The Competences of Software Translators from the Point of View of Slovak Translation Studies

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Abstract

The work of Slovak Translation Studies scholars often deals with the competences of literary translators (e.g., Keníž 2018), translators of non-literary texts (e.g., Angelovičová 2018), and audiovisual translators (e.g., Paulínyová and Perez 2018). Not much focus is given to the competences of translators of software products (websites, software, and videogames), which is understandable given that localization does not get a lot of attention in Slovakia. The following article aims to be a contribution to the discourse on competences in Slovak Translation Studies, and it focuses on the translation of software products (localization). Firstly, it introduces competences from different fields of translation, and then it presents a set of competences of software translators. In doing so, it uses works by Mangiron and O'Hagan (2013) and Jimenez-Crespo (2013) as a foundation that is later confronted with practical issues from the present author's own experience.

Introduction

At the moment, the Language Services Providing (LSP) industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. According to the Common Sense Advisory, the market size of the industry in 2019 was estimated to be 49.6 billion US dollars and was expected to keep rapidly growing; however, this growth has been stalled by the global pandemic.

According to the European Language Industry Survey 2020 – Before & After Covid-19, which was undertaken by the European Union Association of Translation Companies (EUATC) and which gathered data from 22 January to 22 February 2020, the LSP industry was expected to grow even further. Up to 16.3% of LSPs saw a significant increase in demand for their services, and 37.9% saw a slight increase, compared to 5.9% seeing a significant decrease and 25.1% seeing a slight decrease (Marking 2020).

By contrast, a second survey by the EUATC, conducted from 23 March to 5 April 2020, showed a decrease in activity, where business affected by the pandemic had either fallen off a cliff (58.1%) or had slowed down (38.7%) (EUATC 2020). It is clear from these numbers that the LSP industry would experience a decrease in revenue; however, as far as localization is concerned, the situation might not be as bad as it seems. Green (the CEO of one of the nine largest LSPs worldwide) stated that as of 13 March 2020 he had "not noticed a difference in demand for services" (cited in Marking 2020).

It is clear that although the current pandemic situation is rapidly changing, the LSP industry, and localization specifically, will still play a key role in upcoming changes as new medical studies will need to be translated and as global and local companies prepare for a possibly similar situation in the future. The situation may call for translators of software products who will need to be trained in localization. It is therefore important to look at the present (and possibly even future) competences that translators of software products (localizers) need to command in order to be well-prepared for the global market and in order for educators to prepare them. For this purpose, this article will look at translator competences from different branches of translation in order to see how these could contribute to localizers' competences, and then it will present a set of competences that could play a key role in the education, training, and practice of future localizers. It also adds software translator competences to the present discourse in Slovak Translation Studies, as this topic has not yet been explored in the field.

1 Key competences in various branches of translation

In order to identify key competences in localization and contribute to the discourse on competences in Slovak Translation Studies, this section briefly presents key competences from different branches of practically oriented translation as they are described by various Slovak Translation Studies scholars, and it will identify their importance for localizers.

In discussing translator competences in the translation of fiction, Keníž (2018) mentions that having a set of communication competences (first mentioned by Gromová in 1996 and Bell in 1991) is of primary importance. He connects these competences with overall translation experience and adds that knowledge of literature, literary systems, and literary processes, as well as the translators' relationship with the source literature, information about the source, the authors' style, readers' expectations, and the translators' relationship towards the target culture are of great importance. Keníž also highlights the importance of linguistic knowledge about the target language, as the command of this language is of utmost importance, and he stresses the fact that translators should be avid readers as this improves their stylistic competence (2012), which is important for non-literary translators as well.

To this list of literary translator competences, Gavurová (2018) adds three things – thematic competence, language competence, and cultural competence – which she considers important for the translation of children's literature. According to Gavurová (2018), the most important thing here is thematic competence, which entails translation and literary knowledge since translating for a child or young adult reader is conditioned by the specifics of literary form and genre.

A different set of competences is described by Angelovičová (2018), which she already mentioned in her paper in 2014 (Kraviarová 2014). Her competences are aimed at translators of non-literary texts, and she states that translators should be able to communicate with a client, find out what

they need, and provide a quote for translation services. Her type of translator should be able to interpret the original and should not forget that even a non-literary text needs to be interpreted and analysed as a source text. During the analysis, translators should detect potential errors in the source text and they should be able to tell how much time the translation may take. Other important factors include the ability to search for terminology and determine the dependability of sources and parallel texts. Angelovičová states that translators should write with an appropriate style and should be able to work with CAT tools if needed, while remembering that they have positive as well as negative effects. Translators should therefore be able to create translations of high quality according to their clients' needs; also, they should know how to communicate with their clients in the case that changes need to be made to translations, and they should be able to explain why they are necessary. Angelovičová (in Kraviarová 2014) adds that her competences correspond with the requirements of the 2009 European Master in Translation model (translation service provision, thematic, intercultural, technological, language, and info-mining competences) (EMT, 2009).

The competences in audiovisual translation are quite similar with those in non-literary text translation, since they are based on the same model (2009). Perez and Paulínyová (2018) lean towards the competence model designed by the European Master in Translation and also speak of linguistic, intercultural, info-mining, thematic, technological, and translation service provision competences. Perez (2014) also surveyed translators from European countries and found that respondents saw linguistic competence as being the most important. This was followed by intercultural, thematic, technological, info-mining, and translation service provision competences and then by other types of competences concerning specific types of audiovisual translation such as audio description and subtitling for the hard of hearing.

Gromová and Müglová (2018) write about general translator competences that need to be valid for the whole profession, since linguistic competence today is not enough on its own. According to them, translators should have the relevant competence in language, culture, research, interpretation, the topic of the text, and technology. These competences also align with the above-mentioned sets of competences for translators in different fields of translation. Similarly to Gromová and Müglová, Koželová (2018) describes a set of general translator competences needed for a successful translation process: linguistic, interpretation, research and verification, cultural, strategical, technical, translation service provision, and (meta-)critical competences.

Following this summary of the sets of translator competences from various branches of translation, an overlap can be seen. The most frequently repeating types were thematic, linguistic (or language), (inter-)cultural, translation service provision, technological, and info-mining competences. These competences also overlap with the 2009 European Master in Translation model and to an extent with the 2017 European Master in Translation Competence Framework (that is also why the article

uses these competences, not others, e.g., PACTE 2003). It seems to be clear that these competences are important for various types of translation and therefore could play an important role in software translation as well; therefore, they will be closely examined in the next section from the point of view of localization and they will be supported with examples from the present author's own experience.

2 The competences of a software translator

After considering various types of translation and their respective competence models introduced by Slovak Translation Studies scholars, it becomes clear that software translators need to possess competences in translation, linguistic, intercultural, info-mining, strategical, technical, thematic, and translation service provision fields. These play key roles in the process of localization, and several localization and translation scholars (Jimenez-Crespo 2013, Kiraly 2000, Dunne 2006, O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013) reference them as well. The following subsections introduce these competences, explain their importance in the localization process, and give practical examples of their relevance.

2.1 Translation competence

In this regard, translation competence is seen as an important basis without which it would be quite difficult to successfully translate software products. It is seen as a kind of prerequisite for other competences and the whole localization process. Kiraly understands translation competence as a set of skills that helps translators to "comprehend a text written in one language and produce an adequate TT for speakers of a different language on the basis of that original text" (2000, 10). This basically means that translators are qualified to translate if they can analyse a source text, interpret it, and create a target text.

In the context of teaching localization to university students, O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) add that students of localization should have this competence developed and that they should understand how translation works before coming into contact with localization courses. They also recommend that localization courses be taught near the end of university courses and not at the beginning. This is true for Slovakia – where localization is taught at the master's level and not at the bachelor's level of studies – although localization is only taught at one university there at present.

2.2 Language competence

The purpose of language competence lies in the mastery of both the source and target languages. Localizers need to fully understand all the intricacies of the source language, and they have to be able to use the dynamic target language in a way that adequately conveys the message of the original.

Mastery of both languages is required, as software strings are often fragmented and only consist of partial sentences that require a thorough analysis and interpretation. Localizers therefore need to be able to understand the speech acts of the original text and understand the illocutionary act (e.g., they need to understand whether a string is a command, a description, or a question) of the interactive text (Jimenez-Crespo 2013). In practice this means that localizers should be able to tell whether a text string like "Read aloud" is a command or the name of a dialogue window, as the translation might slightly differ on the morphological level depending on the language the localization is being done for (e.g., in Slovak the verbs in commands tend to be infinitive ["Čítať nahlas"] while dialogue windows use a gerund ["Čítanie nahlas"] – both meaning "Read aloud").

On a structural level, language creativity plays an important role as localizers need to be able to work around different structural limits imposed by different languages. This is mostly evident in dealing with variables in localization: e.g., a sentence like "User added {0} items" needs to be structurally different in Slovak as it has two plural noun forms (the numbers 2 to 4 take the nominative case in the plural and numbers 5 and more take the genitive) whereas English only has one. In order to translate this sentence in a way that would still be grammatically correct, the structure of the sentence would have to change, e.g., "Používateľ pridal položky: {0}" (back-translated as "User added items: {0}").

Another example of this competence is the use of variables instead of nouns. In a sentence like "The selected {0} is corrupt," any type of file (such as a document, presentation, or sheet) may be inserted in place of the variable. This is not true for Slovak, where nouns have a grammatical gender and where a fluent translation would thus not be possible. Localizers need to look for alternative solutions, e.g., using a hypernym: "Vybraný súbor ({0}) je poškodený" (back-translated as "The selected file ({0}) is corrupt"), or by omitting a part of the sentence: "Poškodené – {0}" (back-translated as "Corrupt – {0}").

2.3 Intercultural competence

This competence means that translators understand and know the various cultural intricacies of the source text and are able to deal with them during the localization process. However, this competence has a broader scope in localization because the whole product is localized alongside the text being translated. This means that localizers should be made familiar with the graphical elements of the original as well, as these can be of cultural significance and might need to be changed. Elements like these include (videogame) characters and website and icon designs. In short, it is important to remember that the extralinguistic elements of the source product should be taken into consideration and that localizers should be able to identify their meaning and suggest changes accordingly.

In order to better understand the above-mentioned concept, the example of an e-shop selling bedding can be used. If such a website had a

black design and needed to be localized for Slovak customers, localizers should inform their clients that black represents sadness, death, and funerals in Slovak culture and that this might hinder product sales (this can be observed, for example, on the websites of Ikea and McDonald's as they differ in some locales: McDonald's, for instance, has a different layout for European and US markets). Another example is videogames: e.g., when localizing from Japanese for the US market, the characters are often altered in order to look older (if children characters are involved) or more Western (the shape of eyes is changed and skin tone in a bit darker). It is also a well-known fact that the colour of blood is changed to green when localizing for the German or Chinese markets. It is important to stress that localizers only inform their clients about the possible intercultural differences and that clients then decide whether a change of design will be a part of the localization strategy. Localizers are unable to change anything on the design level; in order to do so, they would need to have access to the source code and programming skills. But if localizers do not see the website and only receive text files for translation, naturally they cannot suggest a change in the design. This means that localizers should be given as much context as possible, since localization goes beyond language transfer.

2.4 Info-mining competence

This competence includes the ability to search for information, terminology, and missing context. Localizers should know how to verify information, check its fidelity, and choose and use only important information. They should know how to use advanced search engine functions (e.g., putting a query into quotation marks will search for the exact wording used in the quotation marks) beyond just writing something in the search bar and "googling it," because these functions can enhance and speed up the process.

In regard to localization, it is also important to be able to search for information on new technologies (types of machine translation), formats (.xliff), and tools (most notably CAT tools) as localization deals with software products and uses many different software technologies. Clients often have their own CAT tools or use specific file formats (more on this in section 2.6) and localizers need to be able to look for tutorials or information on how to use these tools or formats as fast as possible, as this saves time. It is therefore important for localizers to be able to adapt fast and search for information, tutorials, and advice for problem-solving online.

2.5 Strategic competence

This competence has a twofold meaning: localizers should be able to imagine context that is often absent, and they should be able to predict the possible results of their translation solutions.

In connection with language competence (section 2.2), translators should be able to identify the context of the translated strings (based on other strings around the one being translated). This can prove to be difficult as simple phrases can be understood in different ways (whether the phrase "Read aloud" is a command or the name of a dialogue window, because these may be translated differently). Localizers therefore need to presuppose context based on different strings in the translated file in order to determine what part of a software product they are translating. However, without visual cues one can never be totally sure about the missing context.

Localizers should also think of the possible future implications for their translated strings. As an example, they should not forget that if a noun replaces a variable, it is highly probable that it will be singular in the nominative case. (Remove the {0} – when translating into Slovak, the object behind the variable would normally be in the genitive case. This issue needs to be addressed with the help of the linguistic competence of the localizer.) They should also be able to identify different parts of a localization project that could be connected, e.g., when localizing a videogame and several segments include colours (e.g., "red", "green", and "blue") another sentence in the same project might have a connection to these colours (e.g., "Hand me the {0} ball"). Localizers should identify this connection and translate accordingly (in this example, the mentioned colours would take the feminine gender and the accusative case – "červenú", "zelenú", and "modrú" – in order to fit into the above sentence "Podaj mi {0} loptu").

2.6 Technological competence

Since the localization of software products primarily deals with software, it is of no surprise that localizers should possess competence in technology. They need to understand different software tools that are used during the process of localization. These include widely-used CAT tools that are often taught at university level in Slovakia (MemoQ, SDL Trados, and Memsource). Localizers should also be able to pick up and learn how to use CAT tools created by developers (e.g., the tool MS Leaf was developed by Microsoft and is used to translate various Microsoft products) or localization companies (e.g., before becoming widely used, Memsource was the in-house CAT tool of Moravia) for their own products. Of importance are also different quality assurance (QA) tools like spellcheckers, terminology checks, formatting checks, and consistency checks (e.g., Idiom and TWS Tools). In addition, one should not forget about translation memory management systems, machine translation engines, and various terminological databases. Localizers should be always prepared to learn to use new technologies.

On top of this, they should also know how to work with different kinds of file formats (these are quite often closely tied to respective CAT or QA tools). These include, but are not limited to, formats like .xliff, .tmx, and .xml, which can be considered to be "universal" CAT tool formats (.tmx is widely used for translation memories, and .xliff is used for translation projects created in CAT tools). Localizers should be able to find suitable computer programmes to open these files and edit them (quite often they can be opened in Microsoft Excel or SDL Trados, although some can only be opened by specific CAT tools: e.g., .lspkg can only be opened in MS Leaf, as the format .lspkg was specifically created by Microsoft for use with their own localization projects). In addition, Localizers should also have a basic command of programming logic, as this will greatly aid them in working with variables, tags, and placeholders (e.g., when confronted with tags like and they should understand that the first tag symbolizes the beginning of bold formatting and the second tag represents the end of that formatting).

2.7 Thematic competence

Thanks to this competence, localizers should understand how the process of localization works, what steps need to be taken in order to localize a product for a different locale, and what role localization has in the Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, and Translation (GILT) process (Esselink, 2000).

They also understand the management of a localization project and know of the different people who may take part in this process (the manager, terminologist, translator, proofreader, and language lead) and are ideally able to complete each of these roles to a basic extent themselves.

Lastly, they should be able to specialize in selected fields: e.g., websites and software or videogame localization, and more specifically things like e-shops, social media, office tools, technical tools, RPGs, and strategy games. This specialization is determined by the market size. In smaller markets, such as Slovakia, specialization is less possible than elsewhere.

2.8 Translation service provision

Localizers should know the intricacies of the localization market: its size, demand, and supply. They should also know about different rates for translation, proofreading, and machine translation post-editing. This information might have an impact on the survivability of individual localizers on the market. For instance, a localizer might ask whether it is possible to survive as a videogame localizer in the current market by finding out what the market rate per word/standard page is in order to maximize income.

There are also abilities that often require soft skills, like the ability to communicate with clients and preferably create lasting partnerships, the ability to explain different changes made during localization and translation,

the ability to explain the possible impacts of (not) localizing some content, and the ability to answer different queries raised by clients. These abilities often require patience and clear communication skills. In the case that localizers find themselves in a team project, they need to know how to comply with different instructions, roles, deadlines, and team organization.

Last but not least, localizers should be able to tell the difference between translation and localization, and they should be able to explain this difference to clients in case it is needed, especially in connection with ethical problems. (Is it ethical to let clients pay more for "localization" when what they really need is translation, given that there is no software product in question?)

Conclusion

Localization is a complex process, and localizers require a set of competences that will help them linguistically and culturally analyse the source material and create adequate translations of it using the required technological tools. They often need to learn how to use these tools themselves, so they need to create strategies to work efficiently and provide their clients with high-quality translations for market prices while also trying to specialize in their chosen fields.

This set of complex competences needs to be taught at university level in specialized localization courses where students get to know about the localization process and many of its intricacies. The competences mentioned here can also be helpful in the process of syllabus creation, allowing for assignments and exercises to be modified so that specific work can be done on a competence (e.g., including team projects, terminology exercises, and translations with and without visual context).

This article has aimed to contribute to the discussion on localization and localization competences in Slovak Translation Studies, where until recently localization has not received much attention. In conclusion, given that the above-mentioned competences of translators of software products (localizers) align with the already mentioned competences specified by the 2009 European Master in Translation expert group and to an extent also with the 2017 European Master in Translation Competence Framework, it would be interesting to see this competence model tested using a survey with practising localizers, which is an area for future research.

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