

"This timely and inspirational book is a fantastic resource. It brims with relevant information and exhilarating examples for us all to learn from and contemplate our own approach to diversification. Enjoy."

—**Annamaria Arnall**, National President of the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT)

Diversification in the **Language Industry**

Success beyond translation

Nicole Y. Adams

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DIVERSIFICATION THROUGH SPECIALIZATION

Valerij Tomarenko started doing translations when he was still a student of English philology in Russia. He also studied music composition and worked as a composer for theatre, film and television. Since settling in Hamburg, Germany, in 1991, he has been working exclusively as a freelance translator and interpreter (German to Russian and English to Russian) specialized in marketing, corporate and technical documentation, having been the owner of a boutique Russian translation company (www.tomarenko.de) ever since. Valerij is a member of BDÜ (German association of translators and interpreters), tekom (German professional association for technical communication) and IAPTI (International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters). He is active as a contributor to publications on translation issues (e.g. on the EN 15038 standard) and as a blogger (Translator's Notes or Anmerkungen des Übersetzers³⁴, in English and German). His special interests in connection with the translation business lie in the area of translation quality and marketing communications.

ONE OF THE MUSIC TEACHERS I had in my formative years was a very peculiar person. Apart from being a composer with a degree from Leningrad Conservatory and a fabulous self-taught jazz pianist, he had a real passion for philosophy. His was a rather odd mixture of classical Indian texts in scientific editions and the great German thinkers of the early 19th century like Fichte and Hegel. Boris was a true Hegel freak. He always had a dog-eared and battered volume of Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* in the Russian translation with him, from which he could recite whole passages, if not pages. However, it was never boring, since he had a very idiosyncratic, typically Russian way of making fun of everything, including Hegel and himself. Boris was extremely popular among his students; he was a legend. For us teenagers, it was fun listening to all his weird stuff.

Among all the random quotations that I have remembered ever since are some of Hegel's appallingly difficult, abstruse and obscure definitions, for instance, that of a method. I don't really know how it reads in the German original (Hegel himself thought his concepts were untranslatable and should never be translated, but that is another story), but the back translation from the Russian would be something like 'form of self-movement of intrinsic concept'. I did say it was odd stuff, but in my formative years it sounded sort of cool.

The true meaning, as my music teacher used to explain, was the 'intrinsic' (his favourite word) connection between a method and the subject matter that the method was to be applied to. For a methodology to be right, it should always reflect the subject matter, should be derivative of the purpose of the matter itself. Today, we would probably use the term 'compatibility'. What does this have to do with the subject of this chapter, that is, diversification and specialization? It was a fancy definition, but the idea stuck: a method is linked to the nature of something more substantial; it originates from the subject matter.

What is the nature of language and translation? According to most definitions that I know, it is a means, seldom an end. That is to say, we use language to explain, argue or persuade. It is a means of communication and thinking. We use it to get to know who did it when we read a thriller or to drive down the price when haggling at a bazaar (they do it in old books, at least). One way or another, language is instrumental. So is translation – or in most cases (I would leave aside poetry or literary translation), this is how it should be.

When language and translation become our area of expertise (and our way to earn money, by the way), we translators tend to forget that both are a means, not an end in themselves. Our clients order translations not for the sake of translation, but because they need us to get their message across. That is something that is worth remembering when working on a translation, I think, and something which helps to get a better idea of what a translator's specialization and diversification are about.

A piece for one-man band without music

In the late 1990s, one of my major clients was a German publishing house specializing in trade fair catalogues for the Russian market. At that time, the German publishers were in charge of the whole spectrum of relationships with international exhibitors, clients of the major Russian trade fair company, ZAO Expocentre – International Exhibitions and Conventions, in Moscow.

The texts that I received to translate were on different subjects, depending on the exhibition under way. Most events were industry-specific and business-to-business, but there were also some popular fairs aimed rather at the general public, like Consumexpo, for consumer goods, and Prodexpo, Russia's no. 1 food industry show. Regardless of the wide range of themes, most exhibitors' texts – articles and contributions for directories, catalogues, exhibition magazines and other media – had much in common. Many were in typical PR style, meandering between factual, objective information and outright advertising.

The German publishers did a lot of editorial work, compiling, preparing, correcting, modifying and otherwise shaping what many exhibitors managed to put on paper only at the last moment before the deadline. My task was mostly to translate this into Russian, since the majority of exhibitions took place in Moscow, occasionally into English or German for Russian exhibitors or presenters at symposiums, later on into other languages, a part that I outsourced. Though my formal task was primarily to translate all this scattered and highly diverse material, it was quite clear that translation was only one element in the editorial work. You didn't need much knowledge of Hegelian dialectic; plain common sense made the purpose of a typical magazine article quite obvious.

In many cases it was clear that the exhibitors who ordered a translation actually wanted, and needed, a lot more. Their need, which I defined above as to bring the message across, boiled down to persuading the target group in another country to buy their products. I think this example illustrates clearly what I meant by instrumentality of translation and language in general.

As soon as I realized its purpose, translating exhibitors' articles became instrumental in my development as a translator. To achieve the internal or, to use Hegel's terminology once again, intrinsic, purpose of a particular text, a translator needs to interpret it and, being essentially an interpreter, to improvise. It is a method which is more than compatible with the subject within certain areas of work. I don't make a case for taking liberties with the source text in general. The method originates from the subject. It all depends on the particular purpose, client and target group. In my case, I think, certain liberties, typical for a journalist's or an editor's approach, were not only justified, but also methodically necessary and expected.

I don't want to go into all the details of a translator's work when translating and editing texts for publication in trade fair catalogues or industrial magazines. Into the bargain, I also took on the desktop publishing part of the processing later on, adapting the layout in QuarkXPress and organizing the whole prepress production. The final product that the German publishers received from me for each trade fair project was a set of high-resolution colour separations on film, ready for the printing of catalogues, magazines and, in several cases, even large format posters.

My work as a translator for this publisher was fairly specialized and diversified. It was fun, similar to working in a rather frantic, but cool and vibrant, advertising agency. It had nothing to do with music, but I felt like a one-man band. I diversified into being a translator, copywriter, editor and art director in one person. I still remember my creative attempts to find several Russian equivalents for 'plain vanilla' in an advertisement for some high-tech product, all of which I had to chuck away when I finally saw the photo of the product to be used in the ad. (I thought about suggesting another shot, but the client already had their article with their photo in other languages.)

I still have a very special and very diversified relationship with the people at the publishing house. (In case you are wondering why I describe my experience in the past tense: today, ZAO Expocentre, the major Russian trade fair organizer, has its own publishing and printing facilities in Russia, so the German publishers don't get as large a portion of jobs as they used to some 10 years ago.)

Nevertheless, such a relationship can also have a flipside. Above all, it is extremely difficult to find a replacement if things go wrong. The more special something is, the less chance of finding a substitute. This applies to both sides. On the other hand, to put a positive spin on such a setup, you are really hard to replace if you are doing a good job. Ideally, you have created the Blue Ocean with no competitors around. I don't think there is anything more desirable for a company or a serious and committed professional than this. It is also both interesting and rewarding, if you manage to cultivate your specialty and make the best use of your unique position.

Needless to say, you can always use your special experience elsewhere. Ever since, I have regularly worked on assignments and projects where translation goes along with copywriting and creative editing. This special experience with the publishing house also helped to shape my professional understanding and skills. Whenever people ask me about my profession and I say 'translator', I feel inclined to add: 'Well, not only'. It is not quite accurate to describe what I

frequently do as a typical translator's work. Instead, I think of myself as a journalist (and sometimes even a PR manager) who prepares, processes and adapts the material provided by the client and takes care of the client's communication with a specific target audience in a particular country.

You don't have to invent anything

In terms of methodology, there are two basic ways to achieve a certain uniqueness, become something special or develop a USP (unique selling proposition) for the customer.

The first way seems to be quite natural and stands to reason. If there is something that you enjoy, or are passionate about, or have always taken an interest in, you already have your area of specialization. Again, the language serves as a means of developing and expressing what you are inherently interested in or passionate about. Your language skills could perfectly complement your subject of interest to land translation projects in this particular field and, quite possibly, you would find direct corporate clients among those who pursue your common interest in a professional way.

If you are 'just' a good translator with exceptional writing skills, the second way to specialize would be to follow your client. This is where the definition of a method (it is about compatibility, remember) stands us in good stead once again. A translation is a kind of copy, a reflection of a certain source. If you want to have a really good copy, you should engage with the original. Logically, if you pay attention to or take an interest in the source, in the original subject matter, you will find out that it is something special. It is something special for your client, and if it can become special for you as well, it certainly helps. The chances are that this specialness will rub off on you, so eventually you will have a special area of expertise and will be regarded as an expert in this or that particular field by your clients.

In any case, either you can draw on your special interests and skills and let them develop into your area of specialization as a translator or you can follow your clients, including your potential clients, as a translation follows the original, adopting the perspective of your client as regards the subject matter and arriving at your possible area of specialization.

Here we encroach upon another vast subject, that is, customer orientation. But it all is linked together. Translation is instrumental for our clients. Its purpose is to reflect and convey what is relevant for our client, that is the initial purpose of our client's communication. Once we realize that what we do serves as a means to achieve our client's purpose (and I think client orientation is to a large extent derivative of this), our task is to learn our client's priorities and interests. Adopting the perspective of our client can help our translation become a better copy of the original and can help us get a better idea of what kind of diversification and specialization is in line with the expectations of the market.

What do you mean you still don't buy it?

So what is the initial purpose of our client's communication? Granted, haggling in a bazaar would probably be way too special and not much in demand on today's business-to-business market and, hence, on the market for our translations. My example with companies preparing themselves to participate in industry trade shows may sound too straightforward or even blunt (persuade the target audience to buy the client's marketed and advertised products), but, to tell the truth, much of what we usually get to translate is about selling.

I could go even further and perhaps divide the stuff we translators usually receive to translate into 'pre-sell' (corporate brochures, presentations, contracts and agreements) and 'post-sell' (operating manuals, user guides). It all depends on who our clients and consequently we ourselves try to sell something to.

Just think about the words 'buying' and 'selling' in many idioms like 'I don't buy it' (especially if you don't 'buy' my arguments here). Even cold numbers, in case you are a financial translator, are possibly meant to convince people: the board of directors, shareholders, a purchasing manager or a tax inspector. If we are storytelling animals, as Jonathan Gotschall (*The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*) wants us to believe, it is worthwhile considering anything that we happen to translate a story. And, believe me, then it is more fun to translate it – even stories with numbers.

In any case, if we agree that the purpose of our clients' communication and information is, at least partially, selling (including selling in a figurative sense), it is worthwhile thinking about how our clients try to achieve their goal. They also resort to specialization and diversification to have a skin in the game.

Today, even commodity companies strive to be different. They don't want to be perceived as faceless sellers of interchangeable goods, who are forced to compete on price only. They are searching for and promoting innovation. They are looking for unique selling propositions. They develop brands and build customer relationships to enhance their specialness, to get a competitive edge, and to set their products and themselves apart from the competition.

I won't bore you with common knowledge and commonplace observations on the strategy of differentiation. I just think that it is worthwhile to bear in mind that it is directly linked to specialization – and diversification. If a method depends on the subject matter, if a translation is a copy and reflection of the original, and if we believe in customer orientation, we are best advised to follow the example of our clients.

As customer-oriented service providers, our task is to incorporate and convey our clients' specialness that they try to communicate to their target audience. They expect us to bring this message across and, quite often, adapt it to the specifics of the target culture. For our own professional growth, I think we can learn a lot from our clients in terms of differentiation, specialization and innovation.

The opposite is standardization. Hence my mistrust of all the known attempts to standardize our profession. Yes, I know that is mostly about processes and workflows. But if our clients strive to be special and take pains to express it in their brands, communication, corporate wording (for which we

as translators are supposed to create a replica in the target language), and their own processes and workflows, I don't think it is helpful to emphasize a one-size-fits-all approach. It is best avoided if we, like our clients, value specialization and diversification. It is customization, not standardization, that goes hand in hand with client orientation in our business. Especially in reference to the definition of method that I started my reasoning with, and considering what language and translation are about (a means, not an end).

You're so special, you know

In my most creative days when I was translating and doing layout for trade fair magazines as a one-man band, I invented a couple of slogans for myself. '*Alles aus einer Hand*', the German for 'everything from a single source' or 'one-stop shop', is rather trivial. It captures an idea of diversification though. Another slogan which I actually consider to be far superior, but totally unusable on account of the risk of never finding new clients, was 'Better than the original'. But even if we curb our ambitions and don't pretend to know better than our clients, specialization is a way to get on par with our clients in terms of knowledge and expertise. It is a very constructive way of customer orientation.

If you translate technical or marketing content for your corporate clients, you cannot *not* be specialized, because specialization, to a large extent, is predetermined by your clients' products and services, by the very content that you get to translate. It is a given. As more products and services become interchangeable and risk being copied and commoditized, as brands have ever more difficulties to find a distinction and secure a competitive advantage, our clients are increasingly looking for specialization. This concerns not only their own products and services, but also all the available resources and the whole production chain, including service providers. In other words, us.

Although a single product or service may not be necessarily special, a certain combination might become unbeatable as a unique innovative package. A part of this equation is your personality. It is what makes your work unique, especially in a creative field such as translation.

Having recalled my earlier music teacher when I started working on this article, I gradually come to a conclusion that his being both specialized and diversified made him so peculiarly inspiring. Since we as translators deal with such a wide variety of special subjects, all the makings for becoming specialized are staring us in the face. The Blue Ocean strategy (which suggests that an organization should create new demand in an uncontested market space, or a 'blue ocean', rather than compete head-to-head with other suppliers in an existing industry) for creating market opportunities or developing a specialty in a niche market may help with the rest. I even think we cannot do without fancy definitions or any twisted quotes from Hegel or whoever else. Specialization and diversification opportunities are not far to seek. From the viewpoint of methodology, at least.