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# Exploitation By Translation Agents

By Doris Ganser

Because of an extremely time and money consuming business matter, I was happy and grateful to hand over the chairmanship of the ATA Ethics Committee to Gabor Bokor, a long-time translator and bureau owner and member of the ATA board who will carry on the task with efficiency, especially the updating of the ATA Code of Ethics.

While preparing to send the committee files to Gabor, I came across a note concerning my own appointment last year: "How could ATA possibly allow an agent to become the head of the ATA Ethics Committee?" the translator inquired full of indignation.

In the past, I often rang bells warning translators against the ruses of unscrupulous agents but the time has come to stand up for the other side. I feel competent to speak up for that side, too, since I have been and continue to be on both sides of the translation business.

Few translation bureaus, agencies, and firms were established by outsiders as purely commercial operations, and I venture to say that it is mostly those that have given the "translation agent" an undeserved bad name in the translator community. Many of us other "terrible" agents were professional translators long before becoming agents, in fact at a time when many translators of today were still learning their mother (or father) tongue. We did a good job for our clients so that we began to have an overflow of work; we were happy to refer it free to less fortunate free-lancers who had presented themselves to us as professionals perfectly capable of translating *at least* as well as we could.

What a surprise and embarrassment when the customers called after such a referral to say that our work had been excellent, but that they had been very disappointed by those to whom we had referred business.

In disbelief, we cautiously asked those "perfect" translators to let us review their

work before they passed it on to the client so that a "few shortcomings" could be eliminated. Soon we were not only editing translations but also arguing for hours with "perfect" translators about blatant errors and not so blatant inadequacies.

Thus we were not only providing free editing services to them but also free training. Eventually we decided to eliminate the return of the translation to the original translator and to charge for turning raw material into a salable product. Yet many of us continue to translate full-time.



DORIS GANSER

It was a rude awakening to realize that in the minds of many translators, all agents, bureau and service owners and managers are the same, and that translators like Gabor and I were resented by free-lancers as a class of exploiters of the poor translator, that we were obviously all seen as unethical because we charge for the selling, editing, revising, proof-reading, and other work we do to the raw material we buy. Yet it is often the agent who "rescues" the translation and the translators who were on the verge of making a fool of themselves, had the unedited material been turned over to the customer.

A few years ago, I wrote to a colleague that the translators are the lifeblood of the agency; that still holds true. Yet many free-lance translators would not be able to function effectively in this country without the assistance of the agency (by any other name), and many would not have any work at all, were it not for the agent.

A very obvious difference between the translator listings in the phone book in my native Germany and the United States

is that in the former, only a few agencies are listed, yet numerous individual translators have their names and languages in the equivalent of the Yellow Pages. The reason is obvious: For years, American translation users—exporting manufacturers, international consultant and accounting firms, engineering companies, attorneys, and many other organizations—lacked sophistication to determine the quality of the translations they were (often reluctantly) buying. The relative insularity of this country had caused a blatant disinterest in the learning of foreign languages, and an attitude of "let the rest of the world learn English" had prevailed. In contrast, Europeans, many close to the borders of several countries, had always been aware of the advantage of speaking the language of the customer. Thus European companies were (and still are) able to buy translations intelligently and selectively from individual translators. In contrast, the concept in the United States has often been termed "one-stop-shopping"; the translation supermarket won here over the "corner grocery store." That some of us who are more enterprising have taken advantage of this supermarket opportunity and continue to do so is a simple economic fact, and in economic circles it has never been considered unethical to respond to the market demand with a legitimate product.

The lack of foreign language knowledge on the part of the translation user has not been the only cause for the development of a different translation buying system in the United States. Historically, two groups of translators prevailed through the sixties—immigrants who arrived, often with no saleable skill other than their foreign language, and teachers of foreign languages. The former worked for low rates, dictated by those who had begun to take responsibility for translation—typesetters, printers, advertising companies, and similar firms—without any pride in the skill of the translator and essentially uncomfortable about having to handle this type of business. The rates were accepted by those who operated in an economy in which supply exceeded demand because everyone who spoke a foreign language was considered capable of translating. The other group, mainly in academia, saw no great need to

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excel in commercial translation. Contacting schools and universities for translations was (and often still is, as a recent publication from the Small Business Administration showed) the first thing that came to mind when someone was needed to "convert a foreign language." The agent paid the professor something, and the professor was happy to have made a few brownie points to add to the resume. The agency concept became ingrained. ATA was still in its infancy at that time and experienced growing pains, although some of those first dinosauric visionaries attempted to improve the quality of translation training at a German university towards the end of the fifties, we had some good laughs about supposedly German, French, Italian, and Spanish brochures from American companies (this was the time, when many American firms began to establish their European subsidiaries.)

The rise in the degree of education, training, and professionalism of the individual translator has been extremely slow, but Patricia Newman's survey made it clear that the average translator today is indeed quite well educated. So has the agent outlived his/her time of usefulness? Is the average translator ready and willing and capable of marketing his or her own skill? Is the average translator able to produce what the market needs?

From my personal observation of the increase in the volume of translation needed at all levels, John Bloke Translator would not be able to keep up with the demand of the market. Many projects have become so enormous in scope that one translator working alone would be busy for one or two lifetimes on a single job, such as a set of computer manuals. At the same time, deadlines have become shorter and shorter, because the manufacturer in the international marketplace is in a constant race with competitors to hit the international market <sup>world</sup> ~~place~~ before another one captures the portion of the market his management has calculated he should gain. No individual translator can maintain this pace. Instead of disappearing, many agencies have become larger than ever and have taken on the new role of coordinators of large size pro-

jects. Surely we cannot consider that unethical!

"Alright," I hear Lolita Bright Translator say, "I have just bought this new word-processor, I do like to be in my cozy room surrounded by my dictionaries, I receive the stuff from the agent by fax, and I get to send it back by a courier who picks it up, so that I hardly ever have to venture outside, and I never have to deal with the end <sup>user</sup> ~~customer~~. I do like that. But I feel exploited by the agents. They are unethical because they pay me only 8 cents, ~~from them~~, and I hear they charge their customers 20 cents and more a word into the language I translate. If I were to work for the customers direct, I could offer 13 or 14 cents, I would make some real money for a change, perhaps take a trip to the Bahamas next year, and that customer would still save a bundle of money that the agent now pockets for doing nothing except selling the job, sending it to a bunch of translators and to the client when I have done all the work. I recognize that salesmen are entitled to a commission, really, and I don't mind giving them what salesmen normally get, 10 or 15%; I'd even throw in a few bucks to pay for their postage, but not all the extra money they are making off my perfectly good translation!!!"

While some so-called "translation" mills may truly operate as forwarding agents and nothing else, they are fortunately few and often short-lived in a translation market that is gaining in sophistication. Translation mills oversell inferior quality because of their lack of knowledge of the product they are buying. Eventually something they buy is bad enough so they don't get paid, they stop paying the translators and disappear. To keep this type from resurfacing under a new fictitious name, ATA will hopefully find a way to adopt an official or unofficial grapevine or better business bureau system. In the meantime translators should heed warnings previously published in the Chronicle under the subject "Translators Beware!"

But how about the others who are not translation mills? Why should they get all the money they make from the translations over which Lolita and Joe have sweated? Well, they coordinate a translation project, that's really all, and they as-

sure timely delivery. So what's so complicated about that, again, why all the money?

Let us look at what happens at Agency Supertrans one bright morning: The phone rings, Mr. Smith of Softstuff Company Macrochop in Wildwoods inquires about Super's capability to handle a translation project consisting of 12 softstuff manuals. How much material? "Well, maybe 50, maybe 75 pages each, we are still getting some bugs out of the softstuff, so we don't have a final English version yet. But they are not supertechnical. We had some similar manuals translated in Europe last year but we thought we'd give you a try because of the dollar rate...." When will they be needed? "Oh, we'll give you lots of time, you can probably have 2 or 3 months, that's when they will be needed for a product show in Europe." What languages? "We thought we'd start with German; we haven't decided on the other languages. We can probably tell you in a week or so. We'd like to discuss the project with you. Can you come to Wildwoods to-morrow morning?...OK, see you then."

Supertrans, a translator himself, watches the sun rise after a 90-minute drive to Wildwoods. He spends the better part of the morning waiting for Smith who had briefly shaken his hand and promised to be right back after what had gone wrong with the softstuff overnight would be fixed. Picking up some of the foreign language company literature in the reception area, he tries to entertain himself by becoming better acquainted with the firm and its products. ~~Some of the~~ <sup>part</sup> ~~English~~ <sup>some</sup> reads like Svahili, a leaflet in German does not appear to say the same as its English counterpart right next to it.

Finally Supertrans is taken to a room filled with manuals, and Smith presents him with ~~some~~ <sup>part</sup> of the material to be translated. "We need a quote right away because we have to get approval from our Belgian rep who is responsible for Germany, and the Germans are paying for part of the translation. They will also review the translations once they are done." Super finally obtains permission to take along an earlier version of the manuals to allow him to prepare a quotation in more leisure than sitting at the customer's office. He has to sign a non-disclosure agreement to

take the material he promises to return the same week. A man from the plant helps carry the manuals to Supertrans' car. Nice gesture!

On the way back, by now late at night, Supertrans does some preliminary mental calculations about the number of translators needed to do a job of the size involved, 12 manuals x 50 pages, maybe 75, nothing drastic having 2 or 3 months for completion.

The next morning, Supertrans and his staff get to work assessing the scope of the requested quote. For a moment, Supertrans' thoughts wander back to the project that has just been pushed out the door. He was hoping that all the work and expense involved in preparing this new quote would bring results--so much time and money were wasted almost daily because after all that goes into calculating words and prices, many a customer happens to find a place to buy more cheaply or shelves a project into which hours had been invested counting, contacting potential translators to determine their availability and rate validity to incorporate concrete figures into the Supertrans' quote, calculating a margin of profit to allow paying bills such as the \$300 courier and \$650 telephone bills he ran up on that last project, contacting the customer for clarifications on misspelled English terms, contradictions in the copy sent for translation, repetitions, things incomprehensibly expressed, and similar headaches, the salary of the compiler of glossaries (that half the translators had omitted, <sup>with terms</sup> neglected, mis-translated, or decorated with question marks), the new \$3000 bond fax he installed because the old one had finally gone out, when the last instalment had just been paid, the hundreds for the computer maintenance contract...

Supertrans' thoughts were interrupted by a cry of disbelief. "How many manuals and pages did you say there were?" asked Jack. "I just got through counting one, and there were some 250 pages plus some extra charts and graphics in the back, and I counted 14 manuals, not 12. And did you look at their English? This will have to be practically translated to English before it ever goes out to a translator! And they appear to be using new acronyms for the same thing every ten pages or so! ~~And~~ there are so many corrections in the illustrations, we better find out whether this is

the best they can do. They want camera-ready copy, don't they? Hours will be spent on reformatting, even if the translators all use the margins we tell them to use and stuff like that, but so many of them don't seem to read their instructions at all! You sure, Mr. Supertrans, that we want this job? Sounds like it may turn into another headache. When I was free-lancing, I never had to worry about stuff like that. I did a translation, and that was that. Here, they want all these extras, graphics neatly pasted or scanned in, headlines typeset, margins here, margins there, and a different margin somewhere else, make sure the translation fits exactly into the same amount of space that the choppy English page takes, and that with all those long German words! And, I almost forgot, Macrochop's Mr. Smith wants you to call him back right away, he said something about reducing the deadline to 1 month, and he now needs everything in several other languages within the same period of time. Oh, he also mentioned that he gave you a couple of wrong manuals but forgot to give you three others. He found out when Extrasupertrans called him back...so Macrochop is shopping around on top of everything else...!"

That night, Supertrans had a beautiful dream: He was a free-lancer again. He had just bought a new word-processor and sat in his cozy room, surrounded by his dictionaries, received translations from an agent by fax, sent <sup>them</sup> it back by courier, and he was taking a vacation in the Bahamas next year.

## Happenings

### Summer Courses in Court Interpreting at MIIS

The Monterey Institute of International Studies will offer two intensive courses in court interpreting in May and June 1989.

For the first time ever, a short course especially designed to prepare candidates for the oral portion of the Federal Certi-

fication Exam will be offered. Applicants must show proof of having passed the written portion of the exam. Dates of the course are **May 8-12, 1989**; tuition is \$360.00. Students will be given an initial diagnostic test to assess their skills, and then they will be assigned practical exercises in simultaneous and consecutive interpretation and sight translation tailored to their individual needs. Enrollment is limited to 8 students.

The 4-week intensive course in Court Interpreting that has been given at MIIS since 1983 will be offered from **May 22-June 16, 1989**. Tuition is \$1,320.00. This course is designed to prepare prospective court interpreters for the State and Federal Certification Exams in Spanish. No interpreting experience is required, but applicants must demonstrate superior (college-level) knowledge of Spanish and English, both oral and written.

Students will be introduced to the techniques of simultaneous and consecutive interpretation and sight translation. Practicum sessions consist of specially-designed drills, with the use of lab equipment, court transcripts and tapes. The classes are divided into small groups to ensure extensive personal feedback from the instructor. Students also attend lectures on the U.S. system of criminal justice, legal terminology and procedures, courtroom protocol, ethics, slang and non-standard Spanish, and specialized terminology. The class will also attend actual court sessions throughout the four weeks.

Classes will meet every day from approximately 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., depending on individual sections assignments.

Both courses will be taught by Holly Mikkelson, a federally certified court interpreter who holds a Master's Degree in Translation and Interpretation from the MIIS. She has been interpreting and translating professionally since 1976, and has been training court interpreters since 1983.

For more information about housing, tuition, and course credit, contact the Division of Translation and Interpretation of MIIS, 425 Van Buren Street, Monterey, CA 93940, (408) 647-4185.

**Application deadline: April 15, 1989.** A \$50 application fee and a non-refundable deposit of \$100, for a total of \$150, must accompany your application to