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Translation Journal

The Profession

Working for Translation Agencies as a Freelancer:

A Guide for Novice Translators

by Lucja Biel, Ph.D.

The translation profession has recently undergone three important changes: globalization, professionalization, and specialization. Not so long ago translators would mainly operate on local markets, delivering their translations in person. With the advent of the Internet and e-mail, the profession has gone global and geographical boundaries have disappeared. On the one hand, this means that translators may solicit clients from all over the world; on the other hand, it means a markedly larger pool of translators agencies may choose from; hence, increased competition. Combined with the recent rapid development of translator education, the increased competition means that it is more difficult to get into the profession if you do not have sufficient education and training. The market has also evolved into higher specialization which is driven by the growing knowledge of languages, in particular of English, among employees. Easier texts are translated in-house by clients themselves, while more specialized or technically complex ones are outsourced to translation agencies.

My short survey of translation agencies' recruitment websites shows that most agencies require translators to have at least 2 to 5 years' experience (in addition to a language degree and specialist knowledge). It is a recurrent problem of novice translators how to acquire experience if agencies do not want to work with them exactly because they do *not* have experience, which seems to be a vicious circle. Frustrating as it may seem, remember that many people do get into the profession every year. There are times when professional translators are on holidays or the job is rush and nobody else is available. Your chance will come sooner or later but you have to be ready to emulate and surpass your competitors.

Here are a few tips on how to work with translation agencies.

Before you accept the job...

1. **Check the agency**. There are several websites where you can do it, for example, Hall of Fame and Shame at http://translatorscafe.com, BlueBoard at http://proz.com, Untrustworthy Translation Agencies at http://translationdirectory.com, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pl-p-t (Polish). In general, it is quite risky to accept an assignment from an agency which does not have a website, uses a yahoo e-mail address or does not answer a phone provided as a contact number. There may be exceptions to this rule, though.

2. Before you accept the job, check whether you are **comfortable with its subject matter**. If you do not feel competent enough to translate for example a forklift truck manual, refuse the job. The FIT Translator Charter emphasizes that the translator should "have a broad general knowledge and know the subject matter of the translation sufficiently well and refrain from undertaking a translation in a field beyond his competence." As an independent service provider, you are liable for your translation and, anyway, under certain circumstances it may be wise to consider buying a professional indemnity insurance.

3. Before you accept the job, **estimate the time** you will need to complete it and if it matches the delivery time. You should know your translation speed and the ability to estimate the completion time is part of your translator competence.

4. Check whether **the file** opens and whether it is the right file for translation. Send a return email confirming its receipt. If a message is of an inquiry-only type, wait for the go-ahead before you start translating.

5. Ask for a Purchase Order/Work Order with payment terms. Check whether it has the right word count (or character count, line count, etc.). The easiest way to do it is to check Statistics in Microsoft Word (Tools>Word Count). Remember to **discuss all payment issues before you accept** the assignment; for example, whether you charge by a source or target word count, whether your standard translation page is 1800, 1600 or 1500 characters with or without spaces. It is unprofessional to raise your rate during or after the translation process unless you have a really good reason for it.

The Translation Process

1. Read carefully the translation brief/**instructions** and follow them closely.

2. **File name**: do not change the file name but simply add an international language code at its end, e.g. PL for Polish, EN for English, unless an agency requests another coding.

3. Layout: it is an industry standard to **preserve the source text layout** in the target text.

❍ If you have a source file in an editable format, simply overwrite source sentences. Do not do any additional formatting. In particular, do not use the spacebar to create an indent or start a new page because it may damage the layout. Remember Samuelsson-Brown's commandment "Thou shalt not use the spacebar" from his excellent *Practical Guide for Translators* (2004: 114).

❍ If you use a CAT tool, such as SDL Trados, it will be easier to keep the right layout. You will not have to delete the source text as the CAT will do it for you when you clean the file.

❍ It is natural that the text **'swells'** in translation and becomes longer than the source text. It is mainly due to explicitation (regarded by Mona Baker as one of translation universals) whereby information that is implicit in the source text becomes explicit in the target text to enhance its comprehension or fill in knowledge gaps. Secondly, swelling may be caused by systematic differences between languages; for example, a Polish translation is on average 10-20% longer than the corresponding English original, English being a more synthetic and 'compact' language. This may be a problem when translating text fields or forms that have to fit into a predefined space. In such a case you should clarify with the client whether you are to adjust the format (e.g. by decreasing the font by 1 point) or leave it as it is.

1. **Tailored style** and **readability**. If you look at a couple of translation agencies' websites and see how they advertise themselves to end clients, you will soon realize that emphasis is placed on functionality and readability: *stylistic aptness, lucid translations that read like original, a tailored language style*. To prepare a fluent and readable translation, try to adopt your reader's point of view, think of his/her expectations, needs, potential knowledge/ cultural gaps. Use an unmarked language--language that does not draw attention to itself, is natural, and idiomatic. It is not infrequent that the source language shows through the translation, the language of translation being referred to as translationese or a third language. It may be difficult to eradicate all source-language interference; nevertheless, it should be limited to the minimum. You should also focus on conveying the meaning in a clear and lucid way. If you don't understand the sentence you've just translated, there's little chance your reader will.

2. **Accuracy.** Nearly all translation agencies advertise their ability to ensure the highest accuracy. This feature seems to be most appealing to end clients of translations and is an industry standard. As noted in the FIT Translator Charter, "Every translation shall be faithful and render exactly the idea and form of the original--this fidelity constituting both a moral and legal obligation for the translator." Faithfulness is achieved, *inter alia*, by attention to detail. For example, 'considerably higher' is usually not

the same as 'higher', 'nearly 5 times faster' is not the same as '5 times faster', 'beyond reasonable control' is not the same as 'beyond control'. Novice translators are more prone to omitting these little words--obviously, in some cases this may be acceptable but when you are translating a contract, they can make a difference. More serious consequences may follow when a numeral is distorted (e.g. one '0' is lost in the remuneration clause) or when a negation is overlooked. Problems with negation are well illustrated by the case of German surgeons reported by Der Tagesspiegel (http://www.pssjournal.com/content/1/1/5). Having read English instructions, the surgeons understood "non-modular cemented" as "non cemented"/"without cement" and implanted total knee arthroplasties to 47 patients without cement. As a result, most of the patients had to undergo a surgical revision since the procedure required cemented use only.

3. **Terminological consistency**. You should use consistent terminology within the text as well as in connection with texts that constitute previous discourse. Ask for reference materials, do some research first, go to the company's website to learn their lingo. **Queries:** if you have terminological problems, report them or ask for clarification in sufficient time to ensure they will not jeopardize the delivery time.

4. **Spotting errors**: If you spot an error, notify the client or add a translator's note. As recommended by the ITI, "be an independent problem solver, spot things like missing pages and don't pretend that the source text is all right if there is a glaring error. Clients and authors make mistakes and you can actually score brownie points by drawing these to your client's attention".

5. **Deadlines** (delivery dates)--always keep them. Do not accept a job if it has an unrealistic deadline. If for some unforeseen reason you are unable to meet the deadline, notify the agency in advance so that it can arrange a substitute. The worst thing you can do when you fail to meet the deadline is to stop answering the phone or responding to e-mails; face it and notify the agency how long the delay will be. Most agencies advertise themselves as offering fast turnarounds; if you are late with your translation, the agency will also be late and may face penalties.

Quality Assurance

6. Do not send incomplete, unfinished or DRAFT translations-- only **finalized**, thoroughly checked files. It is your duty to provide a spotless text so do not expect a reviewer to do a QA check for you. Reviewers are usually remunerated on an hourly basis and it is more expensive for an agency to review a draft translation than a finalized one.

7. **Develop your own QA procedures**. It is advisable to print out the translation, and read it in paper. Anachronistic as it may seem, you will be surprised how many issues you have overlooked on the screen. A day's interval between translation and proofreading may do

miracles (rarely possible, though, when you're faced with fast turnaround times). It is also worth subcontracting a third-party reviewer.

8. **Spelling/typos:** switch the spell checker on. After you finish your translation, highlight the entire text and change the language setting to your target language because sometimes the spellchecker still remembers the source text language. It is also useful to untick "Ignore words written in capital letters" in Tools>Options, which is a default setting in MS Word - a spelling error in a capitalized title will be glaring. Secondly, remember that the spell checker does not recognize all errors. To give you a real-life example, an English menu in a Polish restaurant has an entry *tomato soap* instead of *tomato soup;* obviously, it wouldn't be highlighted by a spell checker as both words do exist. Now, the restaurant has to type-set and print the menu again. Guess who will pay for it?

9. **Aesthetic** qualities of the translation. **Remove any double spaces** and check consistency of punctuation use. For example, do all bullets start with small/capital letters throughout the text?

10. Things to check:

    - **Numbers**: a distorted number may be a critical error or high-risk error (Pym). For example, if a dose of 0.05 is erroneously changed into 0.5 in translation, it may have fatal consequences.
    - **Completeness.** Check if there are no omitted sentences, paragraphs, bullets in the translation. Omissions are more likely if you translate from a faxed or scanned original rather than from a .doc file.
    - **Conventions**. Adjust conventions to the target audience's expectations: the way numbers are spelled, capitalization and punctuation, page size (letter format more popular in the US), weights and measurements, and currencies if necessary. It is better to spell out dates due to US and UK differences: 1/10/2007 is 10th January (or rather January 10) in the US and 1st October in the UK.

This section may be concluded with the recommendation from the ITI's guide *How to get money working freelance for translation companies:* "Remember that you are only as good as your last job. Competition is stiff and you can't afford to let standards drop at any time." How true!

Customer Relationship Management

1. You work in the service sector and deal with people. Be **courteous, helpful** and **reliable** to ensure that the project manager will choose YOU out of 20 other translators s/he has in the database for your language pair.
2. Try to **add value** to your services. As recommended by Alex Eames in his Translatortips": give them a little more than they expect--a little more than the competition."

Professional Ethics

3. **Confidentiality**. As a translator, you may have access to protected, restricted, private, insider information. The FIT Charter emphasizes, "The translator shall respect the legitimate interests of the user by treating as a professional secret any information which may come into his/her possession as a result of the translation entrusted to him/her." This information may include trade secrets, proprietary processes and tools of an agency and of its clients. Some agencies require translators to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) or Confidentiality Agreement before they assign any work.

4. **Non-competition**. Be loyal to your direct clients and do not solicit assignments from your clients' clients. You may be asked to sign a non-competition/non-solicitation agreement.

Getting paid...

5. **Invoice** the job: it is convenient to do it on a monthly basis. The invoice should be prepared in a language understandable to the client (or use a two-language version) and should include the agency's PO number. Specify the method of payment (PayPal/Moneybookers, bank transfer, check, etc.) and provide all payment details, such as the SWIFT/BIC code and IBAN number for bank transfers.

6. You may consider opening a **PayPal** or **Moneybookers account** which will save you time and money. Wire transfers are expensive, and agencies usually shift their cost to translators. It may take a long time to clear a check outside the USA; for example, from 6 to 12 weeks in Polish banks. With Paypal or Moneybookers, you have the money almost instantly at low charges.

7. In case of **delays in payment**, contact the agency first to clarify the issue. If no payment is forthcoming, inform the agency politely that unless they pay you by a specified date, you will send their details to non-payers lists. This usually works. There are also more refined ways of getting paid--see discussion forums, for example, at http://proz. com or http://TranslatorsCafe.com.

8. Don't put all your eggs in one basket! If you work for a number of agencies, you minimize the risk. And this will also give you a wonderful feeling of independence.

Useful materials on the web:

- ITI's guide: Getting started--Translation: http://www.iti. org.uk/pdfs/newPDF/05FH_IntoTrans_(20-10-04).pdf
- ITI's How to get money working freelance for translation companies: http://www.iti.org.uk/pdfs/

newPDF/08FHMakeMoney_(20-10-04).pdf
- Special Report for Translators. Customers--Make Life Easy for Them and They'll Stay with You by Alex EAMES: http://www.translatortips.net/freerep/freerep.pdf
- FIT Charter: http://www.fit-ift.org/en/charter.php

Excellent books for novice translators

Samuelsson-Brown, G. 2004. *A Practical Guide for Translators.* 4th Ed. Multilingual Matters.

Sofer, M. 2006. *The Translator's Handbook*. 6th Ed. Schreiber Publishing.