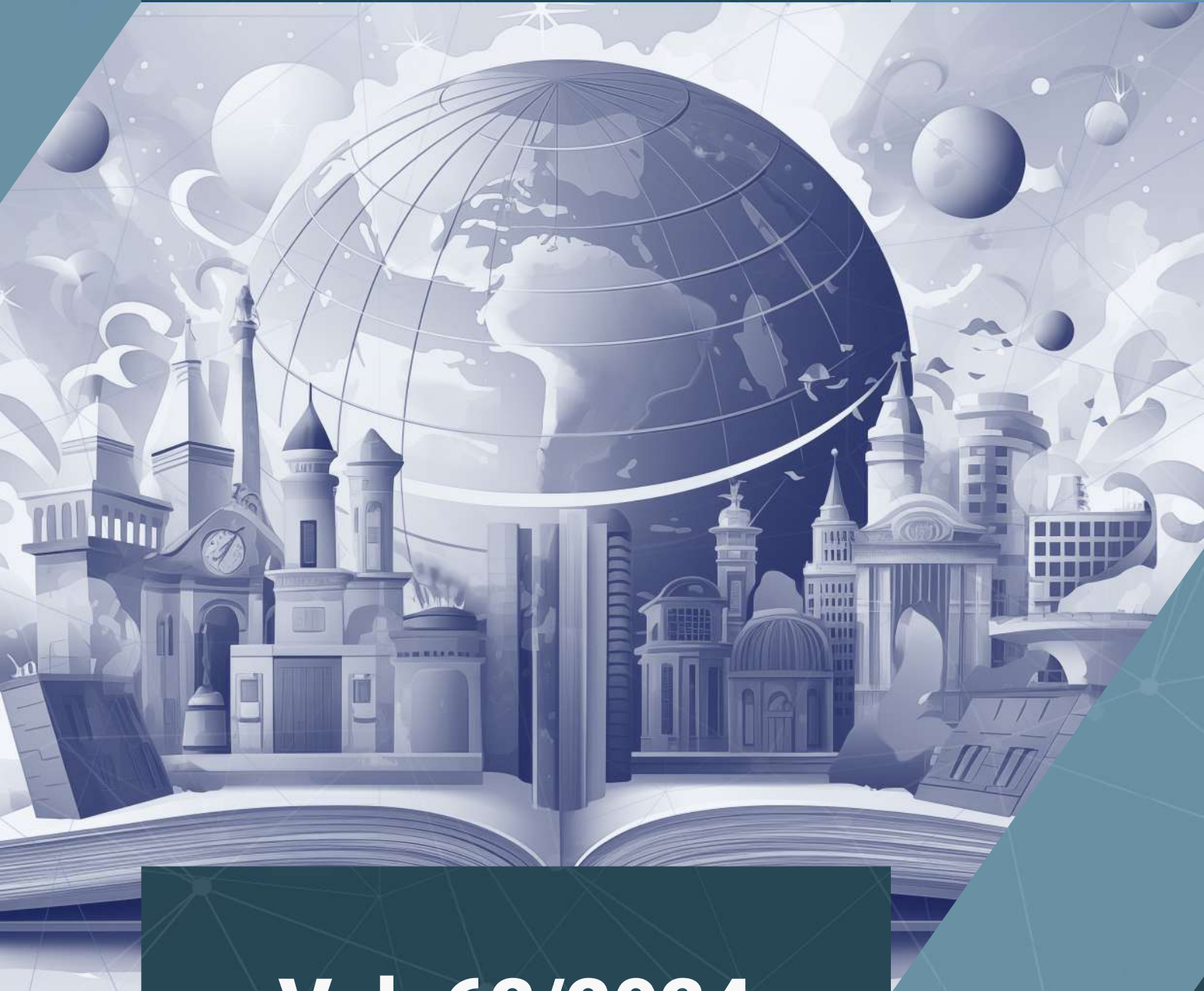




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Exploring Translation Profession in Iraq: A sociological Perspective

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Abstract. The motivation for the current study is two-pronged. First, it tries to address the existent obstacles for establishing a translation profession in Iraq; second, on the light of the recommendations suggested by the active agents in the field, the study seeks to come up with some solutions and suggestions to upgrade the status quo. The key agents such as translators, publishers and others, and in addition to the institutions involved have all been the recent emerging research focus in translation studies. Looked at as a profession, the research avenues have been to investigate the status of translation from a sociological perspective. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of translation agents in Basra city to collect data qualitatively in Iraq. The study reached some significant results that indicate the challenges facing the establishment of translation as a profession in Iraq. Based on the participants' comments and replies, and the reviewed relevant literature, some solutions and suggestions were introduced to help improve the current situation.

Keywords. Translation profession, translator status, professionalization, translation guild, translator certification

1. Introduction

In a globalized world, translation plays a key role in bridging the intercultural communication barriers and helping connect people of different linguistic backgrounds. In the first decade of the new millennium, Translation Studies (TS) has witnessed a new shift of focus in research interest. Instead of viewing translation as a product, researchers investigated translation as a social practice involving a number of agents working in cooperation (Wolf 2010). As a result of that, a Translation Studies witnessed the emergence of a new research domain focusing on translation as an occupation elevated to the status of a profession after fulfilling a set of standards set by translation scholars.

The concept of professionalism has been tackled by several prominent scholars in their studies; they set some required standards specific for professionalism. Downie (1990), defines a profession as “a full-time occupation supported by a body of knowledge and skills and represents the main source of income for its practitioners” (In Kifai et al, 2027). Roberts and Dietrich (1999) set social respect as the main standard for professionalism.

For most of the definitions put forward by scholars (e.g. Barber 1963; Greenwood 1953; Downie 1990), having a systematic body of knowledge is the key profession feature for

professionalism. However, despite all the agreed-upon features of the translation profession, it turns out to be a debated topic among prominent researchers. Some have been optimistic to claim that ‘translators are now regarded as high-profile cultural mediators’ (Gentzler (2001) with the functionalist turn in translation studies, and no more looked down upon by clients (Chesterman, 2009). On the other hand, other researchers (e.g. Pym 2005; Simeoni 1998; Muzii 2006; Gil and Pym 2006) appeared to be less optimistic towards professionalization in translation due to the current trend issues in deprofessionalisation, low bid market economics, the emerging competitive machine translation, the translators’ voluntary servitude.

1.1. Translation profession across the world

To contextualize the current argument, previously-published research would be reviewed in brief. In a volume of several collected articles, Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger (2011) addressed the status of translator and interpreter in specific countries (China, Spain, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Belgium, Palestine and Australia); the articles in this volume, entitled *Identity and Status in the Translational Professions*, discussed different issues related to translation and interpreting. and drawing on translation agents’ comments for their study, Dam and Zethsen (2010), explored the prospects and challenges crippling the translation profession scene in Denmark; their conclusions indicate that translation is an emerging profession that still lack the expertise level necessary to translate.

Other researchers have tackled the translators and interpreters’ attitudes towards their profession. For example, in his investigation of translators and interpreters’ attitudes, Katan (2011), concluded that they are satisfied with their professional status despite the fact that they are not highly recognized socially. Similarly, Myoung and Shunmugam (2014) tried to gauge the translators’ perceptions towards translation as a profession in Malaysia; they concluded that great efforts still needed. Pym et al. (2013) introduced some suggestions to improve the status of the translation profession in the European Union (EU) and compare it with other countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States. The authors studied the profession from several perspectives such as social, economic and gender, and others.

The T/I certification procedures have also been a research area. Hlavac (2013), for instance, addressed the certification procedures in 21 countries; his case study has some practical implications for the profession. Similarly, Godbout (2009) investigated the annually-held certification exam in Canada as a case study. Other researchers looked at the translator associations to highlight the code of ethics followed as Pym et al. (2013), did when he enumerated 11 associations with a total number of 4438 members.

1.2 University translation programs and associations in Iraq

From the 9th century till mid-13 century, Islamic history witnessed an unprecedented golden period for the translation movement. The Abbasid Caliph Al-Mamun established the “House of Wisdom” to become a world hub where valuable ancient works were collected and translated from world languages at that time such as Greek, Chinese, Sanskrit, Persian, and Syriac into Arabic. This vibrant translation movement attracted many prominent educated translators to work for considerable income from the ruling authorities.

During the Ottoman ruling of the present-day Iraq, starting in the mid-14th century, “Arabic continued to be the language of learning and law. Arabic continued to play a major role in the translation movement, though now it had to share this role with Turkish” explained Baker (1998, p. 322). Equally important, in the beginning of the 19th century, Egypt, Syria, and Sudan witnessed an active translation movement encouraged by Mohammad Ali, the Ottoman

governor; in his attempt to modernize Egypt institutions and build an independent state away from the Ottoman Empire, he sent many students expeditions to France, set up professional schools, he required students to translate texts from French into Arabic required for modernizing the military and administration.

Modern Iraqi state was formed In the second decade of the 20th century, unfortunately under British occupation, and modern state institutions began to form. Among them are universities. University of Mosul (1976), the University of Mustansiriyah (1978), Basra University (2010), are the first state universities which launched translation programmes, and later in many other state and private universities. Sadly, these universities still follow almost the same traditional teaching methodology; being mostly as a teacher-centered rather than student-centred methodology where students duplicate what the teacher presents as a model translation; normally students look for high marks so they begin to imitate the teacher`s translation in their draft.

Education in TS is rather newly-introduced at Iraqi universities. At the beginning, translation was taught as a minor in BA English programmes. The first undergraduate translation programme in Iraq was first established in 1987 at the University of Mosul. The BA program spans over four years and translation and offered in Arabic and English language. After that, the same university offered the first M.A in English Translation in 2001. Currently several state-run and private universities offer BA in TS in English/Arabic translation. In the MA translation programmes, students have to pass two semesters of coursework then write a dissertation as a research project to meet the graduation requirements. In the MA programmes, students have to complete compulsory modules on translation practice, theories of translation, research methodology in TS, translation assessment, culture and sociology in translation and translation seminar.

Once again, in 2011, Mosul University offered the first PhD programme in TS in Iraq, then the Mustansiriyah University followed in 2012. Currently, a number of public and private universities offer BA progammms in TS in Iraq. The BA syllabus has four main areas: modules on languages, linguistics, literary works and translation theories and translation practice. Regrettably, since it was first offered in Iraq, translation curriculum witnessed few minor adaptations; these minor changes cannot catch up with the fast technological advancements in multimedia texts, fast flowing of translation materials, and demanding translation labour market. Concerning the teaching approach, teacher-centred transmissionism rather than the student-centered is still sadly adopted in teaching translation at universities. Despite the recurrent calls by academic researchers to adopt the modern constructivist approaches to translator education (Király 2000), the dominant teaching methodology among university translation scholars is still prescriptive and follows the spoon-feeding technique. As for the study period, The MA and PhD programmes typically span over two years for the MA and three years for the PhD, where students have to take coursework for two semesters and write a thesis project. Some of the modules of the MA and PhD programmes. Among the compulsory modules that students have to take are: modern translation theories, pragmatics and discourse analysis in TS, translation pedagogy, culture and translation, terminology and lexicography, computers and translation, translation criticism. Finally, a limited number of students are admitted to both postgraduate programmes in MA and PhD in TS after passing an annual nationwide admission examination. Currently, there are two official translation bodies that can offer accreditation in Iraq, namely the Iraqi Translators' Association (ITA), and the Appeal Court. Since it was first established, the Association's main objectives are to provide:

“1. Certified legal translation from Arabic into all foreign languages and vice versa in all fields of knowledge and specializations, including legal, media, scientific, literary, medical and engineering translation.

2. Certified legal translation from a foreign language into another foreign language.
3. Interpreters specializing in simultaneous interpretation in conferences and seminars.

4. Organizing specialized courses in translation and interpretation for graduates of language departments.

5. Organizing developmental courses in teaching living foreign languages.

6. Organizing proficiency testing courses in English and other living languages.

7. Organizing special exams to obtain membership in the Association for non-graduates of language departments.

8. Providing state departments and official and non-official institutions with translators in all specializations.

9. A specialized library that includes rare dictionaries and dictionaries in most international languages.” (ITA, 2024)

Currently the association has approved (68) translation offices in all of Iraq. In addition to hundreds of members who specialize in different languages including English, Arabic, Spanish, German, Farsi, French and Russian. In Iraq, the only way to become a certified translator is to successfully pass an examination held by the association.

2. Research questions

This paper tries to answer the following two research enquiries:

(1) Are there challenges facing the establishment of a translation profession at Iraqi universities?

(2) What are the suggestions and recommendations proposed to improve the translation profession in Iraq?

The study draws on in-depth interview as a data-collecting technique; the collected qualitative data, in the form of responses and insights drawn from a selected cohort of participants, are analysed thematically to investigate the phenomenon under study. To clarify further on the adopted methodology, Fylan (2005), defines semi-structured interviews technique as ‘conversations in which the interviewer knows what s/he is looking for using a set of questions to cover, but the structure of the conversation is flexible and may vary for different interviewees’ (in Kafi et al, 2017). In other words, the interviewer ‘continues collecting data until new information saturation is reached’ (ibid). The researcher conducted the online interview with (n=10) cohort of participants from Basra city as active translation agents; they are as follows: five translation scholars, three professional translators, a manager at a translation agency, and the head of a publishing house. All the interviews were audio-recorded for analysis. The reason for choosing Basra city is that it becomes a commercial hub in Iraq where tens of international oil companies invest billions of dollars; therefore the translation job market is thriving there. In addition, Basra university offers BA and MA programmes in translation studies.

Based on semi-structured interviews and using grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967) for analyzing the data, this study attempts to draw on a similar study by Kafi et al (2017) to probe the translation profession scene in Iran. It tries to duplicate and adapt the same framework reached by the researchers to explore the translation profession status quo in Iraq. In addition, a thorough literature review of the relevant research studies churn out some

significant themes which were successfully considered as indicators of a true profession. During the interview, the participating interviewees expressed their opinions on specific aspects of the translation occupation reality in Iraq. Later in the interview, the participants were presented with some questions to offer their own specific solutions and suggestions for developing the translation as a profession on the from different aspects: ‘authoritative bodies, economic condition, social status, admission criteria, translator education, regulatory measures’

3. Results

3.1. Challenges facing the translation profession in Iraq

Drawing on the framework developed by Kafi et al (2017), the interviewees were asked to comment on the main themes and challenges facing the translation profession in Iraq, the researcher adapted the main themes from the interview discussion, each of the main themes has several sub-categories:

3.1.1. Administrative issues

Starting the interview with discussing the administrative aspects, almost all the interviewees (9/10) confirmed that they face continuing administrative challenges when practicing their profession; these challenges are beyond their duties as translation agents whether they are translators, translation teachers, or publishers; as the issue belongs to higher-authorities.

3.1.1.1. Absence of a strong translation guild. Although there are many associations for the different professions in Iraq such the Iraqi Writers, pharmacists, doctors, calligraphers, dentists, etc., all participating respondents (10/10) confirmed the absence of a strong representative translation guild that can fulfill its responsibilities towards the major challenges they face in their profession. The interviewees added that translators and interpreters do not receive any governmental or nongovernmental financial or moral support since they were authorized or accredited by the Iraqi Association of Translators. The latter also pointed to the absence of a higher translation body authorized to judge and make settlements in interests disputes between a client and any of the translation agents.

3.1.1.2 Code of ethics. Schmeiser (1992) defines codes of ethics as “a series of principles which guide the behaviours of practitioners in any given profession and ensure the public that the members of the profession follow certain moral principles”. Currently, there are two state-owned bodies in Iraq, the Iraqi Translators’ Association (ITA), and the Appeal Court, which have authorized hundreds of members. Both clearly set the ethical codes outlining the responsibilities and rights of its members; however, Iraqi translators do not seem to follow. Most of the participants (8/10) stated that Iraqi translators do not explicitly abide by any set of ethical principles. Interviewees have mentioned many cases where preachments frequently happened; this is due to the lack of a representative guild with the authority to reinforce such types of regulations.

3.1.1.3. Lack of strict criteria for market entrance. Most of the respondents maintain that in the current translation market, any bilingual person with an average foreign language proficiency may claim the title of translator in Iraq. This is partly due to the haphazard, unplanned policy followed to recruit interpreters by the coalition forces during years of occupation in Iraq (Aldanani, 2020). However, if a translator or interpreter wants to be licensed, he/she must pass an entrance exam for entering the field of professional translation.

3.1.1.4 Unofficial translation services. Since there is a lack of strict legislative laws which govern the unofficial translation offices in the translation market, all of the respondents confirmed the fact that prevalent unauthorized translation offices represent a big obstacle for

establishing a translation profession in Iraq. Most of these offices employ translators who may be bilinguals with an average linguistic proficiency and computer skills with heavy dependence on Google translation, or they may be first-year or novice translators using machine translation when commissioned with loads of translation work to offer low-quality translated products. However, only the prominent official translation agencies, which either have been authorized by (ITA) or the Appeal Court and often managed by legally sworn translators, can issue translated documents certified and accepted for legal procedures but charge much higher fees for translation services provided than the abundant freelancers or unofficial translation offices, which do not abide by the legal regulations.

3.1.2. Social status issues

The issue of social status received considerable comments by almost all the participants (9/10).

3.1.2.1 Recognition of translators. Almost all the participating respondents confirmed that translators' and interpreters' social status went through wax and wane. Prior to 2003 war and invasion, translators are highly recognised by the large majority of Iraqi people especially the professional interpreters and translators; this popularity continued especially with interpreters and translators working for the coalition forces in the first years of the occupation of Iraq. However, in later years of the invasion and as the militants circulated grim narratives of betraying against interpreters (Aldanani, 2020), interpreters and translators faced life-threatening risks and the profession underwent critical changes in social status. Currently, with the spread of social media, professional translators regained their social status at least in academia.

3.1.2.2 Misconceptions associated with translation. The interviewees also highlighted some misconceptions associated with the practice of translation in the Iraqi scene. For example, a lot of ordinary and even non-ordinary Iraqi people believe that any bilingual person with an average competence in two languages is capable of becoming a translator. This misconception among Iraqis has mainly resulted from the random recruitment procedures for unqualified translators and even for bilingual with minimum linguistic knowledge followed by the linguistic companies contracted with the American Army during the occupation years. The rapid technological advancements in recent years spread a popular misconception that translation engines can replace humans and produce perfect translations. These misconceptions resulted in low amounts of payments by clients for the commissioned translation services.

3.1.3. Issues related to translation agency

Some of the issues mentioned by the interviewees concerned translation agents themselves.

3.1.3.1. Disunity among translation agents. More than half of the interviewees indicated in their comments that there is a close-to-non-existence unity among translation agents. This reality can act as a barrier to the establishment of a translation profession in Iraq. Again, this is due to the absence of strict legislative laws that regulate the translation market.

3.1.3.2. Unawareness of basic rights and duties. All the interviewees (10/10) pointed to a significant lack of awareness among most translators and interpreters who worked for the coalition forces in war zones in 2003 American occupation of Iraq. Being recruited randomly, the majority of the interpreters were not aware of their rights and responsibilities. Instead of acting as linguists and intercultural mediators who abide by translation ethics, they were commissioned other duties not related to linguistic issues (Aldanani, 2020)

3.1.4. Training Challenges

This section will focus on drawbacks associated with translation education in Iraq.

3.1.4.1 University Translation syllabus. Most of the interviewees (8/10) confirmed that translation modules at Iraqi universities have remained almost the same since it was first launched more than 30 years ago except minor changes which cannot meet the current rising translation market needs. As a result, novice translation graduates lack drastically many necessary skills. Syllabi need to be updated to include modules associated with technological advancements especially with media accessibility and multimedia texts.

3.1.4.2 Neglecting the role of experienced translators. Almost all the interviewees were deeply pessimistic in response to questions concerning the training workshops held and the trainers at these workshops. Generally speaking, very few translation workshops are annually held at the headquarters of the Iraqi Translators' Association in Baghdad and many fewer at the Iraqi Writers' office in Basra by translation scholars or some professional translators. The interviewees added that most of these translation workshops are held as part of academic activities for translation lecturers and are often delivered by translation scholars who may not have a strong practical translation skills; hence, students do not receive the desired practical output expected from these workshops. Respondents also added that only the translation workshops held and taught by professional trainers with deep practical experience can yield valuable outcomes.

3.2 Suggestions for promoting the translation profession in Iraq

This part will discuss the interviewees' recommendations and suggestions proposed for enhancing the status quo.

3.2.1 Establishing a strong translation guild

Having a strong translation guild was strongly argued for by the interviewees as a first step towards professionalization. This initiative needs some preliminary conditions such as unity among translation agents and also some relevant legislation in Iraqi parliament to support the Iraqi Translators' Association. Unfortunately, the interviewees were deeply frustrated as previous attempts have failed to establish a translation guild with strict legislations in Iraq due to the absence of competent authority that can follow up the application of laws in the translation market.

3.2.2 Raising public awareness of the act of translation

In the beginning years of the American occupation of Iraq, interpreters and translators who worked for the military had high positive social status among local people (Aldanani, 2020). The reasons range from economic to power and skills. However, this prestige did not last for long. With the growing resentment of people against the American presence in Iraq, the positive narrative of interpreters turned down (ibid). Many of the interviewees suggested some initiatives to enhance the dwindling and fluctuating social status of Iraqi interpreters and translators such as informing the public about the vital role the translators have in the process of intercultural mediation across the globe. This information may be provided through many social media platforms and even TV channels, specialized websites, and the written press as well. Also, the Iraqi Translators' Association can take the lead through various activities such as user-friendly translated materials. In addition, among the other effective awareness-raising techniques is celebrating the International Translation Day on 30 September. The Iraqi Translators' Association can consider it as a national event in Iraq would help draw the public opinion to the significant status of translation, and the key role of translators in the intercultural communication among nations and enriching the local culture.

3.2.3 Establishing a translator certification system

There are many famous certification systems around the world. For example, (NAATI Certification System) in Australia (Hlavac 2013; Ozolins 1998), American Translators

Association Certification in the US (Hammond 1990), DACTI certification in Denmark (Dam and Zethsen 2010), (CIOL, ITI and ATC) in England (Osers 1983). Likewise, in addition to the exam the ITA sets for candidates to be certified translators, all the interviewees strongly emphasize that there should be a national translation certificate scheme to issue and accredit the minimum requirements for anyone who wants to claim the title of translator or interpreter in Iraq. Also, the respondents recommend a nationally approved list of translators and interpreters to ensure that only approved/certified translators and interpreters offer the highly specialized services. The interviewees also suggested that there should be a “ranking system” for translation proficiency as an additional prerequisite for distinguishing among average, skillful, competent, and professional translators and interpreters. Thus, this ranking system would offer ample opportunities for clients to choose the suitable translator or interpreter based on the translation quality they look for, and also this ranking system will distinguish the novice translator from the professional and thus help ensure the translators’ rights and rewards depending on their levels of translation proficiency.

3.2.4 Revising the current syllabus of Translation Studies

Among the significant suggestions the respondents strongly called for is the issue of TS syllabus at universities. The participants strongly lashed their criticisms against the current translation curriculum. They maintained that translation modules taught especially in the BA programs do not seem to yield any significant output for the students. They also added that the translation curriculum should heavily focus on the practical modules that imitate the real market needs because novice translators struggled a lot when commissioned with a translation task. Some of the courses suggested by the interviewees were machine translation, time and project management, marketing and communication skills modules.

4. Conclusions

The main focus of study is to focus on the largely-neglected research area in translation studies in Iraq, i.e. ‘translation as a profession’. The data obtained confirm that translation as profession suffer from a great number of challenges that they need greater understanding, joint efforts from all the involved partners, and intensive research studies from all in order to promote it to the level of a profession as the interviewees repeatedly emphasised in their responses the central importance of overcoming these economic, administrative, and training issues.

Some of the findings reported here also suggest new reasons for interpreters and translators to reflect on ethical aspects of their practice. These reasons relate to effective professional performance and status as well as ethics. The professional clients of interpreting and translation surveyed here had overwhelmingly never received any training whatsoever in cross-language or intercultural communication

Drawing on the interviewees’ comments participated in this study, it can be concluded that absence of strict legislations represented by a strong translation guild is the main challenge facing the development of the translation profession in Iraq. The other challenge is numerous unofficial translation offices working with low fees and employing unqualified translators. These findings are an overall challenge faced in most countries according to the findings of Katan’s (2009) case study.

A code of ethics for translators to follow is also recommended by the respondents and stressed by academic researchers from different fields of knowledge (e.g. Scanlon and Glover 1994; Adams, Tashchian, and Shore 2001; Wotruba, Chonko, and Loe 2001). The absence of which can be a major hindrance for the translation profession.

The other significant issue confirmed by participants interviewed in the current study (9/10) is translator training. This conclusion is in accordance with previous research findings conducted by translation scholars (Gouadec (2007), Schellekens (2004) and Olohan (2007), Perez (2002). The arguments that run through these studies indicate that universities offering translation programs must have the necessary human, financial and material resources. This suggestion resonates with the interviewees' perception of the importance of practical translation skills that fresh translation students often lack when they want to successfully join the translation market as reiterated also by Katan (2009) in his research studies.

Furthermore, all interviewees participated in this study stressed the importance of a certification system as an effective solution to the issue of unqualified translators; a suggestion is strongly supported by the existing literature (Pym et al. (2013) and Moav and Neeman (2004). This advantage is increasingly supported by the fact that many international investment oil companies started to ask for applicants for the announced translation positions to be translation graduates. More job offers, enhanced self-confidence and higher respect by colleagues are among the other advantages of the certification system requirement in order to join the translation labour market. In addition, the interviewees were so concerned about the lack of expertise of some translators working in the field. They strongly recommend offering them additional professional development in the form of remedial translation workshops.

To conclude, this study reports on the key barriers facing the development of a translation profession in Iraq: these issues include administrative, social, academic and educational challenges. Also, the majority of the participants stressed the need to have a representative translation guild as a first step towards professionalisation.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that this study is no more than a preliminary step and cannot be considered comprehensive in its results and conclusions; further work is required for more detailed workable solutions.

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