

Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A. in Global Communication & Applied Translation program.
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Adeline

Born and raised in Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak, Malaysia, Adeline now lives in Adelaide, Australia where she works as freelance translator from English into Simplified Chinese and vice versa. Before becoming a translator, Adeline used to be a radio announcer, producer, and journalist. These days, her work includes translating subtitles and marketing materials for websites, and she has been affiliated with companies including Netflix, Amazon, National Geographic, Elite Asia, TVibe, Hiventy, and Pixelogic.



How did you first start as a translator?

I always wanted to become a subtitle translator. I was always looking for opportunities to jump in. But in Malaysia, it's not a common job, so I didn't know the appropriate pathways to get into the field at the beginning. However, I happened to come across a job vacancy online as full-time subtitle translator when I was 26 years old. I quickly applied and I got the job. I guess that's how my journey began.

What led you to becoming a professional translator?

Before I started working as a translator, I had accumulated 7 years of experience in both technical and creative writing, which enabled me to make a smooth shift when I decided to become a professional translator. The opportunity came when I saw a hiring post in one of the jobsites in Malaysia. It was a small localization company located in Kuala Lumpur, and they needed an English to Mandarin subtitle translator. I quickly jumped in and applied for that position. I received a test from the hiring manager right away. And two weeks later, I was informed that I passed the test and that they wanted to have me on board. That's when I got my first job as a real translator. Honestly, I don't have any degree in translation. I picked up all the relevant skills through practical work and hands-on tasks. Of course, the writing skills I have been honing and my previous work experience helped a lot in adapting to the challenges. I did make a lot of mistakes at the beginning when I wasn't familiar with how translation and clients' specifications worked. But I did realize that QCers' or proofers' opinions and feedback were really useful when it came to understanding my own weaknesses, and my translating skills improved within a short time. At the same time, I also read a lot of books about translation, and I would do some translation exercises whenever I was free. So, I think it was the amount of time and energy I poured into it that helped me get up to speed in two years.

I saw on your Facebook page that you have worked as an in-house employee before. What was it like, and what were you mainly translating?

Yes. As I mentioned previously, my first job as a translator was in a localization company in Kuala Lumpur. Although it was an in-house position, it's not like I had to be in the premises physically. The word "in-house" for that particular employer meant that I had to work 8 hours per day for them, and I needed to prioritize their tasks. Other than that, I was allowed to work anywhere I wanted to. So, the word "in-house" was just another term for full-time employment or retainer agreement. For the first one and a half years under the retainer agreement, I was working on text translations of subtitles from English into Chinese for films, series, and documentaries that were mainly aired in Malaysia and Singapore.

*Just in case you don't know, most Malaysian Chinese and Singapore Chinese are fluent, and even proficient in Mandarin, because they were educated in both English and Mandarin during elementary and high school.

Why did you switch to being a freelancer? What part of being a freelancer do you like the most?

Good question. I realized that the company that I was serving as full-timer didn't have any space for career development or advancement. I felt like there was so much more than that. That's when I started looking for freelance opportunities online. I started off by working with a few clients in India, the United States, and Singapore. The best part about being a freelancer is that you get to schedule your time, and you don't need your employer's approval if you want to go somewhere or you don't feel like working. But I feel like I need to burst some bubbles here. Being a freelancer doesn't mean you have more free hours that allow you to travel around the world, because I feel like I'm busier than ever before now that I got everything on track. And I desperately need good time management more than in any other phase of my life.

Working as a subtitle translator means that you're working on a relatively tight deadline. The longest is 1 or 2 weeks, the shortest is 1 or 3 days. So, you don't have much time to travel like a digital nomad (Digital nomad is a lie =)). And sometimes you have to cancel your plans with your family or friends just to make sure you deliver your work on time.

And there are other challenges working as a freelancer as well. Like, how do you cope with low times? Are you able to handle the anxiety when you can't be sure of your income? You might be getting \$4,000 this month, and the next month, you're getting only \$2,000. How are you going to expand your clientele?

You just have to make sure you are well-prepared before you get into freelancing.

Are you using any CAT tools? If so, which ones? Are there any other websites or software that you'd like to recommend?

I used to use MemoQ and Trados for some projects. But I quit using them after most of my major clients started to come out with their own CAT tools. For subtitling tools, I've been using online tools or platforms provided by clients all these years. I would use Subtitle Edit if I am required to come out with the templates. But most of the time, I'm working on online platforms provided by clients.

What brought you into the field of subtitling? What other fields have you worked in before, and how did you like them?

I am a movie fanatic, so I always wanted to become a subtitle translator, instead of a translator. So, when the opportunity came, I just jumped in. After graduating from college, I started working as a Mandarin program producer and announcer in a local radio station, and later, I took a big shift to become a journalist. These two positions also required me to translate some documents or other materials from English to Mandarin, but I wouldn't say it was a professional experience, but it somehow helped me to get a glimpse into what translation is like.

How do you view subtitling work, and how different is it compared to pure translation of texts?

Subtitling requires translators to strictly follow the timed-text guidelines and specifications provided by clients, streaming companies, or television networks. For pure translation of texts, most of the time there's no specific guideline. You just have to follow the PM's instructions and get your translations right. But both of them take experience, time, and energy.

How are you managing all the projects from various companies and clients right now?

I work for only three major companies at the moment, and I work almost every day. But the point is that I have to schedule properly and make sure I deliver my work on time. So, it is important that we master time management skills.

For the companies you are working for right now, what do you think made you stand out among all the other applicants?

Back in 2016, I was selected to work as one of the 200 translators for Netflix's first global talk show "Chelsea," which was going live in 190 countries in 20 languages. To be eligible for the role, I was tested how well I interpreted content that was profanity-laced and politically complex into Simplified Chinese while preserving cultural relevancy and tone. I would say working directly with Netflix's localization team has opened up a big door for me to become a part of their international vendors instead of just working with local vendors. And that experience actually helped me to land more projects along the journey.

Living in Australia, do you think your profession meets all your financial needs?

Yes. Honestly, it's actually more than enough, because I am getting paid in USD. And living cost in Adelaide, Australia is pretty affordable, if you compare it to Malaysia.

Do you have any concrete advice for translators who are new to this industry?

Don't think of doing other irrelevant things while you're pursuing to become a translator.

I have friends who are working as emcees, deejays, painters and other things at the same time they're working as translators. They've never tried to improve their translating skills, and they don't spend time to find out how to expand their clientele, merely because they see being a translator as a part-time job that they have never been serious about. They stay mediocre. Sooner or later, they just give up. My advice is to persevere and never cease learning. You can start off with working as an in-house translator before you move forward to become a freelance translator, if you have to. Working as an in-house would help you to gain more perspective of how the industry works, and at the same time, it helps to build your profile. And you should never stop learning. I always believe that there's no best translator, but there's always a better translator. So be a better translator.

This interview was conducted by Qianru Bao.