Academia expectations versus industry reality

Oleksandr Bondarenko

I've always really been into the translation. The benefit of being both a lecturer in translation and a manager in a translation agency is that you're always seesawing. With a bit of luck, it's either amusing or useful; if you're really a success, it's both.

My "seesaw" experience – 17 years in the translation business and lecturing at a local university at the same time – made me strongly doubt the professional competence of translation department graduates.

Our corporate email is constantly swamped with resumes, as is the case with every company similar to ours, I suppose. The conversation starts and those who have just successfully graduated from the university start discussing salary, social safety net and so on, with their "spick and span" resumes and strong belief in their unapproachable proficiency. Yet when it gets down to the first basic translation test, a brilliant student with a perfect master's diploma can turn out to be a loser.

I always intuitively felt that something was wrong with translator training. My 15 years of scientific experience in the translation and contrastive studies field led to the scientific approbation of my vague suspicion. So, to conduct research I preferred to leave the talking to the experts: 48 university translation teachers from 21 universities and 117 translation industry representatives, including 49 translation company representatives from 35 companies and 68 experienced freelancers. Practically all university representatives and the majority of industry experts were from Ukraine.

Not to reinvent the wheel, the mentioned colleagues were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The principal and most interesting challenge was to invite both parties to the conversation. Both did their best: academicians maintaining the behavior of a know-all, and industry representatives seeking a professional equivalent to the issues under the question. Both parties were asked to evaluate each of the 43 invest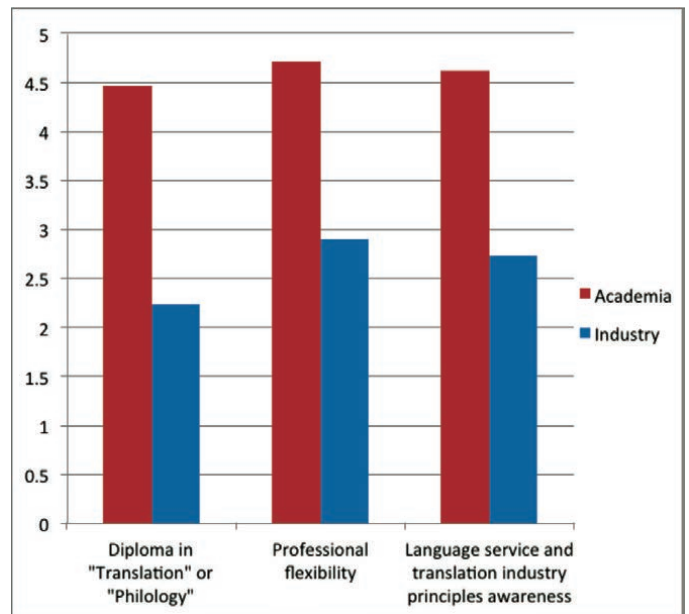igated competencies, ranking their professional relevance from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). Further in the article we will deal only with those out of the 43 questioned competencies that were ranked high at least by one of the parties and trace how the "opposite" party ranked the same highly evaluated competence. Usually the results of the very

Figure 1: Experience and qualification, personal qualities estimated highly by academia (as compared to industry).

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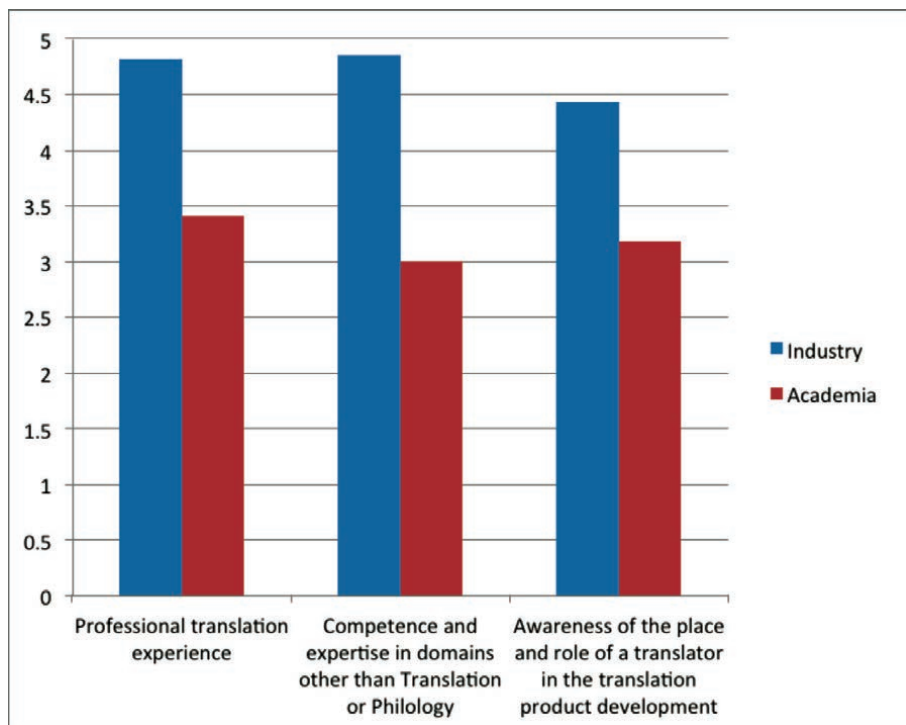
Figure 2: Experience and qualification, personal qualities estimated highly by industry (as compared to academia).
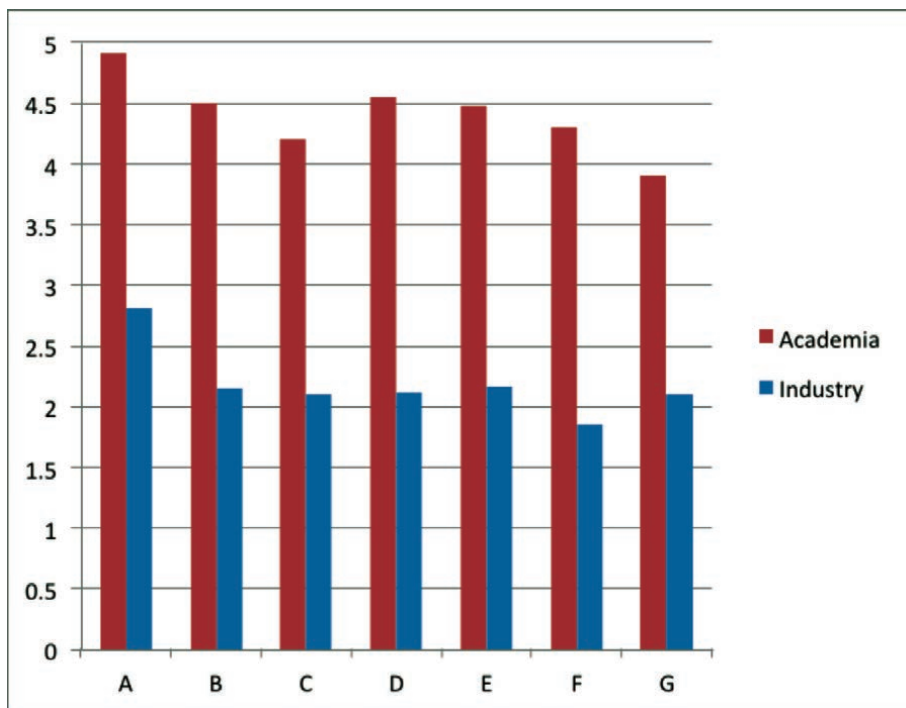

Figure 3: Linguistic competencies estimated highly by academia (as compared to the translation industry). A. Ability to compile glossaries and termbases. B. Ability of pre-machine translation (MT) text editing for more effective MT results. C. Ability to edit poor quality source text (optional service). D. Ability to compile style guides. E. Ability to translate from a second language. F. Ability to perform a summary translation. G. Ability to customize the text (adaptation, transcreation).

same competence evaluation by the other party proved to be totally different: highly evaluated competencies of one group of respondents were most often disapproved (or at least ranked not as high) by the other group.

The idea of the questionnaire was partially based on the European Master in Translation (EMT) list of competencies for professional translators. It should be noted nevertheless that the whole competence system was thoroughly reconsidered. The EMT list of competencies is presented in a form of taxonomy that works perfectly if you see the translator as an ideal concept. My system of competencies was supposed to be more industry-oriented, replicating the real process of translation with all the stages involved. Moreover, I couldn't help but make a curtsey to the post-Soviet tradition of linguistic education. The Ukrainian and Russian linguistic education level is fairly high, so graduates have practically zero problem with lexicological, stylistic and grammatical theoretical background — at least it is sufficient to back up the reviewers' knocks. At the same time some concepts are an absolute *terra incognita* for university teachers (concerning technological competence issues in particular) and so should be adapted. I singled out 43 competencies that were grouped into three major categories: experience and qualifications, linguistic competencies (including translation and editorial competence) and technological competence.

Two groups of respondents from the translation industry and academia representatives were asked the same question about the three sets of competencies, regarding "Which of the below mentioned competencies a modern translator should possess." They were asked to rate each of the competencies from 1 to 5, where 1 is the least important competence and 5 is the most important one.

Experience and qualification, personal qualities

The first set of competencies drew knee-jerk answers out of academicians in their pitching of the diploma's significance. The diploma itself is regarded by scholars as a performance bond, so the results are somewhat predictable.
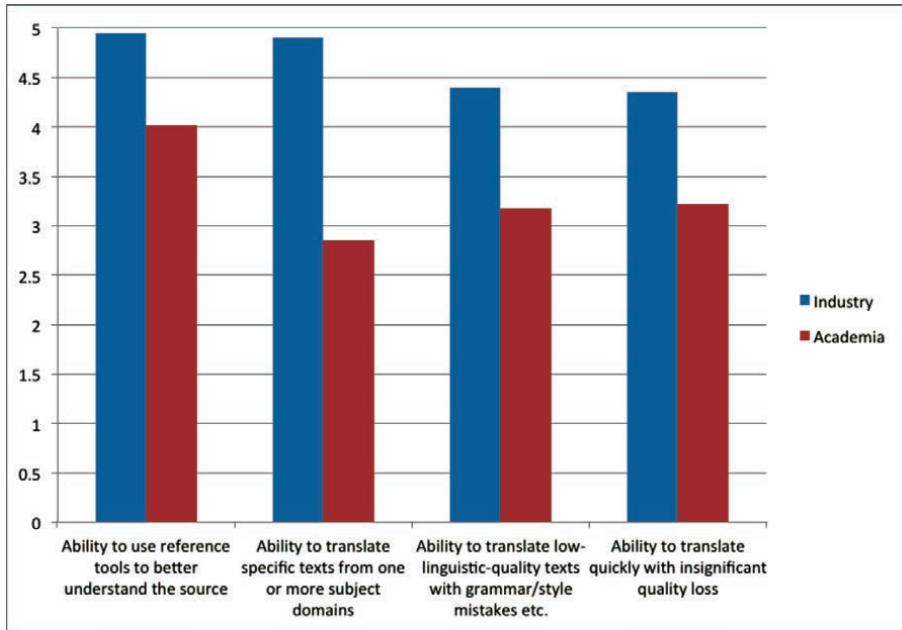
Figure 4: Linguistic competencies are estimated highly by the translation industry (as compared to academia)
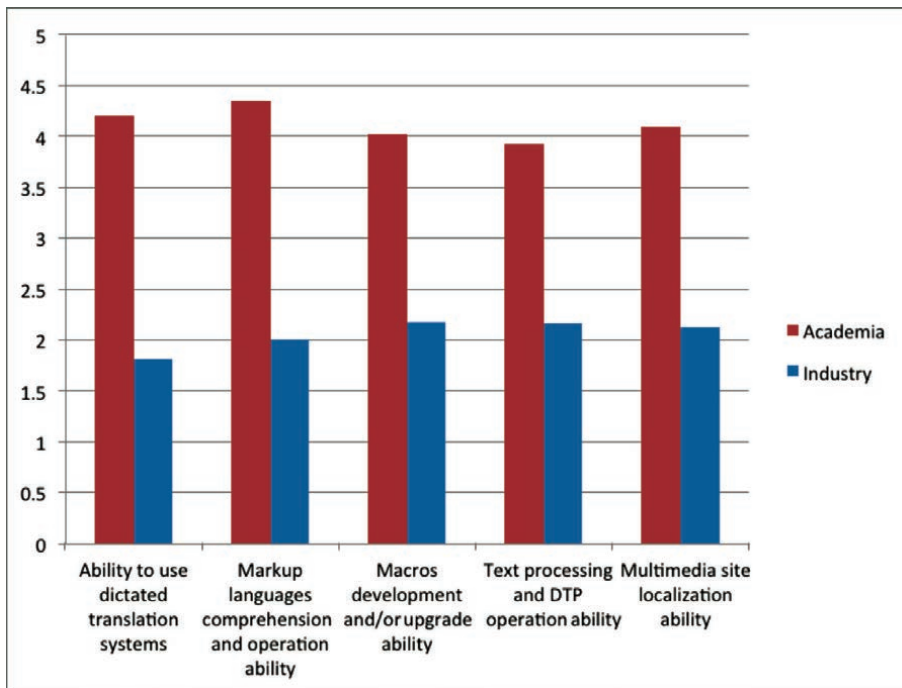

Figure 5: Technological competencies estimated highly by academia (as compared to the translation industry).

Figure 1 shows lecturers' reactions compared to that of industry representatives. So why is it that companies haven't been able to appreciate diploma status in the same way that academia has? Obviously this is due to the importance of job-related experience, at least in some particular areas.

As seen from Figure 2, academia doesn't really value the competencies highly estimated by the industry.

Linguistic and technical competencies

As for the second set of questions concerning linguistic competencies, the university representatives claimed that

their graduates should have the competencies shown in Figure 3.

As it turned out, potential employers are more modest in their requirements. According to them, all that is really needed to be a professional translator is shown in Figure 4.

The most obvious gap between respondents' evaluation was the technological set of competencies. Diagram 5 proves that academicians strongly believe that the translator's professional life will make no sense without certain competencies.

The unexpectedly high rating for the most tech-consuming competencies completely slackjawed me. Putting two and two together, a suspicion crept into my mind about the psychological reasons for this. Teachers are teachers – sometimes preferring to be on the conservative side, sometimes trying to be on the high horse in every possible situation. Their purely speculative rating of competencies clashes with a relatively modest evaluation of the same competencies by industry representatives. According to them (see Figure 6), to be a success a translator must possess specific tech-related competencies. That's all that is appreciated and is paid for.

In the long run, my subjective belief that translators are not trained properly was proven quite obviously by the results of the questionnaire's answers. The two groups of respondents believed completely different competencies were important for the modern translator. The results lead to many conclusions. One of the main ones is that academia does not train translators the way that their future employers require.

The way forward

One way forward is to be aware of the gap, the imbalance between the theory studied and ongoing information from real professional life. The academia-industry team play is one of the most fruitful ways to adjust training process to industry demands. The concrete ways out are round tables, master classes of industry gurus and many other proven activities. Besides this, academicians may (and should) be invited to translation companies for a taste of true field experience, up to fully carrying out a translation project from start to end.
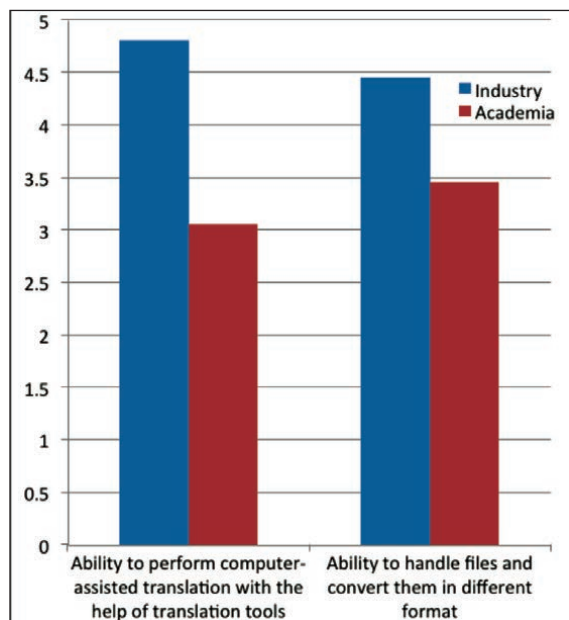
Figure 6: Technological competencies estimated highly by industry (as compared to academia).

Language companies should also consider a supervised student internship. Our company internship program has been in the works for six years and the whole seven-step methodology has proved to be a success.

Step 1: The interns dive into company policies and standards, production profile and their duties. At this stage we conduct them to the coffeemaker and clear some place for the coffee mugs they've been invited to bring in from home, and these mugs join the collection of mugs brought in by the rest of the staff. There's usually a group of four to six students led by a mentor — not a wet nurse but rather a sensei. The baptism may take a couple of days, considering the huge Britannica-sized process description in our company.

Step 2: Dissecting long-term projects. At this stage necessary translation tools are taught or adjusted to the concrete demands with style guides provided simultaneously. Given that translation tools are taught in Ukraine sporadically, this stage requires much effort. Long-term projects are taken on deliberately. The interns are fully immersed into the domain and try it round and round. Passing the stages may not only show pure translation or technological progress, but learning capability and motivation. After having studied the issues, the interns are required to pass a test on comprehension and translation tools proficiency.

Step 3: The newbies are required to study already translated projects (5,000-6,000 words) and then bombard the mentor with questions. The silly questions are welcomed as well.

Step 4: The interns are required to execute a piece of work that we call "translation with a key." The "keys" are usually real, "hot" works done successfully and approved by clients. The freshman is given the key to do a self-check after finishing the task. We deliberately don't check this activity ourselves, in order to release some potential tension.

Step 5: Completed translation jobs are checked. Usually the interns retranslate projects that have been done by our professionals and the mentor compares two variants in special programs and analyzes mistakes. All results are saved for us to trace the dynamics of this.

Step 6: Each week the interns are invited to a rendezvous with a mentor and proofreaders to dissect their translation work. Scary? Yes! Effective? Definitely.

Step 7: Do you remember the mugs from Step 1? On completion of internship, 30-40% of the interns are hired on, and their mugs remain in the kitchen.

Some remarks on the internship program as a takeaway — I'm lecturing and choosing interns myself, so I definitely have an edge, and obviously the happy mugs quantity may be bigger in our company than average, I suppose.

Despite the fact that the process of internship is rather time- and effort-consuming, it's no-charge. My interns are not bound to continue cooperation after their internship, the projects they work at are already "passed" to the client and paid for — so they are not condemned to the galleys. So what's the point? A pragmatic one, I suppose: to tickle the inner mentor in all of us and, truth be told, to find proper people for a proper place.

To sum it up, so far my initial subjective suspicions concerning the substantial gap between industry and academia were experimentally proved. Solutions to the problem exist and some of them have been described above in the article. The key success factor as I see it is a team play of two main stakeholders — academia and industry. **M**