

## The Concept of Translation and Translator in the Districts of San Isidro de El General and Bahía Ballena

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**Resumen:** Este artículo proviene de un estudio de campo que se llevó a cabo en la zona sur de Costa Rica. Tiene que ver con el concepto y el estado de la profesión del traductor en los distritos de San Isidro de El General y Bahía Ballena, en el Pacífico Sur de Costa Rica. El estudio analiza los conceptos de traducción y traductor desde la perspectiva de los contratantes y proveedores de servicios de traducción en el área, los teóricos y la *Ley de Traducciones e Interpretaciones Oficiales de Costa Rica*. El propósito de esta investigación fue establecer cuál es el concepto de traducción y traductor que prevalece, pues esto también puede explicar la situación actual de la profesión en el área.

**Descriptor:** traducción y traductor, *Ley de Traducciones e Interpretaciones Oficiales*, estatus profesional.

**Abstract:** This article comes from a field study developed in the southern region of Costa Rica. It deals with the concept and status of the translation profession in the districts of San Isidro de El General and Bahía Ballena. It analyzes the notions of translation and translator from the perspective of buyers and suppliers of translation services in the area, theorists, and the *Ley de Traductores e Intérpretes Oficiales de Costa Rica*. The purpose of this research was to establish what the current concept of translation and translator is, for that may also explain the status of the profession in the area.

**Keywords:** translation and translator, *Costa Rican Act for Translators and Interpreters*, professional status.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is a novel science when compared with other ancient sciences such as philosophy, pedagogy or physics. If we make a mental exercise on the great personalities that have shaped the history of humankind, it is likely that among the older or more cultured individuals their choices would point at Pythagoras, Socrates, Marx, the Lumière or Wright brothers, Marie Curie, Cervantes, Galileo Galilei, Jesus of Nazareth, Marco

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Polo and Christopher Columbus. Younger people may be inclined to indicate Bill Gates, Saddam Hussein, Madonna, Pele, Michael Jordan, and Lionel Messi.

Regardless of the field of preference and level of identification that would lead a person to propose this or that personality, we would have little success if we ask them to name a famous translator. Is that possible? Is there a famous translator in the history of humankind? We know of the existence of the Bible and other historical texts, but do we know who translated them? How did people of different languages use to communicate in ancient times? Is there a record of such activity in historical treatises and textbooks? The data on this are always either very general or null. The translator and interpreter, unless they have excelled for some other reason, whether the case of famous authors who make translations or as in the case of La Malinche<sup>3</sup>, have remained anonymous ever since.

Perhaps, for those of us in this profession or career, that anonymity is good. We take comfort in the idea that a good translation is one that does not seem to be a translation, one that goes unnoticed. The translator, therefore, must neutralize as much as possible his participation in the text; he is a conduit for others' ideas, not the author. However, as a result of our contact and communion with the translation activity, we know for a fact, too, the general ignorance that prevails in this profession in our country and more specifically in the southern region.

## 2. DESIGN AND SELECTION OF THE SAMPLE

In order to establish what the current concept of translation and translator in the area is, it was necessary to conduct a survey among buyers and suppliers of such services in the area. In short, they are the agents that provide the terms in which this activity is established, which in turn determines the status of the translator. The sample of the study population was defined by the researcher in 30 effective informants (20 buyers and 10 suppliers); however, the final number of buyers closed in 15. It may not be said that the sources were selected randomly, since there is no record of all the local businesses that hire translation services, which could allow for a random selection in a list of choices. However, the same opportunity to be included in the sample was impartially given to the elements of the population, and there was no deliberate preference from the researcher over a certain group of the target population.

It should be clarified that the number of participants is the total of individuals who voluntarily chose to answer the questionnaire, who were contacted by phone or email. Despite the limitations of time and some difficulty in arranging appointments for interviews at times that were convenient for both the interviewer and interviewee, an effort was made to obtain sources from different sectors of the community. However, given the homogeneity of the sample, especially the buyers, most of whom own small businesses, the researcher was satisfied with the number of participants and it is expected

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<sup>3</sup> The reader will recall that Doña Marina, known as La Malinche, acted as an interpreter for Hernán Cortés in the early sixteenth century in Mexico. However, she is mostly known for the betrayal of her people when warning Cortés repeatedly about the ambushes planned by her people against the colonizers (Baker, 2001, p.xv)

that the results achieved are generally representative of the employment status of the local translator and considered valid for this research.

The type of study done is inferential and through this the data may not only be described but the study also allows to make inferences of the results obtained in the sample to the rest of the population, leaving a necessary margin of error, what is known as sampling error (Gómez, 2005, p.18). The risk of error is the price to pay for the benefits in cost and speediness that the sampling provides (Gómez, p.8). The units of study (buyers and suppliers) were addressed by email, mail, telephone or personal interview. It is important, before delving into this survey, to review some of the most widely known definitions for translation and translator.

### 3. THEORISTS' DEFINITION OF TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATOR

Amparo Hurtado (2001) explains that "la traducción es una habilidad, un *saber hacer* que consiste en saber recorrer el proceso traductor, sabiendo resolver los problemas de traducción que se plantean en cada paso" (p.25). She uses Anderson's distinction (1983) between declarative knowledge (*knowing what*) and operational knowledge (*knowing how*) to conclude that knowing how to translate is primarily a type of operational knowledge obtained through practice. Hurtado adds that translation is done "*porque las lenguas y las culturas son diferentes ...para comunicar, para traspasar la barrera de la incomunicación... para alguien que no conoce la lengua, y generalmente tampoco la cultura*" (p.25).

About the translator, Hurtado believes that his main characteristic is to have translation competence, i.e., knowledge about language and technical translation since when translating texts he must "efectuar un complejo proceso mental que consiste en comprender el sentido que éstos transmiten, para luego reformularlo con los medios de otra lengua, teniendo en cuenta las necesidades del destinatario y la finalidad de la traducción" (p.41). However, in addition to knowledge of the language and culture of source and target texts, and being skilled in the transfer of meaning between these linguistic codes, the translator should know how to conduct himself in the medium in which he operates. His responsibility as a communicator entails him to be aware of the requirements of the job market in which he operates and to have the tools to overcome the obstacles faced (p.30).

For Peter Newmark (1988) translation "is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language" (p.7). He argues that this practice leads to loss of meaning due to a number of factors and provides two cases: 1) overtranslation, when you increase the level of detail and 2) undertranslation, when you increase the degree of generalization. As for the translator, Newmark (1988) gives him a sixth sense, part sensitive, part intuitive, and "many times (...) during a final revision [of the translation] tells you when to translate literally and also instinctively "(p.4). The translator is, therefore, a professional as any, who must constantly deal with the complexity of choosing from several options, and like everyone else, enjoys the satisfaction of solving these little problems.

Proponents of the Skopos theory, including Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer, view translation as a functional act which must revolve around the role the translated text fulfills within the target audience, taking into account the needs and expectations of the receivers and the rules and conventions of the target culture (Reiss and Vermeer, pp.80-87). Thus their theory separates from traditional schools, focused primarily on formal and linguistic aspects of translation, to propose that there are other essential elements in this act of communication such as the culture of the user or receiver of the target text and of the client that made the translation assignment, and the role that the text will play in that culture.

Skopos theory emphasizes the need for the translator to take into account the contextual factors mentioned above, essential in translating literary texts such as medical and scientific treatises and other technical texts. Also, it leaves the translator to decide, as an expert in this practice, what role the source text will play in the translation process. The translator must make conscious decisions that are consistent with the function of the target text, and for every particular case he will establish a specific function that does not necessarily have to coincide with that occupied by the source text in its original context. Therefore, the translation professional is someone who knows in depth the circumstances of the source text and, according to the needs of the translation brief and the target audience, adapts the foreign skopos to the reality in which the target text will be inserted (Reiss and Vermeer, pp.80-87).

### **3. THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATOR IN THE LOCAL SCENE**

#### *3.1. Act of Official Translations and Interpretations (MREC).*

Although no single theory of translation exists and definitions are counted by the hundreds, it is interesting to consider what is conceived by translation in our country, and for that let us see what is established in the Bylaws to the *Ley de Traductores e Intérpretes Oficiales de Costa Rica* (Act of Official Translations and Interpretations) issued in 2002 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Costa Rica (MREC). In Chapter 1, Article 2 of this act, it is decreed that translation is the "expresión, en una lengua, de lo escrito o expresado en otra." It also clarifies that an official translation is "traducción de un documento del idioma español a una lengua extranjera o viceversa, con fe pública y carácter oficial, efectuada por un traductor oficial debidamente nombrado y autorizado por el Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto" (paragraphs 2 and 7).

It then remains to define what is meant by 'translator' and 'official translator'. In this respect the act states that a translator is the "profesional con conocimiento suficiente de la lengua española y una o más lenguas adicionales para trasladar de manera fiel, en forma escrita, los términos de la lengua fuente a la lengua meta. Es una persona de vasta cultura, con los conocimientos necesarios en gramática, vocabulario general, técnico, jurídico, literal o cultural que la facultan para desempeñar su labor" (Chapter 1, Article 2, paragraph 1). It specifies, in turn, that an official translator or interpreter is a "profesional dedicado a la traducción e interpretación, debidamente nombrado y autorizado por el

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto, para realizar traducciones e interpretaciones con carácter oficial y fe pública" (Chapter 1 Article 2, paragraph 9).

The concept of translation proposed by this entity is very abstract, but its definition of translator is more detailed and is directed towards the emphasis he must make in order to maintain the fidelity of the source text. At this point the law argues that a faithful translation or interpretation is one that "es fiel reflejo de documentos o situaciones. Para llevarla a cabo, deben observarse y respetarse la forma del original, así como los signos de puntuación, los modismos y la redacción o entonación para evitar que se atribuya una interpretación o significado distinto del que debe tener" (Chapter 1, Article 2, paragraph 10). In these terms the figure of the translator is seen almost as a mirror, someone who is able to formulate a target text that resembles and reflects as closely as possible what is said and the way it was expressed in the original.

### 3.2. The buyers and suppliers' view.

There is some coincidence in what the buyers and suppliers of translation services think of the image of the translator, but it also differs from what is established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Chapter 1 of the *Bylaws of Official Translations and Interpretations* tells of the spoken language skills and text type knowledge that translators must possess in addition to being well versed in world knowledge. Several of the buyers surveyed agree with this point, and believe that one of the tasks requested from the translator, in addition to translating well, is to make revisions and corrections to translations done by the buyers themselves or by others within the company. The translator is expected to advise and propose other linguistic turns according to the socio-cultural profile of the target audience, something that recalls the premises of the Skopos theory, in which the needs and expectations of the recipients are a central theme.

The buyers explain that it is important that the translator be well versed in technical language and have advanced knowledge in the target language, as their translations will be evaluated by native speakers of that language. The translator must be able to formulate a text that provides a fast and light reading; his writing and spelling must be impeccable. Moreover, they add that it is important that he be precise in the choices regarding linguistic and stylistic factors, so that the documents accurately reflect the meaning of the original. A good translator, according to the respondents, has the ability to express the meaning of the text as closely as possible to its meaning in both languages. Also they argue that as the journalist, the translator should know about many subjects and situations, so that his actions reflect 'savoir faire' and be able to do his job fluently. Even some respondents make reference to binding aspects of a translation, saying that an error of the translator could cause a legal problem.

For providers of translation services in the districts of San Isidro de El General and Bahía Ballena, their work involves, first, the command of the target language. Nonetheless, they argue that translation goes beyond linguistic knowledge. A person may be bilingual or multilingual and ignore how to behave in the face of a technical text, or how to navigate the stylistic scale levels, for example. Of these skills and knowledge writes Hurtado (2001) and she calls it translation competence (p.30). Her proposal is based on the translation model developed by Neunzig and Dams (1994, cited in Hurtado,

p.389), in which there are two types of knowledge: epistemic knowledge, referring to the bilingual quality or purely linguistic competence, and operational knowledge, which is one that distinguishes him from the mere language user and entitles him to use the tools and strategies to conduct his work professionally.

There is little consensus among the translators of the area over which model of translator should be implemented. Some believe that the best translator is one who has studied translation, since throughout his preparation he will have learned how to perform his work adequately and be able to offer a quality product. They note that in the job market there are many pseudo-translators, people who "do translations" because they "speak" English. This phenomenon generates a lot of unfair competition, for there are low fees charged for a job that obviously is not up to the standards of one that is done conscientiously. This situation causes all the translators to be measured with the same scale, especially in terms of payment, and creates profuse dissatisfaction and frustration among the translators who have had academic training in the field of translation.

Other respondents felt that a good translator is neither exclusively nor necessarily the one who has been trained for the job. Within this framework of thought lie most of the responses, being experience in the field the main requirement. Some a little more idealistic or philosophers call it 'life experience'. Others somewhat more realistic and practical agree that experience is what has enabled them to obtain accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which in turn further strengthens their position in the job market. They criticize, in general, some of the university programs which 'launch' to the institutions of primary and secondary education 'professionals' in languages, who know little or nothing about methodology or language. It is understood, therefore, from all the criteria specified, that neither the degrees nor the credits make the professional. A good translator is someone whose performance speaks for itself and whose work is coveted and in demand in the job market, mainly through recommendations and not by advertising or self promotion.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In this way, and based on the views expressed by the suppliers and buyers of translation services in the communities of San Isidro de El General and Bahía Ballena, it may be concluded that like theorists, views on what is translation and what is a translator vary from person to person depending on their experience in the field, whether it has been negative or positive, close or rather distant. In general, the vision the buyers and some of the suppliers have, especially those with the least training in the field, is as broad as that of MREC. It speaks of a process of transferring what is said in one language to another, of mastering a second language to communicate two receivers or groups of people who do not understand each other because of the language barrier.

As for the translator, the buyers see him as a facilitator, a 'supporter' in the area of communication for other businesses or economic activities of higher returns. In other words, his occupation is not considered a profession in its full range; it is a para-profession, if one may call it so. The person who claims to be a translator should master the basics of both languages, but little attention is given to how he acquired these skills or



knowledge. The image of the translator as an individual who has been educated in the matter and who ensures quality in his work is considered an excessive and unnecessary expense and, sometimes, even a non-existent resource in the region studied.

This notion does not neglect more specific indicators such as the stylistic features of technical texts, in which suppliers and buyers agree that the translator must specialize, for it is in these technical areas that there is more demand for translation services. They also agree on the need for the translator to have vast world knowledge, or at least be aware of the cultural environment of both the 'initiator' of the text and the translated version's recipients, so he can give an accurate and relevant criterion when considering the solutions to problems of cultural transfer. This cultural knowledge, both parties assert, can be obtained through a habit of intelligent and varied reading that allows him to stay updated on the political agenda, economic and social development of the country or region from which the texts and receivers come.

The translator is, in the opinion of those who are dedicated to providing translation services in the area bounded by San Isidro de El General and Bahía Ballena, a communicator, not necessarily with studies in languages, who serves on stable economic activities, mainly those which have experienced a commercial boom in the last two decades due to tourism and the internalization of trade, and provides help in the shooting down of communication barriers that hinder the daily activities of these businesses. However, due to ignorance of the general public about the existence of a degree in Translation and because the region's economic activity falls outside the Costa Rican capital city's ring, there prevails a common idea that translating is a hobby, a task that many bilingual people and professionals in other fields can do in their spare time, and therefore should not be so expensive. The effort and time involved in a well made professional translation is ignored, and the translator is still considered an individual whose livelihood comes from a different career, and who employs translation as an activity that generates additional revenue to his main job.

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## ANNEXES

### CUESTIONARIO 1

*Contratante del servicio de traducción*

1. ¿Con qué frecuencia solicita los servicios de un traductor en inglés?
2. ¿Qué funciones solicitan del traductor además de traducir? ¿Qué tipo de documentos solicita que se traduzca con mayor frecuencia?
3. ¿Solicitan algún requisito del traductor?
  - a. ser graduado universitario
  - b. tener certificación del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores
  - c. tener experiencia



- d. tener recomendaciones
- e. probar conocimientos mediante entrevista personal
4. ¿En qué áreas/actividades comerciales considera usted que son más requeridos los servicios de traducción en inglés en Pérez Zeledón?
5. ¿Trabajan ustedes con material publicado en inglés?
  - a. documentos escritos (especifique)
  - b. páginas web
  - c. otros \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. ¿Quién se encarga de procesar esa información?
7. ¿Qué hacen con ese material/esa información)?
8. ¿Quién revisa/supervisa el trabajo del traductor?
9. ¿Qué opinión le merece a usted la profesión del traductor?
10. ¿Qué imagina/le parece a usted que un traductor debe saber/ ser capaz de realizar?
11. ¿Qué cualidades debe tener un buen traductor? ¿Cómo las ordenaría en orden de importancia?
12. ¿Cree usted que un traductor debe ser un buen escritor? Explique.
13. ¿En su opinión debe un traductor leer literatura variada? ¿Qué tipo de material?
14. ¿Conoce a algún otro traductor?
  - a. graduado o certificado
  - b. empírico
15. ¿Ha visto/ha recibido publicidad ofreciendo servicios de traducción?  
¿Qué tipo de publicidad?

¿Cree usted que la publicidad empleada brinda suficiente información sobre el traductor, el tipo de servicio ofertado?

16. ¿Continúa siendo la traducción un servicio o cree usted que se ha convertido en un producto de consumo?

17. Al contratar un servicio de traducción, usted considera (en orden de importancia):

- precio del servicio
- expectativas de calidad (toma en cuenta referencias del traductor)
- tiempo de entrega (cuanto antes mejor, no importa tanto la calidad)
- títulos del traductor que lo acrediten como tal (preferiblemente traductor oficial)

18. ¿Quién considera usted que es capaz de realizar una mejor labor: el traductor profesional o el profesional traductor? ¿Qué lo inclina a pensar de esa manera?

19. ¿Le menciona usted al traductor quién será el destinatario del documento traducido? ¿Revelar esta información le parece importante o no?

20. ¿Ofrece usted su colaboración cómo editor del texto traducido? ¿Le parece trivial o cree que no es su responsabilidad efectuar esta labor?

21. En el tiempo que ha contratado servicios de traducción, ¿cómo calificaría su experiencia al respecto, se siente satisfecho con el servicio prestado por parte del traductor contratado; qué cambiaría, mejoraría?

22. Defina en sus propias palabras los conceptos de *traducción* y *traductor*.

#### CUESTIONARIO 2

##### *Oferente* de Servicios de Traducción

1. ¿Cuál ha sido su experiencia como traductor en Pérez Zeledón?
  - a. ¿Cuántos años se ha desempeñado como tal?
  - b. ¿Cuáles son las áreas comerciales en las que se ha desempeñado?
  
2. ¿Se ha desempeñado en la traducción (medio escrito) o en la interpretación (medio oral)?

3. ¿Para cuál de las dos considera usted que existe mayor mercado en Pérez Zeledón?
4. ¿Le han solicitado demostrar su capacidad/habilidad para la traducción como requisito para algún encargo?
  - a. títulos que lo/a acrediten
  - b. pruebas escritas
  - c. cartas de recomendación
  - d. entrevista
5. ¿Qué tipo de publicidad ha empleado para ofrecer sus servicios de traducción?
6. ¿Se especializa usted en algún campo?
  - a. textos turísticos, jurídicos, económicos, médicos, etc.
  - b. páginas web
  - c. otros (especifique):  

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7. ¿Es usted graduado universitario?
  - a. ¿De qué universidad?
  - b. ¿En qué carrera?
8. ¿Ha escuchado usted de la carrera de traducción?
  - a. ¿En qué universidad?
  - b. ¿Está de acuerdo con el programa?
9. En su opinión, ¿es necesario estudiar traducción para dedicarse a la profesión?
10. ¿Qué ventajas le ofrece a un traductor el obtener un título que lo acredite?
11. ¿Sabía usted que el Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores es el organismo encargado de acreditar a los traductores oficiales en el país?
12. En orden de importancia, ¿qué considera usted debe poseer un traductor: estudios formales en traducción, acreditación por parte del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, experiencia comprobada a través de un portafolio de encargos bien realizados?
13. ¿Cree usted que un traductor debe ser un buen escritor?
14. ¿En su opinión debe un traductor leer literatura variada? ¿Qué tipo de material?

15. ¿Continúa siendo la traducción un servicio o cree usted que se ha convertido en un producto de consumo?
16. ¿Qué piensa de la traducción como actividad comercial en Pérez Zeledón?
- ¿Existe suficiente demanda de trabajo?
  - ¿Puede un profesional en traducción ‘ganarse la vida’ dedicándose de lleno a esta labor?
  - ¿Es bien remunerada esta actividad?
17. ¿Conoce usted a otros traductores de la zona?
18. ¿Cuáles son sus métodos/técnicas de traducción?
- emplea diccionarios especializados
  - consulta glosarios y bases de datos en Internet
  - emplea el servicio de consultas de traductores en línea
  - consulta con expertos
19. ¿Cuáles de los siguientes aspectos (en orden de importancia) le solicitan con mayor frecuencia para encargarle un servicio de traducción?
- precio bajo
  - calidad del servicio
  - entrega del servicio en corto tiempo
  - títulos que lo acrediten como traductor profesional u oficial
20. ¿Quién considera usted que es capaz de realizar una mejor labor: el traductor profesional o el profesional traductor? ¿Qué lo inclina a pensar de esa manera?
21. ¿Le menciona a usted al traductor quién será el destinatario del documento traducido? ¿El que le proporcionen esta información le parece importante o no?
22. ¿Se ha ofrecido o le ha solicitado usted al profesional que contrata sus servicios revisar/editar del texto traducido? ¿Le parece trivial o cree que no es responsabilidad de esa persona efectuar esta labor?
23. En el tiempo que ha ofrecido sus servicios de traducción, ¿cómo calificaría su experiencia al respecto, se siente satisfecho con el servicio prestado; con la remuneración obtenida; qué cambiaría, mejoraría?
24. Defina en sus propias palabras los conceptos de *traducción* y *traductor*.