

TRANSLATORS, INTERPRETERS, AND THE CREATIVE CLASS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE POST-COVID PROFESSION

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Abstract

Coined just over two decades ago, Richard Florida's concept of the 'creative class' has generated significant academic and popular interest. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, the present literature-based study examines the links between translators, interpreters, and the creative class. This is accomplished firstly by outlining relevant sociological perspectives pertaining to the status of the translational professions, before presenting and reviewing Florida's definition of the creative class. Subsequently, building on a range of recent academic studies on the topic, attention turns to how the translation and interpreting professions navigated the uncharted territory of the coronavirus lockdowns. As such, the technological, practical, and pedagogical aspects will be presented, discussed, and compared with other creative professionals. Finally, the overview concludes with some brief potential implications for future professional practice.

Keywords: *translation profession, translation sociology, creative professionals, status of translators and interpreters.*

Introduction

Although adapting to constant change is seemingly part of modern life, recent advances affecting translators and interpreters have included the growing prevalence of artificial intelligence, expanding institutional language policies, as well as the

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move to remote working heightened by the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions. Indeed, though translation and interpreting are commonly considered among the most ancient of human activities, the professionalisation of the sector remains relatively recent. The creation of accreditation procedures, training programmes, and professional associations is largely a product of the last century, and it has been fuelled primarily by increased demands for translation and interpreting services in both the public and private sectors at local, national, and international levels. In addition to established specialisations such as technical and literary translation as well as conference and community interpreting, new domains such as post-editing, localisation, and transcreation have also entered the field over the past few years.

Though the role of creativity in the act of translation is well-attested, comparatively little attention has been paid to sociological aspects of the convergence between translators, interpreters, and the creative industries. Accordingly, this article aims to explore the nexus between these translational practitioners and the so-called 'creative class', a notion outlined by Richard Florida, the American urban studies scholar, in his landmark book *The Rise of the Creative Class* over twenty years ago [Florida 2002] and subsequently revisited in a later, fully-revised version [Florida 2012]. Accordingly, this literature-based analysis explores the role of translators and interpreters within this milieu, informed by examination of the translational professions from a sociological slant. Particularly in this post-pandemic era, attention will be paid to the increasingly fluid nature of translation and interpreting in modern times through presentation of several recent research studies. In addition to noting the rise of these new domains mentioned above, this contribution aims to highlight some of the evolving changes to the translation and interpreting professions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, these changes will be compared with wider developments in other creative professions.

Translation, creativity, and some relevant sociological aspects

The links between translation and creativity have been much discussed over the past few years. This has been illustrated, for example, by the noted scholar Kirsten Malmkjær's recent monograph entitled *Translation and Creativity* [Malmkjær 2019], as well as a recent special issue of *World Literature Studies* [Hostová 2022], which included a roundtable with prominent experts in translation studies [Bassnett et al. 2022]. To name just a few additional examples of the significant amount of research being conducted in this broad and growing field, other studies include examinations of how creativity can be incorporated into media accessibility and audiovisual translation [Romero-Fresco & Chaume 2022], translation for arts and

cultural institutions [Rizzo 2022], as well as how to enhance the inclusion of creative aspects in translation training contexts (e. g., see Morón & Calvo [2018]; Ponce-Márquez & García [2020]). Indeed, this interest has been heightened by the advent of transcreation, which has been the subject of burgeoning scholarly activity over the last decade. Though acknowledging that a variety of possible definitions exist, and also that the exact limits of the term may be somewhat unclear, a recent definition of transcreation has been put forward as:

“the intra-/interlingual adaptation or re-interpretation of a message intended to suit a target audience, while conveying the same message, style, tone, images and emotions from the source language to the target language, paying special attention to the cultural characteristics of the target audience. This re-interpretation of the message may imply adaptations that move away from the original text to a greater or lesser extent to fit the original purpose, transmit the original message and overcome cultural barriers. For such reasons, it is present in persuasive and communicative contexts” [Díaz-Millón & Olvera-Lobo 2021: 12].

As highlighted in the last sentence of the definition, the uses of transcreation in “persuasive and communicative contexts” make it versatile enough to be incorporated into the realms of marketing, advertising, and other relevant professional areas. Indeed, several studies have been published exploring the differences between translation, transcreation, and copywriting (e. g., Pedersen [2014]; Benetello [2018]; Carreira Martínez [2018]). In this regard, it can be argued that this certainly highlights the links between translators and interpreters with the broader creative and cultural industries.

Yet, despite this evident interest in the intersection of translation with creativity and the creative industries, the examination of translators and interpreters as creative professionals appears to be somewhat understudied, save for the studies presented by Veselá & Klimová [2015a; 2015b] and Kapsaskis [2018]. This is despite that a swing within Translation Studies towards sociological angles from the early 2000s onwards (see e. g., Wolf & Fukari [2007]) has helped to place translators, interpreters, and their profession in the foreground. Many studies which explore the occupational status of translators and interpreters have appeared, analysing a variety of markets, contexts, and modalities (recent examples, include Arévalo-Montoya & Cordova-Bernuy [2020]; Hoyte-West [2020]; Uysal [2021]; Ruokonen & Svahn [2022]). Indeed, this contribution develops the author’s broader project on this topic [Hoyte-West 2021a; 2021b; 2022] by extending its scope to include relevant creative and cultural aspects.

The creative class: a brief overview

As mentioned in the introductory section, the idea of a ‘creative class’ was coined by Richard Florida in the early 2000s in the light of ever-evolving urban geographies. As posited by Florida, a new class of creative urban-dwellers would assist with regeneration and bring prosperity to cities. At the core of this new class of professionals there would be “*people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music, and entertainment whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content*” [Florida 2012: 8]. This nucleus was surrounded by creative professionals “*in business and finance, law, health care, and related fields [who] engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital*” [Florida 2012: 8] and who also “*share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference, and merit*” [Florida 2012: 9].

Indeed, Florida’s definition of this creative class encompasses many of the professions traditionally thought as comprising the creative and cultural industries, to which the requirement for an economic component is added. Through this economic prerequisite, and by including not only artists, musicians, and filmmakers but also those white-collar workers who incorporate a creative aspect into their work, Florida extends the potential scope of this new, highly-educated cadre of twenty-first century professionals.

As a framework for analysis, Florida’s work has brought both acclaim and controversy (e. g., Peck [2005]). These factors have ensured that over the past few years, Florida’s notion of the creative class has gained wider traction, thus influencing other scholarly disciplines and attracting media interest (e. g., Heathcote [2014]; Williams [2016]; Wainwright [2017]). To give some examples, work researching aspects of the creative class regarding rural areas [Eglite 2022], transnational commuters [Łuczaj, Leonowicz-Bukała & Kurek-Ochmańska 2022], and specific cities and countries (e. g., Báez, Bergua & Pac [2014]; Pavelea et al. [2021]) has been done. In addition, the fluid nature of the composition of the creative class has also been analysed and critiqued (e. g., by Kačerauskas [2020]). Yet, building on Florida’s definition of the creative class, and given the highly-specialised nature of their educational background and professional activities, it is evident that translators and interpreters could be considered to fall under this designation. Though it could perhaps be mooted that translators and interpreters do not form part of Florida’s ‘core’ (with the possible exception of transcreation-related activities), nonetheless, it could be argued that they are part of that grouping of creative professionals whose occupational tasks align with Florida’s wider notion of a creative class.

The pandemic and its aftermath: Some observations regarding translators, interpreters, and other creative professionals

As has been clearly documented in academia and beyond, the restrictions associated with limiting the spread of the COVID-19 have had ramifications for society at the local, national, and international levels [Kumar et al. 2021]. For many countries, the COVID-19 shutdowns came after years of economic uncertainty, which was combined with other issues such as strict fiscal measures and changing demographic shifts. In the world of employment, these policies resulted in the large-scale adoption, where possible, of technology-based remote working options.

In their 2021 study exploring how urban areas might change in a post-pandemic world, Florida and colleagues Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Michael Storper highlighted some of the macro- and micro-geographic implications that various aspects of COVID-19 policies could potentially have on the creative classes. This included the legacy of the social mixing and lockdown restrictions, as well as changes to the ways work and commercial activities are conducted (e. g., citing the move of creative professionals away from urban areas due to remote working opportunities) [Florida, Rodríguez-Pose & Storper 2021].

As outlined elsewhere (e. g., Liu & Cheung [2022]) the COVID-19 pandemic has had a large-scale impact on the translational professions, with major changes to the location and nature of the work undertaken. Though home-working was previously common among some professional translators (e. g., see Kolb [2017]), in noting wider trends away from in-house employment [Risku, Rogl & Milošević 2020], for some practitioners this was a new development, especially for many interpreters. Indeed, with multilingual meetings and other events forced to shift online, this change brought with it a host of technological, professional, and institutional factors which required immediate attention [Hoyte-West 2022]. In contrast with translators, who were well-versed in the various software and interfaces required to do the job in this age of increased digitalisation, for interpreters, the rapid move to technology-based Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI) via Zoom and other platforms meant the quick mastery of these digital tools to ensure an effective and professional service. Under strict conditions, interpreting hubs were also set up where groups of interpreters could use the relevant technical equipment to ensure high-quality RSI (see Buján & Collard [2022]; Giustini [2022]; Hoyte-West [2022]).

For other members of the creative class, the enforced confinements also proved vastly limiting. In some instances, in the world of theatre and the dramatic arts, the complete moratorium on live events and social mixing required significant accommodations to be made (e. g., see Mellēna-Bartkeviča [2021]; Hylland [2022]), with some events able to be moved online, as demonstrated by the virtual staging of Shakespeare's plays by the prestigious Globe Theatre in London [Marcsek-Fuchs

2022]. In general, though, the uptake of remote work proved challenging for creative professionals. Though precarity was previously a feature of many creative professions across the spectrum, the impact of COVID-19 merely highlighted this aspect (see e. g., Comunian & England [2020]; Kurzbauer [2022]; Richards & Pachella [2022]). Indeed, with regard to the translational professions, it can be said to be characterised by a high proportion of freelance practitioners [Moorkens 2017], with all the varying positives and negatives this status can bring. As such, Florida [2012: 89–94] acknowledges the complex reality that freelance existence entails. In the context of translators and interpreters as professionals, issues of the growing “uberization” of the market have been already explored [Firat 2021], as has the importance of ensuring adequate remuneration through the setting of appropriate rates [Lambert & Walker 2022]. As noted before, this situation compares similarly with others among the creative class, extending latent trends which existed even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the rise of the gig economy [Spurk & Straub 2020].

Lastly, the lockdown rules had an important knock-on effect on the provision of education and training linked to the creative professions. For university teachers of translators and interpreters, the mandatory shift to online learning meant that trainers had to adapt rapidly to new virtual teaching environments, a challenge in common with primary, secondary, and tertiary educators in many countries across the globe. As detailed in the case study by Hodáková & Perez [2022], translator and interpreter trainers had to quickly learn how to engage with their students, amend curricula, and adopt relevant assessment procedures without compromising the high standards of professional practice required by the translation and interpreting markets. In addition, the changing employment practices already mentioned have also encouraged the proliferation of various translation and interpreting-related certifications offered alongside traditional degrees and diplomas [Hoyte-West 2022]. Whereas the latter are typically awarded by a university or accredited professional institution, many of the new credentials (for example, the training courses for using specific interpreting portals) are offered by private companies. As such, though different in content, form, and approach, these qualifications cater to the changing educational and professional reality occasioned by wider market forces.

Building on the examples of transcreation, the concept of ‘translation plus’ has gained extra traction (see e. g., Spinzi [2021]) exploring, for example, the “*value-added service*” that the role of the translator could bring to financial institutions [Williamson 2021: 83] and to broader corporate communication strategies [Massey 2021]. Indeed, with all the changes that the global translation and interpreting professions are undergoing, it is important to be cognisant of the extra value – beyond their multilingual expertise – that practitioners can bring to the broader organisational – and by extension, creative – context. This is particularly true in a world where English

is increasingly dominant, and where initiatives like the European Union schemes to promote fluency in two languages as well as the mother tongue mean that formalised multilingualism will become more and more prevalent [European Parliament 2023: 2]. Accordingly, this will undoubtedly have repercussions not only for translators and interpreters, but also for professionals active in the broader creative and cultural industries.

Coda

In a precursory manner, this short exploration has sought to outline some of the links between the creative class and translation and interpreting practitioners. In providing a panorama of the long-attested links between creativity and translation, this study also outlined some relevant research dealing with sociological areas of the translational profession. Then, the relatively new concept of transcreation was also presented, before Florida's notion of the creative class was briefly introduced and explained. Further to Florida's definition, it was established that translators and interpreters could indeed be considered members of this select grouping.

Turning to the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath, the recent study by Florida, Rodríguez-Pose & Storper [2021] was used as a springboard to summarise some recent research on the impact and ramifications of the lockdown mandates on translators and interpreters as well as on the wider creative class. Worthy of specific attention were the necessary changes to work modes and professional practice caused by restrictions on social mixing and the move to online work. These changes also contributed towards underlining remuneration issues and the latent precarity of employment, as well as the changing urban dynamic and need to be physically present in the workplace. Some of the consequences on the education and training of translators, interpreters, and other members of the creative classes were also highlighted, of which the shift to virtual formats remained paramount. Finally, the importance of translators and interpreters contributing more than simply linguistic expertise was underscored by the concept of "translation plus", with its allied notion of conferring additional advantages to a given context, client, or market.

At the time of writing, in common with other occupational areas [Kramer & Kramer 2020], it still remains to be determined how all of these post-pandemic changes will influence the broader professional status of translators and interpreters. Yet, as demonstrated by the wealth of research studies showcased in this article, the interlinkage of translators and interpreters with Florida's concept of the creative class is a topic ripe for additional investigation. As an overview purely based on the analysis of scholarly literature, the limits of this contribution are quite clear and more in-depth survey- and interview-based work remains necessary. Indeed, with advances in technology, it is certain that our professional and personal lives will become ever

more linked with artificial intelligence. These advances may affect not only the modes and means of working but, as observed in a recent newspaper article written by a copywriter about the nascent ChatGPT technology and its possible impacts on his profession [Williams 2023], may also have an effect on the creative product itself. Should this be the case, then there will undoubtedly be clear consequences for the professional trajectories of translators, interpreters, and other creative professionals over the next few years.

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