

International Translation Day 2018

This Sunday, September 30th marked International Translation Day, an annual celebration that acts as an opportunity to pay tribute to the life and work of translators and interpreters who aspire to make the world a slightly smaller place by breaking down language barriers. The day is celebrated with a series of dedicated events, seminars, and symposiums across the world.

Four women shared their experiences building careers in the translation industry, and while their job titles, experience, stories, and backgrounds differ wildly, their sentiment was the same.

“As a translator, you are bridging the gap for humans. You are helping people’s businesses, education, careers.”

It’s impossible to ignore the passion and gratitude behind Blessing Uzuegbu’s voice as she speaks about her career as a freelance linguist for the Igbo language. Her words come across clear and proud, despite the slight fuzziness of a Skype call coming into Prague from Nigeria.

As a mother in a country of increasing unemployment rates, Uzuegbu did what any of us would do in uncertain times; she turned to the internet. She wasn’t looking for anything in particular, any job would do. But when she came across the concept of working as a translator, she knew she had struck gold.

“I never thought about translation as a career, but as I was researching it on ProZ.com and TranslatorsCafe.com, I thought, I’ve always loved writing and learning, and am very good in English. I can do this.”

9,000 km away, Svetlana Uleva had the same thought.

“I can do that,” Uleva said when her father introduced her to a professional translator. Despite considering a career path in engineering roads, her love of literature was enough to convince her otherwise. She began her translation studies in Russia, and in her second year traveled to California in order to immerse herself in the culture and to, “begin dreaming in English.”

The trip was fruitful enough to draw her back to California after graduating, where she’s been ever since. “You learn the mentality of the country through the language, and moving was the next step,” she said. “It was the right move, professionally and literally.”

At first she gruelled in unpaid internships and interpreting jobs that were unfairly paid, because she believed, “it wasn’t about making money, it was about making myself.” Uleva committed to

and honed her craft by constantly reading articles, attending webinars, completing courses, and closely following industry trends.

“To be a translator means non-stop learning.”

Which is the same concept behind Claire Languillat’s 25 years as a French linguist. While it was the promise of travelling the world that initially drew her to the industry, continuous learning is what has kept her engaged. “To be a translator you must familiarize yourself with a variety of things beyond just the languages themselves. I read and research constantly -- medical, marketing, technical, computing, and so on,” she said.

The laundry list of things to keep up on seems daunting, but Dutch linguist Maria van der Heijde-Zomerdijs insists that it is one of the things she cherishes most about the profession. “I love the fact that I get to search many different disciplines. I get ‘to look in the kitchen’ of many different industries,” she said.

And indeed she has looked into many kitchens throughout her 20 year career editing, proofreading, software validation/testing and voice in a number of fields (medical, telecom, software, marketing, education to name a few).

Both Languillat and van der Heijde-Zomerdijs share an interest in the medical industry that was sparked by translation work. Van der Heijde-Zomerdijs even miraculously found herself on the other side of her medical-related work. “A number of years ago, I had translated the instructions for use of the device that a couple of months ago was implanted in my back,” she shared.

While it certainly helps, the full-circle effect doesn’t have to be so literal to be felt. While in one way or another, every woman expressed the positive impact the career has had on their life through its flexibility and promise of there always being something new to learn and to share, Uzuegbu put it best.

“We are the sharers of information which connects the world. We are the innovators, the entrepreneurs, problem solvers. We are learning and teaching at the same time -- it’s a privilege, really.”

Interview Notes

Svetlana Uleva

Svetlana is a Russian linguist and business owner who is interested in participating in the article and sharing her experience in the industry. Owns BEEHIVE L10N

From Russia - near the last olympic games location. Went to school for t9n and l10n there. l10n wasn't really a thing when she graduated. After graduation she found a t9n agency in the US. She worked as a freelance translator for a while (legal, medical which is popular in the LA/SF area due to all the Russian people under workers comp). Unstable income month to month so she decided to pursue something more steady within the same industry. Worked for several companies as a assistant PM, PM, to senior PM in the American corporate field. Eventually she needed a more flexible schedule to cater to her child so she started her own company. RU > EN.

In school she loved geometry and math — she was prepared to go to university as a civil engineer designing roads. but her dad knew someone at a university in theatre of translation department and she said sure I'll give it a try. She loved literature so she figured it would be a fine path to learn cultural aspects of other countries through their language.

Women in localization gave her the ability to thrive.

An internet search turned out QA/translation/assistant jobs sponsoring visas in Santa Monica (unpaid internship w no housing or assistance) gave her mentorship and a better understanding of the industry. Then she transferred to a new company who actually paid her and let her do freelance translations as well.

Living in the US makes her dreams possible and more achievable in Russia, where it's even worse politically colored.

In her 2nd year of studies she traveled to the US to, "be able to immerse herself and start dreaming in English."

No one from her graduation class occasionally translate but aren't actually in the industry. The desire to move to the US was driven by the fact that she really wanted to

pursue a career in the industry. The past 2-3 years she's really hit her professional stride.

15 years ago there wasn't such a community.

"It was the right move, professionally and literally."

She took interpreting jobs that were very unfairly paid because she believed "it wasn't about making money, it was about making myself."

"It's a very competitive industry, you always have to be at your best. Everyone expects everything yesterday at the best rate possible."

Her parents were a great example of hard work and drive that they distilled in her.

"Those little victories in the process make me fall in love with my profession and industry all over again."

Cat tools, tm, mt wasn't taught 15 years ago, and school didn't give us those technical skills. A lot of schools still don't — they focus on interpretations, basics.

"You learn the mentality of the country through the language." Right now her son is learning to balance the differences between Russian and US mentalities. He didn't start to learn Russian until attending his Russian kindergarten. The freedom of being outside in Russia vs helicopter parenting.

"regardless of culture, nation or language there are always good people around us." Having the flexibility to work from anywhere and for anyone around the world was a great strength for her. "This industry gives a lot of help for single mothers — I could go corporate, work freelance, or set up a business fairly simply while also having a family and keeping life balance."

The industry itself develops incredibly fast.

It's incredible how much it's changed — I don't even remember what I learned but it's mostly irrelevant. (I10n wasn't even a thing back then!) There are no parallels to my education to everything I know now. I'm constantly reading articles, attending webinars,

completing courses, and following the industry/some new niche I can explore. It's nonstop learning — lots of tests, but in real-life.

For instance, she prepared herself for working with MT by watching a lot of videos on the topic. You have to participate actively to remain relevant.

She found a group of women while working as a freelance translator because she lacked professional community/communication (and still does, locally! it's all online). So she travels to the bay area to participate in women in localization events. They share experiences, support one another. "They don't realize how helpful they are by just listening." Her very first meeting topic was How we're doing it all. How they manage their jobs and family — one of the presenters shared a meeting with execs at her own house with her sick child as it was throwing up and she managed them both. "It was incredible. I could really relate."

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Maria van der Heijde-Zomerdijk

Maria has been a Dutch linguist for over 20 years. Maria has done translation, editing, proofreading, software validation/testing and voice in a variety of fields (medical, telecom, software, marketing, education and more!).

Hi Myra,

I could not choose between two things in translation that I cherish most.

Dutch is a small language and a translator cannot specialize too much or there will not be enough work. I love the fact that I get to search many different disciplines. I get 'to look in the kitchen' of many different industries. I learn a lot about the various industries. The bulk of my translations are healthcare related. So I have learned a lot about medical stuff. In fact, a number of years ago, I had translated the instructions for use of the device that a couple of months ago was implanted in my back.

I also cherish my colleagues. I really enjoy talking to my business/translation partner, we call each other almost every day. Sometimes because we are working on the same job, sometimes because we want the other's opinion about a language issue, and sometimes to vent about an annoyance. My other language colleagues are wonderful too. Unfortunately, I do not see them in person as much as I used to. We used to have in-house jobs at the various companies here in Boulder. But as computers became more powerful and everyone got fast internet, we do not have to come in as much for verifications. So I help organize a monthly translators coffee, where I meet new and old colleagues. They were extremely generous in the first weeks after my surgery. We had 'translator food' for almost a whole month!

Your second question is a bit harder. I had really no preconceived notions when I started doing this work. I did not really set out to be a translator, now almost 30 years ago. The translations and translation related jobs found me, instead of the other way around. And I found out that I was pretty good with computers. This was crucial, because in the 90s the translation business started changing a lot. I 'grew up' with CAT tools.

What changed most were the clients. It is big business now, and there is always much pressure on the prices. Also, I now work mostly with big translation companies. Not by choice, but because the big ones have gobbled up the small companies. That also means that you do not get to know the project managers personally anymore. I miss that.

Best,

Ria

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Claire Languillat

Claire is a French linguist based in the UK and she has been a French linguist for 25 (!! years. Claire was a linguist at Microsoft, and and a smaller vendor called International Language Engineering (ILE), which eventually became Lionbridge, and now owns her own translation business called Lundimartin Translations.

Studied translation in Paris because she wanted a profession that would allow her to travel the world and she was enjoying her English studies, back when localization still wasn't a thing. Afterwards, she became an intern at Microsoft. "I remember a text I had translated needed a small edit, so we redid the entire thing. It was insane but we didn't know any better back then. It takes time to learn the rights and wrongs, and now the technology that comes with it." Now, it's about learning how to talk to the companies when someone wants something new (regarding new tools or tech.) In order to keep up, she relies on YouTube a lot. "There have always been a lot of women in translation, so the community was always there but it's great to see more women coming together." She thinks the cat tools are amazing because she's more efficient, however, "translation has become less fluid -- the text is less malleable now, but the time savings and consistency is the payoff. When she worked in companies, deadlines kept becoming tighter and tighter and she decided to untangle herself and go freelance.

"To be a translator you must familiarize yourself with a variety of things beyond just the languages themselves. I read and research constantly (medical, marketing, technical, computing, etc.). It's fostered a particular interest in medical technology. I remember the first technical manual I translated was so huge and difficult to do but with the modern tech it's so much easier to manage.

She has one daughter, and loves being a freelancer, but does miss the community aspect. “My husband, who works for a technology company, didn’t understand my job as a translator way back. Now of course that’s becoming less common. There’s a lot more awareness about the industry and profession.” And we can all agree that’s a good thing.

Blessing Uzuegbu

Blessing is based in Nigeria and is a linguist for the Igbo language. Since this is not a very common language in the US/Europe, I thought her feedback would be an awesome addition to our article for International Translator's Day. Blessing has been in the localization industry only a few years, but during this time, she has held many different roles: Translator, audio transcriber, evaluator for translation tests, translation coordinator, and voice over artist.

Began in 2016.

“I never thought translation could be a career -- unemployment in Nigeria is so high and I am a single mother -- I thought I would work in a more traditional job.” But when she came across the job of a translator, she knew she had struck gold. “I began to research online -- proz and translator’s cafe -- and thought, “I’d always loved writing and I am very good in English, so I decided that I would freelance.” She trained herself online while juggling the workload of a single mother. “I waited a long time for someone to give me a chance and when they did they were very happy. It’s the best decision I’ve made in my entire life. The flexibility is there. The community is there. I translate marketing, food, nutrition, practically everything. You get so much out of it. You learn and work at the same time. I enjoy languages and learning.”

“As a translator, you are bridging the gap for humans. I am helping people’s business, education, careers. We are the sharers of information which connects the world. We are the innovators, the entrepreneurs, problem solvers. We are learning and teaching at the same time -- it’s a privilege, really.”

“I love what women are doing, how they’re doing, how’re they’re succeeding, and how they’re willing to share all of that with one another.”

The demands of the industry are changing as well -- when her language is not in high demand she begins to feel irrelevant but the demand is growing and there seems to be

a shift toward localization generally in order to bring us all closer together. “I am bringing my language to the table, and in that is my culture and in part, me.”

Her favorite part of her language is the different tones and emphasis needed in order to communicate correctly. For instance, the word Akwe can be pronounced many different ways, and each pronunciation is a different word (egg or clothes). Since the spelling is the same, if you leave out accents, the text can easily become nonsense. Therefore, you must be able to speak it to write it and be understood.