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The transformation of the translator's role in the age of total digitalisation: from linguist to language consultant and AI editor

Abstract. The paper examines the structural transformation of the translator's professional role under conditions of acce*lerating digitalisation and the proliferation of neural machine translation (NMT) and large language model (LLM) technologies. Drawing on discourse analysis and a review of scholarship, the study argues that the contemporary translator is no longer primarily a bilingual encoder-decoder of source texts but an increasingly consultative professional whose core competencies encompass machine translation literacy, post-editing expertise, AI output quality assurance, and the provision of strategic language services to clients navigating an automated translation landscape. The paper maps the principal vectors of this role transformation – from terminology management and specialised domain expertise to the emergent function of language consultant and AI editor – and evaluates their implications for translator training and professional identity. The findings suggest that digitalisation simultaneously erodes the translator's traditional functional monopoly and opens a more intellectually demanding, advisory professional space.*

Keywords: *translator role transformation, machine translation post-editing, AI editor, language consultant, machine translation literacy*.

Introduction. The translation profession has historically adapted to successive waves of technological disruption – from the introduction of word processors and translation memories to the emergence of computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools and online terminology databases. Each such wave has modified the translator's workflow and, to varying degrees, the competence profile considered requisite for professional practice. The current wave, driven by the rapid maturation of neural machine translation systems and the subsequent proliferation of large language model-based translation environments, differs from its predecessors not merely in scale but in kind. Whereas earlier technologies augmented the human translator's productive capacity within an essentially unaltered functional paradigm, contemporary AI-driven translation systems challenge the very conceptual and economic foundations of that paradigm. The question that now occupies scholars, practitioners, and educators in translation studies is no longer whether machine translation will affect the profession, but rather in what direction, to what depth, and under what conditions the human translator's role will be transformed.

The purpose of the article is to analyse the transformation of the translator's professional role in the context of total digitalisation, with a particular focus on the shift from traditional linguistic tasks to consultative, evaluative, and AI-mediated functions.

Main Body. The present paper addresses this question through a synthesis of recent scholarship and a theoretically grounded analysis of the emerging professional landscape. It contends that the transformation underway is not one of straightforward displacement – a human function mechanically assumed by an automated system – but one of structural repositioning: a shift from primarily productive to increasingly evaluative, consultative, and quality-assurance-oriented professional functions. This shift, whilst disruptive, generates a distinctive and arguably more intellectually rich professional space, which this paper seeks to map and theorise. The analysis proceeds in four stages. Following a focused review of the relevant scholarly literature, the paper examines the nature and scope of the translator's evolving competence profile under digitalisation, with particular attention to the emergence of machine translation (MT) literacy, post-editing expertise, and the consultant-editor role. A subsequent section addresses the implications of these developments for professional identity and translator training. The paper concludes with a set of observations on the conditions under which the transformed professional role may be sustained and valorised within the contemporary language services industry. The current state of knowledge on translator role transformation under digitalisation is supported by three distinct areas of established research. Nunes Vieira and Alonso [1] conducted an influential analysis of management and production perspectives on machine translation within professional translation workflows, demonstrating that the integration of MT into institutional and commercial translation processes is driven not only by efficiency imperatives but also by divergent and often inadequately negotiated expectations between commissioning clients and professional translators. Their findings established empirically that the quality, scope, and terms of human intervention in MT-mediated workflows remain structurally contested – a finding of direct relevance to any reconceptualisation of the translator's professional role. Ragni and Nunes Vieira [2], in a critical review of human factors in neural machine translation research published in *Perspectives*, identified a systematic marginalisation of professional translators from the discourses and processes through which NMT systems are designed and evaluated, arguing persuasively that the neural paradigm has intensified rather than resolved the tension between the technology-driven efficiency agenda and the communicative, cultural, and ethical dimensions of translation as a human practice. Most directly pertinent to the present paper's central thesis is the contribution of Ehrensberger-Dow, Delorme Benites, and Lehr [3], who

proposed in *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* a reconceptualisation of the translator's professional function as that of MT literacy consultant – a role in which the translator's primary value-adding contribution lies not in the production of translated text per se, but in the capacity to advise clients, institutions, and co-workers on the appropriate, critical, and responsible use of machine translation technologies. Together, these three contributions delineate the principal parameters of the transformation under analysis.

The most immediate and empirically well-documented manifestation of the translator's role transformation is the shift from source-text-to-target-text production as the primary task to machine translation post-editing (MTPE) as the dominant workflow modality in much of the professional market. Post-editing – understood as the review, correction, and refinement of MT output to bring it to publishable quality – is neither a mechanically simpler nor a cognitively less demanding task than human translation, despite being frequently – and problematically – treated as such by language service providers and clients seeking to reduce costs [1]. The cognitive demands of MTPE are distinctive: the post-editor must simultaneously evaluate the MT output for adequacy, fluency, terminological accuracy, and register appropriateness; resist the priming effects of MT suggestions that may subtly distort the target text's meaning whilst appearing superficially acceptable; and maintain a consistent quality standard across text segments of highly variable MT quality. These demands require a competence profile that is, in important respects, different from that required for human translation from scratch – and that remains, as the scholarly literature consistently documents, substantially underacknowledged in training and compensation structures [2]. The second, and more structurally significant, dimension of the transformation concerns the emergence of what Ehrensberger-Dow and colleagues have termed the MT literacy consultant function [3]. As neural and generative AI translation systems become ubiquitous – deployed not only by professional translation agencies but by individual clients, corporate communications departments, public institutions, and private users with no specialised language training – the informational asymmetry between those who produce and deploy these systems and those who use their outputs in high-stakes contexts (legal, medical, journalistic, diplomatic, educational) becomes both acute and potentially consequential. The professional translator, with their disciplinary knowledge of how translation technologies work, what their systematic failure modes are, and what quality assurance procedures are adequate to different text types and risk profiles, is uniquely positioned to address this asymmetry. The MT literacy consultant advises clients on which translation tasks are appropriate for automated processing, which require substantive post-editing, and which remain beyond the current capabilities of MT systems without risking

communicative or legal failure. This advisory function represents a genuine value-adding professional role that cannot be automated, precisely because it requires the kind of critical, contextualised human judgement that MT systems cannot themselves provide. The third dimension of the transformation concerns the translator's function as AI editor – a role that goes beyond MTPE in the narrow sense to encompass the broader quality governance of multilingual content in AI-mediated production environments. As organisations increasingly [4] use LLM-based tools not only for translation but for the generation of multilingual content from scratch, the need for professionals capable of evaluating, editing, and culturally calibrating AI-generated text across languages becomes pressing. The AI editor function combines the terminological, stylistic, and discursive competencies of the traditional specialist translator with a critical awareness of LLM-specific quality failure modes – hallucinations, register inconsistencies, culturally inappropriate presuppositions, and the reproduction of source-language syntactic patterns in the target text – that only a linguistically sophisticated human evaluator can reliably identify. This function is, in effect, a high-level form of quality assurance that the translation profession is better placed to provide than any other occupational group in the language services ecosystem.

The transformation of the translator's role thus follows [5; 6; 7] a recognisable structural logic: automation displaces the most routinisable, formulaic, and volume-intensive dimensions of translational labour, whilst simultaneously generating new forms of cognitive and consultative work that human expertise is uniquely capable of performing. The critical asymmetry, however, concerns the conditions under which this new work is recognised, remunerated, and institutionally valorised. The evidence assembled by previously mentioned scholarship suggests [8; 9] that the profession is currently traversing a transitional period in which the economic and institutional conditions for the new roles remain underdetermined: pricing structures, contractual frameworks, and professional certification systems lag substantially behind the evolving practice realities. The MT literacy consultant and AI editor roles will only become stably established components of the professional landscape when translator training programmes, professional associations, and the language services industry collectively develop the frameworks necessary to define, credential, and remunerate them. The implications for translator identity are equally significant. The professional self-concept of the trained translator has historically been anchored in the productive act of translation – the crafted transfer of meaning across linguistic boundaries – and in the specialised domain expertise that makes that transfer authoritative and reliable. The repositioning towards consultative and quality-assurance functions does not nullify this expertise; on the contrary, it presupposes it. The MT literacy

consultant's authority to advise on the appropriate use and limitations of MT systems rests entirely on a deep understanding of how translation – both human and machine – actually works, and on the kind of contrastive linguistic, cultural, and discursive knowledge that only dedicated professional training in translation develops [10]. However, the identity anchoring must shift from the act of production to the exercise of expert judgement – a shift that is psychologically significant and that translator training must explicitly address if professionals are to navigate it productively rather than defensively.

Conclusion. The transformation of the translator's professional role under total digitalisation is neither a story of straightforward displacement nor of unambiguous enrichment; it is a structurally complex process of role repositioning that simultaneously forecloses some traditional forms of translational labour and opens [11; 12] new advisory, evaluative, and quality-governance functions that represent a genuine and distinctive professional contribution. Three conclusions of both theoretical and practical significance may be drawn from the preceding analysis. First, the MT literacy consultant and AI editor roles identified in the recent translation studies literature represent not marginal extensions of the traditional translator's function but its substantive reconstitution. The core competencies [13] these roles require – critical evaluation of MT and AI output, domain-specific quality assurance, strategic advisory capacity – are direct derivatives of translator training and expertise, and cannot be credibly performed by professionals without such training. The profession's claim to these roles is therefore well-grounded, but must be articulated and institutionalised more forcefully than current market conditions have facilitated. Second, translator training must be systematically realigned to develop the competencies the transformed professional landscape demands. Machine translation literacy – including an understanding of NMT architecture, systematic error patterns, and the conditions under which MT output can and cannot be trusted – must become a core rather than supplementary component of translation curricula. The practical and cognitive dimensions of MTPE must be explicitly trained, including the management of the priming effects that MT suggestions exert on post-editors' decisions. And the consultative, client-facing, advisory dimensions of the new professional roles must be incorporated into pedagogical design, moving translation training beyond its historically productive-task-centred orientation. Third, and most broadly, the analysis demonstrates that technological transformation does not determine professional outcomes but rather constitutes the conditions within which professional communities make consequential choices about identity, competence, and valorisation. The translation profession's response to the current wave of AI-driven change will depend not only on the pace and quality of curricular adaptation but on the collective agency of translators, trainers,

professional associations, and scholars in shaping the institutional and economic frameworks that will govern the new professional landscape. The scholarly foundations for that engagement are, as the present analysis suggests, more than adequate; what is now required is the collective will to build upon them.

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