Translator Professionalism:
Perspectives From Asian Clients

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, Translation Studies scholars have highlighted the concept of translator professionalism as a multidimensional term related not only to practitioners’ competency in the language domain, but also to their attitudes, behavior, and actions. This article empirically examines how translation clients in Asia perceive translator professionalism. The analysis is based on 72 clients in Asia. The findings suggest that clients perceive the translation occupation as vital to society but have divergent views on whether translation is a profession. They attach importance to translators’ proactive behavior at work, such as their reliability. The clients have statistically different opinions on whether or not translators can share their work-related pictures and information in online communities. They also point out that the lack of a certification system affects the professional image of translators. This research allows translators, clients and scholars to have a more informed perception of translator professionalism perceived by Asian clients.

KEYWORDS

Certification System, Empirical Method, Quantitative Method, Translation Clients in Asia, Translation Profession, Translator Professionalism, Translator Status

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a huge revival of interest in using empirical methods or a sociological approach to understand translators in the workplace and society. However, translator professionalism, which is important as recently highlighted by the International Federation of Translators (2017), has been relatively under-examined in an empirical way in Asia. In view of this, a study, in which a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, was conducted in an attempt to empirically investigate how practitioners and clients in Asia perceive translator professionalism. The analysis of translators’ perceptions will be reported on in detail in another publication, the present article is precisely to study how clients in Asia perceive translator professionalism.

As noted by Chesterman and Wagner, “‘client’ is a rather dangerous blanket term” (2014, p. 49). The present study adopts the viewpoints of Chesterman and Wagner (2014) to include three types of clients: (1) those who are authors. These may be clients who have written a text in their first language or in a foreign language and are having the text translated; (2) those who are middlemen between readers and authors. They may be working in translation agencies or are responsible for hiring translators in a company; (3) those who are readers. These clients need the translation because they do not understand the source language. In this study, comparisons will be made to analyze the different perspectives held by these three types of clients.

Traditionally, Translation Studies literature associated translator professionalism with a person’s capacity to produce acceptable target texts (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017). It may be due to the tendency
in the twentieth century that Translation Studies centered on studying texts. Pym notes that Nida’s work and the whole thrust of Descriptive Translation Studies trace the social and cultural approaches to translation, but those works are “fundamentally ways of studying texts […] texts were the thing” (Pym, 2006, p. 2). However, the past two decades have witnessed a change in Translation Studies wherein translation is increasingly viewed as a social practice (Kafi et al., 2018; Wolf, 2010). Therefore, recent discussion of translator professionalism is no longer confined to the language and translation competence of a translator to produce acceptable target texts. Rather, scholars use a macro perspective to also take factors such as social, ethical and behavioral into consideration. For example, Kościałkowska-Okońska defines translator professionalism as ‘an explicit result of effective functioning of cognitive factors allowing text processing and production in order to convey the meaning in a given social and cultural context in a generally acceptable manner’ (Kościakowska-Okońska, 2012, p. 97). Likewise, Cragie, Higgins, Hervey and Gambarotta (2016) put emphasis on the standards of working and ethical behavior in translator professionalism, noting that “professionalism suggests acting in a manner befitting a member of a profession. More specifically, the term ‘professionalism’ indicates a set of values peculiar to that profession, which informs standards of working and ethical behavior” (Cragie et al., 2016, p. 178). The translator’s ethical behavior is also stressed by Robinson when he (1997) implies that translator professionalism:

...is “the best synonym for the translator’s reliability,” the translator’s behavior should be “ethical professional,” that is “meet[ing] users’ expectations” and ranging from the ability to admit his/her ignorance to demonstrating his/her professional pride, integrity and self-esteem; professionalism means a high degree of internalization of the particular skills necessary for plying the trade of translation... (Robinson, 1997, quoted in Tyulenev, 2015)

Kiraly (2014) gives more details describing professionalism:

...would characterize the translator’s ability to work within the social and ethical constraints of translation situations in a manner that is consistent with the norms of the profession. This would involve aspects like the commitment to meet deadlines and to inform a client in due time if a translation will be late... (Kiraly, 2014, p. 31)

Kiraly further points out that conventional translator training has almost exclusively accentuated the transmission of translational expertise, and yet he calls on scholars and translation teachers to pay attention to students’ need to be initiated into translation as a ‘professional’ enterprise. For example, having students undertake authentic translation work collaboratively in the classroom allows them to be confronted with problems concerning how to act in a professional manner.

Following the prevailing trend, this paper endeavors to define translator professionalism as a multi-faceted term which includes the dimensions of professional status, adherence to ethical practice principles, proactive behavior at work, behavior outside work, organizational context, and situational awareness. (Section 2 of this paper explains these dimensions in detail.)

In Translation Studies, one area that has not been adequately studied is the issue of how translators are perceived by their clients. In Europe, some efforts have been made to empirically study clients’ viewpoints. For example, the Optimale Survey (2012) examined how clients determine current and emerging competence requirements within the European translation industry. Unfortunately, clients’ voices are seldom heard in Asia. In view of this, the present empirical study was carried out to investigate the way clients perceive translator professionalism in the region.
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