

A Polish translator's perspective: an interview with Adam Podstawczynski, professional translator based in Łódz, Poland
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KEYWORDS

Polish translation, CAT tools, IT translation

1) How did your career in translation begin?

I translate computer texts out of and into English. I started out as a student, about six years ago. I studied English at Łódz University. When you study English, you can choose from a range of options, namely teaching, translating, or pursuing an academic career. I decided on translating at the very outset, impatiently waiting for my first assignment until it eventually came from a local translation agency, in my final year at university. My first translations were very varied, ranging from private correspondence through commercial documents to instructions manuals. I literally took everything that came my way. This may not be the best approach, but I had little choice then. I soon started specialising though. The area I chose, broadly speaking, was IT, networking, modern technologies and the Internet. I stopped working for the agency mentioned earlier to take up assignments from a Warsaw-based translation bureau specialising in IT. I still work for them, occasionally accepting assignments directly from clients. Such translations do come as a matter of course: they tend to be better paid, but more challenging. I also translate for computer magazines, rarely books. The bulk of my work, though, is for the translation agency – texts relating to computers, contracts drawn by computer companies and software localisation, something I am quite keen on doing.

2) What suggestions do you have for philology graduates before they accept their first translation assignment?

There is one piece of advice that I have for anybody interested in pursuing a career in specialised translation: never stop learning, deepening your knowledge and skills. This does not concern only language; one has to study what one translates. For example, if you specialise in computing, it does not mean playing a game or two at your leisure or assembling a basic computer kit. There is more to specialising than that. You have to constantly study so that your source text never surprises you. This policy is not only beneficial financially, as clients keep coming if they know you do your job well, not only professionally rewarding, but also personally satisfying. When you join in on a discussion forum and realise you can answer somebody's query and translate a term the way it should be translated rather than the way you think it should be translated, it really is soothing to the ego. This is why I stick to this single

piece of advice: do learn all about what you are into, keep improving, keep learning new things every day.

3) What role does the Internet play in the specialised translator's work?

I use the Internet for communication. I take my assignments on-line, I process them on my computer and email them to the client. There is never a print out in the process, it is all done electronically. It has been long since I took a fax assignment, and even longer since a translation was posted to me by ordinary mail. I now work solely on the Internet.

Another in which Internet is useful is the search function. There are sites designed specifically for translators, where you can pose a question or browse in glossaries. You can also use discussion groups (in Poland pl.hum.tlumaczenia), where your query is very likely to be answered by someone in the know. So for example, I do not run into terminology problems when I translate a computer text, but when my assignment concerns a computer system for an airport, there may be some aviation terminology at work, so to be on the safe side, it's best to ask a specialist or make sure you have access to a specialised glossary. This is where translation portals or discussion groups come in handy. Failing that, there is always your old Google search engine, which is invaluable if you are looking for a term you cannot make head or tail of. I find that you can use this tool as a last resort, if all other resources fail. Then Google can at least give you a clue as to the domain which the contentious term is from, if it is placed out of context in your translation, for example, itemised. So I cannot imagine working without the Internet. Basically, there are three tools the specialised translator can use: text editing software, CAT tools and the Internet. I would go so far as to say that the latter is the most important.

4) What changes in translation practice did Poland's membership in the EU bring about?

I think that Poland's accession to EU structures has had an influence on the translator's work and major changes have occurred. Firstly, there are more commissions from individual clients. It seems that individuals have been increasingly willing to cooperate with translators. So the ratio between assignments from translation agencies vis-à-vis assignments directly from clients has shifted in favour of the latter. Taking assignments from the agency, I have observed an increasing number of commercial contracts to translate. It must be due to the fact that since Poland's accession to the EU, computer systems, especially in large organisations and public institutions, have had to meet European Union standards. Consequently, technical specifications tend to

be translated more and more and the number of contracts for translation has risen even more significantly.

5) Is there a difference between translating commercial contracts and other types of specialised translation?

Yes. I think that translating contracts stands out as a very specific type of specialised translation. The way in which they are specific are multifarious. First, there is the terminology, or more precisely, phraseology. While in computer translation it is the technical terminology that the translator has to be acquainted with, in translating contracts there are whole expressions that the translator has to render as faithfully as possible. In both the source language and the target language there are fixed expressions, characteristic of this type of text, that have to be recognised by the translator. Another issue at work here is the absolute necessity to be as consistent as possible. In other types of translation, even in certain types of specialised translation, it is par for the course to translate certain terms in more than one way. It cannot be the case on translating contracts. You cannot have multiple equivalents of the same term across your target text. It is the translator's (or translators', if there is more than one) responsibility. If the translator is pressed for time, other participants in the process, such as editors, may be of assistance. Resources such as CAT tools also play a role.

6) How do CAT tools help you in your work?

CAT (Computer Assisted Translation) tools, as the name suggests, can be handy in the process of translation. They speed up the work, in that there is no need to translate a recurring fragment for a second or third time. Once the software has identified an expression that has already been translated, it will point to the differences between the two excerpts. The fragments under discussion here are referred to as segments, units on which CAT tools operate. Another thing is increasing consistency in translation, and this is where CAT tools play a major role. If a segment has been translated and the translator forgets his or her solution some twenty pages later, once a similar fragment has been encountered the tool makes sure it is not translated in a way that is markedly different from the first rendition, but bears similarity to it. This fact has contributed to the popularity of CAT tools. Nowadays, not only translation agencies, but also individual commissioners require that CAT tools be used by translators. Clients are in the habit of furnishing translators not only with the source text, but also with a database, a collection of previous translational solutions. The translator can then compare previously translated segments, or just individual terms, thus making sure his or her rendition is terminologically consistent and meets the commissioner's requirements. A number of CAT tools is available; they all work in a similar fashion, combining segments to make databases. Among the most popular are Wordfast, SDL-Trados, Déjà vu and Transit Satellite. There is also, somewhat less known, IBM Translation

Manager. I personally use SDL-Trados and IBM TM. I find them satisfactory, but other translators, and more importantly other commissioners, may have their preferences and demands. Sometimes the translator has no choice but to use a tool that the client want him/her to use, but such tools are easy to learn and similar to one another.

7) You can translate dozens of pages a day, something that a non-professional translator could not do. How is this possible?

A specialised translator can translate significantly more pages a day than a translator working on a general or popular-scientific text, not to mention literature or poetry, quite time-consuming activities. The main reason behind it is that both the sender and the recipient of a specialised text are precisely determined, so the range of terminology used is fairly narrow. There are certain presumptions that the sender and the recipient share, so there is no need for explanations, the translating process can start instantly. Another thing is that CAT tools speed up the process significantly. It does happen, though, that the author of, say, a software handbook may decide to embellish it by throwing in the odd proverb or famous quotation. In such cases, the translator's efficiency per character or per page drops, but such occurrences are scarce. Thus it is not extraordinary for a technical translator to translate twenty or more, not infrequently more, pages a day.

8) You translate mainly IT texts. Do you ever seek help from computer specialists?

Though I translate within the domain of computer science, I have never had to consult with specialists in the field, as I happen to be interested in IT. As a budding translator, my assignments were very varied and I did not even think of specialising in computers. But as my first assignments connected to IT started coming in, my interest in the field grew. I got especially interested in network technologies, to the effect of becoming well acquainted with Linux operating system and writing two books on the subject. I currently specialise in network technologies, Unix and Linux, large computer systems based on these operating systems. I think that translators entering the domain of IT with no specialised knowledge should seek help from experts. Here I would like to suggest discussion groups and specialised portals. I personally use Proz.com, but there are many others. It is essential to keep learning, experimenting, and narrowing down your specialisation. Computer science is not that narrow a domain, within it you can have assignments connected with network technologies, Linux, Unix, databases, contracts, and many other sub-domains.

9) Can the specialised translator have more than one area of specialisation?

Yes, it is worth your while to have more than one specialisation. You must bear in mind, though, that the areas you specialise in cannot be too diverse and there cannot be too many of them, as it can be easy to loose your grip on your work. My broad area of specialisation is computer science, and I can narrow it down to network technologies and security. I also translate contracts between large companies such as banks. I think this is quite enough, since if there were more areas, I would not be able to justify my translational decisions so easily, something a specialised translator has to be able to do. Naturally, I would be hard put to specialise in a completely different area, for example if I were to take up translating cooking recipes, or something along these lines. So specialisation is important, but if it is too narrow, it can restrict the translator.