



Alternatives to Certification

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Abstract: Certification of professionals is a common practice in many industries, but there are alternatives to address the issue that certification of translators and interpreters aims to resolve (the lack of ability of most buyers to directly assess the quality of the translation or interpreting product or to ensure quality up front). This commentary discusses four options and their relationship to certification: academic credentialing, organization-specific testing of translators, tiered pricing models based upon quality, and signing of translations. These alternatives address the same fundamental problem, and it will be seen that they may be broadly compatible even though, to some extent, they address different market needs. In addition, they can be implemented in tandem to promote development of the translation and interpreting industry and improve quality.

Keywords: certification, academic credentials testing, tiered pricing, signing

While this issue of *Translation & Interpreting* is focused on certification,¹ I wish to look at a key question that is *not* the major emphasis of the other articles. The reader will no doubt notice that the articles in this collection dealing with translator and interpreter certification all share one key assumption—that certification is in fact desirable—and focus on how to establish or improve it. Contributors may differ in what they see as the benefits of certification, but none of them fundamentally question the value of translator and interpreter certification.

However, this core assumption really raises the question of whether certification is actually desirable.² This assumption is not universally shared,

¹ As noted in other articles in this special issue, *certification* and *accreditation* are sometimes used interchangeably. However, in ISO 17024 and in this collection, a sharp distinction is made. Certification applies to *persons* (i.e., translators and interpreters) and accreditation applies to *organizations* that certify persons. These organizations are often called *certification bodies* and *accreditation bodies*, respectively. The use of these terms is not specific to any individual certification or accreditation program.

Just as universities in many countries seek accreditation by a recognized, third-party accrediting organization, translator and interpreter certification bodies should seek third-party accreditation to demonstrate that they meet minimal standards recognized across many professions and formalized in ISO 17024. So far as I am aware, no translator certification program in the world has yet been accredited according to ISO 17024. When that does begin to happen, and I hope that it does, many of the concerns of serious translators concerning certification discussed here will be addressed. Note that the situation is different for domain-specific interpreter certification. As of January 2013, both medical interpreter certification programs described in this special issue have been accredited by NCCA (www.credentialingexcellence.org).

² To be clear, many industries debate the nature and value of certification. T&I is not alone in this regard, and nothing in this article should be construed as criticism of any specific existing certification programs.

and there is an ongoing debate in the Translation and Interpreting (T&I) industry about whether certification is, in fact, a worthy goal. Some of the articles in this issue touch on this topic more or less tangentially (notably the articles by Budin et al., Arocha and Joyce, and Chan), but I feel it deserves more attention, hence the present commentary, which is intended to spark discussion rather than to settle any issues in a definitive manner.

Although it is not always made explicit, I believe that most of the authors would make a distinction between good certification (which is, at a minimum, valid, reliable, and fair, per ISO 17024) and bad certification. Certification can be bad in a number of ways:

- It can be “pay-for-play” certification, in which a certification is granted merely for completing a workshop or course of study with no evaluation of competence.³
- Certification may represent the business interests of one company or industry segment. If certification is offered by a company merely to indicate to unwary buyers that its supply chain is “certified,” then certification may have a negative value and may even approach fraud in its intent.
- Certification may be used to restrain trade by artificially keeping competent individuals from working in a field and thus restricting the supply of professionals who can work in it. This criticism is more valid in the case of licensure, in which a government-issued license is required to work in a profession, but well-established certifications can have a similar impact.
- Certification can evaluate knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are not relevant to professional competence.⁴ If the wrong set of KSAs is chosen, certification may not properly indicate competence in those KSAs that actually do matter for the job.
- A given certification may be too rigorous or not rigorous enough. If the “cut scores” (the boundaries between passing and failing) are too high, they may exclude competent professionals who deserve to be certified. At the same time, if the cut scores are too low, the value of certification can be diluted for both buyers of translation and interpreting services (who cannot trust it) and the professionals themselves, who find that certification offers them no benefit.

As this list shows, certification, by itself, is not an absolute good, and can even have a negative impact. However, the authors in this issue clearly all believe that there is value in *good* certification and want to avoid *bad*

³ In preparing this article, and in previous discussions with translators and others, one common criticism I encountered is, to put it bluntly, that certification can be an excuse for certifying bodies to enrich themselves. Having seen a number of pay-for-play certifications in the past in various industries, I can see why some could take this position. However, in my previous work with the now-defunct Localization Industry Standards Association, I was involved with two task forces that looked at the issue of localizer certification, and both of these task forces determined that the financial viability of a proper certification program was by no means self-evident. Indeed, many T&I certification programs are part of not-for-profit professional organizations, and some programs are subsidized by their parent organizations, demonstrating a desire to serve the industry rather than to make money.

⁴ Note the article by Koby and Melby (2013) on translator certification and the articles by Youdelman (2013) and by Arocha and Joyce (2013) on interpreter certification. All of these demonstrate that considerable care must be taken to identify the relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) for certification and that doing so involves close collaboration with working professionals. Any certification that ignores the input of providers themselves and all other stakeholder groups will not succeed and may not even be valid.

certification (and have spent considerable effort in trying to distinguish between the two). I would argue that bad certification is worse than useless: it is a waste of time and money, and it can actually be harmful to translators and interpreters and to the profession as a whole.

So how can we distinguish good certification from bad certification (or even *ugly* certification)? Is there a benefit to certification in the real world? What is the problem that certification claims to address, and does it actually do so? Is it the most economical way to achieve its goals? It may be very difficult to determine the most economical route without trying out several of them.

The Economic Issue

As Andy Chan discusses in this collection of articles, translation and interpreting are fields in which the buyers of services are often unable, themselves, to evaluate the quality of those services until it is too late to make changes. If a defendant in a legal case is sent to prison because a key passage of testimony was badly interpreted, the cost to rectify the problem can be high. If a medical patient dies because a key term is misunderstood, the cost is even higher. If a medical technology product manual is badly translated and causes confusion to readers, those readers may be harmed if they are unable to use the product properly, and even if no person is harmed, the company that produces the product may be harmed through lower repeat sales. If investors steer clear of a venture capital fund because its translated documentation is unconvincing, clunky or factually flawed, the fund will lose traction.

If most buyers of, for example, English-to-Mongolian translation services do not speak or read Mongolian, they need reliable ways to identify those translators who can deliver quality translation. Similarly, an attorney who works with a Hausa-to-English courtroom interpreter may have no way of knowing if he or she is receiving an accurate interpreting of a client's Hausa-language deposition.

Certification is intended to address this problem of asymmetrical knowledge by providing an objective, third-party assessment of the abilities of a provider.⁵ If certification is designed properly and is fair, valid, and reliable, then it should (in principle) provide a way for buyers of services to be assured that they will receive competent services without needing to find a way to evaluate the T&I provider or the product (translation or interpreting) themselves.

In the case of translation, there is often a process of third-party post-delivery review. This review process, however, can be expensive, time-consuming, and has its own problems (reviewers may disagree and matters of personal taste may interfere with impartial judgment). As a result, many buyers seek to find ways to minimize the need for post-hoc corrective action by identifying competent providers beforehand under the reasonable assumption that it is easier to prevent problems than to fix them. In principle at least, certification could address this need as well, although, as shall be

⁵ The subject of information asymmetry has been a major topic of research in economics since the 1970s. The framework assumed here is based on the work of Michael Spence, who, along with George Akerlof and Joseph Stiglitz, won the Nobel Prize for economics in 2001 for his pioneering work (see http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2001/press.html). See also Spence (1973) for the seminal work in this area of inquiry.

seen, there are alternatives to certification that might achieve this same end. In the case of reviewer disagreement, there is the additional question of using clear project specifications, which is important but beyond the scope of this commentary.

Premium vs. Bulk Services, Price Sensitivity, and Certification

Before moving on, one important distinction needs to be addressed: that between “premium” and “bulk” services. In many industries, some buyers place a high value on quality, while others do not, and services are typically stratified along a continuum, with high-cost, premium brands on one end and lower-priced bulk items on the other. Mid-market and premium buyers will be attracted by quality and relatively less sensitive to price (i.e., they will usually have no problem paying more to get what they want). Bulk buyers, on the other hand, are motivated primarily by price and are less sensitive to quality.

Of course the difference between bulk and mid- to premium services is one of degree rather than kind. Actual buyers exist somewhere in the middle between an entity totally insensitive to price and one totally insensitive to quality, striking a balance between what they can afford to pay and the quality they want to have.

However, in some cases the distinction may be more or less institutionalized. For example, by law, U.S. government buyers must make decisions between technically equivalent offers solely on the basis of price (“best price/technically acceptable bid”).⁶ Fortunately, European government buyers encourage suppliers to emphasize advantages other than price. This reliance on price alone (coupled with lack of qualified suppliers), at least in the United States, has led to instances in which government agencies have received incompetent language services (Mosk, Ross, & Rhee 2010). Similarly, in 2003 one of the largest commercial providers of translation and interpreting services in the world was Titan Corporation, a company that in 2000 had no expertise in language services at all but which by 2003 was billing the U.S. government US\$ 122 million/year for language services. Not surprisingly, Titan has been criticized for providing sub-standard services (Frievalds, 2004). A number of individuals whom I interviewed in early 2012 expressed considerable disappointment at how the institutionalized bulk-buying practices of the U.S. government had driven quality down to levels that were potentially harmful to U.S. diplomatic efforts. These individuals pointed to certification as one way to address this slippage in quality: if meaningful certification were in place, they speculated, then governmental requests for proposals could specify that only certified T&I professionals could work on contracts (where such certification exists), thereby cutting out the sub-par providers who were driving prices down.

Similar, albeit less extreme, situations exist for requesters of T&I services at large corporations and organizations. In many cases, purchasing decisions for bulk T&I services are run through a central purchasing department, with the actual requesters having little or no input on the decision. Since procurement staff who deal with bulk T&I services are generally more familiar with purchasing commodities (such as nuts, bolts, computer monitors, or desks), they treat translation as a pure commodity and

⁶ One of the issues is that there is no widely accepted standard for what constitutes technical acceptability for U.S. procurement of T&I services, so price tends to dominate other concerns.

make bulk-type purchasing decisions based on price and objectively verifiable criteria (such as language coverage and the number of staff). These decisions can lead to considerable frustration with poor-quality T&I providers, but attempts to improve quality may be stymied by inflexible procurement policies. (Alison Toon, pers. comm.) In such cases, as with government purchasers, third-party certification may be attractive as a way to “weed out” incompetent providers who compete only on price. (Whether this strategy works depends on whether certification itself is sufficiently discriminatory against incompetent providers and whether there is a way to avoid listing certified translators in a bid and then switching to other translators when the work is done.)

Certification thus seems to serve the needs of buyers for whom price is a primary concern and who must deal with large-scale purchasing decisions. It becomes significantly less important for specialized markets where domain-specific knowledge and reputation are far more common in the hiring process. At the premium end of the market, certification is unlikely to play any role at all.

What Are the Alternatives?

In extensive discussions with colleagues, I have found four primary alternatives to certification that potentially address the same economic needs as certification:⁷

- (1) academic credentialing
- (2) company- or organization-specific testing of T&I professionals,
- (3) tiered pricing models
- (4) signing of work in which T&I companies and individual professionals are identified as producing their work rather than remaining anonymous

I wish to address the first two somewhat briefly (they are also discussed in Budin et al., 2013, and Chan 2013 discusses academic credentialing) and then turn to the third and fourth in more detail, as they are not covered elsewhere.

Academic Credentialing

Academic credentialing (see Chan 2013) is useful in many fields where graduates of academic programs can be assumed to have acquired a certain level of knowledge and skill. However, academic credentialing may be insufficient when experience beyond formal education is required for a professional to complete certain tasks. One of the ongoing debates in the arena of T&I certification is what value should be assigned to academic credentials. While most certification programs formally recognize academic credentials (e.g., by using them as a prerequisite for certification), they also realize that some qualified T&I personnel may not have formal credentials or that academic credentials may be insufficient by themselves. So, although there are those who argue that attaining a specified degree is sufficient, there seems to be rough consensus that degrees are not enough on their own and that those without T&I academic degrees need an alternative path to be recognized as competent. Degrees thus are useful, but do not cover all competent professionals and are also less likely to be useful when domain-specific knowledge is required that may not be available to most graduates from T&I specialist programs.

⁷ See the article by Budin et al. in this issue for more on these discussions and findings.

An additional, and not insignificant, issue with academic credentialing is that there simply are not *enough* academic programs to supply the demand for translation services, particularly in “non-traditional” language pairs. For example, if an organization requires Uyghur→German T&I services, the likelihood of finding language professionals with academic degrees specializing in this language combination would be vanishingly small. For much of the world—and certainly the overwhelming majority of the potential language combinations—academic training in T&I skills is essentially non-existent. As globalization trends continue and the number of languages required for businesses, governments, and non-governmental organizations to deal with their customers and constituents increases, the discrepancy between what academic training can provide and what is needed will only increase. (Of course, the same criticism applies to T&I certification: certification of a language pair is expensive to develop and will be developed primarily for language pairs where it is economically viable, leaving most language combinations without certification.)

Company- or Organization-Specific Testing

Company- or organization-specific testing of translators is quite common and, as Budin et al. (2013) demonstrates, it is already in place as the primary alternative to certification, particularly for organizations working in specialized domains. In such cases generalist certification cannot, by definition, indicate whether a certified individual has the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to work in a particular domain. So specific testing is quite common and unlikely to be replaced by certification (at least general certification). However, the two can easily work in tandem, since generalist certification might help narrow the pool of people to be tested for specialist knowledge. Similarly, testing can work with academic degrees to help narrow the pool of candidates.

At present there is no detailed study of the precise nature of organization-specific testing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most testing involves providing prospective translators with a test passage that they must translate. This test passage is then evaluated to determine suitability. However, much more research is needed about the nature of testing and how it would relate to generalist and domain-specific certification. Careful testing by anyone, including organizations, is expensive to develop, maintain, and administer, and is inefficient compared to any viable third-party shared testing procedure. One route to domain-specific certification would be for groups of organizations to pool their resources to develop common testing models and platforms.

One criticism of such testing is that when internal testing is put forward to buyers as a way to indicate competence, it opens the possibility of manipulation. Companies may indicate that they do internal testing to their clients, but they may have an incentive to use this as a marketing claim rather than a substantive difference. They may develop tests that can be passed by incompetent providers but that convey a false sense of competence to the buyers. Such programs may be perceived as worthless by buyers in such a case, thus undermining the efforts of companies that do implement rigorous testing. As a result, testing may be of more use for company-internal assessment than as a signalling device to outside buyers.

Tiered Pricing Models

Tiered pricing has gotten the least attention of any of these ways of addressing the inability of most buyers of T&I services to directly assess quality. Indeed, it does not even directly address the issue at all. Tiered

pricing has gained prominence in Russia, where it is used by some translation service providers (Tomarenko 2013). The following description is at least somewhat idealized.

In this model, rather than treating quality as a constant, pricing varies according to quality, with providers typically offering three quality levels. The cheapest translation may be “raw” translator output with no revision or review. If the buyer is willing to pay more, there may be a simple revision pass. The highest cost will include full revision and review. Thus, rather than claiming to produce top quality at a bargain price, the provider is transparent about what the buyer can expect at a given price and the buyer then decides what his or her needs are and selects a quality level as appropriate.

This model involves a degree of trust since it is possible that an unscrupulous provider might simply use the same process in each case and pocket the difference in price, but assuming honesty or at least a means of identifying dishonesty, this differential pricing model is a move toward transparency and can empower buyers to get what they need and to better understand the relationship between price and quality rather than selecting only on price. It thus stands in contrast to more typical models in Western Europe and North America that treat quality as a constant and thus obscure the difference between providers and make assessment more difficult for buyers.

This model has yet to be common outside of Russia and Eastern Europe, but it is a rational economic response to the need for market differentiation, much like first- and second-class seating on aircraft. For it to be fully meaningful, industry agreement on the tasks required for each tier is required. Without such agreement, comparison of two companies’ “business grade” is difficult: one company’s lowest tier might actually involve more quality checks than another company’s top tier, so much work remains to ensure full transparency. In addition, if buyers purchase test translations, they must be assured that the test is actually representative of the service level they are buying. Otherwise the provider has an incentive to deliver a high quality level in the test and then cut corners for subsequent work after a contract is in place.

Whether tiered pricing catches on elsewhere remains to be seen. Because it addresses quality at the “bulk” end, it can address some of the needs that certification addresses. Ideally, tiered pricing should be combined with signing work (see the next section), but there are structural incentives against this since providers may be reluctant to have their “Grade B” translation compared to the “Grade A” translation of another provider if the buyer has no way to know that different grades were requested in the first place.

Signing of Work

The fourth alternative mentioned above, endorsing transparency by signing one’s work, has gained prominence through the occasional public campaign of Chris Durban, a well-known financial translator and former president of the *Société française des traducteurs* (SFT, the largest professional association of translators in France) (see Jan-Durban 2011). The idea behind signing is that translation suppliers—both freelance translators and translation companies⁸—should, in Durban’s words, “emerge from the shadows” and

⁸ Companies as well as individuals can sign work. Many companies might be reluctant to disclose the identity of their individual translators (seeing them as offering a competitive advantage), but signing can be done at the company level as well. For buyers, knowing that a

sign their work.⁹ T&I companies or individual translators should ask for (and receive) credit for their work, as is common and expected for other creative professionals, such as writers, photographers, editors, designers, and videographers. (One might ask why translators, who do more with the text than other people who may be credited, are, almost uniquely, invisible.)

The logic is that when providers take credit for their work, their reputations are on the line if they produce bad translations. Better yet, they gain positive exposure (and potential clients) from producing good work. Signing then would serve at least two purposes: (1) by encouraging translators/translation companies to stand behind their work, it is an incentive to improve quality; (2) buyers are able to identify those providers that are willing to stand behind their product and would be able to identify excellent examples and reward producers with additional business.

Signing is an idea that I fully endorse.¹⁰ Giving credit to translators is the norm in book translation. Even if it is not the norm in product-oriented translation, there is no reason why translation companies and translators could not request credit and work to promote it as the norm. Many translation companies already go through the motions of listing their clients in promotional materials, so standing behind the work they do for those clients should not be that big a step, at least for those that actually do provide quality work. And as more companies do it, the pressure for their competition to do the same would increase in a virtuous cycle.

Note that in order for signing to work effectively, translators need to have sign-off rights on their work. Without such rights, others may change translators' work in ways they disagree with, undermining the notion of responsibility for the work. (It would of course be possible for all parties to sign their work, but doing so complicates the task of determining which party is actually responsible for any particular aspect of the text.)

As a way to raise the status of the T&I industry, it is a good idea in its own right and could only be of benefit, both in promoting quality and in changing the image of translators and interpreters to more than faceless and nameless drudges.¹¹ As such, signing is not so much an alternative to certification as it is a course of action on its own. Nevertheless, because signing addresses some of the same economic requirements as certification, it may be seen in some lights as an alternative, and Durban has argued that it would deliver most or all of the benefits of certification at a fraction of the cost.

Accordingly, Durban maintains that signing has a number of benefits over certification.¹² In particular, it is cheaper to administer (it does not require a bureaucratic apparatus or expensive development); anyone can do it, regardless of their position or current level; it does not create the false sense that may come from certification that all certified providers are

given translation was produced by a specific company may be more useful than seeing a list of 30 individual translators since the company would be the point of contact for buying services in any event.

⁹ Lawrence Venuti is well known for questioning whether a translator should be "invisible" by attempting to create a translation that has the look and feel of an original composition in the target language and culture and thus is a "covert" translation (as Juliane House would put it). Signing work and certifying persons apply to both overt and covert translations and have the same general objective: raising the status of the profession.

¹⁰ Speaking personally, and not on behalf of DFKI or GALA.

¹¹ In my own translation work I have requested and received signing rights and would not generally work under conditions in which I am not credited.

¹² This list is adapted from personal communication with Durban in February and March 2013. Any errors of interpretation are, of course, my own.

equivalent; it is controlled by translators and translation companies themselves, not by external parties; it is a practical, rather than an academic response to the economic need at stake; and it does not require a system of accrediting certification bodies (see section below on accreditation) to make sure they are legitimate.¹³ Durban speculates that the positive impact of seeing who is producing what might be visible in as little as two or three years, with none of the associated costs or bureaucratic apparatus required for certification.

It should be noted that the argument for signing works seems to work best at the mid- and premium end of the market. For translation companies on the bulk-translation end, however, who are dealing with large procurement departments, signing may have less value since they are trying to compete on price alone for very narrow-margin projects and certification may be a more attractive option. Certification is an *objective* criterion they can point to when dealing with procurement departments. If all parties trust the certifying body to be neutral and fair in its assessment (a big *if*, one must admit) and believe that certification measures relevant factors, certification is effectively a third-party signature for the translator's work. In essence, it says, "you may never have seen the name of this translator before, but we have, and we know that this translator provides quality work." If certification serves its purpose, buyers who lack the resources or personal skill to track down qualified translators (whether they sign their work or not) can use it as a shortcut to restrict their pool of suppliers to those who meet certification requirements.

Accreditation and Validity of Certification

Of course this last paragraph *assumes* that certification does what it is supposed to, but how does one know that the certification actually identifies qualified people? If it does not actually do so, then certification can be harmful. If unqualified people can become certified, then certification may convey the wrong message. If qualified people cannot become certified, then it may serve as a barrier to competence. One problem with some certification programs so far is that they cannot supply enough professionals, in which case buyers are forced to use uncertified individuals to meet their needs. In this case the value of certification is called into question since buyers have to use alternative means anyway and they may not see the advantage of using certified professionals if they have to implement testing or other processes in any event.

Thus, while signing and transparency can be highly reliable (at a cost in terms of time and effort on the part of the buyer), certification may not be as reliable. Many industries have seen unreliable certification efforts. Over the years a number of groups have claimed to offer translator or localizer certification with little or no evidence that their certification is in fact valid. While such groups may have the best of intentions (and may even do good work), there have been cases in many industries of bogus certifications

¹³ Dave Nelson, of the International Accreditation Service, concedes that these arguments have merit in some circumstances, but argues that certification, properly done, has benefits:

I tend to agree... [some] professional certifications are not too helpful, [have a] poor cost/benefit ratio, [and are] controlled by industry for restraint-of-trade benefit. However, if developed and administered to ISO 17024 standards, and if there is a clear public-benefit need for certification, then [certification] can be helpful. (pers. comm.)

available for sale or run by parties that have a vested interest in “certifying” as many people as possible in order to improve their reputation or simply to collect certification fees.

The number of “bad” certifications in existence is one reason why *accreditation* of certifying bodies is vital. Accreditation according to ISO 17024 provides one way for consumers to know whether certification is valid or not¹⁴. In order for a translation certification program to be accredited, all stakeholders, including providers of both bulk translation and premium translation, training bodies, and of course translators and interpreters themselves, will have to be involved.

If a certification program is accredited, the consumer will then have some assurance that it meets standards for certification programs and that it can withstand third-party scrutiny: in effect, that it is not something only for the benefit of a particular company or that was “cooked up” in a few days to lure in translation suppliers looking for a way to latch onto customers that doesn’t involve delivering good work. Thus, from my perspective, the next major step is for certification programs to seek to become accredited. For most, if not all of them, this step will require substantial adjustment. It may not be easy (nor should it be).

Finally, I maintain that (accredited) certification and provider transparency/signing are not contradictory at all. Both play a role, and both can be used simultaneously. For example, a translation might have the following, with a reference to certification, in its credits¹⁵

*Translation by Henry Fischbach, CT (Certified Translator)*¹⁶

or

Translation by SuperTrans Corp. using certified translators.

A speaker at a United Nations event might be announced as:

*John Dramani Mahama, interpreted by Nicole Kidman,¹⁷ CI
(certified interpreter)*

Signing work and certifying persons¹⁸ could thus be complementary and mutually reinforcing methods of signalling quality that address *different* but related market needs. Not all translators will want to become certified and not all translators, especially those working in an industrial production model, will be able to sign their work, although translation brokers might build this into their negotiating process (if they are committed to quality, some of

¹⁴ Accreditation bodies must be recognized by some authority that makes sure they are applying ISO 17024 properly. The global authority in this area is the International Accreditation Forum (www.iaf.nu), and the European Regional Authority is European Accreditation (www.european-accreditation.org), which is recognized by the International Accreditation Forum.

¹⁵ These might be contrasted with options practiced at present, with no certifying body:

English text: Smith/Jones; Spanish text: José Martínez for InterGalactic Translations, Inc.

¹⁶ The “CT” label is controlled by the American Translators Association (ATA, n.d.). Such labels must be carefully controlled (ideally by accredited organizations), or they run the risk of being used by individuals or companies in a deceptive manner.

¹⁷ To pick a name totally at random... © By the way, Henry Fischbach is not a random choice either: he was co-founder of the American Translators Association in 1959.

¹⁸ Certification of companies (e.g., using the forthcoming ISO 17100) is beyond the scope of this article.

which are not). Some may choose to do both, and some may choose to do one or the other. Not all will want to offer tiered pricing and varied quality levels. Similarly, not all will want to obtain T&I degrees (or even be able to, depending on their language combinations). To insist that only one or the other of these is appropriate is to ignore that they all can play a role and that different translators, different companies, and different market segments have different needs and ideals.

Fortunately, all of these ideas can exist in tandem and compete where appropriate. While this article has framed them as “alternatives,” there is no binary choice. While Chan (2013) is right to point out the possibility of “signal jamming” in which (in his case) certification and academic credentialing compete in a manner that creates confusion, there is no reason that by careful design these signalling methods cannot all exist in tandem (and, indeed, Chan argues for better alignment of certification and academic degrees to prevent jamming).

Indeed, coexistence will be required, since no single method will address the totality of the T&I industry. Academic credentialing and certification will only address those language combinations and geographical markets for which programs exist, leaving many language combinations underserved. Tiered pricing has yet to catch on and, while (at least in theory) it helps foster transparency, it does not directly address the ability to find qualified providers. And finally, company testing, while effective, is expensive and time-consuming. Signing translations, while a welcome addition, requires a considerable investment by the buyer to identify which T&I professionals or companies sign their work, and they may not be able to find professionals in this manner in all cases. Furthermore, the fact that work is signed by a translator or translation company is, in itself, not a guarantee of quality, but rather a motivator for the providers to deliver better quality because they know that they are subject to evaluation. Buyers, however, still need to evaluate signed work in some manner, directly or indirectly.

In addition, because different buyers place different values on quality, they will be attracted to different mechanisms. Highly specialized translators will likely not be interested in general certification and opt instead for customized testing because their quality depends not on general skills but on specific skills that will not be addressed by certification. A quality-sensitive buyer looking at a low volume of critical content will be more likely to select providers based on reputation or signing instead, since certification will not meet their needs and testing will be too expensive.

Accordingly, just because certification programs are being developed, that does not mean that companies cannot offer tiered pricing, conduct domain-specific translator testing, or sign their translations. All of these options can coexist and if one or more gains widespread acceptance, so much the better for all involved. The fact that none of them addresses all needs is not an argument against any of them: rather it is an argument that industry should pursue multiple approaches in tandem. Although this commentary is primarily about alternatives (or auxiliaries) to certification, a properly organized certification program can provide balance among all stakeholder groups in an industry and protect against accusations of self-interest on the part of the providers if its basis and methods are transparent and inclusive.

In the end, care must be taken to ensure that all these solutions (including certification, as one of the most resource-intensive approaches) meet actual needs and can meet the needs of various stakeholder groups. Pursuing them will require care and careful consideration. Fortunately, as can

be seen from the articles in this special issue, certification is receiving this attention, and signs are positive for its future.

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