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New Trends in the Language Professions: a Report from the World of Work

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1. Introduction

In his brief history of the 21st century, Thomas L. Friedman (2006) claims that *The World Is Flat*. Whatever the metaphor, there is no denying that we are living in a global society within which the ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural borders requires competences in foreign languages and cross-cultural communication to a much larger extent than it was the case just a decade or, indeed, a generation ago. This development is borne out in a number of recent projects and publications relevant to our present topic.

In a recommendation at the end of 2005, the European Commission proposed *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework* (Commission of the European Communities 2005) with suggestions as to how these competences can be ensured for all European citizens. In this context, *competence* is defined as “a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to a particular situation. Key competences are those that support personal fulfilment, social inclusion, active citizenship, and employment” (2005:3).

The first two competences in the framework are *Communication in the mother tongue* and *Communication in the foreign languages*, but the list also comprises *Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence* as well as *Cultural expression* (2005:13ff). These key competences for lifelong learning are deemed vital not only for a relatively small group of language experts but, indeed, for European citizens in general.

There is a message in this to the language industries and professions in that they, as a consequence of this, need to reconsider their brief, just as the universities and other institutions of higher education need to address the question of which language and intercultural communication competences foreign language graduates, as well as non-language graduates, should have developed at the end of their courses of study.

1.1 Current situation across Europe

According to a special Eurobarometer survey (Commission of the European Communities 2006), 44 per cent of Europeans say that they do not have a language other than their mother tongue in which they are able to have a conversation. 56 per cent, on the other hand, claim that they have a least one foreign language, 28 per cent that they have a least two foreign languages, and 11 per cent that they have at least three foreign languages in which they can have a conversation (2006:3). There is therefore still quite a lot of ground to be covered before the long-term objective for all EU citizens to speak two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue has been reached, cf. e.g. Commission of the European Communities (2003); and there is still work to be carried out by the language experts, the translators and interpreters. The question is, however, whether this work is similar to what has traditionally been the case in the past, or whether the jobs available for language experts are changing as a result of changing conditions on the labour market in general.

The same survey (Commission 2006) also shows that Europeans are very much aware of the importance of foreign language and intercultural competences on the labour market. Among their most prevalent incentives for learning new languages are those related to their professional careers such as “To use at work (including travelling abroad on business)” 32 per cent; “To be able to work in another country” 27 per cent; “To get a better job” in home country 23 per cent; and “To be able to understand people from other cultures” 21 per cent (2006:5).

The results of a survey of 2000 small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) across 29 European states also indicate that language and intercultural communication competences are important, and that a significant amount of business is lost because of lack of language skills among key employees (ELAN 2006:5). An average of 48 per cent of the businesses in the sample have language strategies (policies). Such strategies include keeping a record of the staff’s language skills and undertaking language training. However, both large and small companies indicate that they prefer to recruit people with these skills rather than having to invest time and money in training on the job.

These recent surveys seem to send a consistent message: While a fair number of Europeans do have adequate language competences in two or more foreign languages, there is still a need for more such people across Europe. The business community in general and, not least, the international organisations need these people in order to operate in the global market place. Therefore, cooperation between the education sectors and the world of work is vitally important in order to establish which language and intercultural communication competences are needed and in which languages. The needs may not be the same in all countries as geographical differences may prevail, cf. also the *Final Report* of the High Level Group on Multilingualism (Commission of the European Communities 2007:14), but general trends can still be detected in the material.

1.2 Thematic Network Projects in the Area of Languages

This paper takes as its point of departure these recent developments in the area of languages in Europe and reports on and discusses the results of a university network project, the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages, TNP3 (2003-06), and its follow-on project, TNP3-D (2006-07). The aim of this paper is thus to publish the project results as well as to discuss the implications of these for the world of work and for the universities in their curriculum planning and research activities.

The overarching aim of the TNP3 and TNP3-D projects has been to map the needs for foreign language and intercultural competences in Europe, and to discuss the role of the European universities in enabling students to develop these competences. An important element in the project was the design and completion of surveys among employers and university graduates in the language-related industries and professions as well as among non-language employers and graduates, thereby also considering foreign language and intercultural skills as central to professional employability on the European labour market in general.

The projects have thus been concerned with language graduates (language specialists) as well as other professionals who need foreign language and intercultural competences. However, in the following, we will focus exclusively on the language experts. Section 2 below builds on project-internal working documents to which the authors have contributed together with a large group of colleagues at other European universities. The section thus reflects the results of the joint efforts of a considerable number of university partners across Europe. The documents that have been or will be released in the public domain may be accessed on the website of the European Language Council under [Projects, TNP Languages](#).

The first decade of the new millennium has witnessed considerable changes in European higher education. There is a shift from teaching to learning, and from a focus on course input (“what do we want to teach”) to course output (“what competences are needed in the world of work” and “what have the students learned”). This development is also reflected in the TNPs. The projects recommend continuous collaboration and cooperation between the higher education institutions and the world of work in order to ensure the relevant updating of curricula and syllabi, so that graduates are equipped to meet the needs and demands of their respective professions when they enter the world of work. Previous publications on curriculum development have typically not taken into consideration the needs and demands of university-external stakeholders, cf. e.g. Cavagnoli & Schweigkofler (2003a; 2003b), and Kathpalia & Heah (2007), but have concentrated on university-internal processes and procedures. In section 2 below, we report on the general trends that form the results of the TNPs as regards the language industries and professions.

2. Language specialists cum business generalists: Multiple identities in the language professions

To identify the profile of the European language specialist, the TNP3 project gathered an extensive set of data from the language professions across the European Union. Employers and employees were asked to identify present and future needs as regards foreign language and intercultural competences in their respective professional environments. Although responses invariably differ somewhat from one country to another, the data analyses clearly reflect that both employers and employees agree that the role of the language specialist has changed dramatically in recent years. The language professions across Europe report to be in a state of permanent flux, and the days of the classical language specialist seem to be numbered. New and additional skills and competences are required to suit the rapidly changing world of work, and non-linguistic tasks seem to become increasingly important in the language professions.

2.1 Changes in the professional environment

Today, translation, technical writing, localisation, and interpreting are far from clear-cut categories of work. Perhaps with the exception of those working in (very) large organisations, language experts typically find themselves in jobs with several areas of responsibility such as translation combined with terminology work, with project management, or with foreign sales and marketing. Further, a substantial number of language specialists report an increase in activities involving text editing and revision due to

changes in the professional environment. As companies outsource parts of their translation activities, we witness an increasing number of freelancers and translators working into their B-languages. Consequently, there is an increasing demand for quality assurance measures to be put in place in order to ensure the quality of the final product (text). In addition, respondents in some countries report that an increasing number of non-language trained professional specialists in e.g. engineering, law, finance, and medicine are now translating texts within their specific fields of expertise in direct competition with professionally trained translators and interpreters.

Other important changes in the professional environment include an increase in foreign language corporate communication, including web communication, an increase in intercultural mediation and consulting, and a demand for advanced and updated IT skills. Respondents in some countries, however, do not mention the need for computer literacy and knowledge of special language-related software applications, presumably because this type of knowledge is taken for granted as a key skill. In other European countries, e.g. some recent EU member states, graduates in general do not seem to be fully familiar with relevant IT and software applications.

2.2 New needs and trends in the language professions

The rapid changes in the professional environment are clearly reflected in the growing demand for cross-disciplinary, non-linguistic skills suggesting that the job profile of the traditional language specialist is undergoing substantial changes. While data were collected separately from employers and employees in the language professions, the input from the two groups of respondents does not show any significant differences or major discrepancies. Consequently, the trends and needs reflected in the data material are grouped according to type of required competences rather than type of respondent. It is worthwhile noticing, however, that the needs and requirements listed as personal competences (cf. section 2.2.5 below) rely on observations and input from employers only.

2.2.1 Core linguistic competences are still an issue

Although a vast majority of respondents stress the need for skills of a cross-disciplinary and non-linguistic nature, one should not jump to the conclusion that core linguistic competences are no longer necessary or no longer valued in the language professions. Both employers and employees are acutely aware of the need for both oral and written language proficiency, preferably in more than one foreign language.

While English is still recognised as the global *lingua franca* by respondents, the data indicate a growing awareness of the importance of non-European

languages, especially Japanese, Mandarin, Arabic languages and, to a lesser extent, some less-studied European languages, cf. also Fjord *et al.* 2007. The situation of the classical European languages such as German, French, and Italian is less certain, although some data indicate a moderate, but fairly steady demand for highly specialised terminological skills in translation of professional texts, especially highly specialised domains such as technology, law, or finance, and for experts in related areas of technical writing. In addition, respondents state a need for trained LSP specialists to revise outsourced translations and to undertake quality control and text revision cf. also section 2.1 above.

One of the most conspicuous results of the data analyses involves what seems to be a general decline in mother tongue proficiency across Europe. Employers across the European Union comment on the fact that language graduates no longer necessarily possess a sufficient degree of mother tongue competences, a fact that is reflected in spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes, style-related mistakes, as well as problems relating to coherence and cohesion in their general text production.

Regrettably, the lack of mother tongue competences reflects negatively in both translations and in general text production in other languages. If the ability of language graduates to express themselves correctly and coherently in their mother tongue can no longer be taken for granted, employers are faced with new types of problems relating to translation quality and correctness. As foreign language curricula traditionally presuppose mother tongue competences, this situation presents a considerable challenge that needs to be addressed. Basic mistakes are often transferred from the source language to the target language, reflecting negatively on quality and customer satisfaction in the language professions.

2.2.2 Language-related competences: Communication, culture and IT skills

Traditional core linguistic competences may to a certain extent have been taken for granted by some respondents. A large part of the responses analysed involves a growing need for competences that are either language-related or concerns the non-linguistic field of general business. As concerns the language-related competences, respondents - employers and employees alike - indicate a need for qualifications and competences within the following main areas: computer and IT skills, communication and culture skills, editing and proof reading skills, and writing skills in different text genres.

As stated in section 2.1 above, some respondents (especially in Northern Europe) take a fairly advanced level of computer and software skills for granted, while other respondents explicitly state a need for language graduates with advanced computer literacy. This is particularly the case in some recent EU member states where graduates in general are not yet fully familiar with relevant IT and software applications related to the language professions, e.g. translation tools, terminological data bases, etc.

The responses also reflect a need for a higher degree of intercultural and communication skills in the language professions. International and global business activities require not only specialized linguistic skills in more than one language. Increasingly, businesses rely on skilled communicators with cultural intelligence, that is, a keen cultural awareness and a detailed understanding of the differences between cultures; cf. Plum *et al.* (2007); Peterson (2004). With globalisation, internationalisation and cross-cultural mergers in several sectors, the growing number of international teams in business requires linguists who must be able to translate a theoretical knowledge of culture and communication into a hands-on, here-and-now work context.

Another set of required language-related skills concern text production and text editing. Many respondents stress the importance of revision, editing and proof reading skills in one or more foreign languages and in the mother tongue. Many language graduates are implicitly and explicitly expected to undertake these activities in their everyday working life, and several respondents state that they do not always feel adequately prepared for this. Together with IT skills, communicative skills, and culture skills, competences in the areas of text production and text revision constitute an important part of the language-related competences required by respondents in the language professions in Europe.

2.2.3 Non-linguistic competences: Hard-core business skills

Interestingly, the data revealed that language experts (graduates) are expected to possess a fair amount of non-linguistic competences. A significant part of the data collected from employers in the language professions stated that, in general, language graduates were inadequately prepared for the conditions of the world of work. For instance, employers complain that language graduates do not understand the importance of keeping deadlines, and that language graduates are insufficiently prepared for the fact that stress and time pressure are normal working conditions. Both groups of respondents recommend that internships become an integrated part of all language curricula.

Overall, responses from both employers and employees reflect that language graduates would greatly benefit from a better understanding of the business world in general. Rather than seeing themselves as a separate unit responsible for language activities only, language graduates are required to demonstrate a higher degree of general business understanding. What are the conditions of the business world? How do traditional language-related activities interact with other business activities? How are businesses run, and who are the primary stakeholders?

Other non-linguistic competences required relate explicitly to organisation and management skills, often related to Human Resource activities. Depending on their background and specific working experience, many language graduates become involved in aspects of project management and general knowledge sharing. Some become project managers and are required to possess concrete management skills to fulfil the role of manager. Others work in cross-disciplinary teams with e.g. engineers, technicians, administrators, production teams, etc., which requires both interpersonal skills and an ability to interact with professionals of a non-linguistic background who might not always see eye to eye with a trained linguist.

Sales and marketing skills constitute yet another set of required skills of a non-linguistic nature. Not surprisingly, employers and employees alike state that language graduates are often involved in activities related to international sales and marketing. Consequently, both groups of respondents point out that sales and marketing skills are essential for language graduates involved in this part of the business world:

I use my degree and my background in languages to sell language-related products. Consequently, I'm in dire need of sales and marketing skills which were not included in my curriculum at university. In my job, linguistic competences come second. (Translation of response from Danish language graduate 2005)

2.2.4 Media and presentation skills

Hardcore business skills aside, the data also reveal a demand for media and presentation skills. As language graduates are increasingly involved in non-linguistic activities relating to communication and external stakeholder contact, media-related skills become important. Press contact, the writing or editing of press releases, and the handling of various aspects of public relations activities are listed as sought-after skills by employers and employees in the data collected. The demand for this type of media-related

skills is largely due to the fact that, in some European countries, language graduates compete with trained journalists for certain types of jobs in the private sector, especially jobs as information officers, communication officers, etc.

In connection with media skills, respondents also state the importance of general presentation skills including an updated knowledge of presentation software. A set of business-related competences regarding the combination of media, communication, and presentation skills is requested by several respondents as the job activities of some language employees involve the preparing, presenting, editing and revision of company websites and blogs at both national and international levels.

2.2.5 Emerging trend: Increased focus on personal competences

Implicitly, the question of personality has always been present in recruiting situations. Increasingly, language graduates become involved in business activities outside of their traditional job profile dominated by translation and other strictly linguistic activities. According to the responses from employers as well as employees, the increase in non-linguistic activities involving e.g. customer relations, press relations, stakeholder relations, team interaction, etc. has led to a keen focus on the personal competences of the employee.

Many employers explicitly state that an extrovert and robust personality is a *sine qua non* for most language graduates because the traditional and somewhat isolated job profile of language graduates is changing rapidly. Working as a hands-on, full-time translator need not involve much external contact. However, as an increasing number of language-related jobs combine linguistic and non-linguistic competences, aspects such as personality and social skills play an important part in recruiting situations. In the data collected, employers explicitly state that the desired employee possesses an extrovert, outgoing, and stress-resistant personality as well as a high degree of social and communicative skills. No more hanging out in the protected environment of fellow linguists, no more hiding in the office behind computer screens and dictionaries. According to the general drift of employer responses, introverts do not stand a chance in the hectic, cross-disciplinary international business world.

2.3 Lessons to be learned

As it appears from the sections above, there is no longer one clear-cut definition of a language expert, a translator or interpreter. While there are still a relatively small number of people working in very large international organisations that may still be conference interpreters and translation specialists, most university graduates with a degree in foreign languages will

find themselves jobs that involve a multitude of tasks and therefore also a multitude of competences, of which the language and intercultural competences form a certain percentage. Furthermore, as it is also the case in other professions, the qualifications and competences required change, so the ability to constantly adapt to a changing environment is a key competence in the 21st century.

3. Discussion and conclusions to be drawn (consequences for research and curricula development)

Based on the results of TNP3 and TNP3-D, especially the questionnaire-based consultation among employers and graduates, as well as the established definition of what competences language experts need upon graduation, it seems abundantly clear that universities must subscribe to a change agenda if they wish to train employable language graduates in the future. However, it is equally clear that the employers must also be willing to cooperate closely with universities in order for them to offer relevant foreign language programmes, the graduates of which are able to meet the demands of a constantly changing labour market. What does this imply? What are the main consequences of such a change agenda for the research and curriculum development at European universities? And how can the world of work contribute to this process in a constructive fashion?

First of all, as has already been indicated above, closer consultation and structured dialogue between the universities and representatives of the labour market should be encouraged. If universities are to train the language experts of tomorrow, consistent and structured dialogue with their graduates and the world of work must be a top priority. A dialogue based on regular needs analyses, on detailed discussion of needs and possibilities, and on mutual respect for the situation of the two parties. For instance, businesses have a legitimate wish for universities to think in specific output based competences, but one employer will probably not ask for exactly the same competences as the next one, and university curricula cannot (should not!) reflect the demands of one employer only. Furthermore, universities have longer planning horizons than businesses, there is at least six years between the planning and offering of a bachelor programme to the graduation of a student in a master (second cycle) programme; therefore, universities cannot change curricula overnight. However, such dialogue is clearly in the interest of both sides, and through such an effort, universities may reach a clearer understanding of needs of the world of work, while employers may come to reflect in a more informed manner on the needs of their organisations in this respect.

Secondly, the TNP3 consultation as well as other national reports and surveys indicate, perhaps without being very explicit about it, that employers increasingly seek to recruit graduates who possess a double competence, i.e. language graduates who, in addition to their language expertise, possess genuine qualifications in another subject area useful for the enterprise in question. Examples of such demands would be competence in e.g. marketing, law, or economics in addition to the expert knowledge of one or more foreign languages, that is, demands not limited to the cultural literacy or computer literacy that, more often than not, would be part of any serious foreign language programme. Needless to say, this is a rather tall order for the students because they are in fact asked to become experts in two different fields. Also for this reason, a close and structured dialogue between universities and the world of work is necessary in order to balance expectations and demands for what a typical three or five year programme can in fact contain.

Thirdly, in order for any organisation to recruit language graduates with the sufficient and necessary language portfolio, much more serious attention should be paid to the issue of 'English is necessary, but far from sufficient'. This is a statement which is often used, but what it means, and what the consequences of it are, is not at all clear. ELAN (2006) as well as other research, e.g. Fjord *et al.* (2007) and Hellekjær (2007), have reached the conclusion that companies lose business simply through lack of sufficient language (and intercultural) competences among their employees, and that they often do not pay sufficient attention to language competences other than English when they recruit new employees. This situation is detrimental to the further development or expansion of business. There is no doubt that in global business, English is unavoidable; however, the idea that one can get by with English everywhere, does not hold true. Therefore, if businesses wish to expand their activities to markets where English is not the first or second language, they stand a much better chance of being successful if they have the necessary language resources within the organisation. Only some tasks can be outsourced to external language experts, and if businesses do not have employees in-house with the sufficient and necessary language competences in other languages, their business opportunities in non-English language markets will be limited.

Fourthly, many university departments training language experts, including translators and interpreters, should reconsider their research profile. For obvious reasons, such departments have traditionally focused on linguistic disciplines as well as translation and interpreting and other LSP-oriented disciplines such as lexicography and terminology. These research areas are, of course, still core disciplines to back up the provision of educational

programmes intended to train language experts, i.e. to back up the core linguistic competences which also employers continue to emphasise. However, if university departments are to continue to deliver relevant programmes to train language experts for the labour market in the future, that research agenda must be revised. Communication in the global knowledge society requires new mind sets and skills sets because there are so many new tasks to be solved in so many new media across linguistic and cultural borders, and the generation and communication of knowledge is more important than ever. We therefore need new, often inter-disciplinary, research to untangle this and form a solid platform for the intercultural communication and foreign language curricula of the future, cf. e.g. Lauridsen & Toudic (2008) and Engberg et al. (2007). This is a major challenge for (traditional) university departments, and probably a challenge that can only be met if the same departments co-operate with other departments within or outside their own universities in order to do so.

Fifthly, the composition of curricula in translation and interpreting and other language specialist programmes should be revised. This revision ought to go hand in hand with the above-mentioned revision of the traditional research profile, since the composition of curricula and the research to back up these curricula are basically two sides of the same coin. Some of the major areas which should be addressed in connection with such a revision of research strategies and curricula, i.e. areas which require new types of research and curricula redesign, include the following:

- The consultation referred to above with employers in the commercial sector as well as the institutional language service employers, such as the EU translation and interpreting services, point out that, when recruiting new people, they give priority to graduates who can demonstrate excellent communication skills (both written and oral) in their first language and in two or more foreign languages as well as a good knowledge of the political and socio-economic situation and the cultures of the language areas they have studied. In addition, graduates should also be well versed in general information processing (e.g. summarizing in one or several languages or translating and/or rewriting for different media and audiences). Finally, graduates should possess good organisation and management skills, and be able to work confidently in a state-of-the-art IT environment, including standard language engineering software.
- Translators and interpreters are often required to work with a range of multifaceted tasks requiring competences and skills that go beyond

their language expertise, such as database management, project management or even sales and marketing.

- Technological developments continuously alter and create new markets for and new types of products which integrate languages. These include multilingual technical or user documentation, multilingual websites, localisation of videogames and software products, adaptation or localisation of international news programmes and international commercial, scientific or institutional events. These areas represent a rapidly growing market also for language specialists, but a market for which translators are not traditionally trained.
- The necessity for greater productivity and lower costs, which is a consequence of increased competition also in the areas dealt with here, has emphasised the need for the use of language engineering tools. These include large scale terminology bases and dictionaries, which are now easily accessible to the general public online or to professionals via dedicated resource platforms; translation memory systems which automatically recover pre-translated segments and are now in standard use in language service companies and among freelancers; and machine translation systems, which provide an instantaneous "translation" of any source material into the required target language. The latest generation of language engineering systems is now combining search engines, terminology resources and translation memory systems which can in one operation scan all the existing multilingual resources either on the internet or within a dedicated resource bank, leaving the human operator to make the relevant choices and to fill in the remaining gaps where no translation already exists. All of these tools can be combined with content management systems to produce and manage multilingual multimedia resources. Needless to say, this development places new demands on language specialists and on those who train them, that is, the universities.

The above brief list of some of the challenges facing the language professions may seem overwhelming. However, there is a clearly positive message to be learnt from this. Instead of predicting the end of the language professions, rapid economic and technological changes have in fact given a new lease of life to activities that were considered to be on the way out only a few years ago, such as text writing and editing, proofreading, terminology creation and management or the creation of language learning materials for professional purposes. They have also given rise to a range of new skills, including multimedia translation and localisation, multimedia content authoring and

editing, multimedia content management, multilingual events management, or the designing and management of online language learning platforms. In other words, there are plenty of opportunities for universities to remain relevant as trainers of language specialists if they are able and willing to adapt and subscribe to the change agenda. And there are plenty of opportunities for language graduates to take on new types of jobs at a time when the more traditional translation and interpreting market seems to be declining.

In conclusion, foreign language programmes at universities have traditionally led to philology degrees or language and literature degrees. With few exceptions, the existing non-philology degree programmes have led to qualifications as translators and/or interpreters, often at higher education institutions outside the traditional research universities. The changing professional environment and the competences and skills required are clearly not all accommodated in these programmes, and the universities are therefore confronted with the need to reassess their programme offerings and adjust the content of these to cater to the needs of the labour market. If this reassessment and subsequent revision is to be successful, it has to be carried out in close cooperation with the world of work.

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ABSTRACT

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The qualifications and competences required in the language industry and language professions have changed and continue to change in accordance with the general socio-economic and technological developments in what is now termed the global knowledge society. Today, most university graduates with a degree in foreign languages will find themselves jobs that involve a multitude of tasks and therefore also a multitude of competences, of which the language and intercultural competences form a certain percentage. This paper takes as its point of departure such recent developments in Europe. It reports on and discusses the results of a university network project, the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages, as well as the implications thereof for the world of work and for the universities in their curriculum planning and research activities.
