

BOOK REVIEW

PROSPEROUS TRANSLATION: ENDURING PRACTICAL ADVICE

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The Prosperous Translator. Advice from Fire Ant & Worker Bee, compiled and edited by Chris Durban, first edition, FA&WB press by Chris Durban and Eugene Seidel, 2010, 282 pp, \$25.00 (Paperback), ISBN 978-0-615-40403-5.

Twelve years have passed since the publication of *The Prosperous Translator*, a serious yet humorous compilation of agony aunt style correspondence between Fire Ant (Chris Durban) and Worker Bee (Eugene Seidel) and readers of their translator advice column. Their column was published in the *Translation Journal* between 1998 and July 2010.¹

The authors are professional translators with, at the time of publication, over 50 years of combined experience on the translation market. Chris Durban has since continued to share her advice and fought strongly against the *poverty cult*, in which translators are seen to be responsible for perpetuating their “low status” and feelings of being ‘underpaid’ (Lambert & Walker, 2022). When the compilation appeared, it was groundbreaking, as it was the first time, as far as I am aware, that hard-hitting clear advice was provided in a humorous format to translators. It sought to prevent translators from being “mere ant(s) toiling in an anthill”, to encourage them to become part of the larger picture, of a “glorious project that connects you with an unbroken line of workers from time immemorial” (Durban, 2010, p. 266).

Covering topics ranging from how to get into the industry, to finding clients, ethics, and rates and tips for clients on how to treat translators, readers are taken on a whistle-stop tour of the *dos and don'ts* of the freelance translation industry. Through the bitesize snippets of invaluable advice, solace, praise and even at times harsh words admonishing the very naivety of their correspondents, budding and more seasoned translators gain an insight into what the industry may hold for them.

Fast forward to 2022, and this compilation is just as relevant as it was in 2010 when it was first published. How then, with the changes in technology, in particular the advent of machine translation, is it all still so relevant?

The title *The Prosperous Translator* encourages the reader to consider the very essence of the word “prosperous”, and upon consultation of the list of contents, it is soon clear that as defined by *The Oxford Premium English Dictionary* (2022), “prosperous” is not just about flourishing financially but about being “successful in material terms”. In the

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¹ www.translationjournal.net

introduction, the authors explain that they have not written “*the A-to-Z guide to translation*” (Durban, 2010, p. VII) but there is no escaping the no-nonsense, often very direct, advice, and that this profession is not for everyone. Becoming a professional translator requires the honing of skills, training, investment, time and patience. For those that persist, the rewards are multifold.

The compilation is divided into 12 easy-to-read sections, the first of which, entitled “Is this a real option for me?”, aims to dissuade those that see translation as a “hobby” or way of earning some money while on a gap year, but also highlights the importance of perfecting one’s source language skills:

You need money? Look around: if you like kids apply for childcare positions (a great way to hone foreign language skills). Wait on tables. Flip the local equivalent of burgers. Pick grapes. Pump iron and sign up as a bouncer at a salsa club. **But whatever you do, live and talk in Spanish—only Spanish** (Durban, 2010, p. 7). (emphasis added)

The importance of language skills is exemplified in the very first correspondence chosen for the compilation. On the first page, the authors dispel the often-cited myth that being bilingual is synonymous with being a good translator, “bilingualism, while enormously impressive to monolinguals, is not on its own enough to guarantee a successful career as translator” (Durban, 2010, p. 1). Further into the same chapter, when faced with questions about English grammar and the struggles faced by a translator working both into and out of Arabic and English, the authors are quick to question whether the translator in fact has full command of the languages with which they are working (Durban, 2010). They also highlight the importance of working into one’s “native language” (Durban, 2010, p. 11). This is something that is now widely debated and it is of note that organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Linguists have removed references to “native language” or “language of habitual use” from their code of conduct (CIOL, 2017). In a recent update (September 2022), the clause on native language/language of habitual use was. This is telling of advances in the concept of language competence, acknowledging that not only is native competence almost impossible to measure, but that overall linguistic competence is more important, whether one is a native speaker or not.

Despite the list of contents offering a multitude of topics, one cannot avoid being drawn to the section on “Pricing and value” a topic that appears consistently in surveys of the industry. The 2022 European Language Industry Survey cites that 37% of freelance translators believe they do not earn enough (Elia et al., 2022), while unstable earnings are listed as a reason for not preparing for retirement. The chapter devoted to pricing is divided into four sub-sections focusing on how to negotiate and how to price translations as well as on the upward and downward pressure facing the market. In response to a letter from a head of translation at a corporation, the authors seize the opportunity to describe what they consider to be “premium customer” etiquette (Durban, 2010): “paying promptly”, crediting translators and “expressing thanks”. This is complemented by more practical advice for ab initio translators, “Intriguing, isn’t it, how many translators get the vapours

when rates come up” (Durban, 2010, p. 99). This comment resonates, as still today ‘rate-setting is a problematic area for newcomers to translation and established practitioners alike’ (Lambert & Walker, 2022), thus suggesting that Fire Ant’s advice in response to Baffled continues to ring true: “If you’re a supplier, aim high... if translation is poorly done it is too expensive at any price; if well done, it is usually worth every single cent” (Durban, 2010, p. 90).

Value, be it monetary or the value of a professional translator in terms of what they can contribute to a project, is addressed directly and indirectly at various points throughout the compilation. Of note are the references to the ‘sandwich’ technique, which can be employed when translators want to show their added value to a client or perhaps increase rates. Here one places the criticism/new rates/new terms and conditions between two compliments or positive points. As the authors reveal, this could be framed within the context of explaining “how much you enjoy working with them” and as the final slice of bread in the sandwich. In other words, even though “you are raising your special rate” it will still be at the “low end of your pricing scale “because you enjoy their texts so much” (p. 116). Of all the advice given in the book, it is this that stands out as it is practical and implementable. After all, who does not like being complimented on their work?

But be there no mistake, Fire Ant and Worker Bee are clear that there are no “fairy godmothers to wave [their] wand and bring you high-paying work without you having to do a thing” (p. 120). Becoming a translator requires “the nuts and bolts” (p. IV) membership of professional associations, language training, business skills, computer literacy “specialisation”, “ethics” and determination.

There is no doubt that this compilation continues to be of relevance. Technology may change, but the key to success remains the same: language competence, specialism, determination, business know-how and computer literacy. If you are reading this and contemplating changing your modus operandi as a translator or if you are an academic and considering delving into the freelance translator field, you could do a lot worse than exploring Fire Ant and Worker Bee’s excellent advice.

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Translation Matters, 4(2), 2022, pp. 120-123, DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tm4_2r1

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