as trainers, we establish relationships not only with employer groups or the current market, but also with a series of local interests. Among which:

- *Students' demands* are key, even if they often have a very indirect relationship with vocational concerns. To take an uncomfortably close example, the 27 or so Spanish universities involved in translator training of one kind or another might have just under 7,000 students in them in any one year (Pym 2000a: 231-232). That means they are churning out far more graduates in translation (and ostensibly interpreting) than any labour market can be expected to absorb. Students can be told this. But they still want to study translation, because it is practical, because they enjoy it, because they want to be UN interpreters, because they secretly want to be novelists, or whatever. Behind those students and their *ilusiones*, parents form a social entity that is similarly well

disposed to a training activity that sounds vaguely professional. Their interests and hopes deserve respect.

- *Teachers' demands* are also a powerful institutional factor. The problem here is not that teachers are queuing up in their hundreds simply because they always secretly wanted to train language service providers. It is more that they want to keep their jobs. As English increasingly restricts the role of the other imperialist languages, teachers of those languages (French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, etc.), have fewer students in their classrooms. And since most translation programs require students to study at least two foreign languages, the otherwise under-employed language teachers find work within those programs. One drawback, of course, is that we could find a generation of language teachers conveying communication skills (translation and the rest) of which they have virtually no professional experience. Yet that is no reason for ignoring the institutional interests of our teaching colleagues.

- *University administrations* then ideally represent what students and teachers want. However, they are more likely to be grappling with factors such as 1) the difficulty of getting rid of tenured teachers in language departments, 2) declining birth-rates in the more advanced economies, which means fewer student entries, 3) the concomitant desirability of attracting students from abroad, and 4) the similarly consequential need to move to specialized postgraduate programs. Courses in multilingual communication skills, with translation at their centre, provide possible solutions to all these problems.

- *National and regional governments* might then be expected to enact the choices of university administrations, if not of some kind of more comprehensive democracy. In Spain, to continue with what is more than an example, further translation schools are sure to be set up, even though it is plain to all that the labour market has no shortage of translators. The reason is that, as long as the existing schools fail to absorb the demands of students and the pretensions of teachers, more such schools will be required in order to meet the *internal* demands of the education system. There might also be more noble logics involved. For instance, it is in a country's interest to have a broad segment of the population with good multilingual communication skills, for economic and political reasons that extend far beyond the narrow market segments that rely on translation. We will come back to this later.

- *Other university departments and disciplines* should also be included in the list of people we must negotiate with. Here we basically mean modern-language departments, with their traditional division into linguistics and literature. These, after all, are the people whose students we have been taking away ever since the barriers were broken between vocational and academic training (when the polytechnics became universities). What happened here very much depends on the local context. If a generalization can be risked, translator training has moved away from linguistics, whereas the more literary locations have come toward translator training, sometimes under the cloak of Cultural Studies. In the middle of all this, the invention of Translation Studies as an academic discipline in the 1970s can be seen as a series of

responses to the underlying institutional antagonisms. One branch (German *Translationswissenschaft*) initially did all it could to look like an Applied Linguistics, while another (European-Israeli DescriptiveTranslation Studies) went to great lengths to appear a structuralist literary science. Both those strategies might now be considered excessive, if not unnecessary. The vocational training base is in most cases sufficiently well established for our academic research to dialogue with neighbouring disciplines, without excessive kow-towing. Yet we must still talk with them.

What's in a school? In the university context, a school involves at least the above factors. It cannot be reduced to a training ground for a labour market. We, as trainers, have to negotiate with a wide range of social actors, and in this resides the complexity of our local knowledge. Rather than serving no more than a market, we would mostly do better to adopt the perspectives of 'human resource development'. We must work from what we have, and in the places we find ourselves, rather than lamenting the distance of ideals.

Some would say that here we are trying to justify the unjustifiable. Indeed, we have tried to explain why a country can have a large number of training programs that are actually dysfunctional with respect to professional ideals (the excessive number of graduates effectively prohibits professionalization at the lower end of the market). Whether or not this is legitimate is quite a different question. Our first task is to understand where we are, why we are here, and what interests are at work in our immediate positionality.

Worse, would add others, the complexity of intersecting local interests means that there is considerable resistance to market adaptation, so training programs tend to fall well behind current market demands. It is difficult, for instance, to replace the term 'translator' with 'language-service provider' or perhaps 'localizer' in the name of our programs, simply because the various social actors have become used to the established term. Often the best we can do is teach new skills under old names. And yet, even this resistance to change may present hidden advantages. We might, for instance, use our academic distance to discuss long-term views of what we are doing with our cultures, in addition to the short-term aims of giving skilled professionals comfortable and interesting lives. We will come back to this too.

Two illusions of the market

The above view might help explain one related paradox and a minor illusionary causation concerning globalization:

- *The diversity paradox*: As English becomes the world language, thus leading to reduced linguistic diversity in cross-cultural communication, one might expect the demand for translations to be decreasing. And yet, but whatever yardstick you choose, the global demand for translations is increasing.

- *The indirect service causation*: As the demand for translations increases, the demand for translator training also increases, so we might expect a very direct causal relation between market growth and expanding training institutions. However, on the strength of what we have said, there would seem to be tendencies going in the opposite

direction, moving training into an academic environment that is even further from direct market demands.

Both problems are explained by the same phenomenon. The diversity paradox can only be understood once we take account of directionality, with rising text production in English and transfer then operating *out* of English into a very wide range of languages, often simultaneously and increasingly with aid from electronic tools, for the global marketing of goods and services. The second illusion is also explained by the rise of English and its specific effects within academic institutions, as intimated above. More simply, translator training has not expanded just because the social demand for translators has grown; both sectors have expanded because of the growing central role of English in their respective domains.

Working with a segmented labour market

None of what we have said so far should suggest that market demands must be excluded when we think about our training programs. Our argument is more exactly that the service function is indirect. This could become an ethical argument if critical use of such distance were to help overcome some of the problems presented by the market.

General tendencies suggest that the market for language services is becoming increasingly segmented, if not functionally fragmented (see Pym 1999, 2001; Gambier 2000). There are two main reasons for this.

First, as might be gathered from the 'diversity paradox' above, the global growth of asymmetrical communication flows means that there is a rising demand not only for translations, but for language learning as well; that is, for *non-translations*. Everyone has to learn English, and teaching it is a language service, alongside and sometimes inseparable from translation. There is a kind of continuum here. Think, for example, of the translator working for a physicist, translating a paper and then checking the terminology with the author. Then think of the physicist who has written the paper in English and comes to a translator to have it revised. The work done is virtually the same in both cases; what changes is the professional status of who is doing it (a professional translator in the first case, a multilingual author in the second). Language-service providers must be prepared to switch between both modes, especially in movements into English.

What this gives us is a very wide range of services and possible relations with clients. Of course, as long as there is professional mobility across this range, there should be no inherent fragmentation. Indeed, language service providers and multilingual text producers would belong to the same professional environment, as cooperating members of intercultural communities. A further factor, however, means that this is not quite the case.

At the same time as the range of language services broadens, electronic communications technology enters to give the field its more problematic segmentation. In areas such as screen translation, software localization and multilingual product documentation, we find that combinations of short deadlines and sophisticated technical skills mean competent professionals are very well paid and have indeed abandoned traditional concepts of translation (as the spreading term 'localization' would suggest).

On the other hand, in the lower-paid segments traditionally covered by precarious freelancers, technical skills with electronic tools are normally quite limited, if indeed the language-service provider has been able to invest in them at all. The people translating anything from menus to promotional material for small companies are operating in quite a different world from that of the top-end localizers, and their notions of 'translation' are correspondingly restricted.

We thus find that a broadening of language services, combined with the unequal distribution of technical competence, gives a highly segmented labour market. If we scratch the surface, we also find signs that these segments are pushing each other apart, as when a broad middle class of 'professionals' (teachers and staff translators) simply brush aside struggling freelancers, who apparently have no social status and perform no useful functions. Or again, we find that localization projects--and localization software--technically separate translation from re-engineering or management tasks, with the effect that translators are left with the most boring work and the slimmer pay-cheques. Similarly, in large projects such as the translation of the *acquis communautaire* in EU-candidate countries, the role of the translator is kept rigorously separate from official deliberations over terminology, technology or policy, often with quite disastrous results (cf. Gambier 1998). In other presentations of this environment (Pym 1999, 2000b) I have used a crude sociology of types in order to suggest three main sectors, with corresponding characterization of the salaries, work habits and translation concepts of each. That picture has a certain pedagogical virtue, at least in that people are invited to locate their current position and map out where they want to go. It must be confessed, however, that the combination of a global language and asymmetric technology means that there are many more than just three segments at stake. The problem is not how many segments there are, but what long-term consequences this segmentation is likely to have.

The effects of segmentation

Short of radical social engineering, we must allow that all market segments have their place. If the precarious freelancers challenge professionalism by doing questionable translations and wandering in and out of part-time language teaching, we have to live with that. After all, their existence as a multilingual workforce helps overcome the language barriers that limit the mobility of labour, and mobility is the main problem facing the operation of the EU, NAFTA or Mercosur as economic spaces. Again, if the odd pompous professional proclaims, after decades of comfortably living off government salaries or subsidies, that 'Translation is...' or 'The translator must...', they resist new communication demands and must thus be ultimately negative for their society's efficiency. Those staffers are, however, quite effective at getting official money to keeping paying for multilingual administrative institutions, and are thus ultimately positive for an inclusive democracy. They too have their place. Finally, if the high-tech localizer is busy spreading 'industry standards' in the name of efficiency, their work might seem to map out a globally glorious future until, as too rarely happens, we delve into the mechanized discourses they work on and the quite tedious translation jobs they produce. What we gain in efficiency, we lose in humanity.

One of the main effects of segmentation is that all these parts have their place, with their pros and cons, but none is effectively conscious of the whole. We thus find

people from a localizing or subsidy-consuming position pretending to speak in the name of 'the market' or 'employer demands', as if they themselves were the entire market. Alternatively, we find language-service users criticizing 'translators' on the basis of a few shoddy jobs done at the more precarious end of the range, somehow concluding that all translators are in the same basket. The criticism indicates a lack of awareness of how diversified the whole has become. The 'market' does not speak with one voice, and seems unlikely to do so until some outsider holds up a mirror so that the whole body can be seen. That is, until language service providers have some kind of identity as a complex professional interculture.

What is to be done?

This giving of identity is, of course, something we might ideally expect from our training institutions, alongside the various professional associations (although they too are highly fragmented). Here I have argued that our academic locations, subject to numerous local complexities, can give us a critical distance with respect to market demands. I have also argued that the labour market for language service providers is ultimately without an established sense of a unified professional identity. It follows that one of the things we should be doing as trainers is not just to supply the existing market, but to help change that market, to improve it, to make it more aware of what it is and what it can do. Local knowledge need not contradict comprehensive vision. In fact, it wins us the distance needed for such vision.

Such an argument inevitably trails off into the vagaries of 'human values', if not the unshakeable virtues of the humanities à la George Steiner. That is not quite where I want to finish. There are far more precise values to be sought, notably in rationalist cooperation as mutual benefit, and intercultures as fields in which the seeds of a cooperative ethics might be sown. But those arguments are for other places, for a more technical kind of theorization.

In the present context, it would seem more important for trainers to look critically at their own institutions, at the social actors they have to negotiate with, and at the various market segments with which they and their graduates will have to deal with. That is, all this should be done within the complexity of immediate situations, without expectations or certitudes drawn from international experts or centres of authority. We must learn from our own attempts to apply ideas and experiences, and hopefully the odd ideal as well.

What is to be done? Exchange ideas, decide what you want from the market around you, then negotiate in order to get what you want. Local knowledge, not just theoretical knowledge, Nathanael.

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