

# Building client trust

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& membre de la SFT (France)*

CIOL Translators Day 2024 / 14 March 2024 / London



In August 2023, I was caught off guard when someone praised me for offering the same advice to translator audiences year after year.

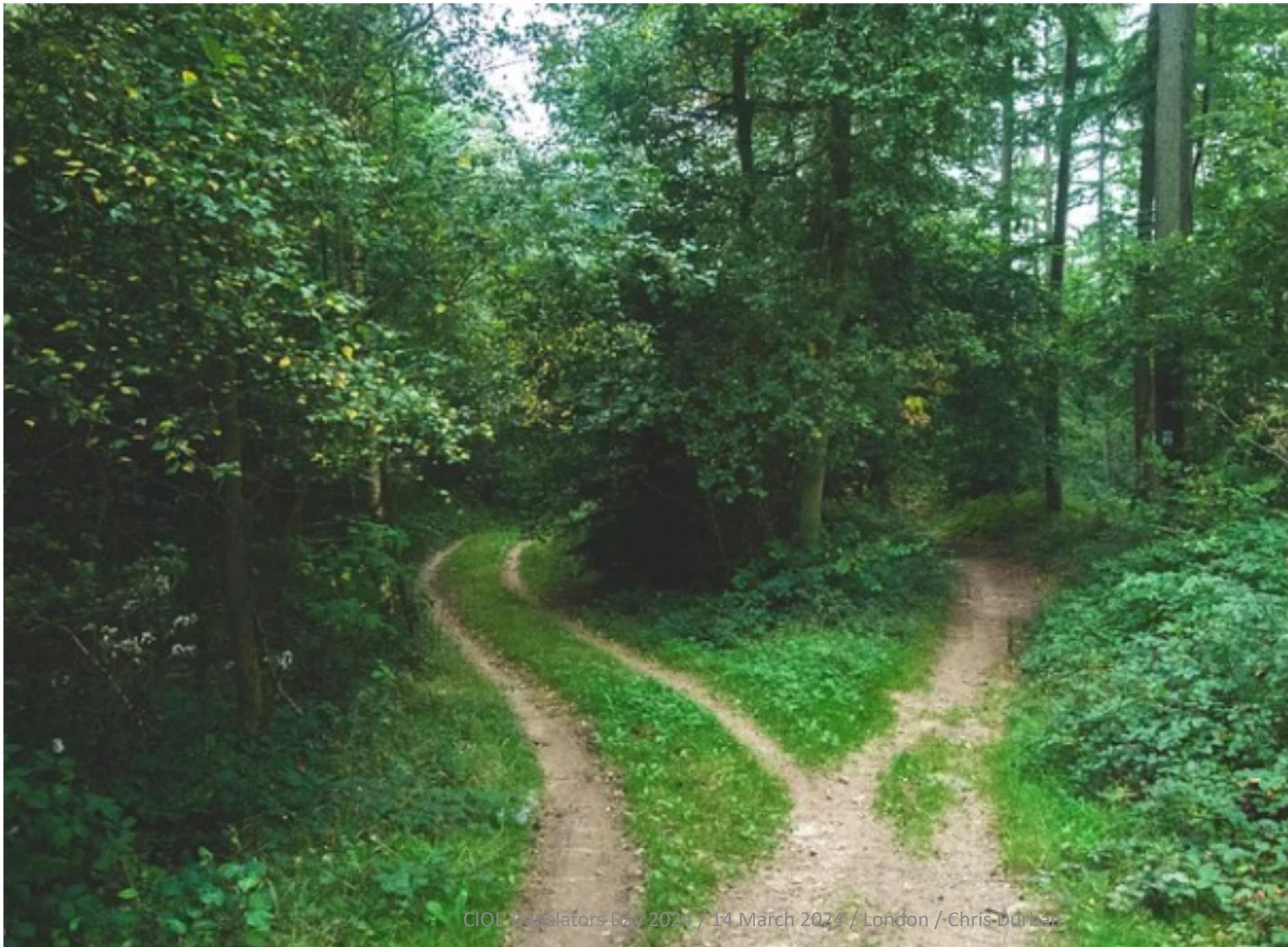
Joni Mitchell/“best of” was mentioned (flattering!).

But what if a “best of” concert morphs into... a farewell tour? I’m not ready for that.



And on second thought, was this even praise? At some point, industry observers and practitioners may stop listening to your free advice.





Whence this talk.

There are lots of paths through the forest, and tons of options for a career in languages/ translation/ interpreting.

But are there any **constants**?

Are there any hot tips from yesteryear that remain timely?

Any new insights to throw out there, gleaned from a half-century in the field?

The next slide shows one constant:

**opposing views on whether to bring clients into the translation process.**



"We're the  
language  
experts.

Trust us:

we'll

handle

everything

from A to

Z."

VS

"We're the  
language  
experts, but

we'll need

your input

and active

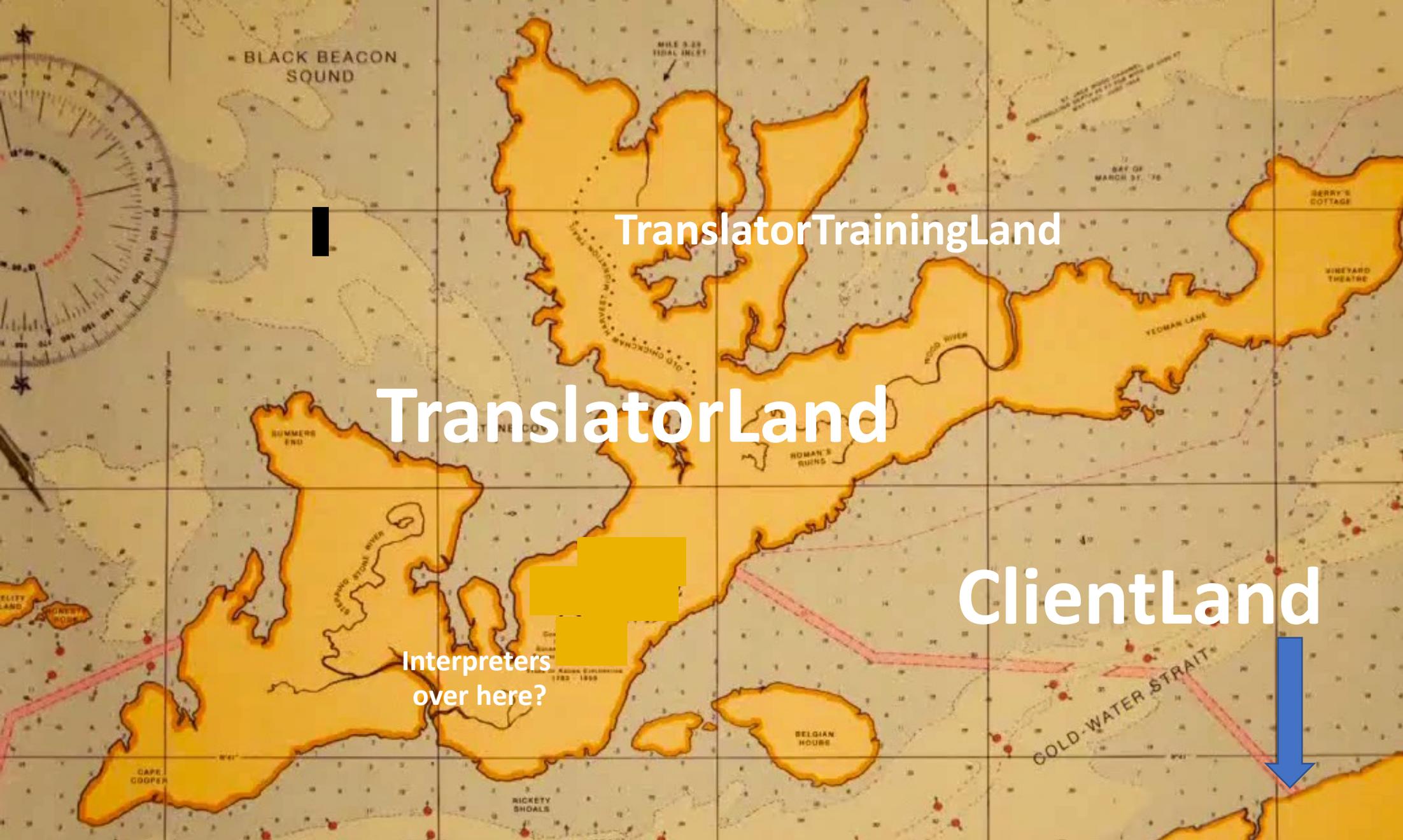
participation

for this to

work."

I'm firmly in  
the second  
column: to  
do my work  
properly, I  
need clients  
to be  
engaged  
and  
responsive.

Col. 1  
demand/  
suppliers  
definitely  
exist, but  
it's a much  
more price-  
sensitive,  
insecure  
segment.  
Less quality  
oriented.



Translator Training Land

Translator Land

Client Land

Interpreters  
over here?

Here's another constant: linguists' discomfort once outside their home territory/natural habitat. (I've heard endless earnest excuses for not crossing the Cold-Water Strait.)

But not visiting/embedding with clients in their environment has negative consequences for the quality of our work, for our job satisfaction, and for our income.

"In today's disruptive environment"

# "In today's disruptive environment"

1. In today's turbulent context
2. In today's chaotic setting
3. In today's unsettled atmosphere
4. In today's tumultuous environment
5. In today's volatile landscape
6. In today's unpredictable scenario
7. In today's unstable milieu
8. In today's disorderly context
9. In today's tumultuous situation
10. In today's disruptive climate

... it's high time  
we took the  
plunge, setting  
out for  
ClientLand.

*(Thanks, ChatGPT)*

In these tumultuous times, building an atmosphere of trust is essential.

How can we best do that?

Here's what doesn't work:

- Complaining about clients who “don’t get it”.

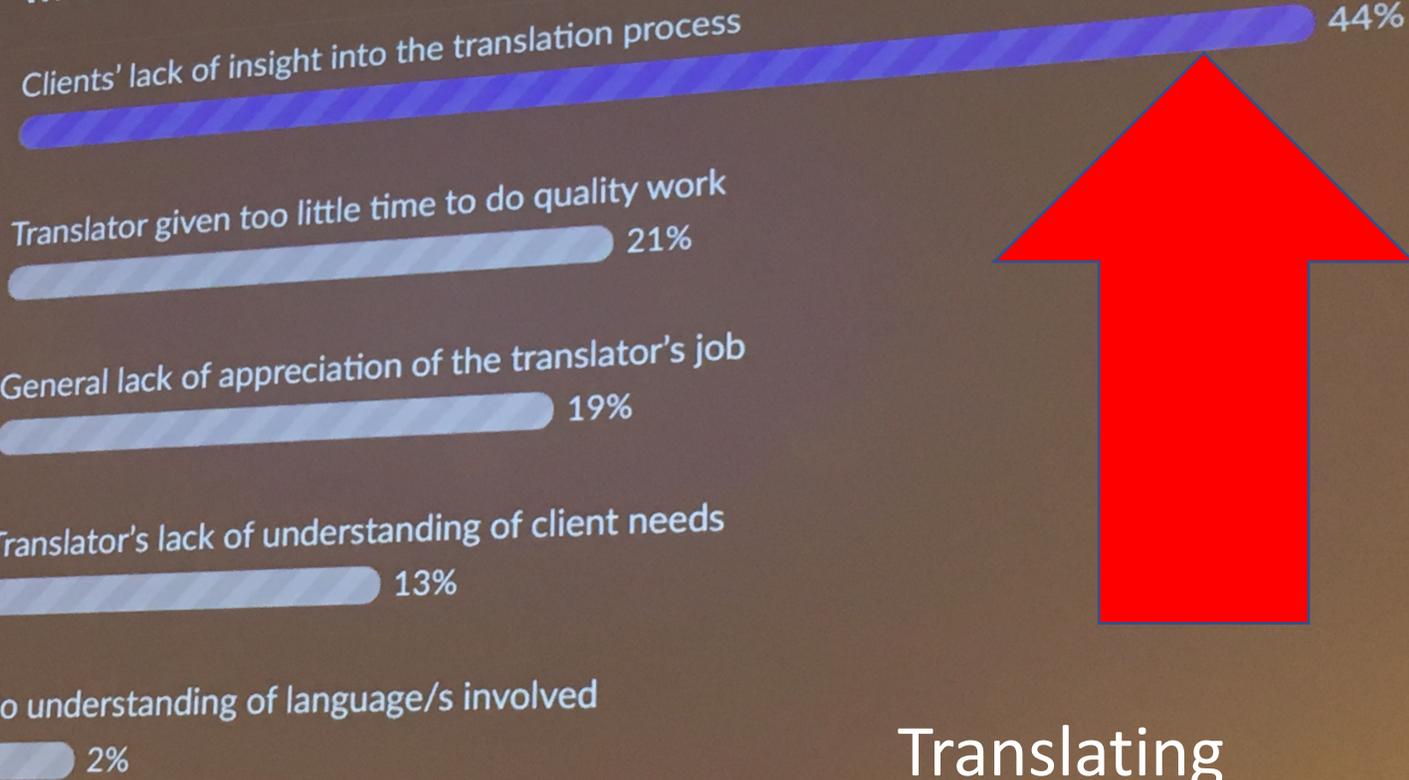
DE GASPERI (main)

Active poll



### What is the biggest problem in the client/translator relationship?

2 2 4



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**#2019TEF**

Translating  
Europe Forum  
(November 2019, Brussels)

Astonishing but true: 44% of attendees at the EC's 2019 TEF said that **CLIENTS' lack of insight into the translation process** (caps mine) was the "biggest problem in the client/translator relationship".

Seriously? Clients are busy making cars, toothbrushes, computers; delivering healthcare, justice, mass transit; financing infrastructure, start-ups, job programs. Etc., etc. They think of translation when they need us, but have a lot of other stuff on their minds.

Surely THE ONUS IS ON US (as vendors) to get them up to speed on what we do. We've failed to deliver (or have ranted or sighed when we could/should have been connecting and speaking their language).

- **Public garment-rending.**  
(Please don't.)

This doesn't work; is even counter-productive.

Am I a cruel, hard-hearted victim blamer? No.

But I've observed many, many negotiations with clients over the years, and have never once seen a potential buyer respond to "It's not fair!"/ "My business is going under!"/ "I will soon be stocking supermarket shelves!" by smacking their forehead as scales fall from eyes... and offering better pay/conditions.

So by all means undertake collective action (associations are great for this), but our aim has to be for end clients to discover/realize how brilliant/amazing our work is—how essential it is to them/the public. Not how hard done by translators are.

Individual tales of woe in public places are simply not effective.

- Viewing social media as the ultimate channel for “business interactions”.

Social media = a fine venue for interacting with other linguists and getting on their radar screens. Posts on LinkedIn to display writing skills and create a “brand” — sure!

**But you are still in your TranslatorLand comfort zone.** End clients are doing their stuff elsewhere. And we would benefit from being there, especially (but not only) for insights on their real priorities.

Note, too, that the “advice” many lovely, energetic, charismatic xlation influencers give is often 100% pure T-Land output. Not necessarily bad or poor, but definitely incomplete.

- Trotting out “universal statements”.

Very few apply in all circumstances, and those that do are bland/obvious (e.g., “the critical importance of communication across borders...”).

To keep eyes from glazing over, try using examples from clients’ own world(s), in as much detail as possible: hair extensions, water bottles with logos, amazing cartoons, etc.

- **Over-selling.**

And it's not just sleek translation intermediaries doing it—boasting about the 3,000 worldclass linguists on their books and world-class technology, all languages, all fields.

Freelancers fall into the trap, too...

"Aéronef, Agriculture, Agronomie, Anatomie, Aquaculture, Architecture navale et Ingénierie marine, Astrophysique, Automobile, Aviation, Banque et Finance, Biochimie, Bio-ingénierie et Ingénierie biomédicale, Biologie, Biologie marine et aquatique, Biologie moléculaire, Biomédical, Biométrie, Biophysique, Biostatistique, Biotechnologie, Botanique, Céramique, Chauffage, Climatisation et Réfrigération, Chimie, Chimie des polymères, Chimie théorique, Commerce (général), Commerce : Administration et Gestion, Criminologie, Droit, Écologie, Économie, Entomologie, Fibres, Textiles, Recherche généalogique, Génétique, Géochimie, Géophysique et Géologie, Gestion de données, Impôts, Ingénierie, Ingénierie aérospatiale, Ingénierie industrielle, Ingénierie métallurgique, Ingénierie minière, Ingénierie nucléaire, Informatique, Mathématiques, Mathématiques appliquées, Médecine – Dentisterie, Médecine – Promotion de la santé publique, Médecine – Médecine du travail, Médecine – Microbiologie et bactériologie, Médecine – Neurosciences, Médecine – Pharmacologie, Médecine – Psychiatrie, Médecine – Soins infirmiers, Médecines médicales, Médecine – Toxicologie, Médecine légale, Océanographie, Optique mathématique et théorique, Production Assistée par Ordinateur, Psychologie, Radiobiologie, Santé, Science (générale), Science de l'environnement, Science des pêcheries et de la pêche, Sciences de la Terre, Météorologie, Sciences et Ingénierie textiles, Sciences informatiques, Technologies militaires, Technologies minière et pétrolière, Télécommunications, Transport, Vétérinaire, Zoologie"

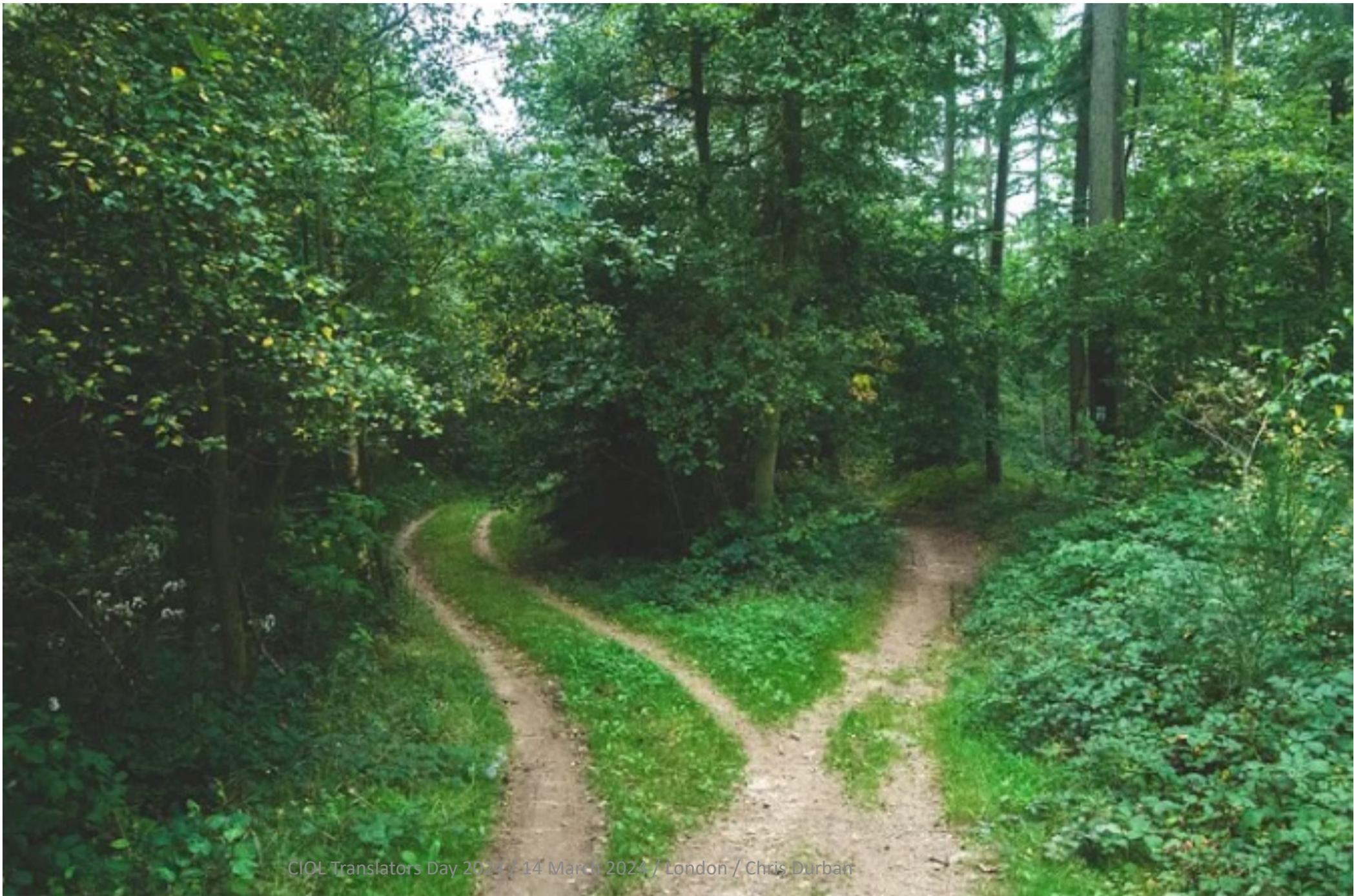
**This is a genuine listing of one (1) translator's claimed areas of expertise.**

**THIS IS AN ABSURD BUSINESS STRATEGY IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR SERIOUS CLIENTS.**

**(Even an agency making such claims looks ridiculous.)**

**DON'T DO THIS.**

- *« For what it's worth, I've started working with two new direct clients this year – large law firms I'd have previously considered out of reach given how the bulk of patent translation, on the face of it, is done by big, MT-heavy agencies. Both firms told me they had tried all the usual suspects and were tired of getting mediocre quality and of not knowing who their translators actually were. One of my new contacts even posed as a freelance translator to find out what it's like working with the big guns and was horrified by the rates, conditions, etc. they imposed.*
- *Ultimately, clients want high-quality work for their money, and I think many are starting to see that that's not what they're getting from the big LSPs – or any company like XYZ paying their translators those ridiculous rates. I'm sure lots of them would rather work with specialist freelancers or groups of freelancers – we just need to be more visible so that they can find us! »*



# Ways ahead?

- **Venture forth!**

(Get yourself out of TranslatorLand / translator caves)

See next two slides.  
During Covid, I took methods that work well at live events into panel discussions and webinars in my clients' industries. Example? Use Q&A to ask industry leaders insightful Qs that are short/to the point and demonstrate that you are part of their tribe. Include a language hook if you like, but it should be non-commercial. No pitching, no whining. Why? Connections to speakers are much easier when you can thank them for answering your Q at event XYZ.



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#### Q&A

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**CD Chris Durban** 8 minutes ago

I'm interested in how you see outreach to readers in other languages (eg NYTimes with select articles in Spanish & Chinese); FT publishing subtitled itvw with Pres. Macron in orig French, then transcript). Do you see this type of outreach expanding or are the logistics simply too complicated?

Q&A



# A EUROPE FIT FOR THE NEXT GENERATION?

stateoftheunion.eu



**Transport Recovery: Which Role for Railways?**



9.00 – 13.30 CEST  
**Channel 1**

9.00 – 13.30 CEST  
**Channel 2**

9.00 – 13.30 CEST  
**Channel 3**

9.00 – 13.30 CEST  
**Channel 4**

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### Live debate:

Comments Community

Favorite 2 Sort by Newest

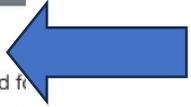
Join the discussion

**B I U S** **Post**

**Chris Durban** · 42 minutes ago

Could you comment on lessons learned from European rail integration from the various national programs offering free rail tickets to Ukrainian refugees (cross-border coordination seems a little patchy).

Edit · Reply · Share



- Give advice with examples, humor and grace.  
(And wiggle room.)

Client education is essential, but as already noted is done best through examples and humor—not ranting, not shaming, and not bland, worthy universal statements that everyone has already heard and agreed with at least once, then just as quickly forgotten.

So: by all means give upbeat do's and don'ts, but use examples and allow for exceptions (= a reminder of how complex language services can be).

# Translation Getting it Right



**A guide to  
buying translation**

**If you're not a linguist  
yourself, buying translations  
can be frustrating.**

**The suggestions in this guide  
are aimed at reducing stress  
and helping you get the most  
out of your translation budget.**

**Q: Translation, interpreting  
– what's the difference?  
A: Translators write;  
interpreters speak.**

If you're working with written documents – a user manual for your German customers, billboards for a sales campaign in Argentina, reports filed in Chinese by your new subsidiary in Shanghai that you must read and understand – you need a *translator*.

If you want to interact with people in a foreign language on the spot – a lab tour with Mexican visitors, a board meeting in Japan, a parents' evening with a family recently arrived from Romania – you need an *interpreter*.

NB these brochures exist in 19 languages, published in tandem with national translator associations in as many countries.

3

ITI is currently revising the content. Watch this space!

## Tell the translator what it's for

A speech is not a website. A sales brochure is not a catalogue entry. A graph heading is not a directional sign. An article in the *Daily Mail* is not a prospectus for an initial public offering.

Style, pronounceability, word choice, phrasing and sentence length will all vary, depending on where your text will appear and what you want it to achieve. An experienced translator will probably ask you for this information, so make sure you know yourself.

You'll get best results by developing an ongoing relationship with a translator or team of translators. The longer you work with them and the better they understand your business philosophy, strategy and products, the more effective their texts will be.

 **Be sure to tell your translators what your text is for, so that they can prepare a foreign-language version with maximum impact for that particular audience and medium.**

## Teachers, academics and students: at your own risk

For many companies faced with foreign-language texts, the first stop is the language department of a local school or university. While this may – sometimes – work for inbound translation (e.g. when you want to find out what the other guys are up to), it is **extremely** risky for outbound material, especially promotional texts.

Teaching a foreign language is a demanding activity that requires a special set of skills. These are rarely the same as those needed to produce a smooth, stylish translation. The risks are even greater if you opt for student translators, which may seem like a nice, inexpensive option.

 **Would you approve of medical students performing minor operations to pay their way through medical school? (Would you describe your brochure/letter/annual report/speech as "minor"?) Would you have your company's financial statements prepared by business students to save money?**

Short heading

Points dev'd w/ examples, engaging tone, exceptions

Call to action

- **Speak your client's language.**  
(The importance of tribal tongues.)

So: speak and write French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Greek, etc. fluently, as a matter of course (and respect for clients). But also use forays into ClientLand to interact and up your game on the **issues, phrasing, register and vocab** of the client industries you are targeting. Specializing and frequenting client watering holes are vital first steps in becoming part of their tribe.

From the Economist 29dec2023

I recently had a very disturbing thought.  
I don't feel like I am an impostor.  
Does that mean I actually am one?

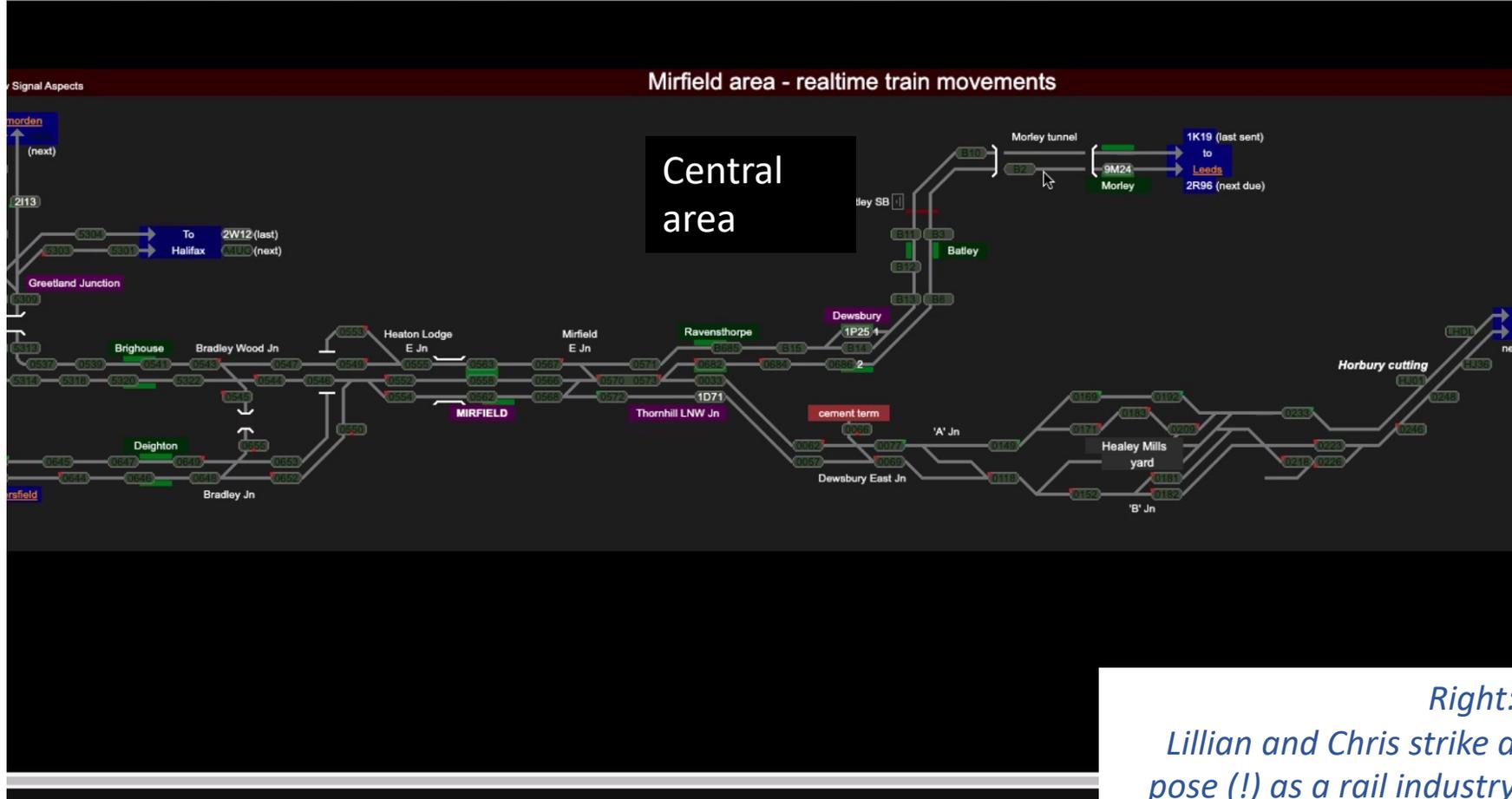
This Q&A/agonny aunt exchange ran in The Economist.

Our TranslatorLand gurus regularly zero in on “imposter syndrome”, too!

Suggestion:

**Specialize** (as in: do the work to **really master** your subjects and skillsets) and head out into ClientLand to keep the dreaded affliction at bay.

- I'm afraid you have developed non-impostor syndrome. Impostor syndrome, the much more common condition, is the worry that you are not good enough to take on certain roles. If you own up to this feeling, you will almost certainly be told that you are way better than the people who blithely hold those roles now. If you have non-impostor syndrome, you start to wonder whether you are one of the people they mean and therefore deeply incompetent. The only known cure for non-impostor syndrome is impostor syndrome.



Right: Lillian and Chris strike a pose (!) as a rail industry specialist (met via Q&A in a panel discussion of top experts) unravels a switching issue for us.

- **Become a better translator.**

AKA a better wordsmith.

(Translation technology is the easy part.)

- **Charge accordingly.**

(If you are a serious professional translator, this will be far more than “the going rate” discussed on social media / on the street.)



**Translator discomfort with money!**

**Q1: What is that all about?**

**Q2: Perhaps linked to a pervasive  
anti-business bias?**

**(Q3: Are these linguists all trust-fund babies?)?**

## Top 10 barriers to rewarding career

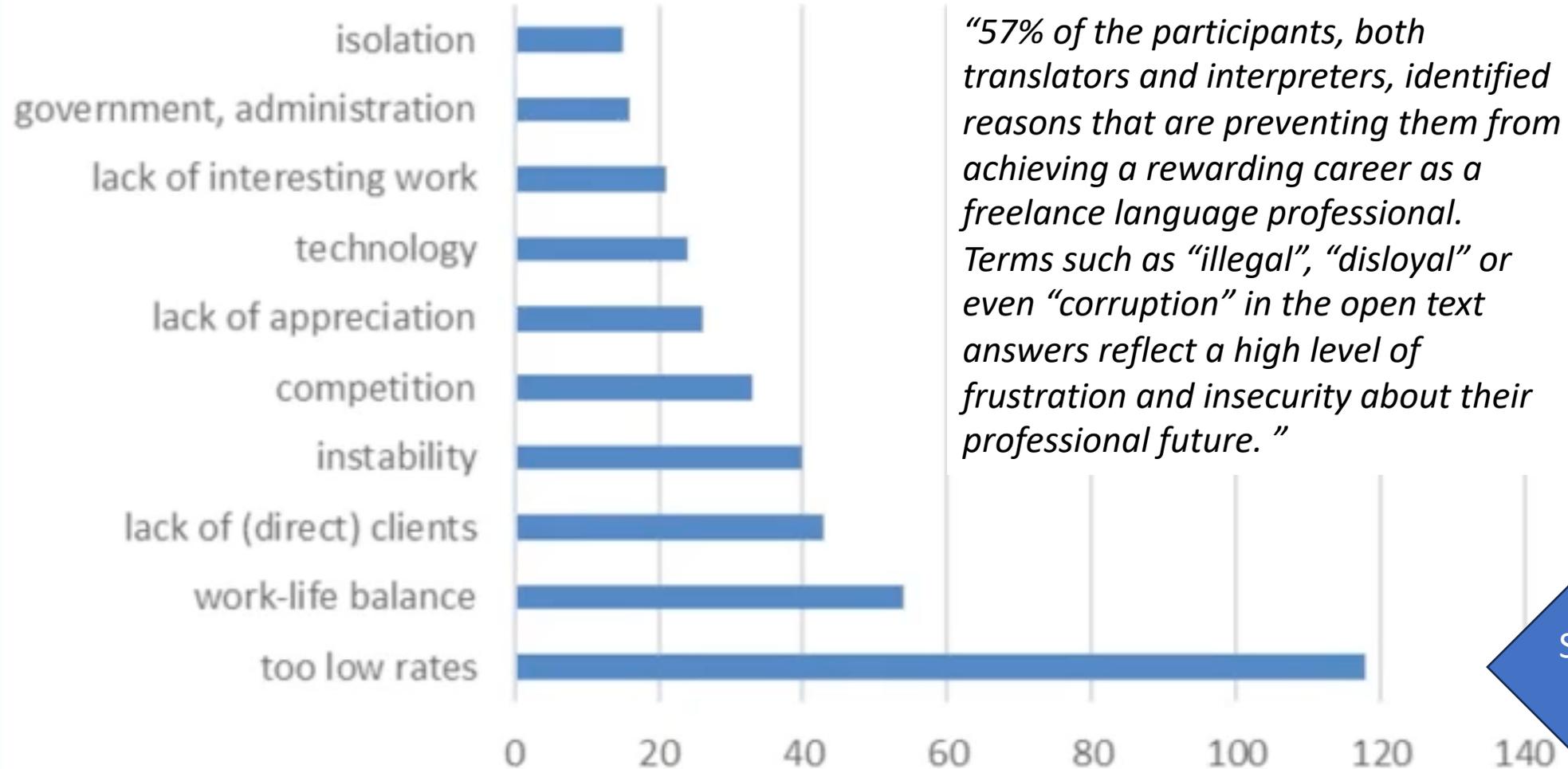


Figure 35 - Barriers to a rewarding career as independent professional, ELIS 2023 Report

*“57% of the participants, both translators and interpreters, identified reasons that are preventing them from achieving a rewarding career as a freelance language professional. Terms such as “illegal”, “disloyal” or even “corruption” in the open text answers reflect a high level of frustration and insecurity about their professional future.”*

Seems to be an issue!

Interesting figure here:

Extrait d'un article de L'Écho belge : "**La traduction d'une seule page au sein des institutions européennes revenait en 2019 à 145 euros et une heure d'interprétariat coûtait entre 270 et 311 euros.**"

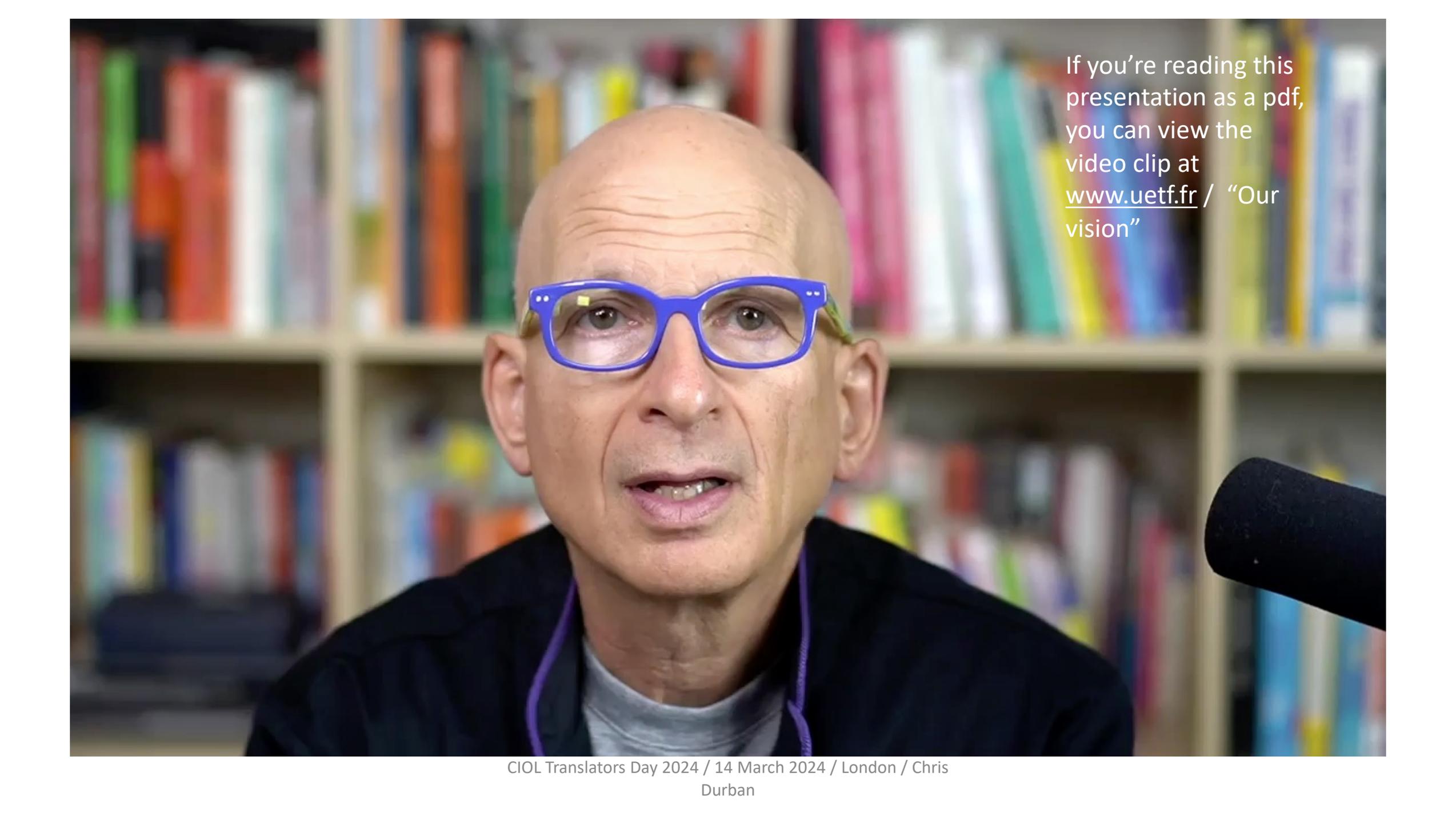
<https://www.lecho.be/entreprises/techno ... 94633.html>

I can't speak for interpreters, but for specialized translators in my field who spend time in ClientLand, rates are very definitely at this level or higher—as **well they should be** given our investment to master and maintain our skills.

# Takeaways?

Translators' facility with words encourages us to talk *around* key issues rather than face up to them. E.g., portfolios, marketing, genuine specialization, client outreach, value pricing, etc.—all essential.

- Clients are our bread and butter: trust on both sides is vital. And if we're selling, the ball is in our court.
- Respect for clients is non-negotiable—at the very least for the length of the job you're doing for them (!).
- Pre-MT/AI, some translators were coasting on lifestyle behaviors and actively avoiding clients (a comfort zone issue?). That's tougher now.
- Likewise, some translators have slipped into the habit of delivering “translations” that are exercises in word replacement using technology as a ~~tool~~ crutch. Here's the bad news for them: advances in tech are making word replacement less viable.

A man with a bald head and blue-rimmed glasses is speaking. He is wearing a dark blue jacket over a light blue t-shirt. The background is a bookshelf filled with books of various colors. A black microphone is visible on the right side of the frame.

If you're reading this presentation as a pdf, you can view the video clip at [www.uetf.fr](http://www.uetf.fr) / "Our vision"

Thanks for listening.  
Feedback always welcome:  
[chris.durban@gmail.com](mailto:chris.durban@gmail.com)