

The status of the translation profession in the European Union

(DGT/2011/TST)

Project Plan

July 2011

Summary

The project will bring together and harmonize the available information on the status of non-literary written translators in the European Union. It will present complete information on the *legal* status of translators and the professional translator organizations in all EU Member States. Further, it will study the status of translators as actors on a specific market, the market for translation services, first at a general theoretical level, and second in the specific context of the labour markets of six EU countries, allowing us to explore the correlations between status, professional certification, academic qualifications, and membership of professional associations. Additional but brief attention will be paid to the possible deprofessionalization resulting from new translation technologies and the growth of volunteer translation networks. The study will present data and models appropriate for policy decisions designed to promote the status of translators in such a way as to ensure the high-quality communication required by the EU institutions.

Introduction

The professional status of translators in the European Union is currently not regulated by any directive, and there are no common rules on the way translators are recognized professionally. At the same time, the constant renewal of a pool of high-quality well-recognized translators is essential not just for the European Union institutions, but also for the development of a multilingual European identity. There is some indication of a shortage of such professionals for some language pairs, and of a tendency towards deprofessionalization in some sectors, particularly as a consequence of machine-translation technologies and the rise of volunteer translation networks.

Information is thus required about the current status of translators, and on the available policy options for promoting that status. Here we consider those policy options to include the regulation of training, the regulation of entry into the profession, the promotion of a (voluntary) professional examination system, or the unfettered workings of the market.

Aims

1. To present an updated and clear picture of the legal status of the translation profession in the European Union.

2. To pave the way for a development of a novel analytical perspective on translation as a market.
3. To give information on the possible effects of the various policy options that might be used to promote the professional status of translators.

Delimitation of the field

The descriptive part of the project will bring together and harmonize data from multiple sources, focusing on the role of legal regimes, professional associations and public examination systems.

It will seek to complement data on training institutions such as that being compiled by the *Optimale* projects of the *European Master's in Translation* (EMT) network. It will cover legal regulations in all EU member states and will administer questionnaires to all professional translator associations and societies.

It will include case studies of the status of translators in six countries (DE, PL, PT, SI, ES, UK), plus general comparisons with the United States and Australia. Brief comparisons will also refer to purchasing-power-weighted rates of pay for translators, considered to be a partial indicator of professional status.

The conceptual part of the project will involve comparative analyses of the main policy options operative in other countries: the ATA examination system in the United States, the NAATI multi-tiered certification system in Australia, and the BDÜ/Diplomübersetzer system in Germany. The conceptualization of the policy options will also include a brief comparison with the similarly unregulated but pluri-certified profession of computer engineers (cf. Adelman 2000).

Given the limited budget and duration of the project, this proposal does not envisage gathering data concerning public opinion; it does not seek to survey academics or business experts; it does not address the status of literary translators or interpreters (except when they also work as technical translators); it will not generate new information on additional variables such as rates or pay, the number of translators working in the European Union, or the technologies being employed by translators.

Conceptual modelling

This project draws on both economic modelling and the sociological analysis of specific market variables. This combination of approaches is innovative and should open the way for further informed interdisciplinary approaches.

The main operative conceptual model for this project is drawn from information economics (applied to translators in Chan 2008). We consider translations as being produced and sold within a market where buyers lack complete information on the quality of the products they are purchasing (the classical study underlying this model is Akerlof's 1970 work on the used-car market).

In this model, problems occur because the person who needs a translation cannot fully judge the quality of the translation. In order for the market to work efficiently, some signalling mechanism is required so that buyers can be ensured of quality. The available signalling mechanisms include academic qualifications, professional examinations, information on quality-assessment procedures, records of experience (cf. Articles 9, 10 and 16 of Directive 2005/36/EC), as well as membership of professional associations and personal recommendation within social networks. If the signalling mechanisms are faulty or contradictory, buyers will not establish relations of trust with translators, poor-quality translations may then flood the market, the price of translations will decline, and high-quality translators will consequently be driven out of the market, in a process of “adverse selection”. In other words, if the signalling systems are poor, good translators will rationally turn to other professions. And in some language combinations, good translators may become hard to find. Some evidence of this happening is to be found in the DGT study *The Size of the language industry* (LTC 2009).

The core principles of the asymmetric information approach and its application to translation by Chan (2008) open the way to further analyses of the economics of translations in two mutually complementary perspectives: (1) investigating the possibilities afforded by extensions of the fundamental model, and (2) linking up the approach with the economics of language (e.g. Grin 2010; Grin, Sfreddo and Vaillancourt 2010), in which the explicit inclusion of translation is a recent development. In addition, we shall explore the connections between the foregoing perspectives on translation and two mainstream specializations in economics, namely, education economics and labour economics (Grin 2005), with a view for the project to also contribute to the emergence of a robust, theory-based approach to the economics of translation.

Recent work in the Sociology of Translation (Pym et al. eds 2006, Wolf et al. eds 2007) suggests that the Akerlof model, even as expanded by Chan, can be no more than a starting point. Although there is clear evidence of declining market prices for some languages, there is also increasing evidence that translators are not solely driven by monetary rewards. Translators may also be motivated by the opportunity to learn, to work with prestigious people and institutions, or to help what they consider good causes. Our model must thus also consider the economies of what Bourdieu (1997) identified as cultural, symbolic and social capitals. Further, the declining rates of pay for a language like Spanish might also be explained by: 1) the oversupply of translators with academic qualifications, 2) the growth in start-up translation companies (cf. LTC 2009: 24), and 3) the internationalization of the market thanks to electronic communications technologies. All these factors can drive prices down and may force good translators out of the market.

The signalling model is nevertheless robust enough to handle several further variables that need to be taken into account. First, the more international online markets for translations have been particularly creative in the development of new forms of signalling mechanisms (cf. kudos points, and lists of prior customers on proz.com). Second, where formal signalling is weak, some segments of the market effectively trust no signals other than their own and thus set up their own recruitment examination systems. The result is a significant fragmentation of the professional image.

It is important to note that in the past 18 months, the tenderer has been contacted by some of the field's major players who are looking for advice precisely on the question of qualifications for translators. Google is seeking to establish a "Localization Translator Certificate", initially conceptualized as an exam that all translators would have to pass in order to work for the Google's subcontracting language-service providers. Proz has also been contemplating setting up its own internal examination system, leading to a system of qualifications that it hopes will tackle the growing problem of poor-quality translations. Both these companies have turned to signalling through examination systems, rather than to the regulation of training programmes. At the same time, the subcontractor has been invited to advise on the conditions required to ensure effective multilingualism in international organisations, with a particular emphasis on UN bodies.

Summing up, the main focus of the analytical approach is on assessing the relative signalling strength of the available policy options, while integrating this question into the broader issue of developing a socioeconomic perspective on translation that lends itself to policy development.

Specific research questions

In keeping with the tender specifications, we will address the following questions:

1. What is the relative status of academic qualifications and training?
2. What schemes are in place for sworn or authorized translators?
3. What is the role of professional organizations?
4. Approximately how many translators are in-house, freelance or self-employed?
5. What values do employers attach to qualifications?
6. What other professional activities do translators also engage in?

In some cases the wording of the questions has been modified in order to address more clearly what we see as the main policy issues, particularly with respect to a possible system of professional certification on the basis of a voluntary exam.

The research methodologies required are slightly different for each question, as is the delimitation of the sample. We will thus explain the procedures for each question separately.

1. *What is the relative status of academic qualifications and training?*

Thanks to close contacts with the network of researchers who are members of the European Society for Translation Studies, we are able to obtain up-to-date information on the general situation in all EU member states.

We are interested in the following information for each country:

- Are academic qualifications required in order to work as a translator and/or use the title “translator”?
- If so, in which market segments (private, national level and international organisations, with a comparison with EU institutions)?
- Is professional certification (e.g. the passing of a public exam or membership of an association) required in order to work as a translator? In which segments?
- What is the relationship between academic training and professional certification with respect to the recruitment of translators?

Data will be gathered from employment and taxation authorities, with input from training institutions and professional organisations.

In some cases this information will update Stejskal’s survey and analyses (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004), which cover “more than 30 countries on six continents” (2003b: 99).

Here we will also note the way the profession is being regulated on a supranational level through the certification of translation companies. Thanks to European Standard EN15038 (2006), control of the translation *process* in a company is increasingly assumed to guarantee the quality of what the translator does. The standard actually relies on other signalling mechanisms, notably academic degrees and/or years of professional experience (EN15038, article 3.2.2).

Despite this attempt at a supranational signalling mechanism, we expect the results for each member state to be so different that regulation along the lines of Directive 2005/36/EC would currently be impractical.

2. *What schemes are in place for sworn or authorized translators?*

Again, the network of the *European Society for Translation Studies* will enable us to obtain updated data on the position of sworn or authorized translators in all EU member states.

The information sought is:

- For the translation of which type of documents is such a certification needed?
- Who grants the certificate and on what basis?
- Are there other kinds of public translator certificates/registries?
- To what extent can the existing systems be harmonized across Europe?

This information will be sought from the Ministries of Justice (or equivalent) in each country, with input from national translator associations and academic institutions where appropriate.

We expect to find countries where there is no special qualification required to produce a translation that has legal validity (e.g. United Kingdom), others where a special test has to be passed and the translator must be registered with the ministry or court (most Civil Law countries in Europe). There are also cases where an academic degree in translation, with the appropriate combination of courses, will allow the graduate to be recognized as a sworn translator (as in Spain). According to some preliminary reports, there are also countries like Belgium where the system differs from city to city.

Perhaps our most useful work here will be to address the terminological muddles created by the existing signalling systems, particularly those that involve sworn/authorized translators, certified translations and authenticated translations. Here, for example, is a query posted to proz.com:

I have done a translation (FR>EN) of a diploma from a Belgium university and now the client asks for it to be sworn. I am English and live in England, client is Belgian living in Belgium (I guess), and I got the work via a Swedish agency. Needless to say I do not know the client.

The answer is probably that the translator should have been registered as a sworn translator in the Belgian city where the diploma was issued. But the important point is that, at present, neither the translator nor the client has any idea of the answer, and we are not sure - the signalling mechanism is weak. A European certification system might send a stronger signal, and do so in a way that could resolve many cross-border complexities.

3. What is the role of professional organizations?

The *Fédération Internationale de Traducteurs* maintains a list of its member associations, which are translator organizations in each country. However, it is also currently compiling a list of non-member associations, since there are many cases where more than one association is operative (e.g. Spain, where there are separate associations for all the official languages, an active association of translation companies, and active translation sections in the associations of writers and editors).

Depending on the completeness of the available listings, we undertake to contact at least the major professional associations in each EU member state. Our survey will gather information on the following points:

- How many paying members belong to the association?
- What translation segments are covered?
- What criteria must be met for a translator to become a member?
- Does membership of the association have a market value?

- Would the association be willing to contribute to a voluntary European certification system for translators?

For the countries selected for case studies, the survey will be followed up by interviews with office holders of the professional associations. The questions to be dealt with in the interviews are:

- What is the relation, if any, between academic training and membership of the association?
- What is the age profile of members?
- How does the association react to the use of online translation technologies and the increase in volunteer translators?
- Does the association attempt to influence the standard rates of payment for translations?
- How could the association best contribute to a European certification system for translators, if at all?

We expect the responses to indicate that many of the associations accept translators without a degree or diploma in translation; younger translators tend not to join the established associations; online technologies and volunteer translators are seen as a threat; there is little direct impact on rates of pay; and there would be general support for a European certification system of some kind, if and when the system can draw on the expertise of the existing associations.

4. Approximately what percentage of translators are in-house, freelance or self-employed?

A number of previous studies offer rough estimates of how many translators are professional in some way, and how they are employed. It is difficult, however, to do quantitative work in this field with any degree of certainty. Our methodology will thus involve a critical and analytical “survey of surveys”: taking the available surveys and informed estimates, re-analyzing the data (especially with respect to categories and types of translators), and proposing the most compatible results.

If we guess that 700,000 people in the world “would call themselves professional translators” (Beninatto et al. 2008) and that Europe represents 26% of the global “latent demand” for translations (Parker 2008), we might be talking about 182,000 translators in Europe. However, the largest surveys of employment patterns cover not much more than 1000 subjects (e.g. Katan 2008, LTC 2009), with virtually no controlled sampling procedure.

Boucau (2005) estimates that there were 100,000 freelance translators in Europe in 2005, representing about 80% of the market (a percentage that he claimed was in decline). In Katan’s sample, of the people who said translation is their main

professional activity, 74.6% were freelancers. So some degree of compatibility is possible (Boucau and Katan roughly agree on the percentage), despite the numerous methodological difficulties involved. At the same time, however, the DGT *Study on the size of the language industry in the EU* (LTC 2009), with 700 respondents in its “primary survey”, estimates that the proportion of freelancers is “in the region of 50%” (2009: 24). Our work in these cases is necessarily to go back to the samples in each case, and to re-work the numbers as far as possible. More important, we must seek out the principles that might indicate market trends. For example, Fraser and Gold (2001) find that freelance translators have considerable control and autonomy, and that translators who move from in-house to freelance tend not to want to go back.

Information on the way translators are employed might be important for the policy options available, at least to the extent that a market that is predominantly freelance seems unlikely to be controlled by restricted access to the profession. The value of the statistics may ultimately lie in the reality principle they convey: if gatekeeping is impossible, then the clear signalling of quality work might be the best we can hope for.

5. *What values do employers attach to qualifications?*

The specific remit here reads: “Where an agreement on the qualifications for translators exists, do employers respect these agreed qualifications?”. As phrased, the question seems excessively narrow, first because there are few binding agreements, and second because the few texts that might look like agreements, such as article 3.2.2 of European Standard EN15038, actually refer to combinations of “qualifications” and “experience” that effectively allow for the qualifications to be circumvented. As the European Union of Associations of Translation Companies states, the standard does not “preclude individuality nor does it regulate commercial decisions” (EUATC website).

Something similar might be deduced from the IAMLADP (2009: 79-97) summary of the “eligibility” requirements for recruitment exams for the main intergovernmental organizations. They find “a universal requirement for a first-level university degree but not for a specific translation qualification” (2009:79). The emphasis here is on the recruitment examination systems themselves, which are followed by various types of in-house training.

We thus propose a slightly larger question. We assume that academic qualifications (of any kind), professional certification and work experience all have relative values for employers, and we attempt to assess the relative strength of each as a signalling mechanism in specific market segments.

Chan (2008) investigates this question by asking employers to rank series of fictitious résumés. His general finding is that recruiters respect academic credentials and give some value to professional certification. Chan’s methodology, however, is not well suited to the wider scope of the current proposal.

Our methodology here will be to identify situations in which there are something like “agreed qualifications” in the six case-study countries, and to devise a short telephone survey for one major company in the segment concerned in each country, plus the localization companies Lionbridge and Logoscript (who are cooperating with us in a parallel project). The companies should be identified with assistance from the EUATC. Our basic questions will be:

1. Are you aware of the agreed qualifications?
 2. Have you recruited translators in the past year?
 3. Do the translators have the qualifications? Do they have alternative or better qualifications?
 4. What value would be attached to a professional certification exam?
6. *What other professional activities do translators also engage in?*

All recent surveys indicate that translation is performed within a fairly wide range of job titles, and this is confirmed by the DGT study on *The Size of the language industry* (LTC 2009). For example, Brown (2001) reports that 68 percent of conference interpreters also work as written translators. Katan (2010) finds many translators who also work in the technical, business, legal and marketing fields, along with large numbers of “academics”, “students” and “mothers”. He concludes that “very few in the profession have *only* one role. Over two thirds (69%) ‘also’ had a second role, while over half (54%) ‘at times’ had a third role” (118). Liu (2011: 59) finds younger translators in the greater China region working with job titles such as “Account Executive”, “Communication Consultant”, “Corporate Communications Specialist”, “Marketing Communications Executive” and “Public Affairs Specialists”. Gold and Fraser’s current research in the United Kingdom may also suggest that younger translators are taking on more entrepreneurial professional identities.

The budget and time limitations of the current proposal mean that we cannot attempt to sample this vast and dynamic phenomenon in any scientific way. We must thus limit our proposal to a critical “survey of surveys”, with special attention to trends in the younger age group.

Selection of case studies and comparisons

We are required to look in detail at six EU Member States, including at least one country of each of the following groups:

- I. Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, United Kingdom;
- II. Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden;
- III. Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia.

Given the countries in which the European Society for Translation Studies has the best contact members, our choice is for: Germany, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom.

On many of the above points, comparisons will also be made with the United States (ATA professional certification) and Australia (NAATI accreditation and certification), and it is with these two cases that the final comparison should also be made. This is because of the highly developed and apparently successful signalling mechanisms that these two countries have put in place, and the significant differences between them (although both systems involve professional examinations, the Australian case accredits training institutions, whereas the US one does not).

The professional comparison with computer engineers is motivated by the availability of previous studies, a degree of public debate about the proliferation of certifications, and the relative failure to establish a government-based signalling mechanism. Comparisons would also be possible with the many editing and teaching activities that translators tend to engage in, but the contrasts would not be as clear and as open to scrutiny as is the case of computer engineers.

Summary of data-gathering methodologies

	Action	Methodologies	Countries studied
1	Academic qualifications	Inventory	Member states
		Case studies	DE, PL, PT, SI, ES, UK, US, AUS
2	Sworn translators	Inventory	Member states
		Telephone survey	DE, PL, PT, SI, ES, UK, US, AUS
3	Professional organisations	Questionnaire	Member states
4	In-house/freelance	Survey of surveys	Member states, as covered by existing surveys
5	Employers' values	Telephone survey	DE, PL, PT, SI, ES, UK, plus Lionbridge and Logoscript (localization companies)
6	Other professional activities	Survey of surveys	DE, PL, PT, SI, ES, UK
7	Comparisons	Mapping of key variables	IT experts
			US, AUS

Methods for summarising, analysing and presenting results

The most useful results will be Tables with updated information on topics 1, 2 and 3, including links to websites where appropriate.

Synoptic and synthetic analyses of the many variables will be in terms of the relative strength of the signalling mechanisms, in most cases presentable in terms of simple bar graphs.

The highly qualitative nature of most of the variables means that no statistical analysis of any degree of sophistication is warranted.

Verifiable objectives

	Topic	Deliverables	Date
0	Technical and planning details	Inception report	Month 1
1	Academic qualifications	Interim report	Month 4
2	Sworn translators	Interim report	Month 4
3	Professional organisations	Interim report	Month 4
4	In-house/freelance	Final report	Month 9
5	Employers' values	Final report	Month 9
6	Other professional activities	Final report	Month 9
7	Comparisons	Final report	Month 9

Timetable

		Month									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Action	0	Inception report									
	1				Interim report						
	2										
	3										
	4									Final report	
	5										
	6										
	7										

Allocation of resources

Main costs	Euros
Overhead FURV	12000
Overhead UNIGE	2203
Research assistant FURV	19080
Research assistant UNIGE	11480
Office costs	3237
Administrative fees and consultancy EST	3000
Travel and accommodation	9000
TOTAL	60000

Cost effectiveness

The project will be able to address many different topics with relative ease thanks to the number and scope of the previous surveys that have been carried out. To that extent, the project is modest in its ambitions, realistic in its objectives, and conservative in its budget.

Intelligent and critical use of the existing data will be able to provide pertinent information adequate to the level of the policy decisions being contemplated.

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