

*The Need of Academic Training towards Quality  
Translation and Professional Translators: the  
Malaysian Scenario*

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**Resumen**

En Malasia, la cantidad de textos que han de traducirse al malayo ha experimentado un enorme incremento, especialmente en la era globalizada en la que nos encontramos. Este hecho ha animado a los expertos en esta disciplina y a las personas con aptitudes lingüísticas a implicarse más en la traducción. No obstante, cantidad debería ser sinónimo de calidad y esto podría conseguirse, y mejorarse día a día, gracias a la formación de traductores. Aunque a nivel extraoficial muchos traductores malasios, que se hacen llamar profesionales, comentan que la preparación académica es algo secundario, esta ponencia tiene como objetivo apoyar la teoría de que los traductores que han recibido formación realizan traducciones de mejor calidad y, en definitiva, son mejores profesionales. Esta ponencia hará, en primer lugar, un balance de la situación en la que se encuentra la formación de traductores en Malasia y de los cursos de traducción que se ofrecen en este país, en contraposición al número de traductores en activo implicados en el sector de la traducción. Asimismo, proporcionará datos acerca de los traductores registrados actualmente, hayan recibido o no formación académica en este campo. Hará especial énfasis en un estudio realizado acerca de la necesidad de formar a los traductores y de lo que se les debería enseñar en opinión de los encuestados. Finalmente, propondrá un módulo consistente en un cursillo de formación diseñado para los traductores profesionales de Malasia.

**1. Introduction**

The impact of globalisation has tremendously influenced the current flow of information. The implication for a small country like Malaysia is that it cannot afford to be behind time where information and knowledge are concerned to enable it to catch up with the rest of developed countries. Industrial progress through transfer of technology may not be possible unless knowledge and information transfer is conducted in a language widely and fully understood by the users. In the case of Malaysia the medium is Bahasa Melayu or the Malay Language.

The need for translation into the national language is most felt and obvious in Malaysia due to the fact that the rate of imported books, documents and materials in other languages is much faster than those published in Bahasa Melayu. Apart from Bahasa Melayu, other Malaysian languages involved in translation are Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil and Hindi, all being the major languages of the nation as well as English, European languages and others including Arabic, Russian and Japanese.

## **2. Translation and the Malay language**

The history of translation in Malaysia may be traced as early as the thirteen century when Bahasa Melayu became the lingua franca in the Southeast Asia region. This is due to the strategic location of Malay-speakers on both sides of the Straits of Malacca (Malay Peninsular and the Sumatra island constitute the core area of Malay language and culture). Equally important is the contribution of foreigners who from early times congregated at the ports along the Straits of Malacca as transit harbours between China and India. These foreign merchants and travelers from India, China, Middle East and later Europe relied on the Malay-speaking inhabitants for their trade communication. Thus translation, in terms of interpreting, took place when the Malay language became the trade language and by the time the Europeans began penetrating into the region in the fifteen and early sixteenth centuries, it had reached its height of popularity and influence (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in Ten Years: 1967).

However, at the end of the eighteen and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, English influence spread in the area during the British Colony and remained so until the era of the Malay language revival which came about largely after the Second World War. The brief Japanese occupation in Malaya had destroyed the myth of European superiority and thus led the movement of independence that brought about the establishment of Malay as the national and official language as part of its policy.

The implementation of the national language as official language and medium of instruction was facilitated through a language and literature agency, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (hereafter called DBP). Prior to this agency the Translation Bureau in the Sultan Idris Training College was established in 1924.

## **3. Translation training programmes in Malaysia**

Translation training programmes in Malaysia are offered by institutes, institutions and even individuals in Malaysia. Graduate and undergraduate programmes are offered by universities with Universiti Malaya (UM) being the first local university to offer translation courses although no specific programme was implemented. UM offers only elective translation courses and the most recent offered is the Professional Diploma in Translation which commenced in 2000.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is the first university that offers a first degree in translation studies as well as a Masters in translation. There are doctoral candidates who present their theses in translation areas in UM and USM.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) began offering translation courses as electives in the early 1990s. Beginning in 1998, first degree students majoring in English Language Studies are given the opportunity to minor in translation apart from the elective courses open to those who only opt for translation courses. UKM is also the first local university to offer a postgraduate diploma in Translation Studies.

Other institutions of learning such as Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) offer translation as elective course or even only as a topic in a course.

#### **4. Translation institutes**

More proactive in translation activities are two institutions and an association which take the liberty to shoulder the mandate in facilitating translation activities. They are the DBP and Institutusi Terjemahan Negara Malaysia Berhad (The Malaysian National Institute of Translation) –henceforth ITNMB, as well as the Persatuan Penterjemah Malaysia (Malaysian Translators Association) –henceforth PPM.

Translation at DBP is done on a somewhat ad hoc and part time basis although before the establishment of ITNM, DBP was more seriously involved in translating books, texts and documents before its Translation Department was dissolved in the middle 1990s.

On the other hand, PPM is a voluntary professional organization formed in 1978 with the realization that there is a need to activate

and implement collectively all fields of translation in order to consolidate all translation activities in Malaysia. To date , there are 1143 registered members of the association with about 200 life members and 600 active members. Among its significant contributions are the organization of conferences and other activities concerning translation and language. Most distinct is the association's contribution to the translation industry in Malaysia in training translators for the Diploma in Translation which is conducted on Saturdays to open an opportunity for those with other commitments during week days.

ITNMB was established in 1993 with the aim to provide the infrastructure for Malaysia's translation industry in line with the country's Vision Year 2020. The association has been entrusted to undertake translation, interpreting and information exchange work at national and international levels.

## **5. Quantity, quality, training and professionalism**

Corridor discussions among some translators in Malaysia express the view that academic qualification in translation is secondary as compared to experience. The majority of free-lance and full-time translators (who are seeking accreditation as professional translators) depend on their experience for recognition. This situation arises because translation professionalism has not received due attention in Malaysia. From this angle, this paper hopes to put forward a preliminary thought to pull efforts towards translation professionalism in Malaysia.

A survey was conducted to observe how respondents who show interest or have been involved in translation are convinced about being professional translators. The respondents are teachers by profession apart from full-time housewives, pensioners, newspaper editors, executives, managers as well as those from the legal field and business. They attend an intensive course for the Diploma in Translation conducted by PPM which reflects their interest in translation. The survey result shows that 91.4% of the respondents have no prior academic background in translation while the remaining attended pre-university language courses that include translation as part of the courses or have attended courses pertaining to translation. The result also depicts that 74.4% label themselves as part-timers, 8.6% free-lancers, 4.7% full-timers while only a small percentage of the respondents (2.3%) would claim to be professional translators. Apart from only 7% respondents who left their career to work as translators, 74% of

the respondents have the opinion that a translator must have at least a degree in translation to become a qualified translator.

What can be concluded from the survey result is that the respondents believe that academic qualification is a pre-requisite for a translator to be a qualified translator; and on the other hand, a translator is best to have at least an intensive diploma qualification to be a professional translator. However there is no standard and exact definition given by the respondents to the term 'professional'. Without the background knowledge on associations and authorities that accredit professionalism to translators such as ATA and FIT, 73% of the respondents do not associate translation professionalism with authorized body or registration with an association.

## **6.0 Towards accreditation and translation professionalism in Malaysia**

Brown (1996: 103) states that formal accreditation is a thorny issue and guaranteed to provoke strong feelings among translators. However, authorized bodies play a very important role in promoting the recognition of translation and interpreting as a professional career.

From the Malaysian perspective and the present scenario in Malaysia, translators require accreditation from an authorized body to cater to those who would like to claim themselves as professional translators in the country. Thus this paper proposes that

1. it is time for qualified translators to be given an opportunity towards professionalism in translation in Malaysia
2. Malaysian Translators Association and/or the Malaysian National Institute of Translation (through higher institutions of learning) shoulder the role as the authority that provides access and approves accreditation to Malaysian translators as professionals
3. the authorized body that gives accreditation to professional translators in Malaysia associate with international bodies in order to achieve accreditation at the international level.

## **Conclusion**

About two decades ago, the lack of quality of translation in

Malaysia was undermined by several factors including problems of translator training, commitment and recognition (Azizah, 1984:7). In the new millennium, only the last factor is yet to receive due attention. Although government and societal recognition have widened opportunities to translators and interpreters in the country, professional recognition should be the main agenda in the present. It is hoped that this paper will contribute towards translators' professional standing and achievement in the Malaysian scenario in the very near future.

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