

## Ethics and Professionalism in Translation

By Roger Chriss

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In addition to translation, he teaches a course on the business aspects of the translation industry to translation students and an introductory course on the translation and interpretation professions to preparatory students at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. He has also written dozens of articles on the translation profession which have appeared in journals around the world and on the Web, including the most recent version of his series of articles, "Translation as a Profession," available at his website "The Language Realm" [<http://home.comcast.net/~r.chriss/>].

Roger has authorized the reproduction of this article on my site.

Whence cometh the true professionals? Are they born or bred? If born, can we develop a brain scan system to detect their ability and then nurture it? If bred, can we identify and then duplicate the ideal conditions to create a translator? More importantly, what do we do now, when we can't answer the above questions? And most importantly, what do we do as freelance translators to become more professional ourselves and enhance the level of professionalism in our industry.

### The True Professional

I am going to make a hazy but important distinction here. I believe there are translators and then there are professional translators. The former are people who translate on the side, using their knowledge of a particular field to translation work. For instance, in a previous article, I referred to a mathematician who translated a book on advanced mathematics from French to English. I do not consider him a professional translator.

Professional translators are applied linguists whose ability to work with language, write well, and for free-lancers, to operate a business, represents their source of income. Professional translators are people who are dedicated to their languages and the nations, societies, and cultures which come with them. They are devoted to improving their ability to understand their source language and write in their target language. They recognize that translation is both an art and a skill. As such, they are also committed to deepening their knowledge of the fields they translate in, and to cultivating greater facility for writing about such matters. They also have nurtured a deep respect for business ethics, aware that they are in many instances the communications conduit for a product or service, for information or opinion, and so must consider the consequences of their linguistic decisions. Finally, professional translators know that they can always improve and polish their translation ability.

Professional translators are also distinguished by certain attitudes and approaches to their work. In this article, I want to take a close look at these attitudes and approaches and help clarify what a professional translator is and how we can all become more professional about being a translator.

Unlike the medical or legal professions, there are no precise academic or professional prerequisites to be a translator. This is a boon for those talented individuals who want to get started in the translation industry and a bane for those people trying to identify true professionals.

The only requirement a translator must fulfill is knowing two or more languages. Anything less is rather hard to accept.

Virtually all professional translators in the United States have at least a Bachelor's degree, and translation vendors will rarely if ever work with a translator who does not have an undergraduate education. Often these degrees are in language studies, or some related field. However, some translators have degrees in their field of specialization and have academic language training as a college minor. Others have advanced degrees in translation itself. Still others have little if any formal academic language training, instead having learned their languages either in the home or while living abroad.

Translators have to be able to write, so you might assume that translators have formal academic training as writers and professional writing experience. I have found little evidence for this. Few translators I know truly love writing; to most it seems to be merely an essential aspect of translation. However, most professional translators do have a deep interest in writing, be it as a necessary tool or an art form.

Finally, virtually all translators have a well developed knowledge of one or more specialized fields, such as finance, law, including in particular patent and corporate law, computer science, medicine, pharmaceuticals, and so on. This is not to say that translators are experts per se in such fields, but they do have enough knowledge to read, understand, and then translate common material in the field. And very few translators will ever develop such in-depth knowledge in more than a few fields.

## **Ethics**

I have said virtually nothing about professional ethics in the previous articles, except to make suggestions as to how translators might better approach their business endeavors. There are, however, ethical considerations in translation, including decisions on how to charge clients, when to refuse to do a translation job or how to respond when clients treat you poorly. What follows is a series of general observations that I hope will provide some ideas as to how and why ethical business behavior is advantageous, particularly in the long run.

Translators are often privy to secret information, be that the financial plans of a company, a pharmaceutical patent, or the specifications for a new computer chip. If it hasn't occurred to you that there are people who would pay a lot of money for this information, then you shouldn't take up writing espionage thrillers. If it hasn't occurred to you that you could use financial information to make money, then Ivan Bosky probably isn't your hero or idol. Translators have to keep this kind of information to themselves, regardless of whether or not they are asked to sign a nondisclosure or confidentiality agreement.

Occasionally the desire for secrecy goes so far as to require the translator not to talk about the job at all. I have at least two larger jobs like this per year, and while doing such work I say nothing to anyone about it other than that I currently have work (much as the Chinese greet each other with a phrase that literally translates as "did you eat rice?", freelance translators often greet each other with a question like

"have enough work these day?"). This probably irritates some of my friends and colleagues, who may arrive at the incorrect assumption that I am translating design specifications for a UFO hyperdrive being reverse-engineered at Area 51 in Nevada, but I do feel bound to honor the agreements I enter into.

You may be wondering, so what? It won't matter if I tell my spouse, my friend, my fellow translator, that I am working on documents related to a major international lawsuit that won't become public for the next three months. Please trust me when I tell you it will. The translation industry is very small and tightly knit; it is composed of people who know how to communicate and are used to doing so via the Internet and the Web, and of people who generally like to talk about work if only because they tend to work alone. So anything you say could end up being mentioned in a Usenet group or chat room, at which point it would be public knowledge. And if you can't figure out why leaking the preparation for a major, multi-billion dollar lawsuit regarding illegal trade practices six months before it becomes public would be a problem, then you probably shouldn't be a translator.

In a similar vein, translators have to honor the agreements they make. If you agree to do a job, then you have to do it. You can't just farm out your work and take a percentage without telling your clients that you do this. They have a right to know who is actually doing the work. If they decide to hire you, then they want you, not someone you know, to do the job. Moreover, you have to do the job the way you say you will, which often means doing what the client asks. If the client provides a glossary or style sheet, follow it, regardless of your personal opinion of their word choice or formatting ideas. If they request a particular file format, provide it. If you really think something is wrong with their terminology or format choices, tell them. The client always has the final word on such matters, but at the same time will usually appreciate your observations or suggestions.

In the same vein, translators should not accept assignments they don't have the time or qualifications to do. I regularly turn down work because I am too busy with other jobs or because I don't have the expertise to do the job justice. Remember, the easiest way to lose a client is to do a bad job. Don't.

### **Efficient Ethics**

All right, enough of the lecture. I realize most readers don't want a polemic, so let me see if I can't motivate you through a simple strategy and a few basic facts about the translation industry to be an ethical, professional translator.

There is a well-established idea for the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma in Game Theory called the Tit-for-Tat Strategy. The Prisoner's Dilemma may be familiar, but for those to whom it is new, it goes like this: Two criminals who together committed a crime are brought in by the police for questioning. The police think they both did it, but would have a much easier time if one ratted out the other. So they separate the two criminals and make the following offer to each: If you rat out your partner, we'll get the district attorney to give you only six months. If you stay quiet and your partner rats you out, you get ten years. And though the police say nothing, there is of course the possibility that the

criminals could go free (but only if they both keep quiet). Under such circumstances, most criminals will rat out their partner. Now to generalize this idea a bit for the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma. In this version, a group of individuals of any size are all set to interact with each other repeatedly over the same issue. In any given interaction, an individual can cooperate or defect. In other words, you can be nice to the other members of the group, or you can screw them. It can be shown mathematically, and has been shown many times, that the best strategy in this Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma is Tit-for-Tat, or to be specific: cooperate (be nice) when interacting with another member of the group for the first time, then reciprocate their behavior thereafter. In other words, after you're nice to this other individual, if that individual is nice back, be nice; if that individual defects (screws you), defect back (screw 'em back). This is the best long-term strategy because it is simple and effective.

Why? You ask. The answer is in thinking about the situation overall. Always start off nice. Easy enough to understand that, since goodwill generally begets goodwill, and you know that you will be interacting with these other individuals in the future (no sense in making enemies right away). After the initial encounter, be nice only if the others are nice to you. Again, easy enough to understand because you want to reward good behavior and encourage it to continue, and you want to punish bad behavior and discourage it in the future. The only requirement for this strategy to work is that you keep track of what others are doing to you. Fortunately, the human brain is well-designed for this task, and there is computer software, such as Personal Information Managers (PIMs) to further simplify the task.

So how to apply this to freelance translation? Again, simple. Always start off with a nice, polite, cooperative attitude toward any new client. Don't be automatically suspicious; just be careful. You can find out a lot about a potential new client by asking colleagues and doing web searches. Unless there is sound reason to reject work from the new client, do the work properly (your form of cooperation), then monitor what happens. If you are treated well, paid promptly, and offered more work (the client's form of cooperation), of course you accept it. You cooperated, the client reciprocated, everyone is happy. If the client screws you, screw them back (so to speak) by not accepting any more work and by reporting their behavior to everyone else in the group. Cheats cannot succeed in the long run unless the group in question is infinitely large; since there is a finite number of translators, no client can screw translators forever. Conversely, no translator can translate for very long while screwing clients, because there is a finite number of clients available. Cheats may be able to succeed in the short run, but only if the rest of the group lets them. We can talk to each other about bad client experiences, just as clients talk amongst themselves about bad experiences with particular translators. We can post accurate, precise information regarding bad behavior from clients on web sites dedicated to such matters. In essence, we can help each other keep track of everyone's behavior, encouraging good behavior and punishing bad behavior. A translator will not last any longer without clients than a translation vendor will last without translators.

Recently in the journal *Science* there appeared the latest in a long series of studies on Game Theory and altruistic behavior. Once again researchers clearly showed that those individuals who are known to be

open, generous, and honest benefit the most in the long run.

The Golden Rule applies here, in other words. Not only will people do unto you as you do to them, or are likely to do to them, but these people are keeping track, as should you.

To sum up, the translation industry is a small, tightly-integrated industry in which people tend to talk a lot. We can use this to our advantage by adopting the Tit-for-Tat strategy in our business efforts and helping each other keep track of who has done what. Good behavior, whether it is a translator doing quality work and delivering it on time or a client offering respectable rates and paying promptly, should be recognized and rewarded. Bad behavior, for instance a translator consistently and without reason delivering work late or an agency regularly withholding or failing to pay translators, should be acknowledged and punished. If each of us does even a little of this, the industry itself will automatically improve rapidly and dramatically.

All that said, now we'll look at some specific recommendations and suggestions as to how we can all become more professional in our translation endeavors.

### **Handling Clients**

The true professional knows how to conduct business, including the art of negotiation, providing necessary information, and making agreements for each job.

I've discussed the importance of negotiation in previous articles. The only point I want to raise here is that sounding confident and definite when you negotiate is important. You won't impress anyone if you hem and haw when asked questions about price or terms of delivery. Know your rates by heart, know your hardware and software by heart, and know what you can do. Give this information freely and firmly, and then watch and wait. Remember, the heart of negotiation is compromise; if the client doesn't like your terms, they'll make a counter offer. Then it's up to you to accept or make yet another counter offer.

One word of advice about negotiation: dickering and bickering is not the way to cultivate clients. Often a slightly lower rate in the short run leads to more work and higher rates in the future. I have started at slightly lower rates with agencies and then found in short order that they were feeding me large assignments regularly. Conversely, I've turned down rates which I thought were too low and then found that the agency later offered me work at a higher rate. If you provide quality work at a fair price, you will have clients.

Providing information is an essential part of being a professional translator. Clients have to know who you are, where you work, what you can do, and what you charge. When you receive a request for information from a client, be it a new client who has sent you a contractor's employment form or an old client requesting updated information, give it willingly and in detail. Your clients have to know you.

You also have to be accessible. Make sure you are in your office, or at least near your phone, during the workday. Just because no one calls you in the morning doesn't mean you have the afternoon off. You should

still be in your office. Sure, you're saying to yourself, that's important, but I can still go out and do things. Yes, you can. But remember that if a client can't reach you they'll send the job to someone else. At the very least, get an answering machine which lets you call in and collect your messages from another phone. I have one and it's helped me considerably, especially when I'm out on business and I want to know what's going on back in my office. Also check your email many times per day. Some clients are now sending out job offers via email and expect prompt responses. In particular, if you participate in any of the Web-based translation exchanges, such as Proz ([www.proz.com](http://www.proz.com)) or Aquarius ([aquarius.net](http://aquarius.net)), then you should check your email regularly to see if someone is soliciting your services, or if your bid for a job has been successful.

Making agreements refers to setting the rules for each job. By rules I mean terms which include how the job is to be done, how much you will be paid, and when and how it will be delivered. Establish all of this before you accept the job. You might even want to get the terms in writing, though I don't bother doing this with clients I know well. Just make sure you know what you are supposed to translate, what file format the client wants, when and how you are to deliver the job, and what you'll be paid for it. Accepting a job without this information is foolish and can lead to numerous problems.

Sometimes an agency will say that they don't really care when you finish a job, what file format you use or how you deliver it. What they mean is that they don't need it fast, they have the hardware and software to handle common file formats, and they aren't concerned with the delivery method. Regardless of their level of interest, you should establish how you are going to do the job, and then do it that way.

### **After-service**

I love this word, whose origin is found in Japanese business culture but exists in one form or another all over the world. The notion that a translation job ends the moment you push the Send File button in your email software, fire off the fax, deposit the papers in an envelope, or complete the upload of the translated file to an FTP site is both unprofessional and irresponsible. Don't leave your home for the beach right after you finish a translation assignment; numerous things can go wrong after you send the job.

What can possibly happen that requires my involvement? You ask. Here's the list: the agency's fax machine doesn't print your transmission clearly enough (this happens often when sending hand-written work, such as an editing job); the BBS or FTP site doesn't receive the modem transmission; the agency can't open or convert your file; the agency opens your file but gets mere gibberish (affectionately known among hackers as baud barf); the agency loses your file; or the agency has questions about what you did.

You have to stick around after you send the job, just in case. I've sent jobs in to agencies on the East Coast on Friday morning and then received calls at 6:00 p.m. my time. If you know you are going out (or away for the weekend), tell the agency beforehand, preferably when you deliver the job. Make sure they know you won't be around after a particular hour and ask them to confirm that the file you sent was

received and can be processed. It takes a little more effort but is well worth it; the agency will love you.

Professionals solve problems. This also means that you should try to help your clients with problems. I have helped numerous clients troubleshoot a computer network, BBS, or software incompatibility over the phone while negotiating or discussing a job. Always be useful and helpful; it will make them remember you and think well of you.

Translators must stand by their work. Eventually, a client will call you and tell you that your translation sucks, that their bilingual five-year-old niece could have done a better job, that a colubus monkey has superior spelling skills. Regardless of how offended or angered you are by such claims, take the time to work through the problem with the client. Ask for specific comments, such as where the errors are, what kind they are, and how many there are. If the errors are in fact your responsibility, offer to fix them immediately at no extra charge. If the errors fall into that nebulous area of style or proofreading, offer to participate in the clean-up process but stand by your work if you did what you were told. The most important thing is to service the client. They have the work and the money, so it behooves you to make a positive impression no matter how negative the situation might be.

Even after the job is finished and the agency confirms receipt of it, keep the file on your hard drive for weeks to come. I usually keep the file on my hard drive until after I am paid for the job, and then I remove, though it is still available on an archival disc. Why? For one, I worked with a translation vendor which lost my translated file some five weeks after I submitted it. They were in a panic and called me, praying that I had kept the file. To their delight, I said I had it and would upload it immediately. Of course, this won't happen five years later, but five years seems to be the current statute of limitations on law suits involving translated materials as well as most other suits in which translated materials could be subpoenaed. So keep everything you translate for at least five years and remember to deduct the cost of the disks and the space used to store them.

As an aside, I recycle printed material after three to five years since completion of a job, but I retain electronic copies of all material I have ever worked on. Data storage is so cheap and efficient that deleting files seems pointless. I may not be able to open some of those files eventually, but with the right tool in the right hands the textual content could be extracted.

Upon finishing a large job such as a book or computer manual (I've done many of both), I usually send the agency a letter along with the finished translation and keep in contact with them as they edit my work and prepare it for publication. I also make clear that I am willing to remain involved in the process, that the agency may call me for clarifications on my work, such as choices about style or terminology, and that I am genuinely interested in the final outcome. It's always good business to be involved in the entire process, not just the small part of it which represents your work.

In sum, you should treat your clients like puppy dogs. They are very curious, very busy, easily distracted, always rushing from one thing to the next, and not necessarily willing or able to understand everything

you ask of them or report to them. I don't mean you should not respect your clients, or that you should look down on them. Quite the opposite. Know their limitations and work with them. Don't assume they already know (much like a new owner of a puppy might do), but instead check, double-check, and then check once more. There is an aphorism in Japanese that goes: to question and ask is a moment's shame; to question and not ask is a lifetime of shame. If you fail to ask, the shame will be doubly yours, because not only will you often look and feel silly, but you may well also lose a client.

### **The Suit Does Not Make the Translator**

Translators are among those fortunate few who do not have to dress up for work. I won't go into the details of what I have worn or where exactly I was in my home when talking to clients on the phone, but suffice it to say that those were not conditions under which I would have wanted to be face to face with a business contact. Conversely, translators have to sound professional at all times, regardless of the situation.

In many businesses, a visual impression is the most important. A good suit, a proper haircut, a clean shave (of the legs or face), and the other professional amenities are essential to success. Translators don't have to endure this unless they work in-house or meet with their clients in person. Instead, we have to rely on what we say, how we say it, and how we sound in order to create and maintain business relations. So good spoken English, or any other language you use professionally, a confident, polished manner, and a strong sense of professionalism in what you say is vital.

You literally cannot afford to have one of those bored, dull voices that telemarketing firms inflict on the average American daily. You can't afford to sneeze and cough throughout your business negotiations, unless desperately ill, in which case you might consider not working. Few people translate well while suffering from the flu and using powerful decongestants. You can't afford the cries of children, the yelping or chirping of pets, or the complaints of roommates in the background. Your home office has to sound like an office. Make sure it is in a quiet part of your home, away from the noise of a kitchen, garage, playroom, or workroom, and can be closed off from the rest of the house by a door. If you live alone, just keep the stereo or TV down, or have a remote with a mute button handy to turn off the volume when the phone rings.

### **A Nice Neat Package**

So a professional translator is something of a package, combining a strong linguistic background with an interest in writing, as well as polished business skills. I realize that I haven't answered the question with which I started this article: whence cometh the true professionals? However, the true professionals themselves may not know where they come from, and I'm not sure it's all that important that they do. All translators have to strive for an ever higher level of professionalism to bring prestige and respect to themselves and the translation profession.