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## Translation Industry in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the important roles played by the translation industry in assisting the development of the economy, this industry has gone through almost neglected or unnoticed. This situation is even more pronounced among the developing nations. This industry is basically involved in translating from one language into another. Track records revealed that the developed countries, particularly USA, Canada, European Union (EU) and Japan are at the forefront in capitalizing this industry in their quest for expanding their global frontier. They have made the translation industry the key ingredient in promoting and facilitating the advancement of their economies, primarily through their global-linkage activities such as international trade, shipping, banking and tourism. This paper aims at elucidating the importance of the translation industry in the Malaysian economy in view of our economic advancement in the global trade activities.

**Keyword:** Translation, translation industry, language, global-linkage

### 1. Introduction

The role of the translation industry is unquestionably great but it seems to be unnoticeable due to the nature of the services being rendered in the economy. For many countries worldwide, the translation service is not even listed alongside with other economic sectors such as agriculture, mining, construction and other services. However, despite this shortcoming, the role of translation industry and the monetary value that has been generated is even more pronounced as the economy enters the sphere of globalization.

Unlike other sectors in the economy, the translation market is not heavily affected by recessions. However, it is a very fragmented market, with the first spot claimed by military contractors and the Top 100 firms ranging from USD427million down to USD4 million according to studies by Common Sense Advisory, a translation industry think tank which estimated the size of the industry to be USD33.5 billion in 2012. According to a report by Ibis World, translation services are expected to keep on growing and reach USD37 billion in 2018. The United States represents the largest single market for translation services. Europe is a close second and Asia is the largest growth area. Currently, business is generated from the government and private industries alike

According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, the translation industry is expected to grow by 42 percent between 2010-2020. The most important reason for this growth is globalization. The European Commission's DG Translation costs €330 million per year. In 2004-2007 with the increase of EU's official languages from 11 to 23 the translation costs increased by 20

percent. Currently, the USA and Japan are among the leaders in the translation industry. According to the US Bureau of Statistics, the translation industry is expected to grow by 42 percent between the period of 2010-2020. The most important reason for this growth trend is the rapid rate of globalization. It is inevitable that the role and scope of translation detonated by the rapid and continuous advances in science and technology.

It is also expected that machine translation and other computer assisted translation software will learn and get better in future resulting in better translation services and efficiencies based on two important reasons, namely, (i) the translation side, resulting in faster and more reliable translations and, as such, companies applying machine translation technology efficiently will be clear frontrunners; and (ii) companies paying less in the future for the same amount of translation work as more contents will be able to be published at the same cost or even cheaper cost.

This paper attempts to explore the performance of the translating services in the global perspective and how this industry translates into the Malaysian economy in its pursuit to transform into an industrialized nation by year 2020.

## **2. Translation Industry**

Headings should be in bold type, in 12 point Times New Roman. First-level headings should be centered, as illustrated above. Second-level headings should be flush left with initial caps. Do not use headings other than these two types. At least one line space should separate headings from the preceding text.

Translation can be defined in many ways based on its usage in different sectors of the economy. Basically, translation is the process of translating words or text from one language into another; or the conversion of something from one form or medium into another. In short, translation is the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text. It also involves the process of translating words written or spoken rendering of the meaning of a word or text in another language (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/translation>). For instance is the translation of English into Arabic or Mandarin or even any other languages for that matter.

Along with the translation process comes the need for localization. Naturally, localization is the adaptation of a product or service to meet the needs of a particular language, culture or desired population's "look-and-feel." Localization involves "the process of adapting a product or content to a specific locale or market." In the business sphere of this globalized nature, localization goes beyond merely having to translate website content, and it connects with consumers on a personal level, builds your brand image in a way that is both accessible and unique. In short, localization is about building trust. Today's localization technology allows companies to reach markets that would have been inaccessible to them even two or three decades ago. The ultimate goal is to build a user experience that garners the most success from your marketing strategy. Businesses accomplish this through customized interactions via native translation, advertising and website internationalization

With the passing of time, the information and knowledge explosion in turn triggers off the expansion of the print media which is growing at a speed which is equally mind-boggling. Every hour, every minute, every few seconds, a book, a journal or a magazine gets published

on the internal scene. What then are the implications of all this to a small developing country like Malaysia?

It means that not only does it have to cope with the translating of old and existing information and knowledge in the hundreds of thousands of volumes of English and Arabic texts found in the libraries of the universities and institutions in the country, but it also needs to cater for the continuous and rapid supply of new materials churned out daily by the publication factories all over the world. The experiences gained by many countries in the translation industry serve to illustrate only too clearly how translation utilizes human, financial and time resources to such staggering degrees. Indeed, the role and scope of translation detonated by the rapid and continuous advances in science and technology (Azizah Mokhzani, 1984).

Based several historical facts, translation first started as a private endeavor with very little support or encouragement on the part of official bodies (Kamel El Sayed, 1984). In the case of Egypt, the service of Mohamed Ali, the first ruler of modern Egypt, was instrumental in pushing forward the task of translating from Arabic language to that of Europe, hence making Egypt on the map of modern civilization. He then proceeded to establish the “Schools of Tongues” which later opened up the road to “golden age”. Due to the demands of business documentation consequent to the Industrial Revolution that began in the mid-18th century, some translation specialties have become formalized, with dedicated schools and professional associations. Because of the laboriousness of translation, since the 1940s engineers have sought to automate translation (machine translation) or to mechanically aid the human translator (computer-assisted translation). The rise of the Internet has fostered a world-wide market for translation services and has also facilitated language localization.

Currently, Japan is by far a developed nation with the most advanced translation services industry. Within the globalized scenario, Japan capitalized the translation services as a tool for the “transfer of technology” from the West. Its effort to become what it is today can be back-dated to the last two decades, with special focus attached to each of the four different periods. Its success today was due to the aggressive and endless effort taken through: (i) Period I (1774-1823) – the publication of the translation of a Dutch anatomy book (Tafel Anatomy); (ii) Period II (1823-1856) – Arrival of Siebold (Philipp Franz von), the Dutch Medical doctor; (iii) Period III (1856-1886) – Establishment of the Institute for Foreign Language Books; and (iv) period IV (1886-1917) – Proclamation of the Imperial University law (Minowa, 1984). Records showed that Japan had been able to publish at least 2,000 copies of new translations, ranging from General Work to Literature. Data for the period 1973-1976, according to Minowa (1984), showed that the annual total of new translations published amounted to 2,211 copies (1973), 2,255 copies (1974), 2,259 copies (1975) and 2,291 copies (1976). In short, the translation services industry in Japan was so efficient that it would take no more than 2 months to translate into Japanese language any new books written in foreign languages and that appeared in the market.

It is a normal practice in Japan that official presentation or address to be made at any international event, either held locally or in foreign countries, must be delivered in Japanese language but ready with the service of an interpreter to provide with equivalent translation into English any other languages. This implies that the Japanese government is very concern about upholding the status of their national language and also the need to enhance the translator services industry.

### 3. Translation in Malaysia

Malaysia is on its way to be transformed into a fully industrialized nation by 2020. In pursuing this transformation process, information and knowledge are indispensable as they are the most important tools for future growth. Hence, it just cannot afford to be behind time where information and knowledge are concerned if it were to catch up with the rest of the developed nations. The transfer of technology, which is so vitally needed for its industrial progress, for instance, cannot be affected without the attendant transfer of knowledge and this can only become effective and meaningful if it is conducted in a language which is widely and fully understood by the users of the technology. In the case of Malaysia, the language that is widely and fully understood by its multilingual beneficiaries of modern technology is Bahasa Malaysia.

Forty nine years after independence, and thirty seven years after the full implementation of the Bahasa Malaysia policy, it is still being debated as to how much of English should be retained, and whether it is necessary or feasible to translate books of higher learning into Bahasa Malaysia or to let them remain in English, in which case, students are given intensive, accelerated and special purposes instruction in English, in order to upgrade their English so that they can gain access to the much needed information and knowledge which are still only available in English.

The need for translation in Malaysia is monumental. This can be deduced by a mere glance at the libraries in the country. They are filled with English publications except for special sections for other foreign language publications, while Bahasa Malaysia titles are few and far between, as the practice has been to acquire publications in English. As the rate of import of new materials in English is much faster than the production of Bahasa Malaysia publications in the country, the extent of the need for translation in Bahasa Malaysia continues to grow.

The need is most felt and apparent in the field of education. At primary and secondary levels, the need for Bahasa Malaysia books has been somewhat met through the efforts of the Ministry of Education. Still, the range and quality of both original Bahasa Malaysia texts and translated texts leave much room for improvement. This was a result of aggressive effort to translate English textbooks into Bahasa Malaysia beginning early 1970s. This was in line with the change in government policy for adopting the Bahasa Malaysia as the primary medium of instruction instead of English in both primary and secondary schools. Anchored by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), this policy also saw some good collection of English textbooks being translated into Bahasa Malaysia for the use in public universities. Despite this progress, it is at the higher education level that the availability of materials in Bahasa Malaysia is still at the crucial stage. While a few Bahasa Malaysia texts exist in a number of disciplines, the majority of disciplines are still impoverished as far as Bahasa Malaysia materials are concerned.

Apart from education field however, the demand for translated materials is also increasing. It is known that ministries, government departments and public corporations, in spite of using Bahasa Malaysia for their day-to-day administration, still have to work with materials that need to be translated. This is especially true in the research and development units of the various public sector departments, as well as in the legal department, the foreign office, the mass media, the trade and commerce industry, the defense ministry and many others. The demand for translation from all these places could provide employment to a few hundred translators.

#### 4. Economic Contribution of the Translation Industry

Currently, there exists no estimates of the value of the translation services industry to the Malaysian economy and neither is there any accepted method to assess its contribution. But past track records available in other countries, such as USA, Canada, European Union (EU) and Japan, just to name a few, which have developed the translation industry to its highest level do show how translation services have contributed to their economies. However, it is important to note that these countries are highly industrialized, investment-oriented, export-led, and heavily-dependent on the manufacturing and the services sectors. As experienced by these countries, the advancement in the economy correlates well with the usage of translation services. In short, the demand for translation services would increase as a result of the increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income along with the expansion in trade activities (exports and imports).

With regards to the manufacturing sector, for instance, there are few critical areas which require translation services: (i) for any single manufactured product on the export list, there is a need for the translation services in the preparation of packaging and labelling; (ii) for manufactured foods the exporter has to provide the ingredients on the packaging; (iii) the provision of user manuals is necessary for electrical, electronics, computers, motor vehicles and many other items; and (iv) exporting of pharmaceutical products would require the translation of the ingredients including the dosage level. Above all, these manufactured products would require standard documents with equivalent translation in the language of the importing parties, particularly for shipping and customs clearance. In fact, in every aspect of the manufactured products bound for export, the exporter needs to translate the local language into that of the recipient (importing) country. For instance, it is a standard procedure and requirement for an exporting agency in USA to prepare all the required materials and documentations for that particular product with the translation from English into Japanese or Spanish or Chinese or Arabic or any other languages for that matter, depending on which importing country the product is bound for.

Applying this procedure to the Malaysian economy, one would be able to estimate how much contribution of the translation services industry to the economy. Based on the major economic indicators, the value of the translation industry would be huge and can make significant contribution to the economy. Table 1 shows the major exports of Malaysia for the period 2005-2013. In particular, Malaysia's GDP for the period 2005-2013 at purchaser's price increased continuously from RM449.25 billion (2005) to estimated RM786.53 billion (2013). Malaysia's biggest revenues are generated by exports from the manufacturing sector. Based on the data for the period 2005-2013, the share of exports of manufactured goods to GDP range between 52.86 percent (2009) to 100.1 percent (2006). In fact, Malaysia is the world's leading exporter of electronic and electrical goods (E&E) and textiles. In addition, the major destinations of Malaysia exports of manufactured goods are Singapore, China, European Union (EU), United States of America (USA) and Japan. The exports of other goods (palm oil, saw logs, sawn timber and crude petroleum) are also destined for many countries (India, Taiwan, Vietnam, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Netherlands, Australia, Thailand and Republic of Korea) and also including the major buyers of the manufactured goods. This implies that a lot of efforts are needed by the manufacturers to provide translations for each of the products produced for the export markets. Obviously, the translations for each of the products needed by various parties, including shipping, customs and others would largely depend on the number of languages attached to different importing countries.

Table 1  
Malaysia: Export Goods, 2005-2013

Exports	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Manufactured Goods	406,721 (90.53)	476,010 (100.17)	438,873 (94.48)	443,014 (92.78)	395,927 (52.86)	441,647 (65.27)	449,217 (63.15)	448,857 (59.73)	464,340 (59.04)
Direction (%)									
Singapore	15.7	14.1	13.5	13.6	14.1	14.0	13.5	13.4	19.9
China	6.2	6.4	7.7	8.6	12.7	13.3	13.7	14.2	11.7
EU	13.1	13.3	13.5	12.1	12.8	12.8	12.5	10.8	12.5
USA	24.5	22.0	18.5	15.1	14.0	12.2	11.0	11.9	8.0
Japan	7.4	6.6	6.4	6.8	7.3	7.5	8.0	7.2	5.3
Others*	54,773	60,102	70,896	95,772	66,301	80,743	97,877	89,811	140,233
Total Exports	461,494	536,112	509,769	538,786	462,228	522,390	547,094	538,668	604,573
GDP at Purchaser's Price	449,250	475,192	505,353	533,910	629,885	676,653	711,351	751,471	786,526

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to percentage of manufactured exports to GDP

\*Includes exports of palm oil, saw logs, sawn timber and crude petroleum & LLG

Source: Economic Report (various series)

A quick check on this can be done through the percentage of Trade Account Balance to annual GDP which accounted for 28.97 percent (2005) and 13.76 percent (2013). In simple terms, this measures the strength of our net export values (such as export values of manufactured goods, electronics, palm oil and rubber) against our annual imports of visible goods (such as import values of cars and consumer goods). Currently, the manufacturing sector contributes about 33 percent of GDP, and electronics and electrical goods and textiles ranked the highest. Our largest market for our exports (including manufactured and other goods) are Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) including Singapore, China, European Union (EU), USA, Japan, The European Free Trade Area (EFTA), The Latin America Integration Association (LAIA), The North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and other countries, including the Middle East.

Table 2 shows some of the indicators that will have impacts on the need of the translation services industry. These increases are reflected well with the trend of our annual Trade Account Balances in the Balance of Payments (BOP). This accounts for our net export values, measured in terms of the Export values of visible goods less the Import values of visible goods. Within the Services Account Balance, our travel account balance reflects the performance of our tourism sector. The tourism sector, which lagged behind many other sectors in the post-independent years through the late 1980s, now emerged as the third largest sector in terms of its contribution to GDP. The net balances of the travel account were persistently negative until after early 1990 when this sector made a complete turnaround for the better.

Table 2  
Malaysia: Selected Accounts in the Balance of Payments, 2005-2013 (RM million)

Items	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Trade Account Balance	130,152	139,489	130,825	170,380	140,355	136,751	151,565	125,190	96,552
Travel	18,684	22,633	29,052	28,515	32,168	31,617	28,959	24,821	29,424
Services Account Balance	-10,872	-9,427	1,384	1,557	4,173	-1,444	-6,272	-16,210	-16,693
Overall Balance	13,530	25,158	45,296	-18,250	13,831	-2,628	94,682	3,873	14,649
GDP at Purchaser's Price	449,250	475,192	505,353	533,910	629,885	676,653	711,351	751,471	786,526

Source: Economic Report (various series)

The tourism sector is another avenue where the contribution of the translation services is highly demanded. This sector which lagged behind many other sectors in the post-independent years through the late 1980s, now emerged as the third largest sector in terms of its contribution to GDP. The net balances of the travel account were persistently negative until beginning early 1990 when this sector started to make a complete turnaround for the better. Currently, the tourism sector is making a lot of efforts through international linkages and promotions aimed at boosting more tourists into the country while at the same time trying to get more Malaysians to admire the tourist spots in their own country. This would eventually reduce the outflow of foreign exchange and improve the net balances in the services account.

A tourist attraction in any country will draw tourists from various countries with varied languages, cultures and customs. Upon arrival at the country of destination, a tourist would require a tourist guide that can show him/her around and be able to converse comfortably with good translation of the language of the tourist. The ability of the tourist guides to serve the needs of the tourists will undoubtedly boost the tourism sector in that particular country. For instance, tourists visiting the Great Wall in China would require the tourist guide to explain to them in their native languages. Similarly, other areas concerning the tourist needs such as hotels, foods, shopping and local travel would require the provision of good translation services. Table 2 shows some of selected indicators pertaining to the Malaysian economy which serve as the basis for the use of translation services.

The major economic indicators in the country imply the need for good and dependable translation services. Hence, the actual values attached to the translation services industry can be easily measured and assessed from time to time. However, there are several issues pertaining to the contribution of the translation services industry to the Malaysian economy. First, most of the manufacturing companies are established through the direct foreign investments, hence the goods are specially produced for the export markets. The foreign companies in the host country (Malaysia) have to export the manufactured goods back to their parent countries that provide the investments. The issue now is: who does the translation and where is it done really matters. If all the translation services are undertaken by the companies then there would be little contribution by the translation services industry in

Malaysia. Secondly, with the advent of modern technology translation services have moved from the traditional method that requires manual handlings to that of computer-aided methods with special soft-wares that are supposedly to be more cost-effective. Thirdly, translation services should be conducted by professionals equipped with the current knowledge of the economy.

## 5. Conclusion

The study is set out to explore the importance of the translation industry in the Malaysian economy in view of our economic advancement in the global trade activities. By applying the method of fusing past and present horizons in order to provide interpretation and explanation of the horizons, the researcher has gained insightful knowledge on the role of translation in Malaysian economic development.

This study has revealed that economics and translation services industry in Malaysia are interdependent. And yet, there are few critical areas which still require translation services. However, there are few aspects that we can do to improve the situations. For instance, not all Malaysian translators possess the minimum qualification of at least a certificate or a diploma in translation. A lack of education and training in the translation field could very well affect translators being perceived as professionals. It is also disheartening to know that the translators who responded to this study do not see education as an important factor in their practice as translators.

In light of the findings of this study, there is an urgent need to form a professional body to represent translators in Malaysia. Setting up of a professional body is seen as the best step in registering the practicing translators and giving them legal recognition and certification to practice translating. This will also allow for standardization of service rates and ensure that professional translators do not lose out when competing with amateur translators. The professional body that is set up would also be a representative association to liaise with the government and related agencies to ensure the welfare of translators as a whole.

Apart from setting up of a regulatory body, there is also a need to educate the public on the merits of engaging professional translators to do translation work and on the meaningful contribution translators make to society. This would help change the perceptions of the public towards translators and would also encourage them to engage the service of professional translators to carry out their assignments. Providing a legal representative body and educating the public would definitely help change the perceptions of translators towards their profession. With all of these steps taken, it is hoped that one day translating will gain a full-fledged professional status and will be placed on par with other established professions in society.

As this research has shed light on the status and self-perceptions of translators in Malaysia, further efforts can be directed to investigate in greater depth other aspects which are closely related to establishing the professional status of a translator. These aspects include professional development, adherence to a code of ethics, the use of quality standards and the possible barriers standing in the way of the accreditation of translators and the institutionalization of a professional body for translators. Alternatively, similar research can also be done on a bigger scale to include more translators. The number of respondents should be randomly selected and substantial enough to represent the population of professional translators in East and West Malaysia or could even be extended to the ASEAN region. This



would then provide an Asian perspective to complement the study on the status of translators in the European Union.

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