

Abstract

This study combines linguistic and economic points of view to deliver insights into two national translation services markets. Translation services form a relatively large market and provide quite a high number of jobs globally. In this industry, which is largely unregulated by government bodies, translation agencies have the potential to act as quality warrantors by applying elaborate quality-assurance procedures and requiring their freelance translators to possess certain qualifications. A controversial yet widely mentioned qualification is being a native speaker of a specific language. Drawing on a critique of the conventional “native speaker” concept and on insights from economics, Language Management Theory, and critical discourse analysis, this study investigates how the native-speaker status, along with other translator qualifications, is used as an argument for higher quality and a higher price in marketing and price-setting strategies of translation agencies in the Czech Republic and Germany when it comes to a technical translation into a non-local language. The research makes use of the market-research technique called “mystery shopping” and is designed as a combination of experimental and observational qualitative research methods. The four distinct stages, which correspond with different types of marketing-related discourse, allowed for an analysis of the translation agencies’ publicly accessible marketing copy; of their private correspondence with a prospective client; of samples of their work; and of their response to quality-related concerns. The native-speaker status and experience, rather than any kind of formal education, proved to be the most recurrent translator qualification advertised by the translation agencies. Despite this fact, none of the translation agencies attempted to define who a native speaker is or explain why she may be the right choice for a translation project. Furthermore, the term “native speaker” was often used ambiguously, i.e., with no indication whether it pertains to the source or the target language. Both of those facts imply that the translation agencies largely relied on the assumption that their clients shared the same native-speaker ideologies and that the concept was generally considered self-explanatory, unambiguous, and unproblematic. The translation agencies often did not explicitly link qualifications, quality, and pricing in their marketing discourse. None of the four delivered sample translations were flawless although some were commercially viable. A consistently recurring problem in all of the sample translations was deficient knowledge of the subject

matter and its specific terminology. There was an apparent mismatch between the translation agencies' marketing statements and the delivered work. While there was an identifiable correlation between the price quoted and the quality delivered for the German translation agencies, there was no such correlation for the Czech research subjects.