



PROFESSIONALISM IN TRANSLATION

Karla DEJEAN LE FEAL

Consultant in translation and interpretation at
C.R.A.L. (The Regional Unit for Linguistic Action),
French Embassy.

PROFESSIONALISM IN TRANSLATION

paper presented at the International Conference on Translation

Kuala Lumpur, March 13-15, 1984

When I was asked by the organizers of this conference to talk about professionalism in translation, the very first question that came to my mind was: *What is the definition of a professional translator ?* I thought it over for a while. Well, here is the definition I ended up with: A professional translator is someone who can say "no" or preferably "no but". I believe that this definition applies to all professionals, not only translators, as professionalism always means full awareness of the conditions that have to be fulfilled to accomplish a given task in one's special field, and knowing the extent to which one's own qualifications match the requirements of the job that has to be done.

This instant assessment of a problem and its possible solutions can only spring from a thorough understanding of all the operations involved in the global process, and the knowledge and competence they require from those who have to perform them. You will probably all agree with me that somebody who tries to build a car without any knowledge of the mechanics of an engine, road holding, suspension, stress and strain, aerodynamics, corrosion, etc. can hardly be considered a professional. You will also agree, I suppose, that there would be serious doubts about the professionalism of, let's say, a general practitioner who would eagerly accept to perform a heart transplant. This basic truth also applies to translation. What allows the translator to gain insight into the nature and prerequisites of the operations involved in the process is a full understanding of the fundamental principle of all forms of translating, i.e. that translation means comprehension of the author's meaning and restating that meaning in another language in the same way the author would most probably have expressed himself had he been a native speaker of the target language. As you are all translators, I hardly need to mention why it is impossible to dodge this principle. You are all aware of the fact that there are not only syntactic

and semantic differences between languages, but that different languages do not deal with reality in the same manner, that each has its own logic and its own way of expressing facts and concepts.

One needs only to apply this principle to any given text in order to realize that full understanding of the author's meaning can be achieved only if two major conditions are met: perfect knowledge of the language and of the subject matter. According to my experience, both these conditions are generally grossly underestimated. Yet it is obvious that the message cannot be grasped unless the reader has the impression not of reading words but ideas, not of processing the language mentally but of actually feeling it, since connotations, nuances and stylistic devices are more a matter of feeling than of cognitive analysis. Needless to say, one must have lived abroad for quite some time in order to get that feel for the language and to acquire the necessary background knowledge of the culture and civilization of the country concerned.

It is equally obvious that there can be no proper understanding of a text without thorough knowledge of its subject matter. If that knowledge is inadequate, comprehension will at best be very limited - far too limited for translation purposes. In fact, it is bound to be restricted to what is explicit in the text. Yet we all know that part of the author's meaning will only be implied in his writing as the author is addressing a certain public that is expected to share the background knowledge with him. If the translator lacks this background knowledge, he will miss part of the author's meaning. Thus the message cannot be fully grasped, and therefore cannot be reexpressed in the target language either. Indeed, as the translator switches over to being a writer in this second stage of the translating process, it goes without saying that he cannot clearly state an idea that is not clear in his own mind. It is also totally impossible to handle a technical jargon correctly without proper knowledge of its referent, just as it is impossible for a translator to do justice to a beautiful literary style if he is not a highly talented writer himself.

Thus, it is by applying the basic principle of translation that one becomes aware of the very stringent linguistic and extra-linguistic requirements of translation. Ironically it is not so much the problems and difficulties the translator may encounter in the process that make him aware of his limitations. It is rather the translation which he has managed to do particularly well that will be most effective in this respect. Indeed let us assume that a translation has been done under favorable conditions, the translator being perfectly at ease in the source language, fully acquainted with the subject matter and its jargon. If, on completion of his task, he compares his wording with that of the original, he himself may be astonished to see how far he often had to stray from the original wording in order to communicate the same message in the target language. Please note that I said "*in order to communicate the same message*" and not, for instance, "*without changing the message*". Indeed the choice of wording in the target language can only be made once the author's meaning has been totally appropriated by the translator who is then able to communicate it in the most fitting terms in the target language. In so doing he must take into account the needs and expectations of the potential readers of the translation, and reproduce the stylistic effects of the original, even though the linguistic means may be completely different. As soon as the translator becomes aware, in hindsight, of how far the requirements of communication have carried his wording away from that of the original, he will realize that this process could take place thanks only to his perfect knowledge of the source language, complete insight into the subject matter and thus a thorough understanding of the author's meaning, as well as his full mastery of the relevant jargon in the target language. At the same time, he will himself come to the conclusion that it could never have been done by mere guesswork. By then he will know what he is able to do and what he is not able to do. He will have learned to say "no" and, according to my definition, he will have become a professional.

* *

*

It could easily be argued of course that saying "no" most of the time may not be particularly helpful to those who require a translation. True, and this is where the "no but" comes in.

Indeed the concept of professionalism pertains not only to professionals and professional standards but also to the profession as a whole. And the profession is more than just the sum of the professionals at any given time. It is rather like a living organism. Its different cells do not live independently from one another but are complementary. Each is specialized in a certain task by which it contributes to the functioning of the organism, which in turn provides it with the life support that it could not otherwise obtain by itself.

Of course this implies a certain degree of organisation. Yet it is not enough in my opinion to establish an association of translators that collects fees from its members, publishes a bulletin and tries to defend its members' financial interests. There must also be a close cooperation among members in their daily lives. For instance, if translator A, who, let's say, is a specialist in engineering, is asked to translate a medical text, he must be in a position to say: "no but". "No, because I personally would not be qualified to do it, but my colleague B is a specialist in your field and is an excellent translator." Or translator C may be called upon to translate a text into his second language. He must have the possibility to reply: "no but". "No, because a translator can do a good job only if he does it into his mother tongue, but I suggest you ring up my colleague D who is a native speaker." Or let us take another example: Translator E gets an offer for the translation of a novel. He must be able to reply: "No, I am not a literary translator, but colleague F would certainly be pleased to do it, as he is a specialist in this field, being a novelist himself."

Obviously such cooperation has considerable advantages:

- best possible service to the customer through optimal use of existing competence.
- maintenance of professional standards.

Indeed, if one asks why translation is in such a miserable

state in many parts of the world, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that the main reason is lack of legal protection. Since anyone can proclaim himself a translator, the need for proper training is ignored. The lack of training in turn results in poor quality of translation. No one will ever pay good money for poor quality no matter how many translators' associations there may be. Persistently low fees, in turn, mean unattractiveness of the activity and therefore low qualifications and slapdash work.

Although, to the best of my knowledge, there is no effective legal protection of the profession anywhere in the world right now, in some countries it has been possible to at least break out of this vicious circle. The change has been brought about by training. If proper training is provided at the right level, i.e. post-graduate level, and if people become aware of the fact that translations need not be unintelligible or even unreadable, they will become more demanding and be willing to pay for good quality. Translation will become a more attractive proposition. Admittedly this will not mean the end of self-styled translators and poor translations. But if the few true professionals that do exist, then join forces and cooperate in a spirit of professional responsibility, they will gradually succeed in upgrading the profession. As any chain is only as strong as its weakest link, it will be in the interests of every member of the group to see to it that professional standards are maintained. Thus lack of legal protection can be at least partly offset by professional disciplinary rules even if they are unwritten. Growth of the young organism need not endanger these achievements as long as new members are coopted on the basis of professional competence and not solvability. The more this group affirms its professional profile, the more momentum it will gain since it will encourage outsiders to reach the same level of qualification so as to be able to join it.

Thus the upgrading of the profession is only possible through the upgrading of quality, which in turn requires professional training.

I know, of course, that in translation - like in any other profession - there may be a few competent self-made men and women. Yet they will always be the exceptions to the rule. It will not be the other way round.

The organization and handling of this professional training (aptitude tests and qualification exams included) are another major task for the profession. Indeed, being a living organism, it must reproduce itself.

In a country where the profession is not yet established, either the first generations of professionals will have to be trained abroad, or outside help will be required, as translators can only be trained by translators.

At a later stage, however, the young profession must see to it that those of its members with pedagogical interests and gifts acquire the necessary qualifications to train their future colleagues. They will probably also be the ones to engage in research since teaching and research are bound to go together. And translation, like any other profession, needs its own methodologists.

* *
*

Sooner or later there comes a time when a living organism undergoes mutations. They may be caused by either internal or external factors.

In terms of translation, internal factors may be the shift from part-time to full-time practice of translation or vice-versa; or rapid expansion of the profession requiring a more sophisticated organization with by-laws, specialized organs and officers, a written code of professional conduct, a yearbook, etc. The profession will have to take early steps to adjust itself.

As to external factors, the emergence of new technical devices may constitute an important challenge for the profession. Com-

puter assisted translation, to name but one of those developments, must not be left to software specialists and linguists alone, who, however proficient in their respective fields, are not specialists of translation. Otherwise something is bound to go wrong somewhere along the line.

To conclude, let me say that in my view, professionalism is equivalent to the highest possible standard of performance that can be achieved given the state of the art at a certain point in time. In today's fast shrinking world this standard is necessarily an international one, all the more so since translation is a profession of intercultural communication. Set and upheld by the profession through training and organization, this standard must also be raised by the profession through active involvement in research and development. Just as any professional must constantly keep abreast of developments in translation techniques, as well as in his working languages and specialized fields, so must the profession as a whole. In a nutshell, professionalism in translation is the product of competence, efficiency and dynamism.■