#DiscoverTranslation

Debunking translation myths

Translation is as old as civilisation. For thousands of years it has helped bring people and peoples together, to understand each other. Yet there are still quite a few stubborn misconceptions about this profession:

Myth #1 – Anyone can translate (if they have 2 languages)

The reality – this is like saying: 'Anyone with 10 fingers can play piano'.

Translation requires so much more than just 'knowing the language' a text is written in. That knowledge has to be extensive, both deep and wide, ideally gained over many years and often paired with specialised technical insight in the subject – the terminology and concepts – you are translating. Not to mention a sound appreciation of culture behind the languages you are translating from, and to: of the people, their habits and history.

This requires dedicated training, throughout a career as a professional translator. And the final piece of the puzzle: mastery of your own (native) language, so the text you produce is not just clear, but flows so well that the act of translation is invisible.

Pull off all this and you can consider the job done!

Myth # 2 – Computers can now do the work of translators

The reality – machine translation has improved greatly in recent years, but it still can't replace humans.

For some occasions – for example if you want to quickly find out what a text is about – the results may be 'good enough'. But try to use machines without a human to check and the results can range from funny to downright unprofessional.

Example: a funny translation English into Spanish: *In Spanish the word "éxito" actually means "success" rather than "exit" which when correctly translated is "salida."*

Computers are fine with simple concepts, but run into trouble when the meaning of a text depends on its context. That relates to the real world – and to understand that, to interpret nuance and subtleties (to ´read between the lines´), you still need a human.

Paradoxically, better machine translation could actually increase demand for human translators, as its limits become clearer and people (and businesses) realise the need for human intervention, to guarantee – and indeed take responsibility for – a flawless and meaningful translation.

So – as in many fields where automation is increasing – it's not so much a matter of 'man versus machine' but rather using technology to increase efficiency. Nowadays machine translation is generally accepted as just another tool that helps professional translators deliver the quality required.

Myth # 3 – Translating is just 'changing words'

The reality – if this were true, anybody with a dictionary could translate anything. Literature, legal contracts, marketing slogans, etc. in any foreign language would all be at our fingertips.

Try it with phrases like 'Bite the bullet' or 'Hang in there'. A non-English speaker might be a little bewildered at the request to chew on munitions, or remain suspended in an unspecified location. Literally swapping out words on a one-to-one basis just doesn't work.

No, translators must first understand what message the text wants to convey and find the equivalent in the other language.

Not to mention: behind every translation there is a lot of painstaking research, reflection and self-editing. And the more effective the translation, the less visible all of this is.

Myth # 4 – Any translator can translate texts on any subject

The reality – for best results, professional translators should ideally specialise in one or two fields (medicine, law, engineering, etc.).

Drafting a legal or financial text in just one language requires expert knowledge and skills – and the same applies even more for translating them.

In the same way you would call a plumber, not an electrician, if you have a leaking tap – if your text is in a certain specialised field, you should be looking for a translator with the related skills.

Myth # 5 – Translating, interpreting – it's all the same, no?

The reality – translators work with written texts; interpreters with the spoken word.

Working in the fringes of major meetings and conferences, interpreters may well have a higher profile. But both activities require different skills, and so are distinct professions (although some people on the private market offer both services).

Myth # 6 – Translation is too expensive

The reality – cutting corners often generates its own costs.

A good translator is a skilled professional, with dedicated qualifications and experience. When you pay for translation, you're paying for that expertise. And the rate reflects the time and money the translator has themself invested in developing these skills, keeping them up to date and delivering a ready-to-use, quality product.

If you're feeling sick, you'd want a qualified medical practitioner to examine you – because it's your health at stake. Likewise, if you're adapting your website to local markets or selling products abroad, it's worth spending a bit more on a trained translator. Because it's your reputation and your business that's at stake.

'Translation all around us'

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A campaign to promote the translation profession to audiences outside the language industry

Translation