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Navigating agency and professionalism in translation and interpreting: A community of practice of coordinators for international relations in Japan

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, communities of practice are commonly situated in online spaces. This paper addresses the role that one online platform plays among a group of largely non-professional translators and interpreters working for local government bodies in Japan as coordinators for international relations (commonly referred to as CIRs) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme. The paper sets out to establish whether interactions on the forum represent an expression of a community of practice. It also investigates whether forum members leverage their interactions online to learn together and solve problems surrounding translation and interpreting. Forum-mediated communications were observed using a netnographic approach, and thematic analysis was conducted to examine the data gathered. Findings from this study establish the online forum as an expression of a distributed community of practice. Members use the forum to discuss linguistic issues inherent in translation and interpreting and macro-level issues such as professional status and agency. We conclude that the forum provides a useful avenue for members to tackle a range of issues that permeate translation and interpreting and result from a vacuum of appropriate translation and interpreting training and support.

KEYWORDS

Communities of practice, translation, interpreting, Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, coordinators for international relations (CIRs), agency, professionalism.

1. Introduction

Given the importance of online communication in the modern world, communities of practice increasingly take advantage of online spaces as a home for innovative expressions. This paper addresses the role that digitally mediated communication plays in a community of practitioners of translation and interpreting who work for local government bodies across Japan, but who often lack academic and/or formal training in these domains. This study forms a small part of a broader study carried out between 2017 and 2021 online and in the field in Japan to investigate the work of these practitioners. The broader study examines data from a range of sources including online surveys, an online forum created and used by members of the community, focus groups, and interviews. However, the online forum is the focus of this paper. Through analysis of posts made to the forum, we establish it as the centre of a distributed community of practice and investigate how specific community members leverage this self-created online space to navigate issues that arise in the course of their practice of translation and interpreting.

Members of the community examined in this paper are current or former coordinators for international relations (CIRs) participating on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme¹. The JET Programme is administered by Japan's local government authorities, a number of government ministries, and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (hereafter CLAIR) and aims "primarily to promote grass-roots internationalisation at the local level" (CLAIR 2020a). As of August 2019, there were 514 CIRs from 42 different countries working all across Japan (CLAIR 2020b). All JET participants are originally recruited through Japanese embassies abroad and may be employed in one of three roles: assistant language teachers (ALTs), CIRs, or sports exchange advisors² (SEAs). The largest group of participants (approximately 90%) work as ALTs teaching predominantly English to children at primary, secondary, and nursery school levels (cf. CLAIR 2020b), while CIRs make up most of the remainder and are dispatched to work for local government bodies throughout Japan. A CIR's role can require them to undertake a number of potential tasks. A handbook provided to CIRs when notified of receipt of their job states that "[t]he role of the CIR is varied and based on the aims of the contracting organisation" (CLAIR 2017: 9). For instance, the role can involve organising events and school visits or maintaining sister-city relationships and social media accounts (CLAIR 2017). Of particular relevance to this paper, it has been shown that translation and interpreting are key activities that CIRs engage in. A survey undertaken by CLAIR included in the same handbook sampling 317 CIRs showed that 304 respondents (96.81%) engaged in translation and 297 respondents (94.5%) engaged in interpreting as part of their work as CIRs (ibid.). Similarly, a survey of 50 CIRs undertaken by AJET, a volunteer group that lobbies on behalf of JET participants, found that 96% of respondents practised translation and 82% practised interpreting as part of their roles (AJET 2009).

While it is evident from these surveys that a significant proportion of CIRs practice translation and interpreting as part of their work, previous training in translation or interpreting is not a requirement for eligibility as a CIR, and any training in these subjects offered on the programme is optional and limited. For instance, short training seminars in translation or interpreting lasting approximately 90 minutes each are offered annually at CIR training conferences, however, attendance at these seminars is not compulsory. A survey of forum members carried out in mid-2020 as part of the broader study on which this paper is based indicated a lack of specialised training in translation or interpreting among respondents. The survey generated valid responses from 21 members. There were 14 of these 21 who stated that Japanese was the primary discipline of their undergraduate degree. Only one respondent listed Translation Studies as their primary discipline. While undergraduate courses in Japanese may include some study of translation or interpreting, these 14 respondents did not report them as a core aspect of their qualifications. Three respondents held a master's qualification. Again, only one respondent specified that this was in Translation Studies. It

is interesting that, despite this lack of formal training and the broad description of the CIR role provided by JET organisers, 13 of the 21 respondents answered that they would identify themselves as a translator/interpreter when explaining their job to someone whom they met in a restaurant or bar.

CIRs' motivations for taking on the role are likely to be varied as hundreds of CIRs from dozens of countries are employed every year. Nevertheless, some CIRs are motivated by translation and interpreting. In interviews with CIRs about their work, conducted in 2019 as part of the broader study on which this paper is based, four of the ten interviewees, who were practising CIRs at the time, stated that they were motivated by gaining experience in translation and interpreting, with a further three stating that the role would give them the option to improve their Japanese. Furthermore, six interviewees stated that, in the future, they wished to pursue a career in translation and/or interpreting.

In the context of the diverse tasks, training, and motivations of CIRs—as well as the varying aspirations superiors have for them—we investigate how the collaborative learning of one distributed community of practice centred on an online forum can play a role in aiding CIRs who lack formal training.

Section 2 of this paper reviews previous studies on CIRs and communities of practice. Section 3 describes the data and netnographic approach on which the findings of this study are based, while Section 4 explains and discusses these findings, especially with reference to two key concepts: agency and professionalism. We will present our conclusions in Section 5.

2. Previous studies

A relatively small body of literature across a range of disciplines, including Education, Management, and Cultural Studies, looks at the JET Programme. Several studies, perhaps unsurprisingly, focus solely on the ALTs that comprise 90% of JET Programme participants. The topics of these studies include perceptions of the efficacy of team teaching and general teaching practice on the programme (Galloway 2009; Mahoney 2004; Valga 2015; Knodell 2017; Kobayashi 2000), the concept of internationalisation in Japan and the role of JET in achieving this (Borg 2008; McConnell 1996), issues of cultural reception and culture shock in JET teacher experiences (Rosati 2005a, 2005b), and a comparison of JET with a similar programme in Hong Kong (Lai 1999). Other studies include CIRs and deal with issues such as diplomacy, training, and experiences of the role: Metzgar (2012, 2017a, 2017b) has examined CIRs (along with other members of the JET Programme) as potential agents of soft diplomacy for Japan, and Yamamoto (2005, 2007) focuses on workplace relations between CIRs and their Japanese colleagues, as well as on training devised to improve this working relationship. Experience as a CIR has also been investigated in studies such as Qing (2010), which focused on the struggles of being a CIR, especially

one from a non-English speaking country, as well as Takimoto (2014), which examined CIRs' own perceptions of the role and general job satisfaction. These studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the CIR experience, especially from an international and intercultural point of view. Despite this, the place of translation and interpreting in that experience appears to have been largely neglected.

Central to the analysis of CIR interactions in our study is the concept of communities of practice. Building upon foundational work in Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) established three central criteria in the definition of a community of practice: a shared repertoire, mutual engagement, and a joint enterprise. A shared repertoire refers to a set of symbols, language or practices that are developed by communities of practice over time. Mutual engagement refers to active participation within a community. Finally, a joint enterprise refers to the understanding within the community of what they all share and what connects them. There has been a move away from the term joint enterprise toward that of a domain inhabited by members (Farnsworth *et al.* 2016), and it can now be said that a community of practice requires members to exist in a shared domain in which learning occurs. Shared domains can be online, and online communities of practice have been variously dubbed virtual communities of practice (Dubé *et al.* 2006), virtual learning communities (Rogers 2000), and online learning communities (Palloff and Pratt 2007).

A further conceptual development, which encompasses both virtual and physical spaces, is that of a distributed community of practice (Daniel *et al.* 2003; Daniel 2014). Theory surrounding distributed communities of practice provides clear defining criteria for such communities and emphasises their informal and geographically dispersed nature (Daniel *et al.* 2003). Eight characteristic factors of such communities have also been identified. These are: shared interests, common identity, shared information and knowledge, voluntary participation, autonomy in setting goals, awareness of social protocols and goals, awareness of membership, and effective means of communications (Daniel *et al.* 2003).

In Translation and Interpreting Studies, Prieto-Velasco and Fuentes-Luque (2016) described enthusiasm among student translators for the use of web 2.0 tools to collaborate on translations. Risku and Dickinson (2009) and D'Hayer (2012) investigated the work of virtual communities of practice among freelance translators and public service interpreters and translators respectively. Nevertheless, as González-Davies and Enríquez-Raído (2016) point out, there is a relative lack of attention given to ICT in the situated learning of communities of practice involved in translation and interpreting.

As we have shown, while many previous studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the CIR experience, the place of translation and interpreting in that experience appears to have been largely neglected. Against this backdrop, we argue that, through an online forum that CIRs

established themselves and which is moderated by members and entirely independent of both the JET Programme and CLAIR, a sub-section of CIRs have come together to form a community of practice as “a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger *et al.* 2002: 4). Thus, this paper is an attempt to examine how community members leverage their interactions online to engage in collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is defined as “groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product” (Laal and Laal 2012: 491).

3. Methods and data

To examine forum membership in the context of communities of practice, we collected data pertaining to the interactions of current and former CIRs³ online, elicited through observation of an online forum. The data were generated, collected, and analysed using an overall netnographic approach suited to the ethnographic analysis of a social group’s online interactions. This approach is elaborated on in the next section and followed by a description of the data and the analytical strategy adopted.

3.1. Methods

We adopted a netnographic approach for this study, defined as “participant-observational research based in online fieldwork” (Kozinets 2012: v3-102). Such an approach uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon (*ibid.*). The main netnographic tool applied in this research was participant observation of interactions in an online forum. Ethical approval was given by DCU’s Research Ethics Committee under project reference number DCUREC/2019/027. As the forum posts were public domain, informed consent was not deemed necessary as per university guidelines. This aligns with Kozinets’ (2010) ideas regarding the use of public-domain posts in internet forums. Nevertheless, usernames and identifying data were removed from posts prior to analysis.

3.2. Data

The online forum under investigation was established in February 2015 by two CIRs following the closure of an official online forum that had been supported by those in charge of the JET Programme within the Japanese public service. As of May 30th, 2020, the forum had 503 registered members, 63 of whom had made more than 1,000 posts each. Overall, there had been more than 350,000 posts on the forum up to that point. There were 80 posters who had logged into the forum in the past 3 months (to May 30th, 2020) and who had posted to it at some point in the past⁴. Moreover, as the forum is not controlled by JET Programme coordinators

and hence not part of the official JET Programme support/training structure, its membership is organic and voluntary. The forum membership is fluid as the upper limit on a CIR's term of service is five years, and many members disengage from the forum when their status as a CIR terminates. The forum is divided into sub-fora where members' responsibilities are considered, meet-ups between members can be organised, and non-work-related topics are discussed. It also features a sub-forum for prospective CIRs where they ask about the CIR job and how they should prepare for coming to Japan. Of particular relevance to this paper, the forum has a special sub-forum dedicated to issues regarding translation and interpreting.

The first author of this paper worked as a CIR between 2013 and 2016 and actively used the forum at that time. However, by the time of the current research, they had significantly reduced their interactions with the forum and knew only four of the 80 active members.

The forum contained 999 threads in total as of September 2nd, 2020 and 350,000 posts. Threads were taken from two sub-fora specifically: a general discussion sub-forum and a translation and interpreting sub-forum. Threads to be analysed were selected based on potential relevance to the research question; i.e. threads that were likely to deal with the challenges faced by CIRs regarding translation and interpreting or to provide examples of collaborative learning between CIRs. Analysing the entirety of each thread was beyond the scope of this study, given the size of the forum. Random sampling of pages was used to reduce the volume of posts to be analysed and to mitigate for potential selection bias in the data set. For threads of more than 10 pages in length, a random number generator was used to select five pages to be included in the analysis. In total, 31 potentially relevant threads were identified from the 706 threads in the general discussion sub-forum and the 25 threads in the translation and interpreting sub-forum (as of September 2020). Membership of both sub-fora is shared as posters register to the website itself and are free to post in both.

The forum posts were analysed using a thematic analytical strategy adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). First, a code manual was developed from the results of an online survey that was part of the broader study on which this paper is based. The survey of forum participants was carried out in May 2018 to understand the work of CIRs. The survey returned 33 valid responses and comprised 15 questions about respondents' profiles, roles, and experiences of translation and interpreting. Analysis of responses by the three co-authors allowed us to develop the descriptive *a priori* codes of agency, professionalism, and translation and interpreting, and these were used to create an initial coding manual. The forum post data mentioned earlier in this section were then repeatedly read in context by the first author and coded according to this manual. Coding reasonableness was checked by the other co-authors. One additional inductive code, CIRs as outsiders, was generated from this process and added to the coding manual. From here, codes were merged or synthesised in the creation of

themes. Coding processes were systematised and recorded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Table 1 shows the initial codes, derived themes, and frequency with which each theme was mentioned on one of the two sub-fora investigated in this study. Frequencies are presented here only to indicate the breadth and depth of thematic patterns in the data. No claim to broader statistical or quantitative significance is intended. Quantitatively infrequent themes were given the same potential qualitative significance as frequent themes in our analysis.

Initial Codes	Derived Themes	Frequency of Mentions in Posts
<i>Translation</i>	Struggles with technical translation	23
	Lack of info provided about translation	5
	Colleagues lacking knowledge of the important to translation	28
	Difficulty translating from Japanese to English.	13
	Non-technical terminology	68
<i>Interpreting</i>	Lack of prior warning about assignments	7
	Interpreting as difficult	15
	Difficulty interpreting for long periods of time	8
	Lack of knowledge among superiors about interpreting	25
<i>Agency</i>	CIRs lacking agency	37
	CIRs successfully leveraging agency	7
	Colleagues changing CIR working conditions	10
	Colleagues amending CIR translations	4
	Interruptions during interpreting	1
<i>Professionalism</i>	CIRs lack experience	5
	CIRs lack knowledge of technical terminology	8
	CIRs lack training	15
	Non-professionals translating into non-native languages	1
	Professionalism depends on the CIR	3
	Criticism of third-party professional translations	27
<i>CIRs as Outsiders</i>	Assumption of poor Japanese	14
	Not feeling like a valued member of the workforce	24
	The futility of complaining	2
	CIRs as privileged outsiders	2

Table 1. Mentions of themes on the two sub-fora under investigation

4. Findings and discussion

As previously stated, the aims of this study were to establish whether the CIR forum comprises a valid distributed community of practice and to examine how such a community of practice might be leveraged by members to tackle issues faced by some CIRs. First, in order to determine whether the CIR forum could be seen as a community of practice, we analysed the data in terms of the three characteristics of a community of practice: a shared repertoire, mutual engagement, and a joint enterprise/shared domain (Wenger 1998; Farnsworth *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, in order to determine whether the forum constituted a distributed community of practice, we analysed the data in terms of eight further factors that are used to define these specific communities of practice: shared interests,

common identity, shared information and knowledge, voluntary participation, autonomy in setting goals, awareness of social protocols and goals, awareness of membership, and an effective means of communication (Daniel *et al.* 2003). In Section 4.1 we will establish the forum as a community of practice and distributed community of practice, while in 4.2 we will examine how CIRs leverage the community of practice to engage in collaborative learning surrounding agency and professionalism.

4.1. CIRs' online forum use: Establishing a community of practice

A shared repertoire refers to the tools, language, and practices that develop among a community over time. The CIR forum in question contains a repository of links to useful online dictionaries and cultural materials carried over from the previous forum to aid members in their translations or preparation for cultural presentations. There are also some materials made by previous forum members that are available to current members, hosted on a Google Drive folder and hyperlinked on the forum. These materials include PowerPoint presentations used in English classes or Japanese lectures, links to online Japanese-English dictionaries, examples of speeches given by CIRs at various events, and ideas for articles written by CIRs in community newsletters.

The forum provides plentiful evidence of mutual engagement: action that creates, recreates, and reinforces the group's culture and practice. In our data, code-switching⁵ and other patterns of language use particular to this group can be seen as a case of mutual engagement. For instance, posts to the forum contain linguistic flourishes and a manner of communication that have been built up over time by forum members and which continue to evolve. One consistent feature is the presence of code switching within posts such as the following post in which a member is looking for assistance to translate a piece of Japanese text into English:

[.....] Coastal Resort Land Division is a 決まってる名詞, so it's really just that last part.

Maybe something like, Coastal Resort Land Division: Community Exchange Forum

I know that "community" and "Forum" are kinda taking liberties with 厚生 and 用地, but Public Welfare Exchange Site sounds a little too KATAI... this is supposed to be a title that makes people excited for all of the new beach development that's supposed to take place after the territory reclamation, so I was looking for words that would sound kinda fancy, but also not too heavy.

The Japanese expression added to the English post 決まってる名詞 [*kimatteru meishi*] refers to 'a set phrase' and is commonly used on the forum in place of the English equivalent. 厚生 [*kousei*] refers to 'public welfare' and 用地 [*youchi*] refers to 'a site'. The use of the Japanese word *katai* [堅い], meaning 'formal' or 'stuffy' and written in transliterated uppercase, is a common rhetorical device on the forums when code

switching to Japanese for a single word within an otherwise English language sentence.

The posts also feature triggers that convert often-used phrases automatically into other English phrases or Japanese transliterations. These triggers illustrate particular patterns of interaction among members of the community and provide evidence for instances of mutual engagement that create, recreate, and reinforce the group's culture and practice. These triggers are controlled and implemented by forum administrators and are based on in-jokes between members that have gained popularity across the boards. One example of this is the common phrase '*otsukare*', which is used in Japanese to acknowledge that someone else has exerted themselves to do something. This phrase is automatically changed when posted to the forum to appear as '*oats and curry*'. This replaces the original Japanese phrase with a phonetically similar but nonsensical and humorous English phrase. In the past, members have also censored colloquial expressions by inserting Japanese syllabary into these expressions. For example, the English '*crap*' was previously converted to appear in posts as '*c̣̣p*', in which *̣̣*, a Japanese symbol (pronounced [ra]), substitutes for the original English "ra". These triggers are revised constantly. Since 2019, the forum has featured a thread with posts explaining the most common of these triggers for new forum members.

One factor in a joint enterprise or a shared domain in which learning occurs is the establishment of an indigenous purpose (Wenger 1998). Here a community establishes its own purpose removed from any hierarchical imperative imposed from above. For CIRs, the JET Programme defines the purpose of their role as '*internationalisation*', and CIRs carry out a wide variety of tasks to achieve this purpose (see Section 1). However, the forum provides an insight into how CIRs see their own role, as well as the issues that they define as important to improving their own practice. The sub-forum labelled '*Translation and Interpretation*' is home to 5,569 posts across 45 threads as of May 30th, 2020 and is the second largest forum on the boards. This indicates that translation and interpreting motivate engagement on the forum and focus attention for at least a cohort of the membership.

The forum membership, however, does not constitute solely a community of practice as defined traditionally, but also corresponds to the definition of a distributed community of practice. Forum members *share an interest and common identity*. These shared interests are evident in the sub-forums—dealing with subjects such as translation, interpreting, or conference planning, etc.—and a common identity originates from their current or previous employment as CIRs. This is expressed in members' self-naming as '*Chirpers*', a title originating in the name of the forum website itself. Forum members enjoy *free association and autonomy* (as members of the forum). Members *voluntarily* register to participate on the forum and fully

regulate the extent of that participation. In addition, the forum is entirely independent of JET Programme administrators, giving members the autonomy with which to establish community goals. Forum members also *share an awareness of these goals and the protocols* around their achievement. While the forum does not have a set of strictly established rules written down in any thread, there are two moderators elected every year with the power to enforce posting bans and shut down threads viewed as irrelevant. Moreover, members *are known to each other* and *communicate* in different ways. Membership of the forum is an active process requiring registration. The forum acts as the primary method for the community to interact with one another. Nevertheless, the community also operates a group on the messaging application Discord, and community members sometimes communicate via the social media application LINE. Furthermore, members can create threads for meet-ups or visits around Japan using a particular sub-forum. Most importantly, forum members use the forum to create and *share knowledge* with each other in various ways, and a significant portion of this relates to translation and interpreting: as explained above, more than the 5,500 posts are found in a sub-forum dedicated to these topics.

The most common form of interaction on the forum about translation consists of CIRs discussing issues related to the translation of specific utterances. The quote below is typical of these types of interactions:

I'm translating an event that involves various West African countries, and I'd like to include the countries' names, since I don't think many Japanese people are familiar with West Africa (hence the event).

Every country but one uses "the Republic of". Am I allowed to omit this on the flyer?

While such linguistic and intercultural issues are fascinating and are worthy of further detailed study, our process of thematic analysis (see Section 3.2) identified professionalism and agency as two macro-level challenges related to forum members' practice of translation and interpreting that leave members feeling particularly exposed.

4.2. CIRs' self-perceptions of professionalism and agency

Professionalism in translation and interpreting is a contested concept, and many scholars debate whether and how translators and interpreters can claim professional status (cf. Chesterman 2001; Kussmaul 1995; Gouadec 2007; Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012). The following four features are used regularly to describe professional status in the Translation and Interpreting Studies literature: (1) Professionals are those who are compensated financially for their work or at least more generously reimbursed than non-professionals (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012); (2) Professionals are registered with professional bodies (Townsend 2007); (3) Professionals have undergone academic training (Chesterman

2001; Gouadec 2007; Townsley 2007); (4) A professional subscribes to a code of ethics (Chesterman 2001; Gouadec 2007; Townsley 2007).

As evidenced in the preceding sections, the forum membership does not meet all of the above criteria, casting doubt on the status of CIRs as professional translators/interpreters. For example, while CIRs are compensated for their work in translation and interpreting, they are not required to register with a professional body, there is no nationally established code of ethics for their practice, and they are not required to have undergone academic training in translation or interpreting. However, it is imperative to recognise that the low levels of professionalisation of CIRs as a group does not negate the fact that some individual CIRs may fully meet these criteria and be more inclined to claim professional translator or interpreter status. It is also important to point out again that most CIRs are involved in translation and interpreting as part of their work (see Section 1).

There were no explicit instances of CIRs identifying themselves as professionals in the forum data. Nevertheless, there were cases of CIRs stating that CIRs as a group lack professional status, as illustrated by the following quote:

what stresses me out the most at work is that i can do so much more and instead am left with tasks that anyone who actually stfu in english class when they were in hs could do. this, along with the fact that nationwide there are hundreds of us are simultaneously being randomly dealt the responsibility of essentially being the voice of foreign correspondence between our local governments and foreign dignitaries when i'd say 95% of us dont even have any professional translation credentials or qualifications freaks me out. there's absolutely no consistency with this job

It was observed that certain community members identified the CIR role with subordinate status in the workplace, labelling it as both an “internship” and “not a real job”.

Conversely, critiques of supposedly professional translators in Japan on the forum were evident, as exemplified in the following two quotes:

[...] I'm also incredibly frustrated that these translation companies get away with sending in absolute crap that doesn't pass for a decent translation by any standards and still have the gall to charge money for it.

The problem is that [the commissioning of poor quality translations is] so frequent, and there's no sign of improvement in the situation. The last 'translation' I had the privilege [sic] to native check was extremely awkwardly phrased, and a quick Google Translate check made it clear from the sentence structures that this literally was a Google Translate-product with some editing of proper nouns. I just hate the fact that these companies can actually make money with this kind of unprofessional garbage.

Both posts were taken from a thread in which the original poster requested advice from fellow forum members on how to deal with the problem of

having poor quality translations provided by external translation companies. One poster planned to have their department manager send out a correspondence to other department managers asking them to ensure that they include a native check (a verification that a translation is accurate, undertaken by a native speaker) whenever translations have been outsourced to translation companies. Another person stated that the original poster could refuse to edit “any bad translations”.

CIRs on the forum were also seen at times to place the quality of their own translations above the quality of these external language service providers:

I'm so tempted to send in my resume to this [outside translation company] and say, "look you guys have sucky translators and proofreaders. hire me. my CV doesn't look fantastic but it definitely looks better than the 'professional work' you've been handing up to your clients."

In addition to some CIRs questioning the importance of their job and displaying a perception that they are not professionals, some CIRs suggested that this non-professional status should be flagged to the assignment requester, especially those requesting interpreting assignments that might be challenging. The flagging of this non-professional status was seen by the CIRs as a way to potentially mitigate the difficulty of the assignment by lowering the expectations for quality among the parties involved in the interpreted encounter. Here is one such example:

.....one of the things you can do is to let the guests know before you start that you are not a professional and you lack knowledge in matters relating to the business so please excuse if you make mistakes or explain further, thank you.

In one instance, a CIR poster stated their disquiet at having to interpret at an event for which they lacked sufficient experience and at which high-profile dignitaries would be present. Moreover, they were worried that they would have to interpret primarily into Japanese. They stated that they would request that their department hire a professional interpreter. However, in case they were ultimately compelled to carry out the assignment, they came to the community for advice on how to proceed with such an assignment. One piece of advice that they received was the following:

Let them know you are not a pro so it may not be perfect. Study up as much as you can and do your best.

In another interaction, a CIR described an interpreting task that went poorly. One poster stated that they should not be too harsh on themselves as CIRs are “amateurs” and therefore cannot expect to be perfect every time. The poster carried on in a separate post that read, “...even if you only get 60% of it that’s more than they would have gotten without you”.

Discussions were observed on the forums surrounding the limited agency afforded to CIRs to control the content of their translations and interpreted speech. Kinnunen and Koskinen (2010) and Khalifa (2014) note that there

seems to be a lack of consensus about what agency in fact is, despite the rich body of literature on the topic. Kinnunen and Koskinen settle on a definition of agency as “willingness and ability to act” (2010: 6). Similarly, Buzelin (2010: 7) defines agency as “the ability to exert power in an intentional way”. However, other scholars such as Ahearn (2001: 112) define agency as “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act”. While all these definitions are useful, we side more with Ahearn’s definition in our study, and agree that agency is often subject to external forces beyond individual control.

For some community members, a lack of agency was accepted as an ingrained reality in their placement, as the following quote indicates:

This isn't a HUGE miff because I'm used to it by now but they just put up some new tourism posters (that I was an consultant on) and as usual they have listened to absolutely nothing and kept them 100% as is.

In response to this post, one CIR asked the poster to get in contact with the department anonymously via a letter complaining about the quality of the translation in the hope that the complaint would be listened to. Again, some CIRs described the role of the CIR as a glorified internship or not a real job. This was linked to low levels of agency in some instances, as evidenced by the following post:

Reflecting on my time here, I think it might be dangerous to spend too long in an organization like a local government with little ability to take initiative or work independently (depending on what sort of career you want to have.)

The CIR position was associated with low levels of agency by a number of forum members, and this was perceived by them to be a negative feature of the role. Interventions by superiors in the work of the CIR were interpreted especially negatively, as can be seen in the following post:

i think i am more passively stressed out at the whole system that is in place here, whether it be having to translate a speech for someone who doesn't even know they are going to be making the speech, only for them to not like it and demand a new draft (just fucking write it yourself you massive twat), or whether it's 副課長 [Assistant Division Director] demanding that we make preparations for every single minute eventuality that could potentially arise; "what if the 室長 [Section Head] asks about minute matter X?" he's not gonna ask about X cos he doesn't know what X is and doesn't give a flying fuck about it

The two extracts above offer one reason posited by forum members to attempt to explain why the agency of CIRs may be limited: the established system. CIRs are subject to restrictions that operate within the limits of their job remit. The CIRs’ dissatisfaction with the conditions of their employment and the established systems and rules that operate in their local government workplaces may create tensions and increase their feelings of constraint.

Some CIRs also noted that they are underutilised in translation and interpreting situations in which they believe it would be natural for them to be used. In the following post, one CIR laments published changes made by superiors to their translation that ultimately made it sound unnatural, as well as the omission of a piece of code that they had written to be inserted into a website:

Once again I wonder why they decided they were special enough to get a CIR only to waste their talents. I think most CIRs come in with a passion and dedication to want to contribute to the local community, so no matter who they got this was going to be an under-utilization of the CIR. I'm just so annoyed that they are so proud to think of themselves as good enough; well, if you think you're good enough, DON'T GET A CIR AND DESTROY THEIR DREAMS.

Another poster sympathised with the CIR's opinion and could not understand why their skills would not be appropriately utilised. Similarly, the following post was made by a CIR who described the demotivating effect of their ability as a practitioner of interpreting being undervalued:

So I'm busy translating a bunch of speeches for a conference coming up, and I just got the schedule for the conference. I confronted my sup and was like it doesn't show me interpreting for the speeches though?! Apparently they're gonna have ANOTHER person read out the damn speeches and I'm there for "[conversational support]" whatever the fuck that means, ugh so annoyed it's so stupid. Can I not be trusted to read aloud the speech I translated myself???? I feel this way a lot that they just want me to be their email/translation lackey and not actually include me in anything =_= Wasting my time as usual. Really doesn't motivate me to work on these translations...

The above quotes generally point to a perceived marginalisation of CIRs within the context of the established local government systems. While the forum offers geographically isolated CIRs opportunities to discuss perceived injustices in their placements and advice on how to navigate such issues when they arise, it is important to note that, in a small number of cases, CIRs found themselves to be trusted with high levels of responsibility, comparable to that of their Japanese colleagues. In addition, some described overwork or the difficulty of being required to do work that would normally be asked of full-time Japanese civil servants and which they believed would not be considered within the remit of the work of a CIR. Nevertheless, when a CIR stated that they were trusted with such responsibilities in their placement, another poster responded with the following, implying the perceived rarity of this situation:

[...] your department treats you like a real person and not just a long term intern.
YOU HAVE ACHIEVED GOD LEVEL CIR STATUS

CIRs operate in geographically isolated locations and are obliged to come together for training as a group only once a year. All seminars at this training conference are optional outside of the keynote address. Only one optional seminar deals specifically with translation, while one other deals with interpreting. Moreover, CIRs come from a variety of backgrounds,

many with little or no experience of translation or interpreting, and few have any formal training in either (see Section 1).

In a thread dedicated to CIRs posting goodbye messages, forum members discussed the helpful role that the online forum plays in providing information to CIRs, as well as being a source of social interaction with others who understand the issues associated with being a CIR. The following quote is an illustrative example of how the forum can be experienced by members in terms of informal learning:

The [...] forums has [sic] been such an awesome source of information and support, and I am so grateful to have been part of this wonderful community of funny and helpful people. I honestly would not have survived my CIR stint without it, especially during my deskwarming days. I've enjoyed reading everyone else's posts full of a whole range of things from incredibly deep conversations to helpful tips for work.

5. Conclusion

Adopting the perspective of communities of practice, we examined interactions between CIRs on a self-created, online forum where they discuss issues surrounding agency and professionalism in translation and interpreting. We leveraged a netnographic approach for the analysis of this community's online interactions. Our findings showed that CIRs' engagement on the forum represents an expression of both a traditional and distributed community of practice in which members take part in collaborative learning. Our findings also showed that, while micro-level linguistic issues were a fundamental reason for community members to create and share knowledge with each other about translation and interpreting, macro-level issues to do with agency and professionalism were also of particular concern.

Many CIRs posting to the online forum reported a perceived lack of agency in their roles or a feeling that they operated outside of the system. In some cases, a lack of agency was linked to evaluations of their level of competency, with the CIR being perceived as lacking language proficiency. This suggests local government employers equate translation and interpreting competence with language proficiency and do not understand the many other factors involved in the development and assessment of translation competence (see, e.g., Schäffner and Adab 2000).

Moreover, as forum posters largely identified themselves as non-professionals, we argue that the forum allows members to navigate the challenges and opportunities posed by this lack of professional status in the absence of adequate, standardised training. Overall, professional status was discussed from many perspectives on the forum. While some forum posters were comfortable identifying themselves as inexperienced and not professionals, other members of the forum called the professionalism of the translation industry in Japan as a whole into question. Paradoxically, still others suggested that CIRs should request that certain interpreting tasks

be commissioned to professional interpreters whenever the tasks would be seen as being too difficult for a CIR.

It is far from clear that the problems discussed in this community of practice surrounding CIR agency and recognition would be solved if CIRs obtained professional status as translators or interpreters. Low levels of status and recognition are said to characterise the translation profession (Dam and Korning Zethsen 2008, 2016). Furthermore, global shifts in the translation industry have pushed many professional translators towards freelance or contingency work with low levels of agency (Moorkens 2017).

Furthermore, professional status might not alter these CIRs' collaboration online significantly. Research has shown that professional translators and interpreters come together in online communities to network, share information, and learn together (D'Hayer 2012; Risku and Dickinson 2009). These phenomena can be observed on online sites, such as ProZ or Translators' Café, and in the work of (usually national or international) associations of translators and interpreters. To some extent, the ways in which professional translators and interpreters share and learn online have already begun to be mapped and researched (e.g. McDonough Dolmaya 2011, 2018). However, our study of members of a largely non-professional online forum adds to existing research by highlighting the perceived emotional and social benefits that engagement with such a forum can bring to potentially isolated and remote practitioners of translation and interpreting. Comfort and assistance were strongly associated with collaborative learning in this CIR community of practice. The recognition and promotion of such communities of practice may provide an avenue to similar groups of translators and interpreters in dispersed locations throughout the world, particularly in navigating complex issues of status, recognition, and agency.

Finally, while the forum was seen as a valued resource by members and helped them to navigate problems, it was beyond the scope of the current study to examine whether advice was ultimately implemented and affected practice. This may act as a further avenue for research going forward. An additional avenue of future work arising from this study relates to the development of training targeted specifically at this community of practice: a comprehensive analysis of the micro-level linguistic and intercultural issues on the forum could be used as a basis for targeted training to help CIRs improve their practice of translation and interpreting. Training targeted at employing organisations could also be useful. The lack of agency and professionalism perceived by some CIRs may be mitigated if employers were trained to better understand what translation and interpreting competences entail and to communicate with and manage a truly internationalised local government workforce. Findings from the surveys, focus groups, and interviews that formed part of the broader study on which this paper was based will be used by us in the future to approach these and other research topics.

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Notes

¹ The current paper focuses on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. Within this programme, a smaller programme known as the JET Internship Programme (<http://jetprogramme.org/en/jetinternship/>) exists that allows JET participants to gain

work experience in Japanese companies for short periods of time. The internship programme is not examined in the current study.

² As of August 2019, there were 13 SEAs in total across Japan, comprising less than one percent of all participants (CLAIR 2020b).

³ Data from former CIRs was ultimately removed from the study as CIRs tended to leave the forums after ending their terms on the programme and the number of pertinent posts by former CIRs to the discussion was not deemed worthy of separate analysis.

⁴ A number of inactive posters have registered to the forum but never made a post.

⁵ Code switching is defined here as “the mixing, by bilinguals (or multilinguals), of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic” (Poplack 2001: 2062).