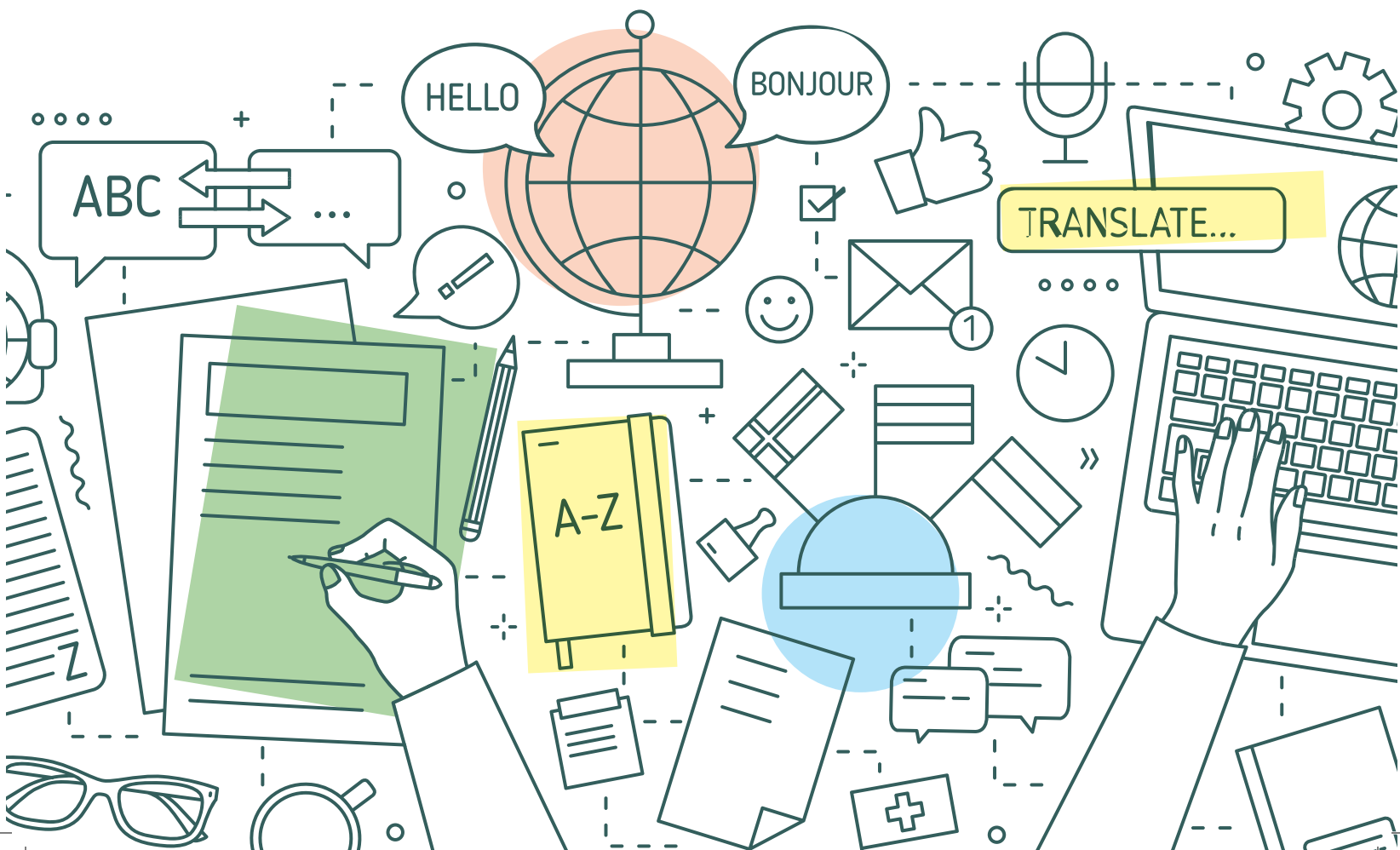


Translation: The Inside Story

A behind-the-scenes report from the world's
largest translator community



Reality check

Have you ever thought any of the following?

Translators are those people you see on TV whispering into the ears of Presidents or business leaders

Translating isn't a real profession, anyone can do it.

We don't need translators any longer as we have Google Translate or other apps to do the job

If you can speak two or more languages, you can translate

Translators speak loads of languages

Translators all work from and into their mother tongue - in other words they translate both ways

Translators can translate just about anything in their languages

Any translation is fine if it's just about understandable.

Translators only translate books, right?

If you've had any or even all of these thoughts, you're not alone. Translating is a fascinating profession which dates back millennia, but one that's often misunderstood. Read on for an exclusive look behind the scenes and be one of the first to bust the myths about the profession!

Inside the mind of a translator

If you open up a translator's mind and look inside, there are some things you'll notice every time, regardless of age, nationality or culture.

First of all, we're people who love languages, and have mastered at least one foreign language - in some cases many more. We're just as in love with writing and communication, and pride ourselves on being wordsmiths - people who craft documents and data sheets, contents and copy, messages and more, using words as tools.

Unlike interpreters, who work with spoken words, our silence is broken only by the keyboard and the whirring of thoughts.

With exposure to at least two cultures, we're also an open-minded bunch, aware that there's always more than one way to look at something.

Think of us as information hunters. We're endlessly curious, avid readers, enamoured with researching our texts and learning on the job. Definitely the kind of people you want on your team at the local pub quiz. And we're also often specialists in a few chosen areas.

We're perfectionists too, and highly detail-oriented. Professionally, that's a real gift, but it can be difficult to switch off at times.

Which of course you'd know if you've ever checked a restaurant menu or watched a subtitled film with a translator and noticed how we zoom in on every mistake.

We think of it as a loveable trait. You, on the other hand, might find it less loveable, but it comes as part of the package!



At the wordface

So what do we do when we get down to work?

A little context first (translators will always tell you it's all about context!)

People around the world communicate for all kinds of reasons: to sell, advertise, educate, inform, share, tell stories and inspire.

If their message stays within their own language or culture, its reach is limited. When they bring in a translator, that message can break through walls, overcome differences and build bridges.

Our work is to create connections between writers and readers.

That's where the skill comes in, above and beyond "just" being good at languages.

It involves breathing new life into texts in another language.



On any given day, translators across the planet might be busy on a press release for an NGO, the controls for an exciting new app, the patent for a time machine, the story of Harry Potter's daughters, Mongolian subtitles for Star Wars X, the spare parts catalogue of your dishwasher, a brochure for a tourist resort on the moon, an interview with Angelina Jolie for a film festival, vital materials for making masks to combat pandemics, or the contract for an international footballer moving to a new country.

In short, the texts we work on cover the entire range of human existence...

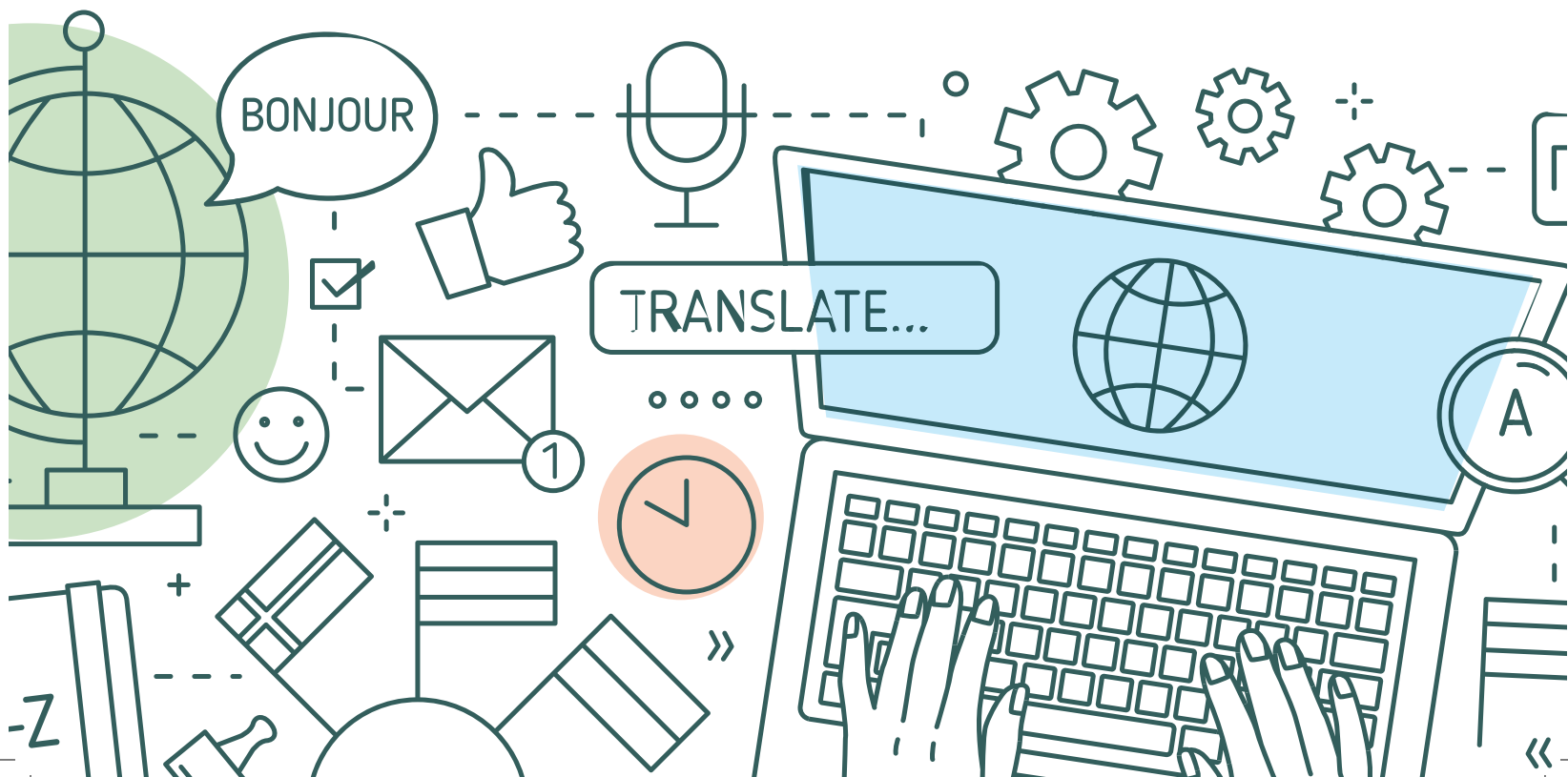
But to do the job, we need to do more than just write their words in our language. That might work for simple lists of countries or objects, but any text more complex than that is a living organism. It needs to be carefully transformed into something that will speak naturally to its readers. To think beyond words to sentences, paragraphs and whole ideas, including, where necessary, new titles, new organisation, and new formulations.

That can mean dismantling, researching, reconstructing, rewriting, and adapting to our culture.

In other words, it's about creating a text that looks like it was written by someone who speaks our language, and for people who read that language.

Only then will the readers be able to relate to it, and the message get through.

As translators our vocation is to ply our craft, and then disappear from the scene, leaving no trace that we were ever there.



Tech talk

Of course, like any industry in the 21st century, translation is affected in all kinds of ways by developing technology. Gone are the fondly remembered days of receiving documents in the post and having the translations typed out, complete with Tippex.

Today's translators are tech-savvy, and know how to get the best out of computers to do their work rapidly, effectively and accurately.

We use email to receive and send our texts, and the Internet is absolutely central to our research work.

For over twenty years, translators have been commonly using computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools to divide up and organise their texts, and store translation memories, from individual words to whole sentences.

You'll all have heard of Google Translate (GT), and presumably you'll be familiar with the fact that it can be appallingly bad, and yet represent something of a miracle at the same time. If you're a Hungarian grandmother communicating with your Irish granddaughter, then GT is very useful to help you get the gist of the message. For translators too, machine translation (MT) can help reduce the workload, chewing up texts and spitting them out in some shape or other (the quality depends on the language). That's often where the work of the human translator begins – injecting flow and style into what the machine produced, (known in the trade as "post-editing").

This new synergy between humans and computers means that more content is being translated more rapidly than ever before.

Yet there are many translators who never touch machine translations, claiming that they produce more problems than solutions. It all depends on the text, the topic area, the language combination, and the software used. For creative translation, or marketing, or literature, machine translation is still virtually useless.

Apart from that, we might well use software to organise subtitles, read our translations out loud (text to speech), check grammar and spelling, lay documents out for desktop publishing, manage our customer database and sales, keep track of workflows and deal with invoicing.

In other words, we see technology as a friend, not a foe. It boosts productivity and hence income, but for now its role is clearly defined. In other words, we don't lie awake at night fearing the day when we will be replaced by robots...



All in a day's work

Ask any translator what they need to do their work, and they'll tell you: a computer stocked with all the various technologies mentioned earlier. Perhaps a few old-fashioned books too. Lots of coffee or tea. And finally, some will add a cat or a dog.

It's a solitary profession. But that suits many of us just fine. We may range from introvert to extrovert, and all stations in between, but our true passion is for words and what we can make them do.

In the most popular languages (Spanish, French, German, Japanese etc), most of us only translate into our mother tongue, as our knowledge of the foreign language may be excellent but is rarely perfect. In other languages such as Vietnamese, Hungarian, Hausa (Nigeria), Tagalog (Philippines) or Quechua (Peru), local translators will work both ways.

We may work with translation agencies, or directly with clients. Either way, it begins with a text. These may come in all shapes and sizes, from 3-word slogans to 100,000-word dissertations.

But of course, each text needs to be in a subject area we feel comfortable taking on. Few medical translators will take on a legal text, or vice versa. There are technical, scientific, creative, artistic,



Location, location, location

One of the great things about being a translator in the 21st century is that we can work wherever we want.

For many of us, that means a home office, but with strict rules as to who can come in, and when! Whether it's a corner of a room or a dedicated space, it's where we keep our computers, printers and reference books.

In a job that requires intense concentration, that space is essential.

Others may prefer to rent an office in order to make a distinction between work and home, or opt to join a co-working space for the contact with others and networking opportunities.

Whatever our set-up, the technology today means we can also opt to work at a local café or in a park. And then there are those who are digital nomads, moving from country to country, always keeping in touch with their clients.

It's a sense of freedom that lies at the heart of the job.

All you need is your computer, access to the Internet, and the power of your mind.

literary and academic translators, to name but a few categories. Each of us gravitates towards certain areas of specialism.

We open the text up, look through it and do our research, then begin the labour of love – of conjuring up those ideas in language that always speaks clearly and naturally, and sometimes sings.

Next we'll work through the text, checking, revising, checking again, asking any questions to our clients, and giving the finished product a final polish. It's painstaking work, but what leaves our desk has to be perfect. That's the case for self-respecting professionals at least, although the availability of poor translations all around the world suggests that not everyone subscribes to such perfectionism!

At the same time, as freelancers and small-business owners, we need to be prepared for anything. A whole variety of texts can come at any time, and sometimes in bunches, from our range of clients, each with different deadlines, and sometimes even in various timezones.

We may work at different speeds – but each of us has to know how much we can get through in an hour, or a day.

We are expert jugglers, in many senses of the word.

And no two days are ever quite the same.



A human endeavour

So who do we work for? Just about anyone is potentially a client, from governments, international NGOs, companies, academics, museums, researchers, marketing departments, laboratories, and games companies, down to individuals looking to translate an immigration certificate or the lyrics of a song they've written.

They have a product or service to sell, a message to communicate, or a procedure to fulfil, and they need it in a foreign language.

What's more, they realise that getting it done by a professional will add some authority, some polish, extra power and above all, quality – a far cry from the mechanical versions offered up by Google Translate, or any other automatic machine translation.

They find us via online searches, on platforms or on our websites, via social media, on the grapevine, or through personal recommendation.

Millions of clients around the world. Billions of words.

Humans, speaking to other humans, in words translated by humans.



Raison d'être

To conclude our little tour, a simple question: why do we do what we do?

There are as many answers as translators.

Some see it as a vocation to build bridges – a chance to change the world, one sentence at a time.

Others as a passion they are happy to be paid for.

Still others view translation as a job that pays the bills.

But just about everyone is delighted to be able to make a living using a talent for languages and a gift for words, doing work that's an endless source of variety, fascination and learning.

So now revisit the ideas you may once have had about translators at the start of this publication. If you now feel more enlightened, our work is done!

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