Community Lives

The human element

Jeannette Stewart

Jeannette Stewart is the former CEO of CommuniCare, a translation company for life sciences. An advocate for the language industry, she founded Translation Commons, a nonprofit online platform facilitating community collaboration.

Lately I've been wondering just how much our associates appreciate the extent of the skills translators and interpreters bring to their work. I'm not referring to language skills, which are taken for granted. I'm talking about the extras that help ensure that a target text captures all the nuances of the original for delivery to a global community.

In fact, in my experience, it is thanks to the high standards most language professionals bring to their work that deliverables may even exceed the quality of their sources. Credit is often given where credit is due, but our status in the professional world does not always reflect this. It's easy to point fingers at some fairly obvious culprits, but maybe we ourselves need to look at ways in which we can make our clients look at us more favorably than simply being word machines that crank out the goods on time, or earlier, on budget, or under, and with accuracy, precision and clarity. I'd like to use this issue's column to examine some of the bonuses we bring to our work that might help elevate our standing in the professional world.

Professional translators must be expert linguists and knowledgeable on a diverse range of subjects. But different translation tasks require different skills and specialist knowledge. How are these prioritized? How does a translator reconcile linguistic accuracy with the need to communicate technical details? It's impossible to generalize in answering this. There are differences between languages, and there is sometimes awkward phraseology used in source texts by writers who may be experts in their subject but not necessarily expert writers. Add in project deadlines and whatever other complications we regularly deal with, and it's difficult to know how to advise new graduates on how to acquire the expertise demanded by the industry. All we can do is to encourage them to apply as much diligence as they can to work on their skills as analysts, encyclopedists and researchers, not forgetting their project management and people skills. Perhaps a more explicit and structured skill tree would benefit the entire language community.

The recruitment process undertaken by corporations employing in-house translators and language service providers contracting freelancers can assist here. In a sense, they are providing an extension of the curricula provided by universities and colleges in their language and translation courses. In particular, governments and diplomatic corps set high standards for entrants, which usually include test pieces that are graded by experienced linguists. However, our community might do well to take a leaf from tech companies and their dreaded "code interviews." These can be so daunting that consultancies have sprung up to tutor prospective engineers in what to expect and how to answer challenging questions.

Linguistic competence

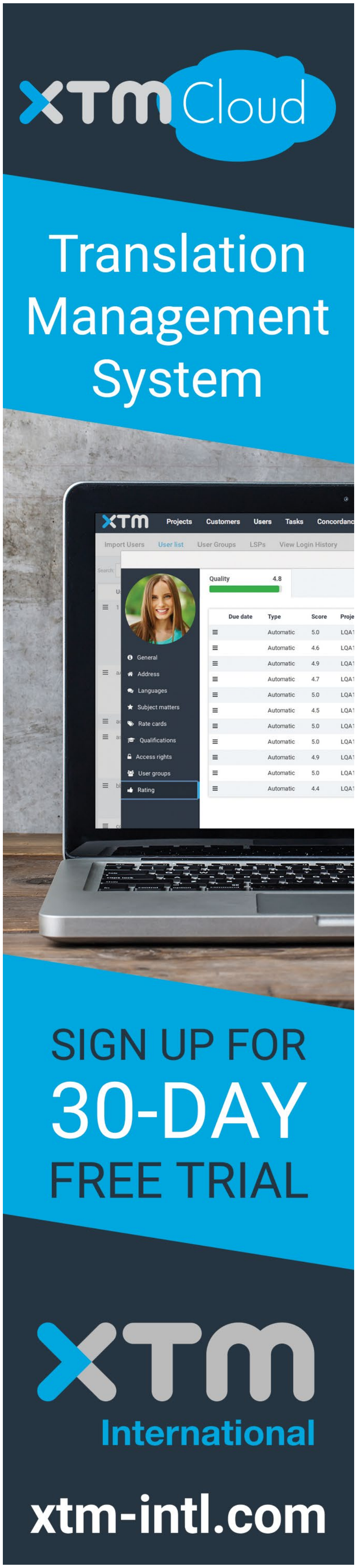
So, we understand that the skills that translators and interpreters bring to their day-to-day work are manifold, and this is not at all surprising since human interests are vast. But not all subjects are equally specialized. Dictionaries and other reference materials play an important role in assisting translators to find the right word. However, there is more involved in that than just looking up a word. Pocket dictionaries may well be a tourist's friend, but they are usually very limited in semantic scope. Specialist dictionaries give much more information about their entries, from etymology to synonyms and antonyms. In fact, in the style of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, many specialist publications offer quotations that help establish context, a feature of particular value in technical subjects. In the end, we must understand what our clients require: expertise in a language or a subject? Naturally both would be ideal, but what takes priority in preparing a target text? I have often found that really expert translators strive to meet such a requirement, but they also know that a sensible compromise between the two usually works. It's too bad we can't simply teach expertise, but if a graduate knows the nuts and bolts of a language thoroughly enough, proficiency transforms into competence.

Linguistic competence was introduced as a concept by Noam Chomsky back in the 1960s to denote a measurement of ideal language use. The idea has been extended and now also denotes a measure of how error-free a translation is. But as I've mentioned, the deeper and broader the knowledge that is brought to a translation, the less likely that errors will occur. As a way of managing any shortcomings, projects may have an error-checking phase carried out by a similarly qualified professional as the translator. This can be a bit like being graded on a college assignment. But who is to say what is an error and what is not? Errors arise from sloppy work, ill-judged choices and deficient knowledge. Techniques like back translation can be helpful, but they are time consuming and not necessarily focused on micro-problem solving. Revising texts is consequently not always the best way of achieving a successful delivery. On the positive side, a reviser with a keen eye can save a deliverable from certain disaster. It is, I think, fair to say that the less revision a text goes through, the better.

What does the language provider do if there isn't budget or time to assure the competence of a translated text? It must be said that providers need to have trust in those they appoint to do work for them. But their faith cannot be blind. An appraisal of a source text should register the level of source-language competence of its author and some description of the task in hand to be given to the translator. Consequently, issues of comprehensibility, technical complexity and factual accuracy should be communicated to a translator who not only understands them, but is equipped with the skillset to handle them. Competence and the avoidance of errors are much more than added extras and if the commissioning business or enterprise is fair, this will not be taken for granted.

Linguistic competence

Steve Jobs, with his now famous teasing tagline "one more thing" loved to give his audiences big news as if it were some coincidental, added bonus. I think that's a lesson our language community could learn to its benefit. When a translator delivers the finished goods, does the client truly appreciate the built-in extras they are getting? Some do; some don't. Giving clients error-free work will most certainly be appreciated, but do they also value the extra care a translator has taken to format the text perfectly? That's not always easy when translations expand or contract the space taken in the source. Do they appreciate the judgments made in resolving issues of language variety to maximize the chances of full comprehension? A translator's depth of knowledge is not necessarily easy to see in the flow of long and difficult texts. Or what about the analytical skills brought to bear on complex subject matter or obscure terms and references, not to mention



actual errors of fact? A translator might well 'wing it' when faced with an unfamiliar topic, but it is part of the job to render even jargon-laden techno-blarney in a coherent and sensible form.

Target texts set challenges that lie beyond the obvious, but for many in the community, these are challenges that they relish. In general, we often are unaware of that portion of the iceberg that lies below the waterline. But the polished quality of a well-worked target text will deflect the reader's attention from much that remains hidden. Elegant phrasing, smoothly flowing style and clever lexical choice make for good reader experiences. Sloppy punctuation, terminological ambiguity or out-of-place idioms, no matter how slight, can have an adverse impact on a target audience.

Specialist language skills

While our amazing educators work their academic magic in preparing new entrants to the language industry, they really cannot possibly equip students with the wits to slot right into the myriad permutations of corporate standards. Nor can we expect the growing number of enterprises making use of localization to loosen their requirements for language graduates. After all, they are the ones creating the demand. Governments are in the same boat. Diplomacy requires multilingualism in many departments, but they all differ so much in what they need from translators and interpreters that generalization is impossible. This brings me to the other added-value skill that language professionals offer and that is specialist language knowledge.

Monolinguists may possess cutting-edge knowledge of their chosen field, but they can only share that with their fellow native speakers. Or they rely on foreigners learning their language. Our community has always supported a range of specialist subjects — medical, legal, technical, for example — but that range is proliferating rapidly as innovation drives us relentlessly into new pastures. In my own experience in the early 1990s, guiding a project involving virtual reality toward successful delivery required a high degree of language innovation to match the technical innovation. Language professionals need to be smart and have the ability to quickly research and master new subjects on a regular basis. But there's more to this skill than simply becoming acquainted with source subject matter. Translators must also be in touch with any precedents already existing in the target language. Further still, they must exercise some judgment on the quality of that translation. Is a certain word or phrase as accurate and precise a rendering of the original as it could be? It may well be that a translator must be able to defend their lexical choices. That's not always easy if a long text has been split and possibly even harder if a translation memory (TM) has been used.

Technology skills

I am a huge supporter of translation tools. They enhance productivity and help manage terminology with little effort. However, I am not such a fan of the idea that they

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will replace the diverse skills that so many different members of our community have and do so for the better. I have always found that those who are fanatical technophiles lack the understanding of the extras that human translators and interpreters bring to their tasks. Perhaps when the singularity eventually does arrive, if it ever does, I shall have to eat my words, but I suspect time is on my side on this count. Please tell me I'm right!

The corporate and commercial world expects professionals to possess the standard set of computer skills. Office is a must, but so are the variants we find in Google Docs or OpenOffice. However, the use of translation tools built into such packages adds a level of required skill not always evident to monolinguists. Translation memories, terminology apps and their quirks need to be mastered. The time taken to deal with this is very much an investment that will pay off, but just as we see elsewhere, investments are not often cheap. But who understands this? When we download an app on our iPhones, we never give the injection of venture capital that made development happen a first, never mind a second, thought. I believe it's the same with deliverables from our community.

There was a time when reference material was by and large found in libraries. But while the book world is still thankfully thriving, we now have the added research tools that the internet provides. However, as any user of Google knows, searching efficiently requires its own kind of competence, and multilingual searches require even more. We still distinguish ourselves by our resourcefulness when it comes to uncovering the lexical gems we seek in our labyrinthine data mines. That resourcefulness also includes keen judgment in knowing just when we have a reliable find and when we have a shard of broken glass.

The human touch

"Human, all too human," wrote Friedrich Nietzsche and even he, a nihilist, got it right. Our humanity is our strength in so many ways. We find ourselves constantly tested and use our ingenuity to guide us through all manner of situations from the sublime to the ridiculous. Language workers live with stress, but as professionals, we maintain our equilibrium, attaining high-quality work under pressure. In that, we're no different from any other profession, but our stresses and strains come from the constant demand for high quality and beyond. We deliver on time under pressure.

The process of rendering texts anew in different languages does require unique skills. The work the language community is engaged in is of enormous importance to commerce and to global culture. I would urge everyone out there, regardless of function, to keep drawing attention to the fact that this is a multilingual world and that the language community is responsible in so many ways for making it a connected one. I would love to see more of our large number speaking up and telling others what an amazing feat we pull off every day as source texts are transformed into target texts. It's not alchemy! It's sheer skill that does it. More than that it's talent. That's not easy to come by and it's certainly not easy to make a fortune from. But we really do need to sing our own praises and let the world hear them. If we don't, no one else will. [M]

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