

BEHIND THE VALUE

WHY SHOULD I WORRY ABOUT WHAT THE TRANSLATOR GETS PAID?

The customer who posed the question informed me that our offer for his 100-page website project was 'a good fifty percent higher' than the bid he had accepted from an agency.

12 to 15 euro per hour...

I had calculated that at least 100 or more hours would be needed to produce a carefully worded translation suitable for web publication in English. Deducting the agency's margin from the rate it offered the customer, this would leave the translator with around 12 to 15 euro per hour – "a good deal less than your plumber earns" I remarked.

It stands to reason, I argued, that when translators' earnings fall below a certain minimum per hour, they're only left with two options: refuse the contract, or work faster than would be required to produce a good translation. Freelancers don't get paid by the hour, but by the number of lines, words or pages they translate.

... or two pages plus per hour

The translator in this case would have to work at a rate of two pages plus per hour. The quality risk involved in forcing the translator to work at this sort of speed was not likely to help the high-profile nature of the project. "It's your experiment," I acknowledged. Our high quality standards, demonstrated in previous major projects, were not the issue; this customer just assumed he could have them for less elsewhere.

When the customer took me up on my offer to review the translation, it was much too late. The English version had already been completed in its entirety and published on the web. Cost of repair? Downstream measures are always more expensive than getting it right the first time: the layout process will have to be repeated for the reworked or retranslated text, which is why things are often left as they are. "Aber es ist doch Englisch, oder?" This attitude should and does damage a company's image, and certainly does not encourage readership in markets it hopes to reach.

A replicable skill?

My own experience convinces me that there are practical, image-building and ultimately cost-saving reasons to correct the prevailing picture of translation as a replicable skill – a cottage industry toiling away at directly comparable rates.

Translators have different, personally acquired talents. It's a mistake to limit qualifications they require to a foreign language degree, the right specialist knowledge, or a Translation Memory made available to them for reference. It simply takes more time, inquisitiveness, thinking power, iterative loops and linguistic talent to translate a press release, marketing brochure, magazine article or website presentation, than it does to update a translation of an operator's manual or spare-parts catalogue.

Blurred distinctions

Customers cannot be blamed for the fact that low-price competition has done so much to erase all-important quality criteria when comparing translations and the rates at which they are offered. The rates themselves disguise the core issue: the lower they are, the faster the job must be done if the translator is to earn anything at all. Most of them are freelancers, and cannot afford to turn the job down.

Although what a translator ultimately earns is no guarantee, it is a prime motivator towards ensuring that enough time will be taken to produce quality. That's the only reason to worry about what the translator gets paid. And that's why it should be everybody's concern, in corporate communications, at least.