Topics List

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特集3　Changing roles in an industrial revolution
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特集『翻訳者の役割について考える』第2回

Changing roles in an industrial revolution

城 雲図　勉（ジョウンズ　ベン）：

People in all periods are prone to describing themselves as being in an era of change, although it is only with hindsight that one can tell how true such sentiments are. Yet few would deny that the spread of computers and the internet has wrought huge changes in business and social life throughout both industrialized and developing nations. Many translators have consequently voiced anxiety over their future; let us examine to what extent this is justified.

For much of history, translation was focused on religious, philosophical or literary texts, and translators were primarily writers who had also acquired skills in other languages. However, as international trade developed, the requirement for dedicated translators became more pronounced, especially when protectionism gave way to globalization following World War Ⅱ.

Just one year after the International Federation of Translators (FIT) was formed in 1953, IBM demonstrated some software which translated text automatically. It was predicted that it would only take a few years to develop machines capable of replacing human translators – but as the number of specialist human translators was still low, there was no hue and cry about the potential loss of jobs.

Since then, FIT has grown to represent over 100,000 translators in 60 countries. UNESCO's 1976 Nairobi Recommendation on the Protection and Improvement of the Legal and Social Status of Translations and Translators marked an important milestone, but the threats from which translators were to be protected at the time seem to have been mostly legal, social or moral: technology was merely one area where translators might operate, rather than an integral part of the translation process or a threat in itself.

Computing power continued to advance. In 1987 translators were beginning to use computers as word processors, and to consult colleagues via BBS systems; in 1997 Babelfish appeared, offering instantaneous, free translations; and in 2007 Google Translate adopted a statistical model with corpora covering billions of words in dozens of languages. TM too has progressed to the stage where it (allegedly) raises translator throughput to over 3450 words per hour.

While MT is sometimes seen as a threat, and doubtless deprives translators of some work, it also relieves us of many boring parts, leaving more creative aspects to be done by humans – such as post-editing. Demand for this skill is likely to grow, as too is the requirement for language-savvy project managers. Many major translation companies actually consist of 95% PMs, with no in-house translators at all. In addition, technophile linguists are often the most adept at using these technologies, so that instead of using the two-stage "post-edit" route, for example, a translator using Wordfast's FreeTM tool can now see and overtype machine translation suggestions as a fully automated part of their translation process. Other TM tools are sure to incorporate similar features in the future.

If the comparison with the industrial revolution 200 years ago is valid, one would expect to see greater mechanization, replacing unskilled labour and enabling 'production line' work; greater efficiency and overall production; greater competition; lower prices; rapid creation trand consolidation of innovative new businesses; groups of learned people sharing their latest discoveries; and a shift in the workforce to higher-skilled jobs.

The languages industry is certainly experiencing greater mechanization, as outlined above. Parts do replace unskilled labour (OCR/VR and electronic texts save on typing), while there is a degree of 'production line' work ("translate these strings: they'll be assembled into the app/brochure/website later", or some of the tasks offered on Mechanical Turk). Greater efficiency is claimed ("never translate the same phrase twice"), and overall production is rising (see e.g. Commonsense Advisory surveys). Competition both between translation agencies and between translators is fierce, within a global online marketplace (ProZ et al.) that

increasingly exhibits the characteristics of a buyer's market. Prices have dropped in many areas, as agencies are pressured into giving volume discounts or compete for large tenders. Countless new businesses have been created (both agencies and translation technology companies), while mergers & acquisitions are creating industry giants (e.g. SDL/Trados, Lionbridge/Bowne/Berlitz, TransPerfect/Overtaal/Crimson, BigWord/Idioma/MultiLingual). Translators and techies meet regularly at off-line conferences and on-line events and forums; so we are left with the shift to higher-skilled jobs.

This is inevitable. As a translator in the UK with over two decades' experience, my rates are higher than those of my younger compatriots, or translators in countries with lower labour costs. How can I continue to justify this price differential? The customer has to see added value, perhaps in terms of quality (fewer errors, more effective promotional text, less checking required), speed (familiarity with the subject matter and style), or less tangible elements such as a flexible approach, understanding their true needs, and communicating well. However, comparative newcomers may utilize the latest tools to achieve improvements in all these areas, and given that certain clients may place a greater weight on price than other factors, they will be able to undercut me unless I remain up to date in a similar fashion. The same will of course apply to them too, in due course.

London Translations, one of various UK agencies that is growing rapidly, agree that translators are increasingly expected to 'up-skill', as their clients demand editing, copywriting, typesetting, the use of a wide range of software including TM, and familiarity with web technologies (especially SEO, search engine optimization). They also note that working hours seem to be growing longer, partly due to the 24/7 culture of an online world that never sleeps, which all larger companies exploit when outsourcing.

One further aspect of the industrial revolution that may also come to feature in the translation industry is turbulence in the relationship between labour and management. While translators unwilling to accept new technology tend to be seen rather affectionately as 'dinosaurs' rather than Luddites, some forums are full of outspoken criticism of agencies, technology companies and large public clients, and there has even been discussion of strike action (not a very realistic proposal in the global translation marketplace, but definitely possible in situations where for example interpreters in a certain area are deprived of work or forced to accept unfair terms).

Here too London Translations note an interesting trend: the need for mutual trust. Just as an agency faced with 1000 online profiles will choose one accredited by a respected national organization, translators will check agencies' credit ratings and reputations before accepting work.

The religious, philosophical or literary translators mentioned before are unlikely to be affected greatly by the digital revolution, but its impact on the 80–90% of translators engaged in industrial or business work must not be underestimated. To achieve their full potential, and move up the skill chain, such translators will need to work constantly on their individual skill set (both IT and specialist subject fields) via CPD. As some sources of work get closed off due to technological advances, translators will need to make use of such tools themselves to stay ahead of the game. To avoid being downgraded to line workers, they will also need to ensure these skills are recognized by industry bodies, and collaborate with other translators to maintain their status. Yet none of this is new: the wheels of change are simply revolving.

城雲図・勉（Ben Jones）：オックスフォード大学から奨学金を得て入学し、後にシェフィールド大学日本研究センターへ。86年に来日、初期は武者小路実篤の「新しい 村」で椎茸栽培に専念するが、一年後に東京で翻通訳を始める。90年から翻訳や出版を英国で、通訳を欧州各国、米国、ニュージーランドなどで手掛ける。英 国翻訳通訳協会（ITI）上級会員、日本語ネットワーク前理事。武神館道場15段。
http://www.japanesetranslations.co.uk　ben@japanesetranslations.co.uk