

Social interaction and the translator

As freelancing becomes the norm for many translators, Glyn Haggett asks whether the isolation it entails has a negative impact upon the way we treat each other



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In 2005, at the age of 41, I was diagnosed with a long-standing brain condition. Apart from a vaguely odd appearance and the fact that I would be the odds-on favourite for any world championship in clumsiness, I am one of the fortunate 'anomalies' who are largely unaffected by the condition and able to live a more or less normal life. However, it is not possible to go through the lengthy process of brain scans, waiting times, consultations, 'why mes' and 'what ifs', nor in particular to sit in the neurologist's waiting room among those who have not been quite as lucky, without pause for thought.

During the months after my diagnosis, every second book I read seemed, quite by chance, to include references to the brain, brain surgery and even, in the case of the late Simon Gray's *The Smoking Diaries*, to hydrocephalus, the very condition with which I was diagnosed. All in all, the experience heightened my awareness of how people treat one another; more recently, I have been intrigued by Sara Maitland's *A book of silence*, which goes to the very heart of personal and social values in its examination of the need for verbal interaction.

Gathering my thoughts, therefore, I felt there might be some interest in a short piece on how we interact with our fellow professionals.

ITI members have created a LinkedIn professional network, and one of the members of the Chartered

Institute of Linguists TransNet e-group has recently set up a Facebook group dedicated to linguists. Other linguists meet up on a more or less regular basis for a drink or a meal, often organised by the networks of professional associations. The translator's necessarily solitary existence is well documented, but I wonder whether the fact that in-house positions are becoming increasingly rare, that many of those employed positions which do remain offer flexible working patterns whereby people are able to work from home some of the time (thanks not least to the ever more reasonably priced, reliable laptop), and that more and more translators are going freelance (either by choice or for the want of it) is actually making it more difficult for the profession to develop any sense of coherent identity, let alone a common purpose.

While the diversity of our profession is a fundamental part of its charm and its strength, even its USP, it requires sensitive treatment. The very fragmentation it entails is apt to undermine any concerted influence

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the profession may be able to exert. The social events, training courses and conferences organised by the professional associations are a constructive attempt to address this situation, and very probably the best that can be done in the circumstances, but they will never quite replicate the relationships developed by day-to-day contact in an environment where the most enlightenment is often found in the 'water cooler' conversation that has little or no bearing upon the immediate work in hand.

I also believe our lack of ongoing personal contact with one another (I am sure I cannot be alone among freelancers in not having met many of my clients or colleagues on various projects in person, and in then finding myself surprised when those I do meet turn out to look completely different from how I had imagined them) affects the way we deal with one another online or by email. The brevity to which we have become accustomed in emails, for example, does not always lend itself to courtesy.

Dismissing others' opinions

On a personal level, I find the academic approach adopted by some translators more stifling than stimulating; that feeling is growing as I become ever more aware of a tendency for some to look down upon those who do not agree with them. I have never quite managed to work out whether pedants are attracted to translation or whether it is in fact translation that makes pedants out of all of us. Whatever the reason may be, some of the rude, aggressive and dismissive comments made on websites and message boards in response to other people's opinions and suggested translations would not be made across the office to a respected colleague; at that point, the internet, for all its multifarious positive effects, entails the risk of coarsening interaction between individuals.

How many of us, for example, can honestly say that we always have a genuine grasp of the instructions given to a translator whose work we are being asked to assess or proofread, or of the circumstances in which that person produced the translation? Quite apart from anything else, any translation brief is open to a range of interpretations, and the only

'correct' or 'valid' interpretation is the one that delivers the service the customer in question has requested; no two customers' requirements will ever be the same. Nevertheless, we will be expected to express a considered opinion on the quality of the translation. Some, of course, thrive on the opportunity to assert their own philosophy to the exclusion of all others, and I suspect it is a great deal easier to do that from a distance, when one does not know the person who produced the translation in question, but I am sure many of us are uncomfortable with the concept.

A culture of judgement

There is a wider issue at stake here; Simon Cowell, Jeremy Clarkson, *Big Brother*, *The Weakest Link* and other television programmes, pitting one candidate against another or inviting a panel or the viewing public to 'vote' people in or out, not to mention the 'How's my driving?' sign, necessarily inform the zeitgeist. Unfortunately, they also legitimise aggression and discrimination and provide an open goal for those intent on mischief-making, some of it potentially harmful. Indeed, while I was drafting the proposal for this article, news broke of television viewers complaining to the BBC that their children were being traumatised by the presence on their TV screens of a presenter with one arm. Those complaints bespeak a frighteningly narrow-minded attitude and a judgemental complacency about the status quo; I fear our profession is by no means exempt from similar effects. The exercise of judgement is of course fundamental to what we do as translators, as we assess register, tone and target readership, for example. The line between a legitimate concern for accuracy and a judgemental preoccupation with a perceived 'correctness' is, however, very thin.

A generation of translators is emerging which, through no fault of its own, has never had the opportunity to hone its skills in the civilised 'white heat' of an in-house translation department, where ideas can be shared with people with different levels of knowledge, experience, backgrounds and outlooks, both within and without the department, in the search for the most convincing

answer to the question at hand. The absence of that face-to-face contact will necessarily colour that generation's perception of the profession and of its members; equally, it will affect established translators' opinions of the new kids on the block. Not least, it makes it a little more difficult to develop respect for someone (often these days sitting behind a computer somewhere else in the world) whose experience, background and even personality lead them to approach the same question from a fundamentally different angle. That respect is a life skill that can and will only develop through engagement. This affects the profession internally and externally. Some outside the profession have always seen it as a little arcane and have not been given sufficient reason to change their opinion. Physical distance is likely to make it even harder to bridge that gap in understanding.

An elite – or elitist?

I am also concerned that the system of funding for postgraduate education in the UK is apt to reduce the diversity of the catchment of our profession. Limiting access to further education to those with substantial private means or able and willing to make significant personal sacrifices brings with it the danger of a narrowing of perspective, whereby we create an inward-looking culture which views any suggestion of difference with hostility and suspicion. There is some interesting research to be done into the tendency among those who hold the taught postgraduate qualifications to appoint others who have studied at the same establishments once they are in a position to do so. While this is perfectly understandable on one level, since they will necessarily be familiar with the standards those candidates will have been required to attain, it threatens to cause the profession to stagnate, since it has the practical effect of exclusion, and unchallenged consensus tends to atrophy. There is a danger that what starts out as the legitimate opinion of one well-qualified and persuasive lecturer soon assumes an unwarranted status as unquestioned authority. I also wonder whether course providers exert gentle pressure upon their graduates to encourage them to assist with employment or training opportunities

for later students; it goes without saying that course providers have a vested interest in ensuring that as many of their graduates as possible obtain relevant employment as soon as possible. I do not actually believe that translation necessarily suffers any more than any other profession from the 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' syndrome. However, we must remain open to the new ideas and approaches best suited to the changing world in which we operate.

Chartered Linguist status has recently been launched; while I can see the virtue in formalisation of the recognition of expertise, I fear this status will, by its very nature, appeal most to those who have already attended structured, taught postgraduate courses in translation, and that it will therefore lead to further

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fragmentation. The system seems to have been designed, with the best of intentions, to ensure that only those of genuinely high calibre will achieve the standards required; that is, after all, what gives the status its credibility. However, we must avoid any possibility of the (positive and legitimate) elite becoming the (undesirable) elitist and thriving at the expense of the rest of the profession. Elite status can only exist in relation to the profession at large; the expertise of those who hold it must filter down to others, both to enhance standards and to provide others with a target at which to aim.

I wonder whether the growing edginess in our dealings with one another is simply a sign of increasingly intolerant times, or if there is any constructive and concerted action we can take to remedy it. I would not presume to know the answer. I do believe, however, that it is an issue we must address if our profession is to retain its credibility and therefore to remain attractive to new joiners. ©