



The Figure of the Factory Translator: University and Professional Domains in the Translation Profession

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Introduction

The aim of this paper, based on two surveys which were carried out in Brazil in 1999 and 2001, is to examine the relationship between translators and academia in Brazil. Although its results primarily examine the Brazilian situation, I believe they bear some relation to the situation which exists between professional translators and academia in other countries.

My hypothesis is that Translation Studies as an academic area exists as an almost separate domain from that of professional translation in Brazil, and that there is minimal contact between these areas, a situation which is found, though maybe to a lesser extent, in other countries.

Despite this somewhat bleak statement, it is possible to find an increasing amount of interest in the work of the professional translator in a number of areas, for example, in Interpreting Studies (see Shlesinger 1995), in Protocol Studies (see Kussmaul 1995), and the publication of such works as *Translators through History* (Delisle & Woodsworth 1995).

Specific case studies can also be found. Johann Hermans and José Lambert (Hermans & Lambert 1998) examine the position of the professional translator in companies in Belgium. In the companies studied, assistant managers and secretaries who have a working knowledge of the foreign language are often called on to carry out translations. And although in-house translators may earn relatively well, they are seldom integrated into the company and usually feel low category employees who are carrying out a non-vital mechanical task.

Another important article, by Kaisa Koskinen, analyzes translation in the European Commission in Brussels (Koskinen 2000). Final documents are usually hybrid, in that they contain translations of sections from different languages, which may have been worked on by a large number of different translators. All documents have to be translated into all EU languages, but in the case of “small” languages such as Finnish, the documents will already have been read in English or French. Frustration at the prospect of having no audience, and the considerable anonymity of the translator, who will have absolutely no contact with those who draft original documents, leads to a high turnover, despite excellent pay.

The 1999 survey

In the first survey I examined three translation courses in Brazil: the undergraduate course of the UNESP (São Paulo State University) São José de Rio Preto, in the hinterland of the state of São Paulo; the undergraduate course of the Universidade Ibero Americano in the city of São Paulo; and the Universidade de São Paulo postgraduate diploma course (for complete results and analysis see Milton 2001). The following questions were given to the UNESP and Ibero university students:

Why did you choose this undergraduate translation course?
 Which professional career do you intend to follow?
 Are you working/ Have you worked with translation/ interpretation?
 Which types? Please give details.
 In which areas of translation would you like to work in the future?
 In which areas will this course most help your skills as a translator?
 How will this course help you in the translation market?
 What are the other positive effects of the course?

The USP questions were slightly different:

Present Occupation.
 Academic background.
 Why are you taking this "Especialização" course in translation?
 Are you working with translation/ interpretation? Which types of translation? Please detail.
 Do you intend to work with translation in the future? In which areas of translation?
 In which areas will this course most help your skills as a translator?
 How will this course help you in the translation market? How will the course help you professionally?
 What are the other positive effects of the course?
 What is your opinion of undergraduate courses in translation?
 Would you have taken an undergraduate course in translation? Why?

I also asked professional translators who were members of an Internet group, Trad-Prt List trad-prt@egroups.com (now trad-prt@yahoogroups.com), their opinions on the connection between the university and the profession and whether they had taken or would take a university translation course before attempting to enter the translation profession. This informal survey consisted of the following questions:

Academic background.
 What type of translation and/or interpretation do you do?
 Which courses in the area have you taken?
 What type of university course would you recommend to someone beginning to work in the area?
 How do you see the relationship between practicing translators and undergraduate courses in translation?
 Other comments.

The main results of the surveys were as follows:

- Most students taking university translation courses do so in order to improve their language skills (RP 53%; Ibero 62%; see Appendix, Tables 1 & 2), rather more than those who aimed to work in the translation profession (RP 14%; Ibero 10%). Thus university translation courses are seen as excellent ways of improving language skills. Indeed, at a number of *faculdades*, private non-research colleges offering degrees, former low prestige *Letras* courses have been closed and reopened as translation courses in order to attract more students. The new syllabus is often very similar to the old.
- The USP Diploma course attracts a large number of teachers (45%; see Appendix, Table 3) who are seeking an alternative profession, and who are also interested in improving language skills, but far fewer practicing translators (25%). The fact that it is held in the afternoon prevents in-house translators from attending.
- None of the courses specializes in the newer areas of translation practice such as subtitling or online translation. Much course work is carried out in groups with minimal use of computers.
- Respondents (n = 30) in the informal survey given to translators were divided on the question as to whether university undergraduate translation courses should actually exist, particularly as many students graduate with a limited knowledge of the foreign language. Surely, say opponents of such courses, diploma courses directed towards students with good language skills are much more practical. Supporters of undergraduate translation courses admit the limited skills of many students but argue that they have a basis which may be built upon by future courses and potential employers. Moreover, undergraduate translation courses give Translation Studies a considerable institutional importance and weight.
- Many translators enter the translation profession through other professions, particularly in technical areas. For example, many translators of technical works are qualified engineers, etc.. This is truer of men than women, who seem to believe more in such courses, and who have more professional and academic qualifications from translation and *Letras* university courses.
- In general, those working translators who took *Letras* or translation courses were happy with their choices and would recommend such a course; those who came in to translation from other areas were satisfied with their choice. The same could be found in the USP Diploma course, where those who had come from *Letras* courses were pleased to have done so (73%; Appendix, see Table 4), and those from more applied courses were also satisfied with their original choices (68%; Appendix, see Table 4).
- The university is generally seen by translators to be very distant from the real translation world and fails to train potential translators for the market. All university translation courses in Brazil originated from *Letras* courses, and few courses have practical contact with other areas. Many students obtain degrees in Translation / Interpretation with a limited knowledge of the foreign language and translation skills.

Thus employers of translators often totally ignore degrees in the area when employing translators.

I can thus propose the existence of two almost separate domains in the translation world: that of professional translators, many of whom work in technical areas, who have had little contact with the university; and that of the academic translation world, of which the main constituents are translation undergraduate, diploma and postgraduate courses, the production of M.A. and Ph. D. theses, and publications and conferences.

I suggest that there is only a very limited area where the two domains overlap, and that they remain virtually separate, with different professional activities such as workshops and congresses, different publications, and most importantly, a different focus, that of the professional area being the production of translations, and that of the university area the study of translations. I believe that the university translation domain can be considered a separate self-sustaining domain, with university teachers teaching translation and translation theory courses, publishing in specialized journals and attending university translation conferences, while they may have little or, in many cases, no, contact with the profession itself, and many will never actually carry out translations.

There is a dearth of published material analyzing translation courses in Brazil. One of the few critiques of existing translation courses appears in Luzia Araújo's thesis, *De Big Bangs a Buracos Negros no Universo da Tradução no Brasil: Um Estudo sobre o Papel da Terminologia na Prática Tradutória e na Formação de Tradutores* [*From Big Bangs to Black Holes in the Universe of Translation in Brazil: A Study on the Role of Terminology and Translation Practice and in the Training of Translators*] (Araújo 2001), in which she compares undergraduate translation courses in Brazil with their counterparts in the UK. Courses in Brazil fail to take this very important aspect of translation practice seriously: little time is devoted to it; it is often placed too early in courses, thereby preventing students from taking advantage of knowledge of terminological practices in the final parts of their courses; few teachers of terminology have experience as practising translators – most are teachers of Linguistics; and students received very limited training in the use of appropriate software. Araújo concludes her thesis by suggesting a programme for a course on Terminology into translation courses in Brazilian universities: an initial course in “Applied Terminology”, and a more advanced course in “Managing Terminology for Translators”.

My study concentrates on the situation specifically in Brazil, where, as I have emphasized, there is a distinct lack of contact between university and the profession. I suggest that this overlap may be greater in countries such as Germany and Belgium, where the well-developed system of *Hochschulen* train a large number of professional translators.

The 2001 Survey

In order to extend this hypothesis and see whether my hypothesis on the two almost separate domains would be substantiated, I asked a number of questions which extended some of the points made above in another questionnaire, which was sent in Portuguese to a number of Portuguese-English translation internet groups: tradinfo tradinfo@egroups.com

(now tradinfo@yahoogroups.com.br), a list which provides information about translation events in Brazil; two general lists for translators to and into Portuguese, Trad-Prt List trad-prt@egroups.com (now trad-prt@yahoogroups.com.br, tradutores tradutores@egroups.com (now tradutores@yahoogroups.com.br); Abrapt abrapt@egroups.com (now abrapt@yahoogroups.com.br), a list for members of the Brazilian Association for Translation Research; litterati litterati@egroups.com (now litterati@yahoogroups.com.br), a group for translators of literature in Brazil; and a group for postgraduate students in the English Department of the Universidade de São Paulo, engpos engpos@yahoogroups.com (now engpos@yahoogroups.com.br). The questionnaire was subsequently sent to a list of ex-students from the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC) Interpretation Course.

Hopefully, this broad survey can be followed by more specific qualitative and quantitative surveys.

<p>M / F</p> <p>Age:</p> <p>Approximate number of hours spent on translations/interpretation per week?</p> <p>Do you work as a freelance?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">For an agency</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">In house translator?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Sworn translator?</p> <p>Approximate monthly income as a translator/interpreter? (You are not obliged to give an answer)</p> <p>In which areas of translation/interpretation do you work?</p> <p>Do you have other professions? Which?</p> <p>When filling out forms do you put your profession as a translator?</p> <p>If not which profession do you put?</p> <p>What was your training as a translator/interpreter?</p> <p>What is your academic background?</p> <p>How do you keep up-to-date as a translator/interpreter?</p> <p>What is your present contact with the university?</p> <p>Which congresses have you taken part in the last five years?</p> <p>Would you think about taking an MA? Ph D? Why?</p> <p>Which publications on translation do you read?</p> <p>Have you published in academic journals?</p> <p>Which professional associations do you belong to?</p> <p>How do you see the connection between the university and the translator/interpreter professions?</p>
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The questionnaire was returned by 34 translators, 13 male (average age 45.53) and 23 female (average age 43.13) (overall average age 44). The number of hours worked on translation varied enormously, between 65 and 4, with a large number putting in a 40-hour-week. Likewise, salaries varied considerably, but a number of translators earned between three and five thousand reais (US\$1=R\$2.5).

The answers to the questionnaire allow us to establish that there are very different types of translators. Firstly, a group of translators working in technical and/or business translation can be identified. The background of these translators may be a degree in a technical area such as Engineering or Business Studies, or, as in a couple of cases, the translators may have no degree at all, or, as in one case, may be high school dropouts. This group of translators had served their apprenticeship “on the job”, working for agencies, under the supervision of an experienced translator, or they may even be self-taught. In several cases, they had spent a number of years living abroad. They take occasional specific courses but in general have minimal contact with the university, do not read academic publications, have no intention of taking any further university studies, and do not attend academic conferences. They improve their skills “on the job” and through contact with other translators.

Some members of this group were members of professional associations such as the American Translators Association (ATA), the Brazilian Translators’ Union (SINTRA), the Brazilian Association of Translators (ABRATES), and the São Paulo Association of Sworn Translators (ATIPIESP). On other occasions, contact with the rest of the profession is made merely through Internet groups.

The translation activities of this group may be connected to other activities such as localization (adapting manuals etc. to local conditions or specifications) or editing previously translated material. Members of this group may call themselves language consultants, “consultores”, or technical specialists, “técnicos”.

Such translators, of whom nearly all work as freelance translators, and who, as mentioned, are often unqualified in any area related to “Translation” or “*Letras*”, have a high sense of individualism and are strongly anti-corporative. They work a 40-hour-week or longer and usually earn from R\$3.000,00 upwards. This is one reason for a lack of interest in taking an M. A. or Ph. D, as the time needed to take such a course would severely reduce income, and any scholarship they might receive would be much less than their current income.

Due to lack of contact with the university, this group often left the question on their opinion of the contact between university and the profession, unanswered. On other occasions, the lack of contact between the university and the translation profession and market was stressed.

The second major group was that of teachers and postgraduate students who do a certain amount of translating as a secondary profession, often working only a few hours a week, from 4 to 10. This group was mostly female, and many of its members had taken university *Letras* or Translation courses or a Postgraduate Specialization Diploma, and comments about these courses were generally positive.

Many of the members of this group translate for publishing companies, and, as the members of this group spend fewer hours translating due to academic commitments, the amounts earned through translation are much lower. In fact, a number of respondents had reduced the hours they had spent translating when starting to teach or take a postgraduate course. University life will also usually involve reading and publishing in academic

journals and participation in academic conferences. This group emphasized the positive role of the university in providing a space for the circulation of ideas and the link between practice and theory, and the fact that a theoretical background that may help practising translators. They also mentioned the fact that contact between the university and the profession has improved to a certain extent in recent years.

Yet there were some dissenting voices, who criticized the lack of contact with the translation industry and market; the inflexibility of the university system, which makes it difficult to offer specific modular courses; the impossibility of accepting non-degree holders in specialized diploma course; and the lack of computer resources. The suggestion was also made that the university could play a much more active role in the profession: it would have the authority to establish some kind of professional qualification, perhaps similar to that of the Institute of Linguists in the UK, which might bring a little order to this very confused area.

Conclusions

The responses from the survey carried out helped to substantiate my initial hypothesis: that there are two very distinct domains in the translation profession in Brazil: full-time translators who have often entered the profession through a technical profession such as Engineering or Computer Studies, and who have little or no university contact and often a rather negative idea of the contribution of the university to Translation Studies; and, secondly, a domain of teachers, often of Translation or Translation Studies, whose main profession is teaching but who will carry out a small amount of translation, often for publishing houses. This group is highly involved in the university world of translation, publishing and reading translation journals and books and attending and organizing congresses. The breadth of the translation “community” was summed up by one respondent: “The translation “community” is too broad and diversified for its relations with the university to be homogeneous”.

The survey does raise a number of questions as to the position of the university with regards to translation: should it make a concerted attempt to provide courses in the developing areas of translation such as media translation, interpretation, and computerized translation tools, or could this function be best performed by other entities: translators associations, more flexible schools such as the American-Brazilian bi-national centre Associação Alumni, which runs a highly successful translation and interpretation course in São Paulo? Likewise, to what extent should the university attempt to approach, work with and learn from the translating profession? Might it also play some kind of arbitrating role in the profession, helping to provide some kind of professional qualification and standard? Should this be a worry of the university? After all, except for a relatively small number of creative writing courses in Anglo-American universities, the university has little influence on creative writers. At the moment, university systems in different countries view translation practice in very different ways. As mentioned, in countries such as Germany and Belgium, it is seen as the responsibility of higher technical schools, which have less status than universities. In Finland it is fully integrated into the university system. Newer universities in the UK are also attempting to provide practical training for translators and

interpreters. In Brazil and Spain, university translation courses are becoming a much more attractive option than *Letras* courses. But many of these courses are little more than general language courses with little very specific translator or interpreter training. Here in Brazil the great majority of translation training takes place outside the university. Should this worry those of us working in Translation Studies at the university? Or should we attempt to come out of the ivory towers and involve the Brazilian university in the professional life of translators?

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Appendix

Table 1a. Reasons for Choosing Course - Rio Preto¹

	1 st year		2 nd year		3 rd year		4 th year		Total	
Course qualities	4	11%	3	7%	6	17%	11	45%	24	17%
Language skills	19	53%	27	61%	16	46%	6	25%	68	53%
Free public univ.	-		1	2%	6	17%	4	16%	11	8%
Not to teach	-		3	7%	1	3%	2	8%	6	4%
Near home	2	5%	-		2	6%	1	4%	5	4%
To be translator	10	28%	6	14%	3	9%	-		19	14%
Others	1	3%	2	4%	3	9%			6	4%
Total	36		42		37		24		139	

Table 2. Reasons for Choosing Course - Ibero

	1st year		2nd year		3rd year		4th year		Total	
Course qualities	-	-	5	17%	8	10%	3	7%	16	8%
More job opportunities	4	9%	-	-	3	7%	-	-	7	4%
Language skills	28	62%	13	45%	52	63%	27	66%	120	62%
Part of job	-	-	5	17%	5	6%	-	-	7	4%
To be translator	6	13%	1	3%	8	10%	5	12%	20	10%
Others	7	15%	5	17%	7	8%	6	15%	23	12%
Total	45		29		83		41		193	

¹ Here, as in a number of the other questions, respondents often gave more than one choice.

Table 3: Profession of USP Translation Students

<i>Profession</i>	No.	%
Translator	16	25%
None	9	14%
Teacher	29	45%
Others	10	16%
Total	64	

Table 4: Students Who Would Have Taken Undergraduate Translation Course: *Letras* and non-*Letras*

	<i>Letras</i>				<i>Non-Letras</i>			
	Yes	% <i>Letras</i>	No	% <i>Letras</i>	Yes	% non- <i>Letras</i>	no	% non- <i>Letras</i>
Students	22	73%	8	27%	8	32%	17	68%