The Transformation of a Hidden Industry: Freelance Translators and the Social Web

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Translator Studies?

- New interdisciplinary sub-field of Translation Studies
- **Focussing on translators**, not translations
- Name coined by Andrew Chesterman (2009)
- Still few researchers, but growing steadily

My previous research:
The impact of the Social Web on freelance translators’ social networks (Methods: Qualitative SNA, workplace observation, interviews)
Are Translators Entrepreneurs?

- 80% work freelance
- Members of the “Freie Berufe” (liberal professions): highly-qualified, creative individuals with strong professional ethics and social norms
- Flexible and hard-working, risk-taking, accountable (Howorth/Tempest/Coupland 2005)
- Alert to opportunities (Kirzner 1979)
- Found a business (Gartner 1989)

“rather than searching for one generalisable definition of the entrepreneur [researchers] should focus on a relevant aspect of what entrepreneurs do.”
(Howorth/Tempest/Coupland 2005, p.38)
Starting up as a Translator

0. Graduation

1. Nascent Entrepreneur
   • Tasks: Write business plan, decide on portfolio
   • Resources: Emotional support, information
   • Key stakeholders: Family, friends, former co-students and experienced translators.

2. Firm Birth
   • Tasks: Create legal identity, find clients and suppliers
   • Resources: Emotional and practical support, experience
   • Key stakeholders: Experienced translators, translation agencies, clients, professional associations

3. Running Business
   • Tasks: Become trusted advisor of clients, build professional network
   • Resources: Emotional and practical support, production networks
   • Key stakeholders: Other translators, translation agencies, clients, professional associations
Promoting Factors

- **Social capital** from private and professional relations
- Mutual support among professional translators, both emotional and practical
- **Experienced translators**, supporting newcomers with advice and work
- **Professional associations**, providing networking opportunities, education and support
- (Regular) clients, appreciating translators’ work – which allows sense-making and increases job satisfaction
Hindering Factors

• **Lack of knowledge** about starting a business
• “Freelancing is not a real job...”
• **Lack of information** about the market and the profession
• Low self-esteem, stereotypes and *urban legends* of bad income situation and robot-replacement in the near future
• **Insecurity** about prerequisites and qualifications needed
• Newcomers cannot assess the value of their work
• Language Services Providers foster price competition among translators, leading to increased price deterioration
What about Internet-enabled Entrepreneurship?

Participants of my study reported negative effects:

• Agencies dominate online marketplaces
• Artificially enforced **price competition**
• Unexperienced translators and laymen work at very low rates, which leads to Akerlof’s “market for lemons”
• Nascent translators turn to online-marketplaces, because of a perceived lower market threshold
• Traditional apprenticeship is inhibited.
• The translation practice, which is based on strong honor codices and unwritten rules, might fall apart.
• No internet-based business models
Future Research

Research Questions:

• Why do “nascent professional translators” turn to either professional associations and personal relationships or to online-communities and marketplaces?
• How does this choice affect their start into the industry?
• How does this choice effect social norms and business ethics of the translation practice?

Mixed-method Research Design:

• Story-telling
• Social Network Analysis methods
Thank you for your attention :-). Questions?