## What is translation? What is a translator? Translation in a corporate era of productivity at all cost

Question: Is there anything about MT that would enable translators to develop the higher skills needed to translate more demanding material?

Alon Lavie: I don't think there's anything; but I'm not sure there's anything in TM either.

Good afternoon, I'm glad to see you all. Before I start, I want to congratulate the organizers of this conference for a job very well done. As former chair of the Conference Committee, from 1997 to 2003, I understand that what looks like a seamless production is the result of a group of dedicated volunteers endlessly sweating the details. I also know about the esprit that develops among members and about the glow of satisfaction after the event is done. I hope that some of you in the audience will consider joining the effort next year. I encourage you to give your name to one of the members of the Conference Committee.

I want to talk today about some profound changes in our field and the effects that they may end up having on us. And in us, too. I'll introduce my concerns briefly here, and then I hope you'll all join me in exploring these issues.

Over the last ten years there's been an increasing emphasis on so-called "productivity" in translation. As translators are bombarded with calls to "get it in yesterday," we are advised – sometimes essentially forced – to use technologies, particularly translation memory tools, that streamline and standardize translation "output." My concern is that if we adopt these "productivity" values thoughtlessly, we risk adopting along with them a drastically narrowed view of ourselves, our work, and our potential. These tools take control of the translation process out of our hands and place it in the hands of others. They are the face of corporatism in translation. They encourage us to make the demands and pressures of the corporate marketplace our first concern, and to place them ahead of our own satisfaction, creativity, and development. This kind of tunnel vision threatens to turn translation into a

sterile technical exercise – a personally meaningless task that affords less and less emotional or intellectual pleasure.

Furthermore, to identify too closely with the needs of our corporate clients ultimately sets us up for lower pay. Corporations are really good at centralizing control of work processes to reduce costs. This is the value of translation memory tools for agencies and their corporate clients. They speed up and standardize output in the interest of reducing costs. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with reducing costs, but I find it hard to imagine that these savings will come out of anyone's pockets but ours. Especially as more and more translators trained in TM come out of the translation programs that have been set up throughout the country. A bit more on that later.

I am not saying that there is no good in these new technologies. I do think, however, that we shouldn't adopt them, or the values they embody, thoughtlessly. If we want to be sure that we use them to our advantage, not someone else's, that we are their masters and not the other way around, we have to make ourselves aware of the risks they pose.

Let me take a moment to remind you of exactly how un-narrow a phenomenon translation really is. In fact, translation is one of those fundamental processes without which life is impossible. Every stimulus from the "real world" that comes in on us is filtered through countless translational processes within our sensory organs and eventually in the brain. It is only through translation that patterns of sound and light can be comprehended as speech or writing or painting or movement. The processes are so seamless that we mostly take them for granted, but without them, there is no meaning.

We are constantly translating and being translated, internally, too. We are the result of countless acts of transcription, coding, and decoding carried out at the nuclear level – translational processes that are fundamental to life itself. And comparative studies of identical twins, fraternal twins, and unrelated children raised together and separately have demonstrated just how formative they are of our physical, emotional, and intellectual makeup.

This awareness that we are always translating, that translation is universal, has lately become something of a commonplace. But it is less commonly recognized, although equally true, that translational processes are not only the result, but also a primary cause of who we are. They define us. They shape who we may become.

Now, most of us here today are engaged in one particular form of translation: the rendering of communications from one human language into another. And as hard as it may be to convince our clients of this, we all know very well that this entails a good deal more than taking a dictionary and swapping out words. I think it is no overstatement to say that good translators bring their entire persons to the task. Our innate genetic predispositions, our experiences, the work habits we develop over a lifetime – everything in us goes into our interpretations, as does the sensitivity to language that we train and refine by practice and study. This is the vision that I think translators need to keep in mind, but that I fear is threatened.

Here's an example. I will be using my own stories throughout this talk, because I'm the only translator I know from the inside out. But you probably all have similar stories of the ways your lives and experiences have impacted upon your work (and vice versa), and I hope you'll offer some of them to enrich our discussion later. In the meantime, here's one of mine. For many years, I made my living translating medical papers, patents, and other documents, and whatever else came my way. As a sideline, I developed a fair amount of skill in reading 19th- and 20th-century German handwritings, which enabled me to translate correspondences and diaries for private clients.

It was in that context that I first became aware of the interaction between the translator and the person "being translated." About 15 years ago I was translating the letters of two brothers who emigrated from Germany to Missouri in the 1840s, and wrote copious and fascinating reports of their lives for family and friends back home. I became aware of a feeling that I was seated in the writers; that I was channeling them, giving them voice. The result was a translation that was widely reckoned to be lively and engaging.

Several years later, however, this method was put to the test. I undertook to translate 400-plus letters written in the 1880s to a mother in Germany by her 19-year-old daughter, who was working as a governess in Constantinople. Identifying with adventurous young men was one thing, but what on earth did I have in common with a teenage nanny? As I embarked on the huge task I wondered where it would take me. But as my relationship with the writer developed, I found myself accompanying the young woman on her errands, consoling her when she worried about being a 21-year-old "old maid," and even reading the romantic potboilers with which she entertained herself after work, like Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*. She commented several times that those letters home were her diary, that she was confiding in her mother. But I, too, became a recipient of her confidences, and I responded to them. Returning some of the letters to the owner one day, I asked for a color Xerox of the young woman's portrait. Wagging her finger at me, my client said, "Now Ken, don't you go falling in love with Marie. She's been dead for more than 60 years!"

I'm not sure about the falling in love part, but my discerning client was absolutely right that I was intensely engaged with my subject. The question of where her voice stopped and mine began is a very interesting one that bears on a lot of translation issues, but I'm not going to touch it today. I will, however, say that this identification with the voice of the writer has always felt right to me. I became increasingly comfortable with it over many experiences like these, and if I can be said to use a particular translation method, that's what it is. It's that depth of engagement that makes translation so rewarding for me. (Incidentally, that's Marie looking over my shoulder in the photo in NETA News.)

And it applies to less dramatic tasks, too, which I'll illustrate in a moment. There is something profoundly transformative about translation. The process changes us. Every act of translation, if we are lucky, leaves behind it a "residue" of experience and comprehension that fuels the desire and the capacity for more. This is why translation is a creative pursuit, and why what we do can be "our work" instead of just "a job."

This is true of any skill that a person pursues seriously and in which experience is exercised and compounded over many years. And this transformative quality in good translation work is why I've never been able to convince myself of a hard and fast line between what is called "literary" translation and the translation of the technical and other workaday documents that most of us engage in. Clearly a Toyota manual makes different demands on a translator than does a novel or a poem. But every document is produced by a person who, to one degree or another, brought his life experience to the production of it. At least until recently. As such, every document is an entrée into a world of human experience. The deep engagement and linguistic finesse that characterize literature can be found in surprising places, and – as anyone who has ever been disappointed in a book can attest – it can be missing in surprising places, too. The voice and substance of the author, and therefore of the translator who conveys them, are not relevant only in so-called "literary" works. Optimum translation of any document requires that the translator be able to recognize the different kinds of engagement that different documents demand. Even a laboratory SOP that sets out the procedure for moving from a dirty room to a clean room can be clearly written and psychologically perceptive. Or it can be junk. And our appreciation of the difference is literary.

To give a more specific example, I once translated an expert testimony in a patent infringement case. I never fully understood the particulars of the case, although I had a grasp of the technical vocabulary, which was not all that extensive. But the testimony was written in such a way that I could follow a complex argument from thought to thought over fifteen pages. I felt as if I were on a tightrope. If the author abandoned me, I'd fall into the abyss and might have to admit that I was translating over my head. But he didn't abandon me. By the time I reached the end, I knew that I had nailed that translation. And as I thought about the experience afterward, it occurred to me that perhaps this was one way of recognizing first-rate expository prose of a certain sort – that it could be followed and translated even before it was fully understood. The writing was so crisp, the grammar so precise, the transitions so logical, that all I had to do was go willingly along.

A translator who does not appreciate the difference between good writing and bad, between solid writing and sleazy, will not produce an ideal translation of either – and, again, that appreciation is essentially literary. Refining our capacity for appreciation makes us better translators; it's one aspect of the residue that I've been talking about. That attorney was a terrific writer. And he, too, added to the creative residue at my disposal.

A few days ago, I finished translating for Stanford University Press *No Justice. Nowhere.*, the diaries of Willy Cohn, a German-Jewish teacher and historian who chronicled the progressive constriction of Jewish life in Breslau from 1933 until just days before his murder in 1941. A far cry from patent translation, it would seem, and indeed these writings involve looser – though not less demanding – modes of translation and a very different sensibility. Still, when Cohn explained a theoretical idea, I felt myself shifting into something akin to patent gear. I know where I learned that voice – from dozens of patents, and from that lawyer. That's what I mean by residue. Translation muscle gets built up when something stretches us; once we have access to that residue, it can be used for purposes for which it was not strictly intended.

These are my stories. But I imagine that most of us have had experiences of being taken beyond the translation at hand to a place where we had to step back and appraise the voice of the writer or the quality of the writing. Perhaps some of us have even found ourselves now and then forming in our minds some piece of a personal theory of translation. These experiences should not be discounted; appreciation and theory-making are among the hidden pleasures of translation, whatever we are translating, and they enable us to grow into our craft. When we lose that expansiveness, we lose our creativity and our freshness.

So. What does it mean that translators are increasingly being urged to be more "productive?" ...and that TMs promise to increase productivity by reducing "redundant" effort in the translation process? As I've said, that promise is very attractive to agencies and the corporations who engage them, and TMs have won great acceptance as a result. It's an attractive promise to us, too. Certainly we want to work efficiently. We have a vested interest in making the most of work we have already done, and it's very helpful to

be able to organize our specialized knowledge and vocabularies into an easily accessible form. But when these tools achieve their efficiencies by weakening our grip on the translation process, it behooves us to be careful. One obvious example is the fact that when agencies mandate the use of these tools, it is often they, not us, who end up owning the translation memories that our work produces. But there are other kinds of control too. As soon as someone or something other than the translator can interject translation solutions – even if the translator is entirely at liberty to reject them, the translator's own process has been interrupted or even hijacked. The question does not revolve, as some would have it, around which texts are suitable for TMs and which not, the real question has to do with the effects that these tools have on the mental habits of translators themselves over time.

Skilled translators, like all other skilled workers, evolve highly personal and sophisticated work and thought processes. These are interrupted when disembodied translation segments are introduced from who knows where. It's one thing to build our own translation memories, freely following our own trains of thought and the voice and logic of the text. But it undermines our process when we are constantly distracted by other people's solutions. These may be good or they may be bad, but before we can make that determination we have to stop what we are doing to judge them. The very fact of stopping, though, undermines the efficiency that is the whole point of translation memory. So there is always pressure on us – more or less subtle – to accept what the TM gives us, especially if we are only being paid a percentage of our full rate. We also know very well that if we look at it long enough, even bad text starts to make sense. Eventually it becomes "good enough." One of my correspondents, a teacher in a well-respected translation program, wrote to me recently, "It is like shoveling sand against the tide as translators (students, but professionals as well) simply get lulled into adopting the solutions proposed by the TM."

This problem is now being acknowledged occasionally on professional forums. Even some proponents of translation memory tools have noted something of a deterioration in texts translated using TMs. I have heard this chalked up disparagingly to a lack of translator "professionalism." But I think that this is a red herring, an elegant way of blaming the

failings of the tools on the translators who are increasingly pressured to use them. We need to be wary of such self-serving explanations. In this case, there are far more cogent ones.

One has to do with morale. People are most engaged in their work when they feel that they matter. But translation memory tools are designed explicitly to keep the translator from mattering – to liberate translation from dependence on any one translator's individual process and even on any one individual translator. To translation memory tools and those who mandate them, I do *not* matter. If my words and those of other people are interchangeable, how can I not conclude that I am interchangeable too?

And it's worse than that. TMs tell us not only that we are interchangeable, but also that we ought to be. If translation output is increasingly going to be a patchwork of translation memories – that is, of many translators' contributions – a distinctive individual voice is more of a liability than an asset. The technology itself works to homogenize diverse contributions. It suppresses the individual realities of the participating translators. In this way it undermines optimum translation, and it is not hard to see why it can never achieve the richness of individually crafted work. But it is disingenuous for proponents to call that the translator's fault – it is the inevitable result of a depersonalizing technology.

This confronts translators with a personal dilemma: If speed of output is everything, if words are commodities to be swapped and sold, there is no point at all in developing our own translation voice. But if we don't develop that voice, then what? Do we spend the four or more decades of our working lives filling in other people's blanks with little opportunity to develop and exercise our full, and most fulfilling, potential? Chasing one project after another, rushing to meet deadlines? Is that all there is? What – a – trap.

If I sound as though this really matters to me, it's because it does. I spent my adolescence at a school in Switzerland called the Ecole d'Humanité. The Ecole was founded by the progressive educators Paul Geheeb and his wife Edith, in 1934, after the Nazis forcibly took over his first school, the renowned Odenwaldschule, in Germany. Rather than fire Jewish and socialist teachers, or compromise the school's egalitarian and coeducational

principles, the Geheebs left Germany and started over. The name of their new school was itself a direct challenge to the Nazis. The word *humanité* (in all its forms and in all languages that use it) encompasses all peoples, not just so-called Aryans.

If the school's philosophy could be summed up in a single maxim, it would be "Werde der du bist" – Become who you are. We were constantly reminded of these words of the Greek poet Pindar, because they were woven into all aspects of the school. We received no grades; we wrote elaborate assessments of our own accomplishments in little green books, and our teachers did likewise. We had three hours of classes each morning; the afternoons were given over to theater, sports, and the arts. Each morning we peeled the day's potatoes and vegetables, and we did most of the cleaning and maintenance ourselves. The school did not want to educate one-sided people, and a great deal of attention was paid to the particular needs of each student. When I arrived, at the age of 11, for example, I had no apparent knowledge of German. But the school knew that I had lived in Germany for a year when I was five. Their solution, and this was very typical, was to place me in a Latin class – in German.

My years at the Ecole had plenty to do with my becoming a translator. When I look back over my life, I can see just how firmly anchored that phrase from Pindar became, and how it guided my choices and thinking. And I know that many of you have had equally intense formative experiences with other languages and other cultures, and that those are what have brought us all together here today as translators.

TMs present another practical problem. Their characteristic segmentation of text interrupts flow. It discourages the translator from keeping the flow of the whole text in mind, and forces concentration on individual parts. This problem, too, is showing up on the forums, where some translators note that transitions tend to get lost, with an adverse affect on smoothness and sometimes even on meaning. Of course, such problems can, theoretically, be remedied in the editorial phase, but what is the point of building this feature in and then having to undo the results afterwards? And what is the cost of being endlessly jarred out of

our own process and the flow of the text? What happens to our ability to appreciate the text?

Remember the expert opinion I mentioned before? The crisp and careful transitions in that piece were among the chief guideposts that allowed me to translate this unfamiliar material successfully. They were also what alerted me to the quality of the writing, which I then strove to emulate in my translation. I doubt that I would have picked up on those cues if I had been using Trados or Wordfast (the particular TM that I own). Instead of an expanding experience and a real pleasure, this assignment would have been just another job. Kaching! Next! That's the commodification of translation in a nutshell.

Yes, it's good to know that we can use these tools to develop our own translation memories and our own specialized vocabularies. And I would be the last to deny that help in avoiding dropped passages is a good thing. We translators with years of whole-text experience can probably find ways around some of the pitfalls I've been talking about. Still, how do we inoculate ourselves against the dulling effects of broken-up material and the constant intrusion of outside solutions? Even skilled and sharp-eyed translators are not necessarily immune to that – or to the siren call of "productivity at all cost."

But the rising generations of translators are the most vulnerable of all. Most of them have limited experience negotiating the linguistic oddities of different languages. They've had little or no chance to develop their own perspectives and their own voices. For translators growing up in the era of translation memory tools, this technology, and its outputs, will be the norm, especially now that translation programs across the country are under pressure to accept that norm as the new standard. I recently spoke with a friend, a translator and translation teacher who is helping to set up a new university translation program. I asked him whether they taught TMs. "The university really wants this program," he said, "but it has to be self-sustaining." This was a cryptic response, and I had to think about it. Then the light dawned. "Wait a second," I said. "Do you mean that XYZ is paying you to use their tool?" "Something like that," he said, suddenly reticent. We should all be concerned about this.

I don't have much to say about machine translation. At the moment, even its most enthusiastic proponents claim that it is suitable only for certain easily controllable sorts of texts, and for gisting and some of the other things that Alon mentioned. But I don't think that this is how it will work out in the real world. MT output may or may not ever meet the Turing test – that is, be indistinguishable from human translation. But it won't have to. All that has to happen is for it to become just good enough to be profitable after post-editing. That "just good enough" may well become a *de facto* definition of acceptable translation. The pressure on us to do machine-driven work will be stronger than ever – and low post-editing rates will probably depress overall rates. Reassurances from the industry that this won't happen are little more than anesthesia.

My own feeling is that translators should refuse to post-edit machine translation if at all possible. Not that I think we will stall the inexorable "March of Progress," but there is really nothing in it for us. How can it be in our developmental or financial interest to tidy up linguistic rubbish produced without benefit of a functioning human brain, mind, or spirit? We gain nothing from it intellectually or emotionally. There is nothing in it that develops our skills so that we can take on more demanding material. (This is what I was getting at with the question I asked Alon during his session. His candid response actually gave me more than I anticipated.) It will not encourage us to get under the text or gain an appreciation of an author – because there is no author. But that is exactly what will give us a decent living and a rewarding life's work.

Because we do have to make a living, and this is getting harder. These are difficult times, and I don't know a single freelancer of any persuasion who doesn't live with constant insecurity. The pressure to "buckle down" and make a "decent living" feels overwhelming, and it's hard to resist the temptation to do whatever it takes to make ourselves more attractive to the market and to get the work "done and out" as fast as possible. And there wouldn't be anything wrong with that – except that TM and MT don't offer us security, and they never will. Translation rates as a whole haven't risen in years; by anecdotal account they are actually dropping. If I am right about the trends I've been talking about,

they will not be rising any time soon. Productivity tools will have played some part in that. And the interchangeability that I talked about will increase, making for even more psychological insecurity.

I have been fortunate in some ways. I grew to maturity as a translator when there was no serious pressure to adopt productivity tools, and I never had to worry about being a socalled "professional." I have no children, and children are the weightiest of all financial responsibilities. Even so, I worry about money in a way that I didn't before. I have declined to do TM work, and that has cut into my agency work. But I did this at a time when I was ready with alternatives. I was willing to make this leap because my work for academic publishers is so much more compelling, even though with all the revisions and extra work that such translation requires, the pay works out to about a third of my usual fee. But I have a few private clients who pay my full rate. And work on privately held letters and diaries – my preference when I can get it – pays very well too, although material like that is not always available. So I'm working toward an economic balance, a "business model" in which letters and regular clients subsidize my book translations. So far it's working more or less well, if somewhat nerve-wrackingly. But it's impossible to see around the next corner. The net I've cast is a somewhat narrow one, in part because I'm older and over time my interests have become focused. There are certainly much broader – and potentially more lucrative – waters for other translators to fish in. But we have to be willing to set out on our own and find them – no one else is going to look for them for us. Don't settle for what falls easily to hand.

Most of us are going to have to engage to some degree with these productivity tools. Their use will probably become a necessary skill, a useful one to fall back on when more engaging and rewarding work isn't available. But finding really good work in the usual places is not going to get easier. There are still agencies that remain uncomfortable with the implications of these tools and refuse to use them, but they will probably become fewer in coming years. For our own protection, at a minimum, we have to be realistic about the limitations and dangers of these new technologies and about their seductions. And we should not identify with the narrow vision of translation that emanates from corporations

and translation-brokers. We have to find ways to reframe what we do to encompass *all* of what translation means. We have to seek out clients – private, academic, corporate, whatever – who know how to value what we do, and who give us work that we can turn into "my work." Even when we do work with these tools, we mustn't let them persuade us that a depersonalized involvement (which reflects the capacities of computers and the priorities of corporations) is the best we can hope for.

How do we break out of the trap? I can't answer that question concretely, because that has to come from within each of us. But when in doubt I fall back on the principle of my school – Become who you are. Not an easy answer, but it does offer us a lodestar by which to set our course. Let me give one last example of the ways that a translator's life and work can become creatively intertwined, and why it's so important to keep a broader vision of translation alive against the corporate forces that would narrow it.

About 10 years ago at a book fair I found a slim volume titled *Selbsterziehung zum Tod fürs Vaterland*, *Self-Education for Death for the Fatherland*. The author was Udo Kraft, an "ordinary" German. The book was published in 1915, after Udo's death, by his brother, Friedrich. These excerpts from Udo's diaries and letters made my hair stand on end. They chronicle his unwavering obsession with dying in defense of the German Fatherland against its arch-enemy, France – and his bitter regret at having been born too late. In 1914, at the age of 44, he finally had his chance. He enlisted in the Kaiser's army – and took a bullet to the head in the first action he saw. I decided to translate the book as a way of understanding Udo. But more than that, I thought that the close reading that translation makes possible might let me feel my way into the mindset that made World War I – and what came later – possible.

I translated the book. I also hunted for more information – any kind of information – about Udo. For several years I came up dry. After all, he was not a "notable" in any way. But, being who I am, I don't give up easily, and eventually I happened upon a 12-page article about him in the journal of a small German town's historical society. And in it I learned that his brother had taught at the Odenwaldschule, the original school established by Paul

Geheeb, the founder of my own Ecole. Utterly astounded, I plugged "Friedrich Kraft" and "Odenwaldschule" into Google, and it was true. Up popped the Geheeb archives page on the Ecole d'Humanité website! Udo and Geheeb, it turns out, were cousins. They were both born in 1870. They attended the same university. For a time they were even members of the same dueling fraternity. They were close when they were young, and there was a fairly large correspondence between them in the archives. I had stumbled upon a dramatic, and very close-to-home, example of something that had fascinated me much of my adult life: the notorious split in the German character of that period. Here it was, embodied within a single family, in two boys who had grown up together, and one of them was a man I had actually known! In Udo could be seen the authoritarian, militaristic, and doctrinaire side of the culture; his cousin Paul Geheeb, who died at the Ecole in 1961, while I was there, was a German humanist and pacifist whose highest ideals were the poet Goethe and "Werde der du bist."

In 2004 I flew back to my old school, to the one archive in the world where I, uncredentialed and unaffiliated, would not only be welcomed, but also fed and housed. I read the correspondence, which added immeasurably to my sense of the man. Then, in a wish to share something of the excitement that this chase and its results had engendered in me, and to encourage other such exploits in independent scholarship, I put my translation and the results of my research up on my website, under a Creative Commons license. I returned Udo to the public domain.

When Stanford University Press contacted me last year about translating the diaries of Willy Cohn, they told me that my listing on PEN had led them to my website. I cannot say with certainty that it was my translation of *Selbsterziehung* that made them choose me. But it was the website that told them what they needed to know about me and my work, including a translation done years earlier for my own purposes alone. That is what was there for them to see, and to judge. And what will happen once *No Justice. Nowhere.* is published? I have no idea, but I look forward to the next chapter of this unscrolling adventure.

As I said before, we are translating animals. What and how we translate defines who we are, and vice versa. In that sense, every translator brings his or her whole person to the task of translation. The task for each of us is to discover who we are, and to find work that engages us – every bit of us. We need to have and develop our own work – work about which we are so passionate that we are even willing to do it – at times – without compensation. Not because it's a moral issue, but because that passion is what attracts others to us, and opens their eyes to what we can do.

I've told you something about the development of my own work and where it has led me. You've got your own stories, and they will be different. But I think we all know how much it matters to be able to say, "This is my work," and feel on solid ground. Translators are individuals first, or they are not fully translators. To reassert the fundamental association of language, translation, and humanity is the only way to keep us from being sucked into a corporate vortex where our skills are little more than an instrument for someone else's profit, and our unique voices are suppressed. It is those unique voices, and what we say with them, that connect us to other people and give life to what we do.

I have tried to place before you today a vision of ever deeper engagement, a translation model diametrically opposed to the depersonalized and ever more superficial corporate model of "productivity," which can only separate us from ourselves. Even when we have to deal with that model out of necessity, we should never let it define us. We need to be looking all the time for new opportunities to use our skills, and to show the world exactly what they are – and who we are. That is how we can place ourselves in the way of work that is both rewarding and fulfilling.

To paraphrase Pindar, "Become the translator that you are." – (And don't get trapped in Trados!)

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