

TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS IN AMERICA
THE ROAD TO RESPECTABILITY

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Everybody wants to be respected, even Rodney Dangerfield. Rodney, the comedian, has two major obstacles to overcome. He does not look like he deserves respect, and he often does not act in a manner which would earn him respect. To a large degree this also holds true of the professions of translation and interpretation in the United States of America.

Here, neither profession is traditionally looked upon as a bona fide profession such as lawyers, architects or ornithologists. Many Americans would not know what an ornithologist is, but the mere sound of the word will convince them that it is a profession. Maybe the fastest road to respectability would be to just call ourselves "translatologists". It certainly has the ring of dignity and big bucks. When you say, "My translatologist charged me 150 bucks an hour", it somehow sounds acceptable. When you say, "My translator charged me forty bucks an hour", it sounds outrageous.

Even this faint attempt to be humorous indicates that -- on the road to respectability -- the actual current status of the profession may not matter as much as the general public's perception of the profession. Unfortunately, that perception is bad for a whole number of reasons.

First of all, the profession started off on the wrong foot on this continent. The American natives who dominated this vast land prior to the arrival of the European settlers spoke different languages but rarely relied on written documents. Each tribe had a medicine man and a council of elders but lacked lawyers, written land deeds, and bodies of written codes of criminal, civil or religious conduct. So there was little need for translation. With hunting, fishing and fighting other tribes being the preoccupation of many, what interpretation was done consisted mainly of interrogation of prisoners, obtaining hunting and travel information, and negotiating terms of surrender.

When the settlers arrived and later the armies to protect them or help expand their territorial holdings, most communication needs, again, were similar and dealt with the native peoples and the Indian tribes who joined or opposed the Spanish, the French or the British in the decades of wars and skirmishes which preceded the eventual division of the North American continent into Canada, Mexico and the ever-expanding United States of America.

The few professionally trained translators and interpreters who had arrived with the educated colonists remained confined to the original thirteen states and found work in cities like Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and later Washington.

Once the original United States was formed, the next hundred years or so consisted of driving its borders relentlessly westward and into the Southwest while moving most of the surviving Indian tribes off in the same directions. Most of the new breed of settlers arriving in search of gold, silver, furs, timber and cheap land were not educated people. The West was won by the gun, the saw and the plough, but not by the pen.

Again, the major communication needs were mostly the same: oral interpretation of information on travel logistics, hunting, farming and trading, and, for the Cavalry, the interrogation of prisoners and negotiating with tribal chiefs who could not produce written land deeds for translation. Written translations were a rare occurrence in the West. Ironically, in our time, more written translations are done each day in California than in New York and Pennsylvania combined.

Yet the traditions of the Old West are still very much with us, and with it the image that language work needs not to be done by professionals. In the Federal Government, this notion is still prevalent in the agencies which deal with immigration questions, the protection of the borders, illegal drugs, counterfeit money, and firearms. The agents and law enforcement officers working at the front, notably at the border with Mexico, or dealing directly with Haitian or Cuban refugees consider familiarity with the other language to be the key criterion for the function of interpreting and translating, not professional training. Most of the more than 200 "interpreters" for Haitian Creole recently employed by various agencies in connection with the processing of refugees never had any professional instruction in interpreting or translating.

Their work at the front line, however, gives them visibility. The agents who worked with them will go back to Washington, Denver or Dallas with a certain image of what an interpreter is. They will never buy the notion that interpreting is a profession until they have an equally long exposure to professional interpreters or translators, and most of them will not get that exposure.

So here then is our first big obstacle on the road to respectability: overcoming the negative image of the past plus echoes of that image still emanating from the present. But let us move on to a much larger obstacle.

Professionals are trained at universities or at equivalent schools of higher education. If you want to become a professional translator or interpreter in Europe, you have a wide array of university programs to choose from. You can go to Florence, Geneva, Paris, Vienna, Heidelberg, Copenhagen, Moscow or dozens of other reputable programs. In neighboring Canada, you have a number of adequate choices. Not so in the United States of America. When it comes to recognizing the national need for university training programs for professional translators and interpreters, most of academia in the United States is as blind as a bat and firmly embedded in obsolete traditions and unrealistic views. The dozen or so good translation programs which exist in the fifty states and the two or three interpreting programs of any consequence are very much the exception which proves the rule. They cover only a fraction of the national need.

Two years ago, I was told that a certain university had developed an excellent foreign language program, with a very large enrollment. When I contacted the university to check this out, I received an invitation to come and lecture on professional careers in interpretation and translation. During my visit there, I found an excellent mix of languages and a high-quality teaching program for foreign languages supplemented by state-of-the art technology. Yet not one of the 14 professors I had a working lunch with had a grasp of what translating and interpreting as a working profession is all about. None of them had ever mentioned interpreting to their students as a possible career choice, and only two had mentioned the translation of works of literature as a possible option. They were surprised by my statement that in the marketplace technical translators outnumber literary translators by at least ten to one and that the average income of technical translators exceeds that of their colleagues in the other discipline. The university career center contained no literature on university training programs for translators and interpreters. The number of foreign language students at that university, coupled with its sister university in the same state numbers several thousand, enough to populate its own training program for translators and interpreters, if it had one, without ever having to recruit anywhere else.

At the universities and colleges where such programs exist, they are often hidden in dark corners of the hierarchical structure, poorly funded and poorly staffed. Just ask the incoming president of the ATA. His program in Michigan is desperately struggling for survival and recognition like so many others.

Which planet do American university administrators and chairs of departments of languages and linguistics live on? It cannot be the same planet where the universities of Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, and dozens of other countries are located who supply their societies with a marvelous crop of high-quality translators and interpreters each year who form that golden bridge across which correct information and billions of dollars in exports flow to other cultures and economies.

The United States does not need any more theoretical linguists. The unemployment lines are full of them and many thousands more fill other jobs in the language field where their university training is more of a hindrance than a help.

In the meantime, the enormous vacuum created by the absence of sufficient training opportunities for young Americans who have the language knowledge and the aptitude to become respected professional translators and interpreters is filled by domestic amateurs and by foreign professionals who are happy to take our corporate dollars back home to Tokyo and Amsterdam. The overwhelming majority of English-Japanese conference interpreters operating in the United States are citizens of Japan or other nations. We are talking here about language professionals many of whom earn six figure incomes. And that holds true for many professional translators who can handle Japanese, Korean, Russian or other currently lucrative languages. How much longer can academic decision makers sit on their hands and deny this income to talented young Americans?

Thus academia in the United States is not only a large hurdle on the road to respectability for our profession, it has through its negligence created another hurdle: the tens of thousands of improperly trained translators and interpreters in the United States who in many places overshadow and underbid the true professionals, thus contributing strongly to the negative public perception of the nature of the two professions.

What other obstacles are there to overcome?

An obvious one is the traditional myopia in the American business community on the usefulness of foreign languages, translating and interpreting as tools to create business and open foreign markets. The Dutch, the Swiss, the French, the Germans and the Japanese, to name but a few, have cleverly used this device to great advantage in vaulting into the top ranks of the world's exporters. It is a fallacy to conclude that because English has become the leading international language of business, we need to pay little attention to this area.

Even today, there are more businessmen and traders in the world who do not speak English than there are those who do. Neglecting to address them in their own language makes no good business sense. Just because something seems plausible or logical on first examination, does not mean that it is.

Let me give you an example. When I had signed on as a salesman with a Washington office machine company many years ago, I was given a territory that was not exactly ideal. The lucrative territories remained with the established salesmen.

I quickly inventoried the few large-sized companies in my territory. One was the Washington headquarters of IBM. I asked our sales manager if anybody had ever called on them. He laughed, "You want to sell business machines to IBM? They are the largest maker of business machines in this country." This seemed plausible and a logical reason not to call on IBM, but to my juvenile mind it was not necessarily relevant. So I made an appointment with the IBM purchasing agent. He was delighted to see me because no office machine salesman had called on him in years. I walked out of my first appointment with a sizeable order for adding machines and printing calculators, neither of which IBM made at the time. Within a few months IBM became my largest account in the entire territory.

Ergo, what seems obvious and logical at first blush, is not necessarily so. The notion that American business can hold its own against tougher and tougher world competition without investing in the use of foreign languages and the professional experts who operate in this field has no practical relevance or merit whatsoever.

Now here is finally some good news. This particular obstacle on our road to respectability should not be around much longer. American business is finally warming up to the idea that the knowledge of foreign languages and business cultures and the utilization of reliable translators and interpreters makes good business sense. We are not out of the tunnel yet. But we can clearly see the light at the end of it.

Once this notion is firmly established in the business world, business leaders will have an incentive to hold the feet of academia's decision makers to the fire when they see their new concept threatened through the lack of training facilities. On the day that corporate grants and scholarships will be as easy to obtain for university programs of translation and interpretation as they are now for MBA programs, academia will take off its blinders and get out of the rocking chair of comfortable but largely useless traditions in the language field. If nothing else seems to be able to move them out of their self-imposed lethargy, believe me, American business will. Virtually all new initiatives of any consequence in this country come out of the private sector.

In the last two decades, our professions have looked to government and academia for solutions, beginning with Jimmy Carter's President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies of 1978, the ensuing establishment of miniscule "National Foreign Language Centers" at prestigious universities, and ending with the language initiatives contained in the recent National Security Education Act.

Some marginal relief for foreign language training has come from all of this, but the dismal state of the professions of translation and interpretation has not improved through these measures. They are no more than lollipops for a sick child in need of strong medicine. And when Senator Paul Simon's proposal for a scholarship grant program for American students who want to become professional translators and interpreters had successfully woven its way through the committees in the Senate and House earlier this year, it died a sudden death in conference committee because of financial anemia and the unwillingness of some in the Department of State to get into the scholarship business.

So let us not fix our eyes so much on government and the American academic institutions because their track record in our field has not been good. Let us take advantage instead of the new curiosity in the business community about what our professions may have to offer. If the promise and the opportunities were not there, do you believe for one moment that AT&T would have jumped into the interpreting and translating business with both feet?

If we can get the corporate community to ride shotgun on our professional wagon, it will clear most of the other boulders from our road to respectability. In this area it should be easy for the ATA, as a strong and respected professional association to become more active. After all so many of you are independent businesswomen and businessmen. The only difference is the annual turnover. You speak the same language already. Call on large companies as I did in my youthful innocence. Get them interested in what our professions can offer them. Organize an occasional symposium for business leaders or whatever it takes to get their attention.

Let us not be like academia and do the same dumb old things over and over again. Agree on new approaches and then stand united behind your new approach and get involved. There has been too much bickering and infighting in some of our professional associations. To outside observers, this makes us look like Rodney Dangerfield at his worst.

It makes no sense to be fighting over crumbs on the inside when there are scores of uneaten pies waiting to be uncrated on the outside. Internal division and lack of cooperation between different associations is not moving us down the road to respectability. Nor will we make progress by meeting time and time again just to cry on each other's shoulders about the sad state of affairs. Your approach to your association should be, to paraphrase JFK, "Ask not what your association can do for you. Ask how you can help your association to move the profession forward." If you are not willing to do that, you are part of the problem, not part of the solution. And if you remain part of the problem, you forfeit your moral right to complain.

Another problem our professions face in the United States is that we have never been successfully counted. In a free country there is a lot of strength in factually supported numbers, particularly at election time. Nobody, not even our intelligence agencies, knows the approximate total number of translators and interpreters residing in the United States. All feeble attempts made in the past, for instance, by Princeton University, do not even have an accuracy rate of plus or minus 100%. My personal feeling, after 30 years in both professions in this country, tells me that the actual number is probably considerably higher than anybody believes. Time and time again, in my travels I happen upon large groups of translators or interpreters of whom I had never heard before. Yet the facts to support this feeling are nowhere to be found, nor will they be easy to come by. What a feat it would be to get this question put on the census form for the year 2000! But somebody needs to develop a strong initiative to get this accomplished.

Whatever the number, this country has many of the finest translators and interpreters the world has ever seen. Our top professionals are highly respected in other countries. There are people sitting in this room who have enriched the world's libraries with superb translations of original works that require the strongest analytical, linguistic and creative powers from the translator. In 1987, King Hassan of Morocco sent his best interpreter to Washington for master-level training -- not to Geneva or Paris. When a peace conference on the Middle East convened in Madrid in 1991, it called for a mix of languages which had never existed at a major conference before. The then still existing Soviets and the Spanish, who were trying to organize the required language support, finally threw up their hands in despair, stating this just could not be done. Secretary of State James Baker telephoned his chief interpreter in Washington from Madrid and called in the American language cavalry. It was not easy, but the job got done. Baker stated to Stephanie van Reigersberg after the completion of the conference, "You performed miracles!", and he was almost right.

The annual conferences of the American Translators Association, too, are usually very well organized and present a marvelous forum for our professions. This year's meeting was a good example. The attempt to widen the reach of the association to include more professional interpreters and topics on interpretation is also a positive step in the direction of unity among two professions which require the same wide range of linguistic qualifications, intellectual acumen and knowledge of diverse cultures and divergent fields of human endeavor. The difference is mostly technical, one delivering the product instantly and without recourse to dictionaries and reference aids, the other working with deliberate care and greater accuracy and with the ability to edit out mistakes before they become public.

The interpreter enjoys the ephemeral moment of glory while he or she is allowed on the stage. But after the performance is over, the interpreter and his work are quickly forgotten while the translator's work may be pulled from a library shelf 500 years later. Translators and interpreters are just different practitioners of the same basic profession. They have much in common and little which divides them. Thus it makes great sense for them to work together in harmony.

Translators and interpreters may not yet have the American public's respect. But they certainly deserve it. It is time for all of us to make a greater effort to clear the debris from the road to respectability so we can finally get from here to there. The most promising approach may well be to concentrate the largest effort on the American business community. It furthers the self-interest of American business to work with us and to support us. Self-interest is a powerful force. But first, we must carry the message from this community to the other.
