

Information Economics, the Translation Profession and Translator Certification

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ABSTRACT

There have been few systematic and descriptive studies of the translation profession. As the demand for translation services has been increasing due to globalization and the development of information and communication technology, more economic and social resources have been spent on translation activities by regional and international organizations as well as multinational corporations. In addition, the status and working conditions of translators are frequently topics of heated debate. Therefore, the translation profession is a legitimate and important sub-field of research in Translation Studies.

This research uses the theoretical framework of information economics to analyze the translation profession. In particular, the economic concepts of asymmetric information and adverse selection are utilized. Asymmetric information involves two or more economic players, one of whom has better information than the other or others. When applied to the translation market, it means that, when translation service buyers need to recruit new translators for their work, they cannot effectively distinguish between a 'good' translator and a 'bad' one. Hence, they tend to pay a price that is below the standard, rather than a higher price when there is perfect and complete information. As a result, 'good' translators may leave the translation profession for other professions, and adverse selection will result. It is sometimes suggested that a translator certification system, if properly designed, can act an effective signal to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' translators.

The research questions that act as the guiding force behind this research include: (1) Do certification systems have any effect on the pay and working conditions of translators? (2) Are translator certification examinations perceived to function as effective signals to translation service buyers? (3) Apart from translator certification, what might be possible signals in the translation market?

A triangulation method is employed in this study to investigate the translator certification system and its signaling effects, using a number of research procedures (corpus analysis, questionnaire surveys, an experiment using fictitious résumés and interviews). The translators and those responsible for recruiting them were surveyed by questionnaire. Hong Kong was used as a case study in the analysis of job advert corpus and in-depth interviews involving fictitious résumés, to examine the complex relationships between signaling devices and recruitment behaviors.

It is perhaps not surprising to find that the translation market is heterogeneous and highly fragmented, and both buyers and sellers frequently enter and exit this market because

translation is generally an unregulated ‘profession’ and translators are an ‘ambiguous group’. The surveyed recruiters seeking translators see translator certification as something that can enhance the overall image of the translation profession and bring benefits to translators who hold it (e.g. increase in number of job offers, higher self-esteem and respect from co-workers). However, increased monetary benefits brought by translator certification might be minimal. The interviews with recruiters show that they still respect academic degrees as a signaling mechanism in the job market.

There are two main reasons why at present translator certification systems do not function effectively as a signal. First, high-quality translators may have less incentive to use translator certification as a signaling device, because signaling behavior may mark them as only medium-quality translators. In fact, they prefer not to call themselves ‘translators’ because, for most translators, their self-image stops short of fully-fledged consultancy. Titles such as ‘language consultant’, ‘language service provider’ and ‘localizer’ are preferred. This phenomenon is sometimes called ‘counter-signaling’. Second, there is the problem of ‘signal-jamming’. Vocation-oriented master’s degrees in translation are likely to compete with translator certification as a signaling device in the translation market. Because the difference between academic degrees and professional qualifications has narrowed, it becomes harder for employers to make inferences about job applicants’ employability from these two credentials. As there is a tendency for translator training schools to oversupply the translation market with academic degrees, it is likely that recruiters’ respect for academic degrees in translation will diminish as the effects of oversupply become more evident.

A number of recommendations are given to strengthen the signaling effect of a translator certification system: closer coordination between certification systems and professional organizations in different countries or regions, better enforcement of professional codes and conduct regulation, more outcome-driven continuing professional development that keeps translators up-to-date with the changing workplace. More importantly, there is a need for professional translator associations, translator training institutions and other stakeholders to work together in developing multilateral signaling devices that can meet the demands of employers and clients, as well as provide professional translators with the required knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to survive and thrive in the complex and ever-changing translation market.

KEYWORDS: counter-signaling, information asymmetry, information economics, licensing, professional associations, professional translators, professionalization, signaling, signal jamming, translator certification, translation market, translator training.

Completion of thesis

Place: Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain

Year: 2008

Supervisors: Professor Anthony Pym, Dr Jiri Stejskal