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Language Community Identity
By Jeannette Stewart

How often these days are we asked for our ID? Doctors, hospitals, airlines, traffic cops and even some stores when we are paying up. They all want to verify that we are who we say we are, to establish that our identity is correct. But identities extend the individual. We have national identities, group identities, corporate identities and so on. Our friends in marketing are currently in love with ideas like platform identity that define a presence beyond branding. And we have, of course, community identities. It is one of the Zeitgeists of our current lives that define us and establish a place in the great scheme of things.

Academic research and business imperatives have invested heavily in understanding what communities mean to us in a whole range of activities. This has involved a truly multidisciplinary effort. All branches of the social sciences seem to have had input as have management disciplines across the board. And yet for all this activity are we truly closer to defining what community identity actually is? It seems fair to say that whatever it is does not seem to arise naturally; rather it seems to be derived from a mixture of elements some of which are fabricated by communities themselves. This leads us to ask whether our language community identity should be based on what we want it to be or whether it should be what seems natural for it to be? Another way of putting this is to draw the distinction between an organic structure that grows freely or a planned one restricted by what is deemed feasible by the members.

So, what can we safely say about the identity of the language community? Those of us who are part of it may have a good idea, but what of all those other people and groups out there who display a blank look when we tell them that we work in the language community? The uncomfortable truth is that our community is especially difficult to define. We are probably the most diverse community on the planet - that's the way it is in a multilingual world. But our skill tree is not even well understood by ourselves. We are a rich community of personalities, nationalities and skills, no wonder it's difficult to put us in a box. Indeed, can that even be done? I suggest that it is something we have to do. If we are to receive due recognition and an appropriate position in the pyramid of human endeavors that we present ourselves to the world out there in a way that commands respect and due recognition for the work we do.

In the language community we have a rich mix of individual traits with which we collaborate in an equally rich mass of groups. The relationships we form can be based on the languages we use, the skills we employ, the subjects we translate, even the tools we use. Professional bodies like the ATA do a splendid job in looking out for our interests, but what about the other side of the fence and the

corporate clients who want our services? If there are bridges there, they seem to carry mostly one-way traffic. We have to admit that the commercial imperative of enterprise culture places monetization at the top of the corporate tree. Generating income is what businesses do. However, the economic equations that are applied to different skills do not seem to favor language services. For example, what is it that makes coders so precious compared to translators? We're all too familiar with stories of computer professionals lavished with perks: free commuter buses; free food; free time to pursue personal projects; not to mention hefty salaries,

health insurance and so on. I wonder how many translators can claim even a fraction of those enviable rewards. How do we explain this jarring disconnect? Comparing the skillsets of translators with other groups is fairly fruitless. Translators tend to be self-starters, certainly models of self-motivation. Many are multilingual by their own hard work and passion for languages. Many acquire language specialisms like medical or legal skills. Many are self-employed and have to deal with all the headaches that can bring. There are also social conundrums like working in isolation while dealing primarily in communication with others. Or what about staying in touch with your native language when you're based abroad? No wonder it's difficult to profile language professionals.

There's another barrier to linguists receiving due recognition for the professionalism of their skills and that derives from the fact that speech is a universal human trait. Everyone speaks a native language and the consequence of that is people taking translation for granted. In fact, it is more likely that it is interpreting that is undervalued as bewildered tourists seek directions to the nearest Starbucks or monolingual business people flail around looking for the local way of saying, 'I need this order delivered yesterday!' What linguists do in effortlessly (to observers) transforming one language into another while accurately conveying meaning is overshadowed by the fact that they are involved in solving problems. With the emphasis placed strongly on problem solving, the linguistic elements are often lost. Who appreciates outside of language practitioners themselves the skills applied in rendering a target translation? Translators and interpreters have their own personal style, their own preferences in working with language pairs. There is a hidden art involved in this work as accuracy, currency, fluency and other traits are brought to bear on an end translation. Certainly there are aesthetic considerations with computer programming and verbose, cruffy code will attract scathing criticism from more adept coders. Good, tight, bug-free code is still a defining characteristic of the computing community. Quality counts, although it isn't always delivered as marketing departments scream for new apps and updates to be delivered asap. At least we have that in common.

However, in the language community we work with different quality considerations. If a project involves localizing in seventy languages, the project management involved in ensuring that meaning is consistently rendered is a massive, intensive task. This brings us to another impediment to defining our

community and that arises from the technology we now use to help us complete highly complex tasks. Human translation versus machine translation! When anybody can use Google Translate or Bing or one of many other tools to do the work, why bother with consideration of human translation at all? It just doesn't occur to many people to ask where the translation came from in the first place, how was the MT engine trained? It is not unknown for corporate ventures and some MT advocates to regard translators' work as their own intellectual property to do with as they please. Why is recognition of the ownership of translated work so difficult to find at times? A simple question and the simple answer is that it's all about money. Large sums would have to be paid out if due recognition were granted and that no doubt would affect the feasibility of global-scale, automated language services. But there is something more insidious here that marginalizes linguists and that is simply that some entities make sure of their lowly status in order to render them exploitable. Nor should we forget that there is always someone out there

who will undercut prices just to get the work and they will get it even if the quality they produce is third-rate. But let's not allow a few bad apples to taint our vision.

Our colleges, universities and other educational establishments do a phenomenal job of turning out a constant stream of new graduates, qualified in language, technical and management skills to augment the language industry. Some benefit from associations with corporate ventures, but what do new graduates do to make a start as language professionals in an environment without a clear-cut identity? Even new graduates finding positions in businesses can be left to a sink-or-swim situation as on-the-job training is rarely available. The pressures on all professionals can be intense and the intimidation that new entrants feel requires steely ambition and mental toughness from day one. If a new graduate is lucky they might find a position working with an older established professional who will mentor them in exchange for hammering out boiler-plate translations. It's not ideal, but it produces results. However, is this the situation that we want to define us as a professional community? Certainly there are coding 'sweatshops' that are the equivalent, but given that the tech industry currently has several billion dollars worth of open positions across the country, a decent coder stands a good chance of finding a worthwhile job if they look hard enough. Can we say the same for linguists? I'm afraid we can't. In spite of the wealth of superb language courses, there is a disconnect between teaching materials and the material that industry and commerce needs to be translated. As these demanding needs of industry and commerce proliferate and the global marketplace expands, we can easily see that there is a shortfall that the language community will find impossible to make up without some far-reaching changes.

Experience and first-hand observation of the language industry at work tells me that we lack cohesion. Our community is not broken or dis-functional or anything as drastic as that, but it does need to be drawn together more effectively, I believe. Mentoring is an obvious way of bringing new blood into the community.

Many established pros are all too willing to help the community in this way because they understand that the skill shortage among linguists is no longer impending, it's with us now. The new members on the other side of the equation are eager to learn and usually extremely grateful for the chance to work with experienced translators.

Mentoring also works well in other disciplines like programming, but they also have the benefit of programs like coding academies. I do not believe that we have anything like the same resources for translators and interpreters, but surely if some of the innovators in our community gave it some thought, they could devise a means of providing training for our members. There are Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on many subjects, but are they meeting the needs of training students to the level of sophistication demanded by business? If there are, I'd love to hear about them so I could help spread the word.

It also behoves our community members to embrace the technologies that now support our work. With the proliferation of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), the opportunities for all members of the community, even experienced members who work regularly, are vast. The more we network, the more we extend our connections in the community.

One final thought that is quite obvious, but needs to be stated and restated. The strength of our community and consequently the nature of its identity is dependent on all of us as members of it. We do need to muster a strong commitment and engage in making the community work.

Ideally we would achieve this with such efficiency that outsiders would yearn to join us. Our individual participation will have a positive effect in creating a robust body of professionals who attract all the recognition we are due and it seems logical that if this is the case, our value will be duly met. Idealistic? Perhaps. But if we don't take our shots, we will never score!

The above are just a couple of suggestions that will help strengthen our community and in turn that will help define our community identity. I have a very clear vision of the language community that I would love to see emerging in the near future. I strongly believe that the combined talents of all those who work with languages along with those who facilitate localization, internationalization and globalization will receive due recognition for the work we do in fulfilling the needs of entrepreneurs and most importantly the several billion users of our work across the globe. If the oft-mentioned ambition of having instantaneous translation on all devices in all languages is to be fulfilled, it will be made much more attainable if our 'insanely great' community projects an unmissable identity to the world at large.