



connexions interview with
RICARDO MUÑOZ MARTÍN

Transcript of the interview with Ricardo Muñoz Martín, Professor of Translation Studies in the School of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in Spain. Ricardo is also a part-time freelance translator.

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The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/115348382>

Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?

Well, I'm actually working as a professor of translation studies at the Universidad de las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in Spain. But I like to think of myself as a part-time freelance translator, something I have been doing since the 80s.

What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?

I worked as a full-time freelance translator in Germany by the end of the 90s, and then in California at the beginning of the 90s. I have part timed ever since.



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And then as a translation scholar, I keep close contact with scholars from many different countries, and we do have international professional communication in multilateral settings, nearly on a daily basis, in the last 20 years.

Do you see translation and translation studies as being separate from international professional communication?

No, not at all. I think that translation and interpreting are just one branch of international professional communication.

What, from your past experience as a translator, has helped you as an academic, and vice versa?

Translators learn that expectations and ways of viewing things are different in different speech communities. And that actually gives you a lot of insight on how to improve communication between people from different cultures and areas in the world—which is not only in different languages; sometimes, it is even within the same language.

And, then, research has opened up many venues of both learning and thinking, because we tend to assume many things and states of affairs that research will show that are not the way we thought. Usually, they are more complex. For instance, many people will complain about borrowing words from a different language. And, in my experience, the words that get borrowed usually end up meaning different things and being used in different ways so that, actually, they only superficially resemble the words in other languages.

What, in your background as a researcher, influenced your teaching and your practice as a translator?

I have a very good example that I actually want to formally study now, which is that students tend to lack concentration when they are writing. And so I decided to test how it would work to get students to translate against the clock. First, you need to make sure that they understand that quality is still first. But, then, that they should do it in such a way that they can pay the rent. And, usually in about eight to ten weeks, their productivity gets a boost and the quality slowly recovers so that, by the end of a

semester, they usually translate nearly twice as fast and at the same quality they did before.

What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

Well, I'm afraid that the answer to this question may sound a little vague. Let me try. In general, I think that Western societies have become more aware of the need to professionalize international communication. In research, I think there is an increased cross-fertilization between writing and translation research, at least in the small area of cognitive approaches I usually consider my domain. In pedagogy, trainers have become much more professional and market oriented than they were in the 80s and the 90s.

Now, in the narrower realm of translation and interpreting, and in Spain, the publishing industry has been serving Spanish speakers in all continents and, therefore, Spain has many more translators than the ones you would expect in a country of its size; that's gonna change now. The way that we enjoy the tourist infrastructure, competitive prices have fostered a convention industry that makes millions every year. We tend to think only of written international professional communication, but the market for spoken language services is also huge and growing. Take us, we're talking to each other through the Atlantic.

You say the number of translators is going to change. What makes you say that?

Well, because both the economy and the education are improving in many Latin American countries, so the market is going to spread and grow there and, therefore, it will have to shrink here.

Communication industries are changing rapidly, and, for instance, DVDs imply that, now, dubbing and subtitling are being done at the source, and not at the receiving end of the chain, which means that, for instance, dubbing and subtitling are done much more, now, in California than it used to be in Spain, before, for the Spanish market.

How do you envisage the role of instantaneous communication and sites like ProZ, where you put out a call and you have translators all over the place applying—how do you see this affecting translation management?

Well, the market is going to diversify. That's certainly so. And new technologies are fostering new ways of communication. We, in Spain, are happy to think that we can offer very good quality in general, but this is not a country matter. The pyramid is going to be taller, now, and also wider. In fact, it is doing so at the same time that the non-professional international communication is growing like crazy. I mean, the Web 2.0 has made it possible that everybody will contact everybody, anywhere in the world. You can tell the quality of the texts is getting lower, even though professionals are many more and better trained than before.

What would you say are some challenges of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

It does depend on the country. In many countries, as professionalization is still in progress, you get big companies that know that professional communication is worth every penny you put in them. But medium-sized and small companies don't really understand yet how much they would improve or benefit from hiring international professional communicators.

And academia does not understand it, yet. Communication studies is spread all over several disciplines, and we need to get together to take advantage of the synergies that now are getting lost. Many people still do not understand the nature of communication studies in general, and their specificity. Also—let me get a little bit serious, here—in many European countries, the universities are transitioning from mass educational approaches that were focused on raising the general educational level of the population, to professional universities—approaches that demand individualized and flexible training programs and, therefore, more investment and more coordination efforts that are, yet, still in their first steps. I think that, as far as pedagogy is concerned, in the case of translation, which is the case I know very well, I know that they will definitely benefit from being trained as technical writers.

How do you imagine a program, or a course of study, in which both components (writing and translating) would come together? Do you envision this as a possibility or a requirement, and how would you see them being implemented?

I think that technical writing is a prerequisite to many kinds of translation. And I think that translation courses, in some cases, may be beneficial for technical writers, too. Technical writing demands mental organization of the information, and an initiative that translators tend to forget about, because they assume a much more passive role in front of the original text; whereas translators tend to look for a thoroughness in the nuances of the messages that technical writers may forget because they are not constrained by an original text.

Do you see a place for collaborations like the Trans-Atlantic Project to develop? And do you see a place for a different type of program being offered—a program with both a writing component and a translation component?

Yes, I think so. I think Bruce has been doing a great job. There are also some precedents in the work of George Gouadec, in Rennes 2, in France, who made international competitions of translation teams, of translation trainees, that had to work on certain projects and communicate, and find out what was going on at the other side of the computer, you know, thousands of miles away. I do think that translation programs and writing programs should be more independent and closer to each other than they are, or have been, in many places. And I also think that we would both save money and diversify the training possibilities that we can offer in our institutions, by cooperating.

I think we are going to renew our syllabi, and this is the perfect moment to start thinking about cooperating with people other than the traditional language and literature departments we usually work with.

How do you see technology or changes in technology impacting, maintaining, or altering international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

I guess that it depends very much on the time frame you are considering. I started out translating with a portable Olivetti typewriter, and with two printed dictionaries.

Anything else would entail writing it down and going elsewhere, to a library, to search and retrieve information you needed. Computers and the Internet have turned the jobs of professional translators upside down. Freelance translators are the epitome of teleworkers and one of the best examples of the adaptation to the new economy.

There is no such a thing as computer-assisted translation because there is no such thing as translating—professional translating—without computers. We actually are so technological that we keep telling each other about applications, programs and possibilities that sprung up just three months ago, say, in India. We are, actually, very busy, and keeping up to date and keeping up to date with the pace of the market and the new possibilities that translation and communication technologies are offering us. And our profession is changing, not before and after computing, but before any single generation of computing power. I mean, the way the translation kits were used in 80s to translate video games has nothing to with the way they are translated now. You know, localization now has nothing to do with localization in the 90s.

In my area of research, using computers has helped us register the behavior of translators. So, it has made it possible to study, not only the products—the texts—but also the process of reading, writing, and translating. So, computers have made it possible to have a look at the black box. And, now, computer power can also be applied to study texts in ways we could only dream of some years ago. Corpus approaches to textual analysis make it clear, for instance, what the tendencies are in, say, text types. How text types are changing over decades, for instance, is something that you can learn now, and it was nearly impossible to trace ten years ago.

What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skill sets has higher education taught students to help them transition to industry? In what ways could higher education do a better job preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

It depends very much on the higher education institution someone is attending. In places where the faculty has embraced professional approaches, then translator training, which is what I know of, tries to imitate professional and market environments. So the

gap is not so wide, and therefore, the transition into the market is not so stressing, nor so difficult for the students.

We still need to remap the disciplines, and acknowledge the increasing importance of communication studies. And communication has not been considered a crucial skill in the university until 10 years ago—not, I don't mean now, in communication studies, but anywhere else. You're calling from the States, and in the States you've got these writing programs and writing courses in support in most degrees. But we don't, in many places in Europe and elsewhere in the world, and that's something that we need.

And higher education could do a better job preparing the next generation of graduates by showing them that the communication skills they learn are to be applied within their community, but may be wrong or different in different communities. We have all learned that when a Japanese businessman gives us their visiting card, we should take it with both hands, and we shouldn't put it in our pocket right away. We should do that, not only with the Japanese, we should know these things, not only with the Japanese, but with practically any culture we need to be in contact with.

What kinds of skills are you teaching and what types of skills you would also like to teach?

Yes, we train our students in foreign languages and in their own language, as well, which is even more important. We train them in communication and information technologies and in protocol, sometimes. We train them in basic knowledge of specialized domains that they will need to understand. And we push them to learn about the culture and the expectations of the people they will be writing for. That's basically what a translator should know. As you can see, there is very little difference with the way you might describe a technical writer or a professional communicator, in general.

How do you handle visuals—the visual component of documents—when translating and preparing translators? How do translators deal with this?

It's a very good question, because there are two main ways of approaching that, depending on whether you are working for an intermediary or for the final client and reader. If they are going to use the document the way you hand it to them, then they

really need to do a very good job in markup and graphic design. And they need to make sure of the quality of the image. They need to make sure that texts and images go well together; that the images will mean the same where they are going to be read in the translation—or whether some of them should be changed or improved.

Whereas, when they work for an intermediary and someone else would do that job, then translators need to be trained to communicate with that specialist, and make sure they enter all the instructions as information—usually between square brackets—so that this person will be able to work on the document without knowing the language they are working with.

How widespread is the awareness that translators and professors of translation need to dedicate some time to this?

There have been some researchers working on this topic, like Paul Kussmaul in the 90s and Isabel Tercedor, from the University of Granada, later on. It is not a very popular topic, because most people tend to go with a wave and think that we deal with words and just words, and not with communicative artifacts that compound many different communication strategies and possibilities.

What has industry done well to help higher education teach international and intercultural experiences and skill sets, or to help their own employees develop such experiences and skill sets? What else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

I think the answer is very different if you are considering big companies and small companies. There are some sectors where companies really know that they need international professional communication, and they will go one extra step to help the university, through practicums and apprenticeships. There is the banking sector. There is, of course, the localization sector, the film industry, but also big companies such as Coca-Cola, and the computer companies, where you can be sure that they know that it is crucial for them to communicate properly and successfully in many different languages. As I said before, in smaller companies, it is not so clear. Many entrepreneurs

still think that trainees are a nuisance, or else see them as bothersome at the beginning, and sometimes even as cheap labor by the end of their training periods. Supervision needs to improve both on the company side and on the university side.

I think that the university should convince authorities to create programs to train companies, especially small companies, in this area. I mean, when companies realize how much they can improve, they usually change their minds swiftly. In fact, many people who are trainees or do an apprenticeship in a certain company end up working there, getting a full time job there, which means that, once they realize that they can improve, they will embrace the notion. But, still there are many others who don't know, and, you know, I am in the Canary Islands, in Spain, and I can tell that the tourist industry is not aware of the need of having very good international communication. Only very big companies, even in the tourist sector, are aware of the need of very good international professional communication. ■

About the Interviewee

Ricardo Muñoz Martín has been a freelance translator since 1987 and is currently professor of translation at the School of Translation & Interpreting at University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Muñoz Martín also coordinates the Expertise and Environment in Translation (PETRA [Spanish acronym]: www.cogtrans.net) research team's efforts to develop a cognitive translatology.

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