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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE TRANSLATOR'S PROFESSION IN THE AI ERA

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Abstract. This article analyses the transformation of the translator's profession under the impact of artificial intelligence, with a focus on literary translation. The evolution of translation technology is traced from computer-assisted translation (CAT) to neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs), and the changing division of labour between human translators and machines is examined. The concept of the translator's new professional identity is developed: from 'creator' to 'creator-controller', integrating classical translation competence with technological, diagnostic, and evaluative skills. Empirical observations show that translators who master post-editing work faster without quality loss, while those who resist technological change face declining competitiveness. The article proposes a framework for professional transition: retraining programmes, new specialisations (literary post-editor, MT quality evaluator, corpus curator), and adaptation of professional ethics. The conclusion argues that AI does not eliminate the translator but redefines the profession's centre of gravity: from production to supervision, from execution to judgement.

Keywords: translator profession, artificial intelligence, machine translation, professional identity, post-editing, retraining.

I. INTRODUCTION

The translation profession is undergoing its most significant transformation since the invention of printing. Artificial intelligence — in the form of neural machine translation and large language models — has moved from research laboratories to everyday practice, changing what translators do, how they work, and what clients expect. This transformation is often described in apocalyptic terms ('the end of the translator'), but the reality is more nuanced: the profession is not disappearing but restructuring. This article analyses that restructuring, focusing on literary translation where human judgement remains most critical. It draws on translation technology research (Vieira, 2019; Moorkens et al., 2018; Macken et al., 2022), professional studies (Koponen, 2016), and Uzbek translation practice observations (Isomiddinova, 2024; Yendirboyeva, 2025).

II. THE TECHNOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY: FROM CAT TO LLM

Translation technology has evolved through four stages, each changing the translator's role. Stage 1: CAT tools (1990s) — translation memory and terminology management; the translator remained the sole producer, with technology providing efficiency. Stage 2: Statistical MT (2000s) — usable for gisting but not for professional output; the translator's role unchanged. Stage 3: Neural MT (2016–) — near-human fluent output for many text types; the translator becomes a post-editor, reviewing and correcting machine output. Stage 4: LLMs (2022–) — general-purpose language models capable of translation, style transfer, and text generation; the translator's role expands further to prompt engineering, output evaluation, and creative direction. Each stage shifts more of the production burden to machines and more of the quality responsibility to humans. The trajectory is clear: machines produce, humans supervise. The question for the profession is how to build supervisory competence at scale (Vieira, 2019).

III. THE CHANGING DIVISION OF LABOUR

The division of labour between human translators and AI can be analysed along three dimensions. Dimension 1: production vs supervision. Classically, translators produced translations; increasingly, they supervise machine production — detecting errors, correcting style, ensuring quality. Dimension 2: execution vs judgement. Machines execute (generating text rapidly); humans judge (deciding what is correct, appropriate, beautiful). Judgement is harder to automate than execution, which is why it remains the human core of the profession. Dimension 3: speed vs depth. Machines optimise for speed and volume; humans provide depth — cultural nuance, authorial voice, aesthetic effect. In literary translation, depth is the product: readers do not buy words but worlds. The new division of labour assigns speed to machines and depth to humans — a rational specialisation. Moorkens et al. (2018) found that literary translators resist post-editing because it feels like 'correcting someone else's homework', but those who master it report satisfaction with the efficiency gains.

IV. THE NEW PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: CREATOR-CONTROLLER

The translator's professional identity is shifting from 'creator' to 'creator-controller'. The creator-controller does not merely translate or merely correct; they direct the translation process, using machines for production and their own judgement for quality. This identity integrates classical translation competence (language, culture, aesthetics) with new competencies: technological (MT literacy, prompt engineering, tool management), diagnostic (error detection, quality assessment), and evaluative (judging machine output against professional standards). The creator-controller's value proposition to clients changes: not 'I translate your text' but 'I guarantee your text's quality in the target language, using the most efficient combination of human and machine work'. This positioning is commercially stronger than either pure human translation (too slow, too expensive for volume) or raw MT (too risky for quality). Ustinova (2025) describes this as the translator's transition from 'artisan' to 'quality director' — a professional elevation, not a degradation.

V. EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS: ADAPTATION AND RESISTANCE

Observations from Uzbek translation practice illustrate the transition dynamics. Group A: experienced literary translators who adopted post-editing. They report 40–50% time savings on first drafts, with final quality maintained (since they control the artistic layer). Initial resistance ('MT produces rubbish') gave way to pragmatic use ('MT gives me a rough canvas; I paint the picture') after training. Group B: translators who resisted technological change. They maintain quality but face declining competitiveness on price and speed; some report losing clients to cheaper MT+post-editing providers. Group C: new entrants trained in post-editing from the start. They reach professional productivity faster than previous generations but risk a skills gap: without deep classical training, their post-editing may miss artistic-aesthetic errors. The observations suggest a paradox: technology raises the floor (everyone can produce faster) but also raises the ceiling (the best translators, combining classical depth with technological fluency, outperform both traditionalists and technologists). The profession's centre of gravity shifts toward those who master both (Bogdanova, 2024; Isomiddinova, 2024).

VI. PROFESSIONAL TRANSITION: A FRAMEWORK

Managing the profession's transition requires a structured framework. Component 1: retraining programmes — short courses for practising translators on MT literacy, post-editing methodology, and tool use. Bogdanova (2024) demonstrates the effectiveness of project-based learning. Component 2: new specialisations — literary post-editor, MT quality evaluator, corpus curator, prompt engineer for translation; these create career paths beyond traditional translation. Component 3: ethics adaptation —

professional codes must address MT use disclosure, post-editor attribution, and quality responsibility; ISO 18587 provides a basis. Component 4: client education — clients must understand that MT+post-editing is not 'cheap translation' but a different service with its own quality profile; clear service level agreements prevent misunderstandings. Component 5: community building — professional associations should facilitate knowledge exchange, mentoring, and collective negotiation with technology providers. For Uzbek, the framework should be coordinated by translation organisations and universities, with international cooperation accelerating progress (Macken et al., 2022).

II-та. HISTORICAL PARALLELS: TECHNOLOGY AND THE TRANSLATION PROFESSION

The current transformation has historical precedents that offer perspective. The printing press (15th century) made texts reproducible, reducing the scribe's role but creating the publisher's; translation became a profession rather than a clerical task. The typewriter and telegraph (19th–20th centuries) changed translation workflows without changing the core skill. The computer and CAT tools (late 20th century) brought the first anxiety wave ('translators will be replaced'), which proved unfounded: the profession grew. Each wave followed the same pattern: initial anxiety, gradual adaptation, eventual integration of the technology as a normal tool, and expansion of the profession's scope. The AI wave differs in one respect: it touches not only the translator's tools but the core activity itself (text production). This makes the current transformation deeper than previous ones — but the historical lesson holds: professions that adapt their role to complement technology thrive; those that compete with technology on its terms decline. The translator's complement to AI is judgement: cultural, aesthetic, ethical. This is not a consolation prize but the profession's highest-value contribution.

IV-та. PROFESSIONAL PROFILES: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The profession's restructuring can be summarised through three profiles:

Dimension	**Traditional translator (pre-2010)**	**Post-editor (present)**	**Creator-controller (emerging)**
Core activity	producing translations	correcting MT output	directing quality
Primary skill	language + writing	language + error detection	language + judgement + tools
Technology role	support (TM, glossaries)	production (MT draft)	production + consultation (LLM)
Quality responsibility	full	full (shared with MT)	full (strategic)
Client interface	delivering text	delivering corrected text	consulting on quality strategy
Economic model	per word/page	per hour/project	value-based (quality assurance)

The table shows a profession not shrinking but stratifying. At the base, commodity translation (volume, speed, acceptable quality) is increasingly MT-served; at the top, high-value translation (literary, legal, diplomatic) remains human-dominated; in the middle, post-editing and quality assurance are growing. The strategic question for individual translators is where to position themselves; the strategic question for the profession is how to raise the value of the top tier while supporting the transition of the middle tier (Koponen, 2016; Vieira, 2019).

VI-та. ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE TRANSITION

The profession's transformation has direct economic implications. For clients: MT+post-editing reduces per-unit costs by 30–60% compared to traditional translation, making translation economically viable for content that was previously untranslated (internal communications, user-generated content, large document archives). This expands the total market: cheaper translation creates demand where none existed, a classic 'Jevons paradox' of efficiency. For translators: unit prices fall, but the volume of work requiring human judgement (quality assurance of MT output, high-value creative translation) grows; total income depends on positioning. For the literary sector specifically: the economics are ambiguous. Commercial publishers may pressure translators to use MT to cut costs, threatening quality; but MT can also make translation of marginal works (small-audience literature) economically feasible, expanding cultural diversity. The economic winners will be translators who combine speed (via MT fluency) with quality (via classical competence) — a combination that commands premium pricing in a market where raw MT is cheap but quality assurance is scarce. Uzbek literary translation faces these pressures as its market integrates with global publishing trends; developing the post-editing methodology (this series) is the profession's proactive response.

VII. CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is transforming the translation profession from production-centred to supervision-centred. The translator of the future — the creator-controller — combines classical competence (language, culture, aesthetics) with technological, diagnostic, and evaluative skills. This transformation is not a threat but an opportunity: it raises the profession's strategic value (quality direction) while delegating routine production to machines. Empirical observations show that adaptation, not resistance, is the successful strategy — but adaptation must preserve the classical core, or the profession loses its distinctive competence. For Uzbek literary translation, the path is clear: train post-editors with deep literary skills, build the methodological basis (this article series), and position the profession as the guardian of quality in the AI era. Future research should track long-term career outcomes of translators who adopted post-editing, analyse client perceptions of MT+post-editing services, and develop best practices for translator-technology collaboration in literary translation.

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