

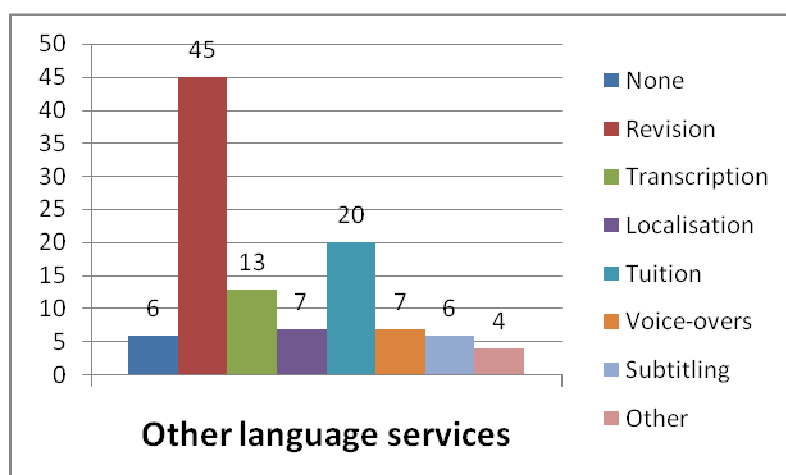
## LINGUISTS' PRACTICES

I have always been very interested in learning more about business practices in the freelance language industry, and what other linguists are doing in terms of service range, marketing practices and improving or maintaining their skills. The fact that such information seems not to be readily available attracted me to the possibility of doing my own research and sharing it with other professionals. I hope this information will be of use to all readers.

For the purposes of this article, a linguist questionnaire was sent to every NWTN member, as well as members of the SpanNet and PSG Alumni groups, in the hope of reaching a wide spectrum of language professionals. The response rate was excellent, and I received a total of 59 completed questionnaires from translators and interpreters whose experience in the industry ranges from 6 months to 42 years.

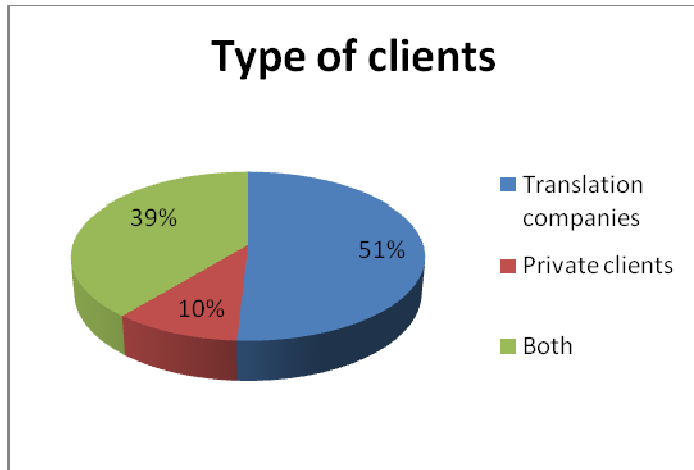
Out of the total number of respondents, 37 work only as translators, 22 offer both translation and interpreting services and none of them work only as interpreters. Although responses from linguists working exclusively as interpreters might have been expected, these figures are in fact representative of the target groups and therefore not surprising.

In terms of other services offered, revision (often called proofreading or editing) is by far the most popular, as the graph below shows:



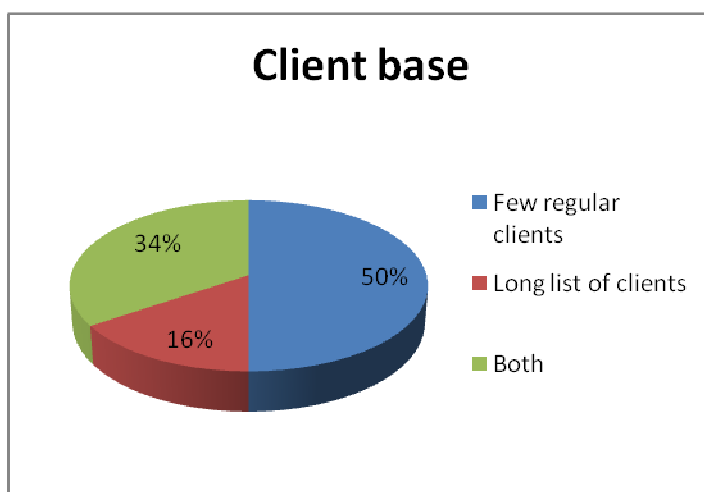
45 respondents in total offer revision services, whereas language tuition comes a distant second, followed by transcription in third place. Other less popular services offered by linguists are localisation, voice-overs and subtitling. Six of the respondents do not offer any additional services at all, whereas four of them offer other services, such as tourist guides, telephone interpreting, exam marking and language recruiting.

In terms of client base, as the pie chart below indicates, most of the respondents work only for translation companies, followed by those who work for both translation companies and direct clients. The option of working for direct clients only comes a distant third.



These results were somewhat expected, given the fact that translators and interpreters working for direct clients often do not enjoy the flexibility, support and regular work offered by translation agencies. However, working with direct clients affords numerous benefits, such as higher rates and the possibility of learning more about particular sectors, and therefore it seems a very positive phenomenon that a good number of linguists are combining these clients with translation agencies.

Similarly, I found that most linguists work with a few regular clients, closely followed by those who combine these with a long list of occasional clients. The smallest group comprises linguists who depend on a long list of occasional clients.



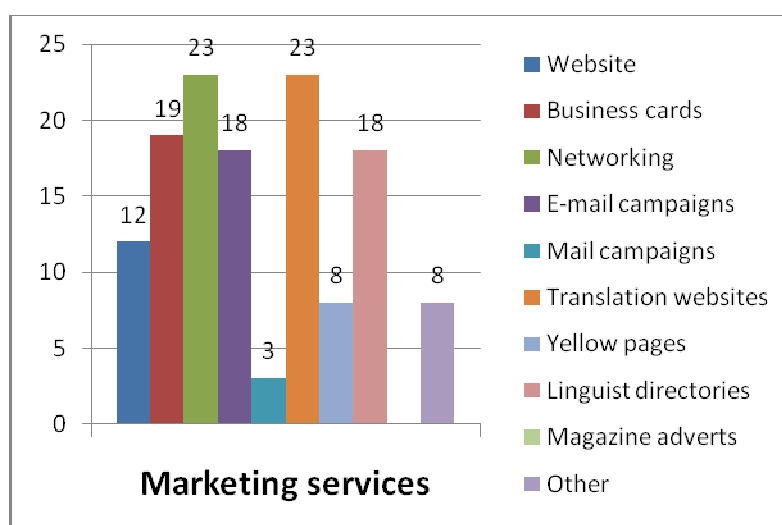
It is worth noting that those respondents who have been in the profession for longer seem to work with a few regular clients, sometimes combined with a long list of clients who might contact them occasionally, whereas relatively new linguists seem more inclined to work with a wide range of clients. This is not surprising, given the fact that newcomers to the profession tend to contact as many clients as possible at the beginning of their careers in an attempt to build their customer base. Once a linguist has managed to secure a fairly regular income and developed good relationships with a number of clients, it is more likely that they will decide to continue working only with those clients that offer more regular work at probably better rates along with better communication or support.

Concerning marketing practices, 12 respondents indicated that they never market their services, in contrast with 14 other respondents who market them constantly. In addition, 5 respondents market their services once a year, 6 do so three or four times a year, 2 once a month, 1 once a week and, most notably, 19 respondents market their services at intervals that were not offered as answers. These typically comprise marketing activities at appropriate events, when asked (giving out business cards) or when they have a gap in their work. It is worth mentioning, however, that of those who never market their services, a third admitted that although they never actively market themselves, their names do appear in certain linguists' directories, particularly, the ITI Directory.

Whereas it is highly commendable that some linguists market their services constantly, or at regular intervals, it is slightly worrying that some respondents hardly ever engage in this activity.

Presumably, this is due to the fact that they have a good client base supplying regular work, but this could place them in a difficult situation if one of their clients were to cease sending them work for any particular reason (owner retiring, bankruptcy, etc.). This dependency places the freelancer in a disadvantaged position in situations such as rate increase negotiations or when raising payment issues with a client, since fear of losing that particular client, and hence a large part of their income, would inhibit their room for manoeuvre. It is true that long-standing clients tend to present fewer problems, after all there must be a reason why a translator/interpreter has decided to collaborate with them for so long, but nevertheless this is an important issue that should not be overlooked.

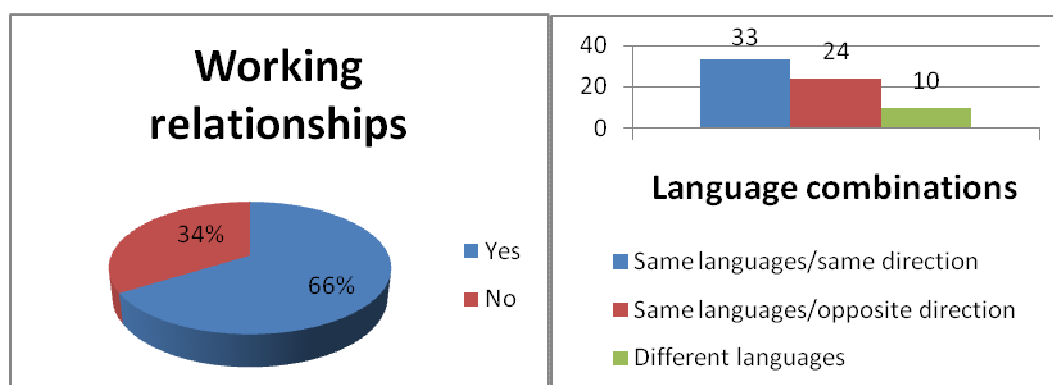
The next graph shows how respondents prefer to market their services:



Networking and translation websites, such as proz.com, are the preferred strategies, with 23 respondents admitting using at least one of these options. They are closely followed by business cards, e-mail campaigns and linguists' directories. In addition, a smaller number of respondents have their own websites, place adverts in Yellow Pages or use mail shot campaigns. None of the respondents place adverts in magazines and 8 use other strategies, most notably word-of-mouth, e-flyers and visiting or phoning their prospective clients.

It should not be surprising that networking is considered the most popular activity, as having contacts and receiving word-of-mouth recommendations have always proven to be very effective marketing tools. Similarly, a ready supply of business cards should be kept at hand to give out at professional events. In terms of online marketing tools, e-mail campaigns, translation websites and linguists' directories are always very popular, due to their cost-effectiveness and relative simplicity (as opposed to creating your own website, for instance).

When it comes to working relationships with other translators or interpreters, 39 respondents admitted having such relationships, whereas 20 do not have any. Of those who do collaborate with other linguists, 33 of them work with professionals in the same language combination and direction, 24 in the same combination but opposite direction and 10 in different languages. It is worth noting that in most cases those who collaborate with other linguists do so in more than one category.

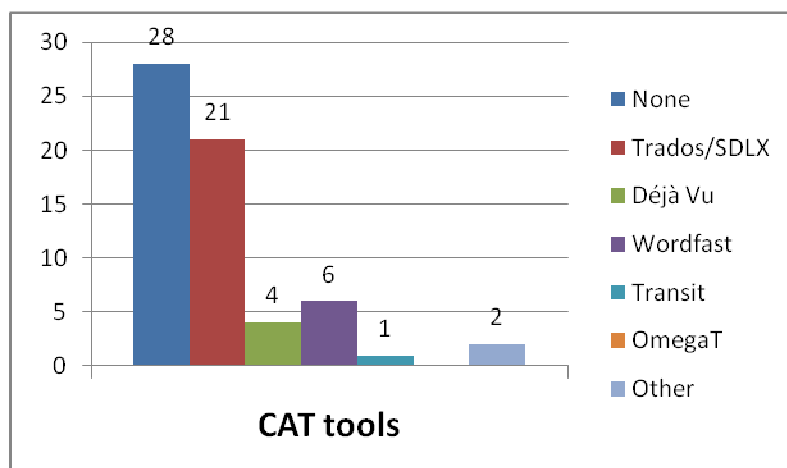


Of those respondents who do not have a working relationship with other translators or interpreters, the majority (12) said they are interested in starting such a relationship. Seven respondents, on the other hand, do not wish to have any relationship of this type and one is not sure.

The main reasons why respondents are interested in collaboration are to share knowledge and experience, to help with excessive workloads, to meet other people and socialise, to be able to work on larger projects and meet deadlines and to offer a revision service (to comply with the new BS EN 15038 standard).

On the other hand, those who are not interested have various reasons, namely it would make life more complicated, they like working on their own, the type of work they do requires a level of consistency in terminology and style that can only be achieved by a single person and the problems of relying on someone else to earn your living and sustain your reputation.

Moving on to the much-discussed subject of CAT tools, most of the respondents stated that they do not use any, as the graph below clearly shows:



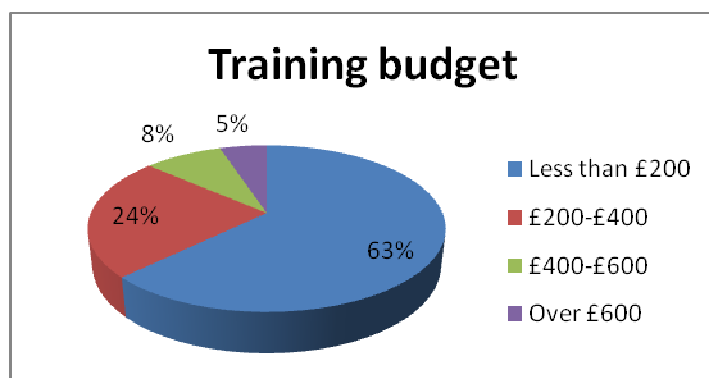
Amongst those who do use CAT tools, Trados is by far the most popular choice, used by 21 respondents. This is followed by Wordfast, Déjà Vu and Transit. In addition, 2 respondents use a different CAT tool, MemoQ.

As these results show, using a CAT tool is far from being a pre-requisite to be successful in the industry, and perhaps newcomers would do better to initially concentrate their efforts on their skills and marketing activities. However, it must be acknowledged that, in addition to their increased productivity and consistency claims, using CAT tools could give you a certain edge on your competitors.

In terms of other specialist software, the results are very similar and once again most respondents (28) claimed not to use any. Amongst those linguists who do use specialist software, the most popular choice is Adobe Acrobat, used by 25 respondents. In addition, 3 respondents can handle HTML/XML files, whereas each of the other programs listed in the questionnaire is used by only 1 respondent: Adobe FrameMaker, Quark Xpress, Passolo, Alchemy Catalyst and Adobe PageMaker. None of the respondents uses InDesign, whereas 8 of them indicated that they use other tools, namely PDF Transformer Pro 2.0, Deltaview, Omnipage, Systran, Multilizer, Dreamweaver, Paintshop Pro and Abby PDF Transformer.

These results should not be surprising. Adobe Acrobat (in its Reader version) can hardly be considered specialist software and is commonly used by linguists to open certain files. On the other hand, the rest of tools are less popular, mainly due to the fact that they are more specialised and only used in certain industries, such as software or website localisation.

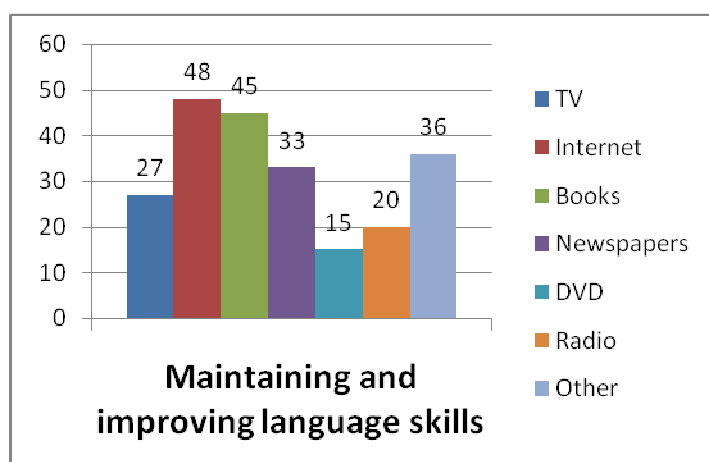
When asked about how much they regularly spend on training, most respondents (37) answered they spend less than £200, as the pie chart below shows:



Amongst the rest, 14 respondents spend between £200 and £400, 5 respondents spend between £400 and £600, and 3 spend over £600. These figures were somewhat surprising and show that perhaps more could be done on professional development. However, it should also be pointed out that, whereas some of the activities on offer can prove costly, there are many cost-effective alternatives and free events, so improving our skills does not always mean having to spend large amounts of money.

Similarly, it was very interesting to read that the same number of respondents (29) live abroad as those who live in the country where their native language is spoken, with one respondent having been raised as bilingual. It is essential that all linguists strive to maintain and improve their language skills, although those who do not live in their native countries must perhaps ensure that they make a particular effort in this area.

The graph below shows the most popular methods used by linguists to work on their language skills:



The Internet is the most popular choice, with 48 respondents using it to improve their language skills. It is closely followed by books. Next come newspapers, TV, radio and DVDs. In addition, many respondents use other ways of improving their skills, such as travelling abroad, phone conversations with friends, family or clients, having a partner who speaks the other language or even going to the cinema.

## **Conclusion**

This study has aimed to show common practices amongst translators and interpreters in the hope that this information will allow readers to compare their own practices with the ones most widely followed in the industry.

Some trends have been clearly identified, for example, the fact that most translators or interpreters seem to mainly work with translation agencies, as opposed to direct clients, and that they generally prefer having a shorter list of regular clients to working with numerous, occasional clients.

It has also been very interesting to read that the great majority of translators and interpreters have working relationships with other professionals, somehow debunking the myth of ours being a solitary profession. Most of us might still work on our own, but a large network of professionals is available and happy to offer support to one another. Similarly, modern technologies such as the Internet make the possibility of having a virtual office a reality.

Other questions in the study have identified the most common practices in terms of language services, marketing activities and improvement of language skills. Whilst the results might not be completely surprising, I hope this information will help readers become more aware of the alternatives that they could explore in their careers and perhaps the areas they could address if they wish to stay ahead of the competition.

On a final note, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who took the time and effort to complete the questionnaire; this article would have never been possible without your invaluable help. Special thanks to Gill Lee for her efforts revising the article.

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