Imagine connecting all the elements of life from the Creator to the dust of the earth in a single hierarchical structure. That’s what classical and mediaeval philosophers sought to do. They termed it ‘The Great Chain of Being.’ This idea dominated scientific and theological thinking for centuries. However, as method-based scientific investigation along with new paradigms of structuring nature began to revolutionize knowledge in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the Great Chain of Being became little more than an historical curiosity. Yet this redundancy does not mean that it has been cast aside and completely forgotten. This idea is still widely investigated by scholars of the History of Ideas in their attempt to understand the past and how it influenced subsequent developments.

In the language industry, I would argue that we are undergoing a similar transformation in our understanding of how to transform source texts into myriad targets on a bewildering variety of subjects in a heterogeneous communications environment. In our case, the chain we use to describe the links between language professionals and end users is termed the Supply Chain. This is a commonly used business term and is key in helping us organize our activities efficiently in terms of costs and time.

The advent of the supply chain in business seems to have been motivated by the desire to model processes in such a way as to facilitate smooth production of goods and services. It also served to identify all elements that were necessary for those processes to be structured efficiently with cost-effectiveness a prime motivating factor. A point we can learn from here is that the elements in a supply chain have always been there, but modeling them endows linkage, a structure where, if you like, causes and effects are explicitly understood.

Except, that’s not exactly the way the Language Industry’s Supply Chain works. The truth known to all language professionals is that the supply chain in our industry is fragmented and actually is prejudicial to the interests of the organizations which provide services like translation, localization and so on to the ultimate buyers.

In the language community, our supply chain models have had drastic changes in very short periods of time. The chain of supply used to be simple and obvious. A client’s requirement and a translator’s work embodied a straightforward one-to-one relationship. Of course, there were complications from time to time, but the list of parameters involved was minimal. Nothing ever stays the same! Client requirements have mushroomed. Technology has proliferated at an unimaginable speed. The world has shrunk. Our community has responded with the advent of localization, internationalization and globalization. And now we’re heading off planet! What’s next universalization?

Well, whatever the Musks and Bezoses of this world are planning, we’d better be prepared because as things stand, the language industry’s supply chain has not evolved in accordance with the aforementioned industry developments. Language services are one of the more recent business sectors to benefit from the wealth of tools and techniques of business analysis. Just a few decades ago, translation was mostly provided by freelance translators. International publishing houses, academia and only a few businesses like language learning were
exceptions. In recent decades, the entire multilingual landscape has undergone massive seismic shifts. As Language Service Providers (LSPs) have responded to the changing requirements of the business community, new ways of analyzing how language services can meet those requirements have emerged. One of those is in modeling a supply chain in which all the intricacies of supply and demand are met. But how successful have these models been? The answer is, so-so. A number of factors are preventing that answer from being an unqualified yes.

There is no single model of the language industry supply chain. In fact, those devised so far lie between the very simple and the very complex. The simplest model describes the process of a language supplier meeting the demand of a plain translation requirement. One source; one target.

Increase the parameters of those elements, introduce language technology, factor in cultural aspects, quality control, peer review, financial constraints and so on and simplicity yields to complexity. One of the developments that characterized the translation and localization industry during the last couple of decades was consolidation. From at least a dozen large vendors, we are currently down to a handful, publicly trading or with full financial backing. Consolidation also manifested itself in the emergence of a relatively standard production outsourcing model. The larger vendors took on multi-language, multi-service projects, outsourcing the core translation services to single-language vendors, one in each target country. These smaller local LSPs normally work from one or more source languages into one target language only, and either work with on-site translators or contractors.

This particular enlargement of the supply chain has resulted in the translators being extremely removed from the client. This fragmentation of the language industry is problematic because it creates division between clients (demand) and translators (supply). The consequence of this is that information which should be freely flowing from the client to the translator is blocked or simply lost in the large chain. The LSPs have used this block as a means to de-value the service of the translator as being easily replaceable should the need arise. The freelance translator as an individual doing business is no match to the LSP which as an organization is able to meet the clients demands and invest in similar automation.

Because of this ability of the large LSPs to match client investment in automation, the language industry operates with an asymmetrical supply chain. The automation and localization efforts of large corporate ventures have resulted in very sophisticated technology to power translation using MT and translation memories, in turn managed with version control and project management software tools. Yet the rendering of source language into target translation is still performed by highly-trained translation professionals. Somehow the requirements of the demand end of the chain are disproportionate to the supply end. Asymmetry exists, disrupting efficiency.

It seems plain, therefore, that tech alone is not the solution to the problem. What is required is a means of strengthening on an equal basis the links in the supply chain, thus providing full recognition of all of those contributing to its functions.

The financial burden of licenses and the constant pressure to upgrade software is a perennial source of pain for freelancers. It’s also a headache for companies, especially huge corporations, where spending on software may be subject to
restrictions stipulated by procurement. Full stack tools are myriad these days and you can’t use every one on offer.

Businesses these days are driven by market forces that massively enlarge their operations and with that comes increasing complexity. As a consequence, any modeling activity must try to capture structures that resist depiction as stable, slow-changing entities. Perhaps business management software tools can help, but dynamic situations are not always predictable. The localization community is a perfect example of this conundrum. The development of CAT tools, industry standards like XML and now some increasingly efficient Machine Translation apps have greatly improved the likelihood of sophisticated client requirements with ever-shortening delivery dates and reduced costs. But this just increases asymmetry between LSPs and the language professionals who actually do the work. Enterprises are not much inclined to speak about this and so the situation prevails. The real truth is that technology alone cannot supply and meet all translation requirements. Thankfully, however, this is now being brought out into the open as the supply chain is increasingly shown to be fragmented.

Language professionals themselves also must shoulder some responsibility for this state of affairs. The language community is made up of many different skillsets and each of these harbors a range of experience by which individuals qualify as translation providers or not. Inexperienced and new translators often find themselves in a supporting role to the experienced and successful providers whose services are in demand by LSPs. This inequality is difficult to overcome and with the pressure mounting for ever-increasing volumes of translations in ever-increasing language pairs, the supply chain’s links are under even more strain.

The above is really only skating over a complicated and tortuously involved situation. Corporate enterprises urgently need to reexamine the status of the language community and elevate it to a much higher prominence in their globally-driven structures. LSPs and sundry consultants need to understand that the days of using translation professionals as irrelevant are distant history. Educators need to forge new links and share their work to elevate the level of experience new graduates bring to the job market. The supply chain needs to be reforged in order to accommodate new and burgeoning technology, skilled users and innovative enterprises across the globe. We all need to keep reminding ourselves of our multilingual status and to cast off the hegemonies that resulted in this highly imperfect business environment. We should be ambitious in attempting to modify our business cultures to reflect more closely the cultures we find in this amazingly diverse world. The challenge is there so what are we waiting for?