

## **Representing and Defending our Profession in the Age of Globalization**

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Translation: an industry crying out for standards.....	2
Guilds: a historical perspective.....	2
Cities and the birth of Guilds in the Middle Ages .....	2
The Renaissance .....	4
The Age of Nations .....	5
From the Industrial Revolution to the present.....	5
The Age of Globalization .....	6
Today: a time to act .....	6

## Translation: an industry crying out for standards

Globalization means different things to different people. For translators, globalization is the age when people talk to people without borders and through more and more diverse media. The internet makes communication instant, free, ever-present, free-flowing - but the one thing computers cannot do is translate. This is one of Globalization's bottlenecks, which places the translator in a crucial situation.

In Europe, the demise of the USSR and of Yugoslavia has resulted in the appearance of new Nation-states. In the process of legitimizing their national identities, language is a key issue. The geopolitics of language is sensitive. Moreover, new nations have joined the European Union. Unlike the UN which chose to use a few central languages, the EU has decided to use all of them in many activities, even if some sectors remain restricted to a few pivotal languages (more info on this passionating subject can be obtained at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/translation/enlargement/preparing\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/translation/enlargement/preparing_en.htm)). Every sovereign State can communicate in Brussels or read legislation using its language. This is seen as making globalization respectful of national identities.

The increase of translation is a technical challenge. It is also a *moral* issue. Translators are what the Greek language called hermeneuts: they don't convey only information, they serve as bridges, go-betweenes, almost ambassadors between people of different cultures. The translator is not just another trader who exploits the lack of understanding among people to make a living, he has to remain a person who offers his diplomatic skills, his vast culture, to make people understand each other, work together.

While some actors of the translation industry may see globalization as profitable manna for quick money making, we as responsible translators should also consider what our duties are. Globalization will increase the possibilities for translators to play an important role in history, something that they have always done, sometimes at the risk of their lives.

The following paper wishes to offer a historical and moral perspective on the role a world guild of translators could play. The author is aware of the various existing organisations, such as the FIT (<http://www.fit-ift.org/>), who have already played a pioneering role in this respect, and extends them a heartfelt salute. As a consultant and a trainer, I am in daily contact with a profession in turmoil, faced with an exceedingly competitive and demanding localization industry, in a marketplace that has gone wildly global. My vision is that our current situation is not a problem, but an opportunity to leap-frog history and create something totally new. Should I fail in conveying this vision, I would be honoured if some of the ideas I present would spark discussions of some sort.

## Guilds: a historical perspective

### *Cities and the birth of Guilds in the Middle Ages*

Guilds appeared in the Carolingian era, with the purpose of regrouping professions sharing a common interest, but which could not find identification or protection within the feudal order.

Because they represented a self-organized power coming from the people, they may be seen as some embryo of the future civil society. Guilds flourished in Northern Europe (England, the Netherlands, Northern France, Rhenania and soon everywhere) and mostly concerned merchants and traders in the beginning. Being involved in transnational activities, they entailed some multilingualism.

Later, guilds come to unite craftsmen at the turn of the 12th century. They later evolve into corporations.

Guilds remain connected to the birth of cities in Europe. The Middle Ages see the multiplication and the establishment of medium-size cities that are havens for all sorts of trades and crafts, organised around the Church, the market place, and local governance. The City is the cradle that fosters the birth of the guilds that naturally emerge to satisfy the needs of various newly-formed professions.

Though the Church was initially hostile to fraternities, the Scholastic thought later acted to legitimize this form of social organization. Other civilizations seem to have known similar types of organization: there were corporations in the medieval Byzantium, guilds in the Muslim world, professional castes in India, and all kinds of brotherhoods in many civilizations.

Most guilds place themselves under the spiritual guidance of a patron Saint or some other indisputable moral figure and call themselves fraternities. Guilds and later corporations are spontaneously formed by professionals bound by the same practice, and who:

- choose and impose a code of conduct (define the morals);
- enhance the profession's skills and knowledge;
- screen and train the next generation (apprentice, companion, master);
- regulate the quality of the production;
- establish solidarity among its members;
- lobby for privileges, speak with one voice;
- provide justice and arbitration for the profession;
- organize conventions, sponsor charities, etc.

Guilds are miniature societies where the individual has duties as well as rights. The fulfillment of duties endows the individual with rights. In keeping with the ages when they were born, guilds are pyramidal organisations that resemble the monarchic or feudal structures of the age. Nevertheless, one should note that guilds are ahead of their times, introducing strong elements of shared power, a more transparent organisation, elective systems, and the accountability of executive officers. They are a driving force toward the future.

Guilds are born during the lower Middle Ages we commonly refer to as the Feudal Age. They are city-level organisation. Of course, when solid nations emerge in the late Middle Ages, guilds expand to the national level, although their roots are clearly at the level of cities.

For the sake of our thesis, we shall simply observe that the age of guilds in Europe coincides with the time when translators become an important component of cultural life. Gradually, all the major works of the Antiquity are translated from Greek to Latin, Arab to Latin (for example in Toledo, Spain), and from Latin gradually into national languages.

Why did the national languages appear?

Around this time, many monarchies appeared in Western Europe, which were the embryos of the future nation-States. When the idea of the Universal Christian Empire collapsed around 919, each nation tried to develop its autonomy and therefore to promote and codify its own vernacular language. The national language soon became a critical symbol of the central power. The monarchic societies started to adopt central administrations which needed treatises and a lot of paperwork. And all universal works had to be translated from Latin, Greek or Hebrew into national languages. Concepts had to be borrowed from around the world and adapted to the national framework.

From this viewpoint, the appearance of guilds and the multiplication of translators don't happen simultaneously by chance. A common underlying factor is man's desire to be autonomous and self-organized, independently from the Emperor or the Pope. Guilds and translators pursued a similar goal: to make people less dependant on the powerful figures who *can*, who *know*, who *decide*.

If people could organize their professions, read books in their own languages, they could become real owners and start to decide what to think, what to say, what to do, without being told from above. To translate was a courageous activity, which wrested the monopoly of meaning from the Clergy and empowered the common man.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Renaissance***

The Protestant Reformation, which gave an incredible impetus to translation (Martin Luther is considered a genius in translation and the first great German writer) and Renaissance's Humanism which gave impetus to corporations and broke the barriers of the feudal order, had a common interest.

There is no established translation/interpretation profession, as a distinct, full-time activity in those days, save a few exceptions. Translators and interpreters, in any city or kingdom, are too few, far from reaching the critical mass required to form a guild. If there had been such a guild, it could have taken Saint Jerome (347-420) as its patron. Saint Jerome translated the Bible into Latin. By deliberately translating the Scriptures into a "vulgar" Latin understood by most of the people of his time, and not into the "classical" Latin practised by scholars, he had made a strong moral, if not political, statement, deciding that knowledge should be shared equally by all and not rest in the hands of an elite. He refused to have any meaning twisted to accommodate the theological preferences of the day and unflinchingly carried out his translation work; when difficulty arose, he went to great lengths to seek the real meaning of the texts.

In Asia, a similar phenomenon takes place. The vassals of China gradually develop their cultural autonomy and the major Buddhist and Confucianist Scriptures are all translated from Chinese into Korean, Japanese, or Vietnamese. In South East Asia, monarchies appear in Cambodia, Siam, Burma, and Laos. These monarchies, in order to legitimize their power, have to translate major works from the Sanskrit-Pali language base into vernacular languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Frenchman Etienne Dolet is seen as a martyr of translation. Because he had added three words in a translation of Plato's Dialogues from Greek, which were deemed blasphematory, he was burned, with copies of his work.

Sometimes, translators even have to create indigenous alphabets. Translation plays a key role in making people become the owners of their national history. A national history often starts as an individuation of a universal culture, but later translators also help each nation be heard in the concert of nations.

We modern-day translators should never forget the noble work of our forerunners, whose work enabled many nations to emerge in world history. Today, when a translator enables Malta, Slovenia or Estonia to make proposals in Brussels, he makes these “small” States actors of the contemporary European history. Apart from being a technical challenge, it is a contribution to peace and a meaningful responsibility. Who knows what great idea may not be understood because the translator was not able to be eloquent enough!

### ***The Age of Nations***

The Renaissance sees a shift from city-level to national-level power organisation. Political, economic and industrial revolutions give shape to the modern concept of nations.

The emergence of modern States entails a greater power of the people by the people and for the people. The King is no longer the owner, but people become the sovereign. Moreover, all modern societies become secularized and the Church loses the monopoly of spiritual power. All ideas are given licence to be written and read. As people are given more and more freedom, they start to mind very much about their economic and social welfare. Knowledge becomes a key component of development and all scientific and academic work has to be translated.

In this new environment, the traditional guilds of the Middle Ages have managed to evolve into national-level organisations, still retaining much of their founding values, their initial brilliance and charm. They cultivate pride, strictly abide by their deontology, have strong morals. This does not prevent them from efficiently carrying out their various goals and acting on the national scene when the need arises.

### ***From the Industrial Revolution to the present***

In contrast, the various unions and syndicates that appear during the industrial revolution are formed to respond to crisis situations, during periods of conflict, when work had become inhumane. A sorry consequence of this is that many trade-unions are “hard” organisations primarily concerned with securing rights for their members, often locked in an “us against them” logic. No one can deny that the creation of these unions was necessary in the 19th and 20th centuries, but unfortunately, they were hastily formed in response to times of turmoil and reflect the conflictual nature of their inception. The spiritual and moral aspects are often absent. Duties are very few; rights are taken for granted.

Raphael Garcia, a French consultant in social relations, advocates the end of militant trade-unionism, which gives a dangerous illusion of counterpower, but is often unable to make positive proposals for the welfare of society as a whole. Talking of French trade-unionism which he calls Gallic – meaning anarchic and immature – he urges it to become truly

representative, less dependent on public subsidies, less ideological and truly able to help the worker become a responsible and concerned citizen.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Age of Globalization***

Moreover, according to Garcia, “Globalization has highlighted trade-unionism’s inability to adaptation, its weak representativeness, its politicization, its divisions”.

Much has been said about globalization. My subject is not about defending or condemning it, and much less about fostering one particular vision of it. Globalization creates passion and irrational fears, as if the individual, or the tribe, or the nation, were to disappear or melt away. The advent of the cities never destroyed families or tribes, the advent of nations never destroyed families, tribes or cities, although all of them were somewhat affected along the way.

Many Guilds or syndicates will have to make the jump and reach world-class. It is conceivable that some purely local professions may not need world-class representation. Our profession is by nature one that cries out for global representation.

The globalization scene is quite hectic these days: every international conference on Labour, Trade, or Environment draws irate crowds of protesters. If an organisation is to be born out of anger or conflict, its nature is likely to remain one of anger or conflict.

There exist a few international bodies of translators/interpreters but we should note that none of them can claim universal recognition across today’s fault lines: “the West” (Europe/North America), the former Socialist block, the so-called “Third World”, and the Far East (these categories are becoming blurred now, they are used as broad outlines). When it comes to translation, each part of the world has its economic realities, different pricing, different quality requirements, different traditions. In each part of the world, the position of the translator is seen somewhat differently. Not only can no current translators’ organisation claim universal presence, but they all represent a negligible fraction of the profession’s global workforce.

### **Today: a time to act**

As this paper strives to explain, there were no guilds or corporations of translators in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and almost none in the Industrial Revolution. Ironically, the spirit of translation is very much one of guild-making: it advocates bridging gaps, power-sharing, solidarity, a move towards equality, power to the people.

The crisis in our profession – or at least the fast and sometimes painful transformation it undergoes – should not be a reason why translation unions dwindle, but precisely the reason why they are sorely needed and should swell to represent not 2 or 3% of the workforce, but a much more sizeable proportion.

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<sup>2</sup> Raphael Garcia, *Changer les Règles du Jeu Social*, Le Figaro, 6 August 2004

Now is the chance for our profession to leap-frog history and show the world what a functional guild at a global level can mean. Our problems actually show us this: we are in a situation where, if we react as we should, we can redefine the meaning of “Guild” by taking it to a level unseen to this day. And, since the same globalization that hard-presses us is the very one that places us in a pivotal position, here is a chance for us to make our union a formidable player in our age.

We *can* make a difference, however small, in tomorrow’s professional landscape.

It would be a pity to wait for a crisis to unite since, as explained above, unions that were hastily created in times of crisis remain “crisis organisations”. It is time for our profession to calmly lay the foundation for a world-class body.

This future body, whether it arises from the evolution of an existing translators’ union or is a new organisation, needs to:

- represent the profession to the UN and any other World-level organisation;
- represent the profession to governments;
- represent the profession to the corporate world;
- define a clear code of conduct that satisfies the various cultural traditions where our profession is practiced;
- define quality standards;
- defend members’ rights, to which they are entitled by adhering to moral and technical requirements.

“Profession” here should be taken to mean all professionals and corporations who engage in translation, interpretation, or localization at a professional level, regardless of contents (literary, technical, legal etc).

As a global organisation, such a guild would also need to accept existing local, regional, or national guilds or unions as members, circulate information up and down, share power, represent them. This ability to federate existing translators’ organizations, truly serving them, and not competing with them, is a key to success for a world-class guild.

This is why the task is immense.