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Embracing complexity: challenges for translator and interpreter education in a technology-driven world

The world is becoming an increasingly complex ecosystem. Recent technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence, are happening very quickly and are expected to be disruptive. As a central element of such an ecosystem, the professions are not immune to these challenges. Profiles, skills and competences demanded by the market are changing rapidly. Some professions are predicted to disappear through automation, while others will be fundamentally changed as a result. The ability to anticipate these changes and adapt quickly is becoming a key competence for individuals and professions alike in what has been defined a constant struggle to remain relevant. While in the past the key to success has been to focus on a limited area of expertise and to acquire a high degree of narrow specialization, many thinkers take the position that such an approach won't be sufficient in an increasingly complex world.

Translators and interpreters training has largely followed this paradigm of narrow specialization. Since these professions experience a high degree of automation, individuals who complete institutionalized training in this area may face serious challenges over the course of their lives: about the relevance of their work, about their self-perception in society, about remuneration. This leads to a certain degree of uncertainty among practitioners, learners, and teachers alike. I will argue that the only possible, albeit partial, answer to this challenge is that translation and interpreting education, especially at university level, should abandon its focus on narrow specialization and embrace instead complexity as its main teaching goal. I define complexity as the ability to understand the many different parts that make up the professional ecosystem and the multiple relationships between them. While acquiring a certain number of practical and job-related skills will remain important, other abilities will be of much greater importance: emotional intelligence, mental flexibility, curiosity, and critical thinking, to name a few. Furthermore, the ability to navigate the major forces driving change in our profession, such as automation and artificial intelligence, will be key to understand and anticipate change. Translation and interpreting curricula should find a way to integrate these key abilities into their respective fields and make a transition to a complexity-oriented education.