

Business Activity in the Counties of Pérez Zeledón and Osa and Its Relationship with Translation

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Resumen: El propósito de este estudio es describir el papel de la actividad traductora en el comercio de Pérez Zeledón y Osa. Los objetivos de la investigación son identificar las principales actividades económicas de la región, investigar acerca de las actividades que hacen mayor uso de los servicios de traducción, y evaluar, si es posible, la contribución económica de la traducción al crecimiento de la región. Con el fin de recopilar la información para el cumplimiento de los objetivos planteados, se consultó las páginas web de varias instituciones públicas de Costa Rica, y se tomó la opinión de varios empresarios locales y otros profesionales con respecto al tema.

Descriptores: traducción, Pérez Zeledón, Osa, comercio.

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to describe the role of translation activity in the commercial counties of Pérez Zeledón and Osa. The objectives of the research are to identify the major economic activities in the region, to investigate about the activities that make the most use of translation services, and to assess, if possible, the economic contribution of translation to the growth of the region. In order to collect the information for the fulfillment of the objectives, the web pages of several Costa Rican public institutions were consulted, and local businesspeople and other professionals were interviewed on the subject.

Key words: translation, Pérez Zeledón, Osa, commerce

1. Geographical and Economic Information about Pérez Zeledón and Osa

Pérez Zeledón is the 19th county of the province of San José. It borders on the north with the province of Cartago, specifically the counties of Paraíso and Turrialba; on the northwest with Dota and a small extension of Tarrazú, both counties of San José. To the east it is adjacent to Limón, specifically the area of Talamanca, while the rest of its territory is demarcated by several counties of the province of Puntarenas, more exactly Buenos Aires, Osa and Aguirre. The latter two are access points to the Pacific coastal area. Due to the proximity between San Isidro de El General—head district of the county of Pérez Zeledón—and nearby beaches, including popular Dominical and Uvita beaches,

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of the district of Bahía Ballena, there is a misunderstanding, even among San Isidro citizens that those beaches belong geographically to Pérez Zeledón. The coastal zone has always been the favorite vacation and retreat spot for families, who by public transport or private vehicle visit the area. At present due to fairly good road conditions, the car travel takes no more than 40 minutes to Dominical beach and 55 minutes to Uvita beach.

Pérez Zeledón is a thoroughfare for thousands of people that go to other places further south, such as Buenos Aires, Golfito or Paso Canoas on the border with Panama, and, most certainly, to the nearby beaches mentioned above. The number of travelers and visitors to the region is considerable, and there are many who, attracted by its nature, warm climate, lush vegetation, and hospitable people, decide to settle in the area permanently. The increase in the number of inhabitants has been the direct cause of growth in the supply of universities and other educational institutions in the area.

Pérez Zeledón and the county of Osa constitute an area of great commercial effervescence due to their geographical location as a transit between the Central Valley and the southern border with Panamá, and as far west as the bridge between San Isidro del General and Pacific beaches. The region has experienced an important tourism boom since the late eighties and this has been a direct cause of the diversification of goods and services in the area. As an example, what used to be a nursery homestead, whose main income was the sale of seeds, ornamental plants and Christmas trees, is now a large company with branches in different locations, primarily in coastal spots, and whose primary revenue sources are service landscaping or garden design and maintenance of large residences, hotels and condos and wholesale sales to other distributors (W. Quesada, La Bonita Nursery manager, personal communication). However, traditional economic activities such as grocery sales, medical services, banking and transportation, have also experienced expansion, in this case parallel to the increase in population in the area. According to the Statistics and Census Institute of Costa Rica, between 1984 and 2008 the population of Pérez Zeledón grew from 82,370 to 140,872 inhabitants (cf. Bibliography, INEC).

The most significant business in the counties of Pérez Zeledón and Osa that generate more resources for the area are in order of importance: 1) agriculture, in products such as coffee, sugar cane, pineapple, tobacco, bovines, pigs and other small farm animals; 2) industry, for example, carpentry and mechanical workshops, sawmills; 3) tourism, such as hosting services, food and transportation associated with this activity (*Plan Regional de Desarrollo Brunca: 2002-2006*, p.73). The service sector should be an important item in the share of resources and sources of employment in areas such as banking, medical and educational services; however, this sector has been poorly studied, and currently there is no statistics that may reveal their contribution to the local economy.

1.1 Agriculture

Agriculture, according to the Foreign Trade Corporation of Costa Rica (PROCOMER), ranked second in the county exports for 2008, with 21.3% of total merchandise exports, behind textiles, with a 78.8%. However, these figures would be very different if coffee exports were included in the regional statistics. Unfortunately, for the purposes of this

research it is necessary to clarify that coffee statistics are recorded directly by the Costa Rican Coffee Institute (ICAFE). A similar situation happens with the marketing of pineapples grown in the area. This activity is in the hands of transnational corporations Del Campo and PINDECO, and their trade flows are not registered by PROCOMER Regional Office (cf. Bibliography, PROCOMER).

Part of the local trade includes activities whose target market are a number of consumers who do not speak Spanish as their native language. Agriculture is not one of them, for it remains concentrated in the hands of local producers and farmers. Despite the presence of a large multinational company, Pineapple Development Company, better known as PINDECO, it does not monopolize the agricultural market since it only focuses on the cultivation of pineapple. However, some activities derived from agriculture, such as the production of gourmet coffee, have expanded their marketing scope and started a hunt for foreign consumers. This refers to the particular case of Del Valle, a product line developed by Cooperativa Agrícola, Industrial y de Servicios El General R.L. (CoopeAgri), a local company founded in 1962 for the main purpose of providing incentives to small farmers in the area. This company has expanded its functions and since 1969 operates in the area of supermarkets, cultivation and industrialization of sugar cane (1974), and gas stations.

Del Valle supports local coffee producers and has made available to the consumer a product line of international quality. Therefore, the labels on their products read in Spanish and English. International Sales Assistant of the Cooperative, Lawyer W. Valverde explained that the English version of the packaging of their products is generally done by native speakers of English, young people involved in a volunteer program, mostly from Europe. This program is part of the benefits received by the institution for being part of Fair Trade, which classifies it as Fair Trade Certified Company. For this reason, there has been no need to hire a local translator (W. Valverde, telephonic interview).

1.2. Industry

The industry sector is another major business activity in the area, especially agribusiness, such as the industrialization of sugar cane by-products and forest products and services. There are also companies engaged in the extraction of minerals such as rock and sand—indispensable in the construction field—automotive repair shops, apparel, woodworking, crafts, in short, the inventory is extensive. A list of patents between 2005 and 2009, provided by the Information Services Department of the Municipality of Pérez Zeledón, reveals the existing amount of such patents in different business activities of the county. However, it is necessary to mention that the list shrunk considerably once the process of classification of specific areas started. Through this inquiry it was sought to identify the specific trade activities where there has been no need or, on the contrary, where there has been interest to resort to the diffusion of information about the company in the English language. For example, in the nursery mentioned previously, the site owner in San Isidro de El General explained that management makes sure to have on staff at least one worker who speaks English. Since most of the bilingual communication is established orally, the

need to hire a translator is insignificant. Any written communication, in turn, is made by the same employee with the assistance of a native speaker or other means not specified (W. Quesada Mora, personal communication).

2. The Relationship between Commerce and Translation

The question is: What commercial activities in the region use written communication in both languages (Spanish-English)? And if possible, have these businesses experienced economic growth as a result of offering their services to a larger target audience, one that probably affords to buy more? The results obtained in this investigation do not permit a fully satisfactory answer, mainly due to two reasons. First, the researcher was unable, for reasons of time and displacement, to consult each of the companies in the area, or at least one of each representative group of the companies listed by patents. According to the Information Services department of the Municipality of Pérez Zeledón, 447 commercial activities were registered in 2009. Second, there are no digital yearly records in this public office, except those provided at the request of the researcher, of the patents filed and granted in previous years. This void prevented the observation of any tendency towards an increase or decrease of businesses in either commercial activity. This information, if any, would give the possibility to study the areas of greatest economic growth, reflected in a proliferation of service centers, warehouses, shops, where a particular product or service would be offered. The research would seek, then, to confirm or refute the hypothesis that greater trade openness, understood for the purpose of this research as any company's effort to cover at a wider target clientele including non-Spanish speakers, would provide greater economic success and higher revenues. The research would conclude that translation for these companies is a useful and indispensable tool in their financial accomplishments.

This image would be the ideal picture of results; however, the study must turn to the reality of what is available. In the survey conducted for the purpose of this study professionals from different fields were consulted, such as administrative staff of financial institutions, staff of dental and veterinary clinics, tourist agencies and real estate offices, lawyers, accountants, in sum, the list is very diverse. The results, not surprisingly, are classified into two groups: the offices, shops, that use and pay for translation (mostly written) services and the places that do not.

2.1. Economic Activities for which Translation Services Are not Imperative

In the first group—those that seldom hire translation services—there is a diverse group of businesses and professionals, who share characteristics and criteria that have been mentioned throughout this investigation. A point that is worth mentioning is that a large number of these professionals cite as a reason for not employing translation the fact that they do not handle documents in another language. The prescriptions, business correspondence such as letters or emails, invoices and other types of documentation handled in the center, clinic or office, are customarily written in Spanish only. They explain that if a foreign customer who does not speak Spanish wants a particular document to be translated into English, it is he or she who should be responsible for

seeking this service. If they know a translator or someone who speaks both languages, they make the recommendation, but their involvement in the issue does not go beyond that.

Another reason why it is not imperative to use a translator's services, in the opinion of these professionals, is that when the time comes to draft a contract, as in the case of an architectural or topographic service, it is the lawyer or notary who must undertake this task. Hence there is no pressure or urgency to have a trustworthy translator, as it is for other companies that will be mentioned later. This is the scenario illustrated by staff from both public and private banks, dentists, veterinarians, topographers, mechanical engineers and architects.

Within this group another phenomenon happens, and it is the case of the professional with advanced or intermediate knowledge of the English language. In the communities of San Isidro de El General and Bahía Ballena, in the course of this study, it was possible to identify the profile of a professional, a lawyer, veterinarian or engineer, with a good command of English. This assertion is based entirely on information provided by the individuals themselves when consulted about whether or not they hired translation services. Although these commercial areas do not use translation as support for the daily activities of the company, oral communication in another language, English in this case, does take place. This is not a case of interpretation, for the one who performs the oral communication is not an intermediary but the professional himself, or an employee of the shop, as in the example of the nursery, serving a client.

2.2. Businesses that Hire Translation Services

A key stage in this research is the identification of the trade activities where there is real demand for translation services. Without a doubt, and this is a finding that was expected at the beginning of this research, the field most in need of translators is the legal area, followed by real estate, hotels and travel agencies. They are noted in that respective order, given the amount of English speaking customers and the frequency with which respondents claimed to transact business with them. Real estate in the communities studied is an activity whose target market are primarily foreign residents or buyers who come to the country in search of a residence to enjoy their retirement. There is also often the case of an overseas middle-aged or younger citizen who has decided to move to Costa Rica and buy or rent a shop, be it a bar, restaurant, or lodge, or any other small tourism-oriented business, allowing them to reside on the beach or the mountains and live off the income it generates.

Hotels and other lodging facilities also manage a portfolio of important foreign clients. At present, according to the Municipality of Pérez Zeledón records, the town has 23 hotels, 20 apartment hotels, 5 motels with more than five cabins each, and other 2 with fewer than five cabins, 5 guest houses outside the city and a mountain lodge. According to statistics from the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT), the supply of housing by Planning Unit for December 2006 ranked the South Pacific in second place in terms of hotel units behind the Central Valley alone. The ICT website also reports that in 2006 the county of Pérez Zeledón had 689 rooms in 42 hotels, ranking number 2 only behind San

José, the central county, and ahead of other counties with great investing value in the Central Valley such as Escazú with 572 rooms and 15 hotels and Santa Ana with 225 and 7 respectively. The country of origin of the vast majority of tourists visiting Costa Rica, according to ICT data for 1997, is the United States of America with 285,361. Of this, 3,920 entered by land through Paso Canoas, the border area in the south of the country, which connects Pérez Zeledón and other southern locations of the country of Panamá (cf. Bibliography, ICT).

Travel agencies, according to the records of municipal licenses for 2009 are eight, though this field study could not confirm that fact. Of the four that were visited only one, Selva Mar travel agency, has a website and hire bilingual translation services. Yoga travel agency, a branch of Columbus Travel company, which began in the capital San José, does not have its own website and uses the company's, which was designed and is customarily serviced by technicians in San José. The other two, Sunny Travel, a smaller and less busy agency located in the suburbs, and Viajes Alturas, neither has a website nor hires translators.

There was no surprise, as discussed previously in the field study, that the law firms occupy the top spot in demand for translation services in the counties of Pérez Zeledón and Osa. Nineteen of twenty sources interviewed stated that the legal field has higher demand for translators. Beirute (2008) stated that it was the law that "creó la necesidad de un traductor, ese primer traductor que surgió en 1854 y que se denominó Traductor General, en el fondo se podría definir como un traductor jurídico con fe pública "(p.35). In fact, this research project sought to collect and capture the image the general public has regarding this profession. With this in mind, professionals of different fields were consulted regarding their opinion on the translation and the translator. These interviewees, professors, statisticians, accountants, small business owners and so on, supported the notion that in the legal field translation should be a requirement if the firm's goal is to gain a foothold in this world of global competitiveness.

This finding is confirmed by a group of lawyers and notaries of the region. The lawyers, as in the case of Ms. Y. Jiménez Figueroa, assert that the failure to provide services to English speakers has limited to some extent the growth of her business. The main reason for this limitation is her not being fluent in the English language, and the idea that another person communicates with her clients makes her feel uncomfortable, as there are issues that are sometimes very personal and private. She adds that paying for the services of an interpreter or the translation of documents is an investment that few lawyers may afford (Y. Jiménez Figueroa, personal communication).

A novelty in this research is the place that Web site designing and developing agencies and publishing companies occupy in the demand for translation services. Pérez Zeledón is a relatively small community with a population of just over 140 thousand inhabitants, and commercially isolated from much of the Central Plateau. This was revealed by the Plan Regional de Desarrollo Brunca, of which Pérez Zeledón is a part. A translated version of a paragraph on page 73 of this document reads:

Brunca region is an area of recent integration into the national economy, its main feature being the formation of isolated and patchy sub regions with different colonization

processes, which generate various territorial and socio-economic inequalities within the region, and therefore with other regions of Costa Rica, mainly from the Central Valley.

However, it was found that at least three publications and two designing and develop Web pages agencies frequently employ the services of text translation. Paloma Alba and Asociados, which publishes the *Directorio Comercial del Pacífico Sur*; *Estrella del Sur* newspaper and *Caminos* magazine are three companies that distribute their products to the public of Pérez Zeledón and Osa. All of these publications frequently use the services of a translator to work on some articles and advertisements. The translator does all the work from scratch, i.e., takes the text in Spanish and puts it into English, or edits an English version done by someone else. The latter is the case of the editor of *Directorio Comercial del Pacífico Sur*, H. Morales, who hires a translator to "improve his translations" (H. Morales, personal communication).

Chameleon Studio and Zews are two local companies engaged in web design and have a long list of clients in Pérez Zeledón and the entire southern and coastal areas nearby. Many of their customers have requested the Spanish-English bilingualism for their pages, arguing that it broadens their business horizons, explained Sharon Chinchilla, Zews editorial coordinator. In late 2008, the same company launched a local newspaper *Perez Zeledón.net. The Newspaper*, which is a brother service of *Perez Zeledón.net* website, a web portal of wide circulation and popularity among the locals since 2003.

3. Conclusion

The counties of Pérez Zeledón and Osa do not escape the economic dynamism of recent decades. Globalization requires companies to diversify and join the world trend in order to expand their business and find success. And although tradition remains strong, in this case reflected by the legal field as the largest customer of translation services, there are other activities where the inhabitants of a small and commercially incipient region struggle to keep pace and go to the battle front. This has been one of the most interesting findings of this research and the researcher personally sympathizes with the efforts of those small companies that with clear and ambitious goals incorporate other professionals, such as translators, in their effort to procure an expansion of their services and products and the growth of their commercial horizons.

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