

## Current Trends in the Translation Industry and

### What They Mean to All of Us

#### *Interview with Oleg Rodavin, translator from the Ukraine*

(complete interview used for the article "Chancen der Globalisierung" MDÜ 2/09, S. 10 ff.)

##### *What is the new emerging structure of the translation industry in your opinion?*

Having sold my crystal ball in 1990's – had to somehow survive when there was no Internet here, and local clients paid less than \$US 1 per page of translation – I can only outline possible scenarios. One thing to mention though: the translation industry does not generate its own product and only processes "raw materials" supplied by other sectors of the economy. Hence, we are fully dependent on the shape the world economy takes in the coming years. How the economy is going to develop remains to be seen.

##### **The scenarios are as follows:**

**Idealistic:** Where are we going to? Mankind realizes at last that we have no idea of the purpose of our development. Industries change to the effect that all activities are intended to make human life better, happier, healthier... Money becomes, instead of the ultimate goal of everything, what it basically is: an instrument. Profits are evenly distributed between employees and employers, doers and administrators/managers.

In this world, the translation industry will be an integral element of the new structure, a beautiful, reliable and efficient one.

##### **Probability:** Zero

**Optimistic:** If money makes the world go round, translation lubricates the gears. The increasing number of translation buyers start to understand that the linguistic component of their products or services is about the only aspect that makes these products or services stand out from those of their competitors. Translators – creators of this linguistic component – become as important as engineers/developers. Translation buyers start caring more about the functionality (which is not exactly the same as quality!) of the final translation product. Vertical segmentation of the translation market strengthens. High-end translation suppliers reap the benefits while low end suppliers (together with buyers) suffer from the consequences.

**Probability:** Low. Possible outcome for 10-15% of translation buyers.

**Realistic:** Everything resumes to what it used to be but slightly worse. Joint governmental efforts are successful in restoring the inefficient and purposeless structure of the world economy and a major part of translation buyers reemerge from the crisis unhurt and enriched with the experience of successfully bringing down the translation costs. The still forming global translation market is further divided between the translation corporations; small and medium translation agencies are forced either out of business or incorporated as minor, low level elements of corporate structures. Tiny niches remain (similar to hand-made furniture in the age of bulk production) occupied by most professional translators or small agencies.

Major changes take place in the very essence of translation: the profession becomes less creative and much more technical. An increasing percentage of sources are generated by machines with

human post-editing; same is true about translation – machine translation is used mixed with crowdsourcing to be further processed in an omnivorous CAT tool (I do believe one standard – and hopefully not very expensive! – tool has to be developed) with an online translation memory database accessible for everybody. Certain jobs disappear from the market forever – no human translation of user's manuals for simple household appliances or electronic equipment. Lots of source texts don't even appear in a format of separate files but rather as texts somewhere in the depths of manufacturers' sites, and translators work with them online. Translation process is included into the production/development sequence at the stage of a product/service conception.

**Probability:** It's already happening.

- There are various players in the translation industry: The top 25 international translation companies, medium and small translation agencies, freelance translators. Which trend do you forecast for each of them with regard to (relative) importance and market share?

The demand is changing, and it will lead to changes in the relative importance and market share for each type of translation providers. Presently, a growing number of translation buyers start buying in stock: they need more words to be handled with shorter turnaround and, importantly, in more language combinations. Surely, the largest players capable of mobilizing extensive resources within limited timeframe fit best for this purpose. Taking into account this as well as their aggressive marketing, availability of funds for promotion/advertising, and natural instinct of end clients who tend to trust brands, certification and similar stuff, they will steadily augment their share of the market.

The remaining two segments will compete hard for the jobs left, with freelancers probably taking over the more "human" jobs like marketing, science, fiction (provided the latter becomes more attractive financially) – in short, everything individual, incompatible with CAT's, hand-made; and medium sized agencies feeling at home with technical, medical, legal areas. Specialization will be the key factor in the competition.

The importance of small agencies will be mostly limited to providing services to geographically local clients.

*- Which translation jobs are best handled by each player?*

Let's first define the terminology and have a look at the purpose of each form of business.

A freelancer is a one person business engaged in translation (in our case). A freelancer's main priority is to provide a commercially viable translation product – therefore, they have to care about the quality to the extent possible. Administrative work is regarded as non-productive and we try to minimize it wherever and whenever we can. We do not or rarely use standard contracts, try to keep accounting simple, reduce the communication to "assignment confirmed", "translation attached please confirm receipt" exchange, etc. Freelancing is a business with a proper balance between freedom and independence.

A translation agency is a form of business which presumably streamlines the "technological process" through distribution of functions: translators won't do editing, editors won't deal with accounting, and accountants won't mess with administrative duties. Another purpose of creating an agency is to increase the revenues via expanded capabilities and optimized process.

A corporation is a form best suitable for the administration and management of extensive and complicated structures or processes. By doing so, it is supposed to boost revenues. A corporation **does not deal with translation**, its purpose is to control and manage – and collect income from the lower levels to channel it up to the top.

Now, I guess the answer to the question is evident. While it's the little translator doing the actual translation work in every case, the jobs vary greatly in size and scope. Freelancers whose turnaround

is limited to 2,000-3,000 words a day will best handle one-off jobs in single language combinations with manageable deadlines. Agencies are very efficient in handling quite a variety of assignments with the exception of those involving translation into multiple language pairs often belonging to different geographical regions and requiring participation of a large pool of translators. Roughly, an agency can probably cope with a 50,000 words translation into 2 to 6 languages to be completed within 10-15 days. Talking about jobs with larger wordcounts, more language combinations or turnarounds requiring participation of a large number of translators at the same time, these are for translation corporations.

#### *How can small translation agencies and freelance translators benefit from globalization?*

I don't see any particular benefits for smaller translation vendors from further globalization – at least, any more or new benefits. Besides, they are counterbalanced by the harm. Small businesses and freelancers were fast to react to globalization and the first to use the favorable situation. Now, the clumsy big players are here, too. Globalization facilitated access of all participants of the market to each other and all segments involved. In our industry, national borders do not exist, and financial barriers are hardly visible – but the same works for MLV's who triple their efforts trying to increase their market shares. Guess who's going to win this competition?

#### *- How can the existing negative consequences be counteracted?*

Negative or positive – it's just a matter of perception. A translation agency snatches a client from me. Is it positive or negative? Depends on what side you belong to.

Speaking about negative consequences for small businesses and freelancers, I don't believe they can be mitigated. Or, rather, there are possibilities – theoretical ones. Just like the climate changes: everybody knows that steps are to be taken immediately until it's too late and the changes are irreversible but... It's usually the big players who have the power of decision-making. In their motivation priorities, profits are at the top. Again, guess who's going to win if it's my interests versus the interests of a large multinational translation corporation or a large multinational translation buyer?

I'm definitely not saying that the doomsday of freelance translation and small agencies is going to be tomorrow. We'll have a few years' cushion period to either adapt to the new situation or maybe drop translation altogether and choose another profession.

#### *- Which tactics should the players employ to achieve good results?*

Tactics are different for each player. I don't care about corporations – they'll survive and flourish. Bigger agencies are mostly out of my scope of interests, either. As for freelancers and small agencies, there's nothing new. Specialization – to the level when a translator's knowledge is comparable to that of a specialist. Targeted approach: there still are and will be translation buyers willing to use services provided by freelancers and small agencies. Utmost quality: freelancers will probably have to include third party proofreading as a part of their services by default (agencies should be doing it already). Technical training so as to be able to work with various or new CAT tools.

In short, good product (translation service) plus ability to sell this product will do the trick.