

SEEING THE WOOD FOR THE TREES

Reassessing research agendas in specialized translation

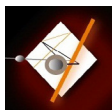
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Keywords. Technical translation, Specialized translation, Communication, Usability.

In 2005, at a conference in Dublin City University, the noted Chinese translation scholar Jin Di once praised the standard of papers presented by the young researchers but marveled at how incredibly specialized they all were (2005, April). This last point seems to encapsulate some of the difficulties facing professional communication research, and in particular specialized translation.

In our efforts to better understand translation, many researchers have become more and more specialized, concentrating on and researching ever-smaller and more highly focused areas. But has this come at a cost? Are we missing out on useful knowledge simply because it is outside of our area?



CONNEXIONS ■ INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION JOURNAL

2013, 1(1), 55–58

ISSN 2325-6044

There is a case for widening the scope of translation—and indeed professional communication—to encompass the broader communication community as a whole because, ultimately, we are all concerned with communicating information effectively. Surely the relatively ancillary modalities of individual languages come a fairly distant second?

Taking technical translation as a case in point, surely it makes sense to subsume it under the general heading of “technical communication”? In this way, we can collaborate more effectively with colleagues who are also concerned with communicating technical knowledge, such as technical writers, instructional designers, journalists and educators. We can then draw on knowledge and research into usability, interaction design, education and so on to help us enrich our own work.

Calls for this approach are not new. Byrne (2006), Schrijver and Van Vaerenberg (2008), and Schubert (2009) have all called for technical translation to be regarded as a form of technical communication, not as a separate area. But there is a certain level of resistance or, at best, apathy to this. In particular, areas such as usability are dismissed by translation scholars on the basis that they are cumbersome, expensive and unwieldy or only applicable in certain circumstances. This is a far from satisfactory justification, not least because the technical communication sector—in its traditional, monolingual sense—has been using usability principles to assess and improve the quality of original language documents for quite some time, without incurring excessive costs or expending vast amounts of effort.

So why is it that some within the translation community seem to regard usability as too complex, too time consuming and too expensive to apply to translation? Is translation so inherently complex that anything beyond checklists or comparisons between source and target text is simply unworkable? It could be argued that the primary reason is an unwillingness to step outside the traditional confines of translation studies. This bunker mentality does little to further our research and is impossible to justify.

Similarly, issues such as instructional design and structured writing have received little attention from technical translation scholars. Presumably the argument being that such fields require interventions in the target text that go beyond the remit of the translator. But if such interventions involve restructuring information, adding information, or changing the focus of a text to better accommodate the target audience and improve the effectiveness of the translational communication, then where is the problem? Postcolonial, feminist and political translators have been doing this for decades (see, for example, Bassnet & Trivedi, 1999; von Flotow, 1997).

If the current research trend continues there is a very real risk that we will examine smaller and smaller issues until we lose sight of the wider picture. We want to avoid the situation described by Nobel Laureate Konrad Lorenz where we become the embodiment of the clichéd specialist who knows more and more about less and less until finally we know everything about nothing. ■

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