

## a Language mediation professions: Humans in multiple loops

Language mediation can be broadly seen as the communication, in various or multiple modes and media, of content, form, messages, intentions, attitudes and values from one natural language and culture to another, or between modes and cultures within a language. Only outsiders unversed in Applied Linguistics and uninformed about language would ever question how indispensable language professionals are in the very large and swiftly growing global industry of language mediation. And only the uninformed would be oblivious to the prospects and potential that the language professions hold – in conjunction with the superb technologies that support them.

Those who have read this volume will understand the complexities of language use in human communication – from what is involved behind the scenes up to the actual performance and its reception. A specific focus relevant to the language industry is the value that human competence brings to mediation between languages and cultures for specific audiences in particular settings.

In the recently published *Bloomsbury Companion to Language Industry Studies*, machine translation (MT) expert Andy Way writes: “The human-in-the-loop will *always* remain the most important link in the chain” Angelone, Ehrensberger-Dow, & Massey, 2020, 326. A related sentiment is expressed by fellow author Jaap van der Meer, director and founder of the worldwide language data network TAUS: “the role of professional translators will not vanish, but it will evolve – again – through technology” Angelone et al., 2020, 308. Both are taking part in a long-standing discourse inside and outside the language industry on the position and added value of the professionals who serve it. And both are picking up on widespread public misconceptions about what the language industry and the language mediators it employs actually do.

The term *human in the loop* is now almost a commonplace in the language industry professions, but one belying a complexity and diversity that is evolving at breakneck speed. Recent listings, grouped by functions spanning language and quality right through to management, marketing and communications, show more than 700 job titles in an industry currently valued in the

narrow definition at USD 23 billion and, more broadly, at USD 50–55 billion, with predicted growth rates of 25–30% over the next few years. In addition to various types of translators and interpreters, the job titles include consultant, content editor, localisation specialist, lawyer-linguist, localisation engineering manager, quality manager, reviser, terminologist, technical writer, post-editor, copywriter and communications officer. It would therefore be far more accurate to talk of humans in multiple loops.

The industry and its mediators do much more than the frequently outdated concepts of activities like translation and interpreting. Accelerating technological developments are changing the practices, processes and profiles of industry professionals. Demand is obviously increasing for technology-led skills such as post-editing of machine-translated output <sup>II.2.2.e</sup>, which has become an identifiable skill set *per se* with its own competence profiles and quality standards. But there is also a growing need for adaptive experts able to identify, deliver and advise on the added value of language services in an increasingly digital age. Moreover, demographic and socio-ethical developments towards inclusiveness are extending the roles and responsibilities of language professionals in a growing variety of settings to foster better accessibility to information and opportunities for participation <sup>I.3.2</sup>. The multiple challenges and opportunities of digitalisation and globalisation are diversifying responsibilities, roles and contexts for professionals working in language mediation and ancillary areas.

This calls for a widening and ever-changing range of knowledge, skills and competences on the part of those in or aspiring to join the language industry professions. Applied Linguistics furnishes the requisite knowledge, by researching practices, processes and needs. It also generates solutions – to address issues in the industry itself and to educate those already in or wanting to enter it <sup>I.1.1.f</sup>.

The present volume lays a much-needed foundation for reflective practice in the language industry. All multilingual speakers <sup>I.2.3</sup> know that superficially similar words can have very different meanings depending on the linguistic context (the sequence of letters that spell *bald* in English has nothing to do with the self-same sequence in German). Yet reflective language mediators can exploit their elaborated multilingual repertoires to choose the

most suitable option to avoid offence or to add the precision needed under specific circumstances. They also know how messages can be enhanced or otherwise affected by the medium or modality used to convey them, and how to overcome any linguistic barriers those modalities might cause <sup>II.2.2.f.</sup> Language mediators, like all students of Applied Linguistics, appreciate that linguistic norms are socially constructed and therefore subject to change. They have cognitive and digital resources at their disposal that allow them to understand and (re)produce even the most complex written and spoken texts appropriately.

This volume sensitises students from the start of their undergraduate or graduate programme to the value that human actors bring to the language ecosystem, reaching beyond narrow preconceptions about language mediation. These can be based on humorous machine mistranslations in tourism contexts or media posts about interlingual misunderstandings with an adverse impact on diplomatic relations. The volume provides cornerstones on which to build knowledge and awareness of the actual communication settings where students may eventually be working. By training reflective practitioners, we have the ability to shape the future of the language industry itself – through the human actors it relies so heavily upon.

Humans with a background in Applied Linguistics are now and will always have to be involved in multiple loops in the language industry, not only leveraging technology to benefit language mediation processes, but also in the metaphorical sense of being in the know. Although technology will continue to improve with humans' help, MT solutions are unlikely to deconstruct the multiple meanings captured by the subtitle of this contribution anytime soon (the Google and DeepL MT engines currently translate it into German as “Menschen in mehreren Schleifen” or “Menschen in Mehrfachschleifen”). Trained language mediators, however, would recognise the intended word play on the familiar expression *to be in the loop* (*informiert sein* or *auf dem Laufenden sein*) and produce interlingual or intralingual translations that meet their target audience's communicative needs.

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Authors

A major focus of their research and teaching has been on the role of human and non-human agents in various types of language mediation processes, especially in an increasingly digitalised world.

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