At left: Christelle Maignan at the BP16 International Conference in Prague, Czech Republic.

Translation in Transition

When we feel overconfident and think that we don't need to change anything about the way we work, we tend to underestimate change.

In the spring of 2015, my professional life took a new direction following a session I attended at the biennial conference organized by the Institute of Translation and Interpreting in the U.K. Dubbed the "Doomsday Presentation," the session focused on the future of our industry and on the changes that are happening all around us. The speaker's message was clear: we need to change because the world is changing.

The night after the session, I couldn't sleep. However, the cause of my insomnia wasn't fear over what I'd heard. It was excitement! A translator with 15 years of experience, I was also a trained and qualified coach with a particular interest in change management (i.e., in making change something positive and fulfilling).

I spent the night imagining how I would write a review of the session for my blog, how it would be shared by thousands on social media, and how I would subsequently be invited to give presentations at international conferences. My ego was having a party, the way egos sometimes do in the middle of the night.

Amazingly, my review—entitled "What Does the Future Hold for Translators?"— has had over 4,000 views, indicating a strong interest in the topic. I was invited to give my first conference presentation soon after publishing it, and more invitations followed. The following highlights some of the points I discussed at the BP16 International Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, earlier this year.[1]

THE TECHNOLOGICAL SIDE OF CHANGE

While many of us perceive progress as linear and the speed of change as more or less constant, progress actually follows an exponential trend where the speed of change increases constantly. If we look at technology over the history of humankind, it becomes clear that there have been far more developments over the past 100 years than in any other century.

This exponential trend is happening in the translation industry as well. In terms of machine translation (MT), for instance, rule-based MT had many limitations initially and was hardly used. Once it was combined with statistical MT its application spread quickly across millions of users. Developers are now saying that machine learning using artificial neural networks could lead to even faster improvements in the next few years.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT MT

But technological progress in translation is not limited to MT. Computer-aided translation (CAT) tools are also evolving quickly. A number of applications, such as Memsource and XTM Cloud, are now taking advantage of the capabilities offered by the cloud, thus eliminating the need for installation on your computer.

High-speed Internet connections are also enabling a growing number of translators and interpreters to interact with peers, share knowledge, raise their professional profiles, and connect with potential clients via social media. Moreover, social media technologies have led to crowdsourcing, which is used to enlist the services of a large number of people who will often work for free or at a very low rate (much to the chagrin of bona fide language professionals).

Translation start-ups offering a combination of MT and crowdsourcing have appeared over the past decade to respond to a growing demand for a high volume of fast and affordable translation. Start-ups like Gengo have created apps that allow access to bilingual people anywhere in the world at the click of a button (although not necessarily to people who are professional translators).

We could call such start-ups the Ubers of translation, and while most translators won't feel threatened by them—because

these start-ups tend to target the low end of the market—these apps could create some disruption in our industry. By automating the project management side of things, such apps could make the work of many intermediary translation agencies redundant, a phenomenon known as disintermediation.

It's important to point out, however, that a number of start-ups have the interests of translators at heart and aim to boost our productivity by putting technology at our service. For example, Lilt has developed a cloud-based translation application that combines MT with auto-adaptive machine learning to help us fulfill our clients' need for faster translations.

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THE HUMAN SIDE OF CHANGE

Hearing about all these changes in our profession can trigger various emotions, including fear and anger. When change disrupts the way we're used to doing things, it's natural to feel threatened. As human beings, we have three basic responses to a perceived threat that we inherited from our prehistoric ancestors.

When faced with a dangerous predator, our ancestors could choose between fighting it (fight response), running away (flight response), or playing dead in the hope that it would lose interest and simply move on (freeze response). We still use these three responses today in the form of anger, fear, and denial.

The third response (choosing not to do anything about a threat or a change) is very common for two reasons. First, our modern lives can be complicated. It's often easier to ignore change and hope that it won't stick and that things will soon go back to normal. Second, when we feel overconfident and think that we
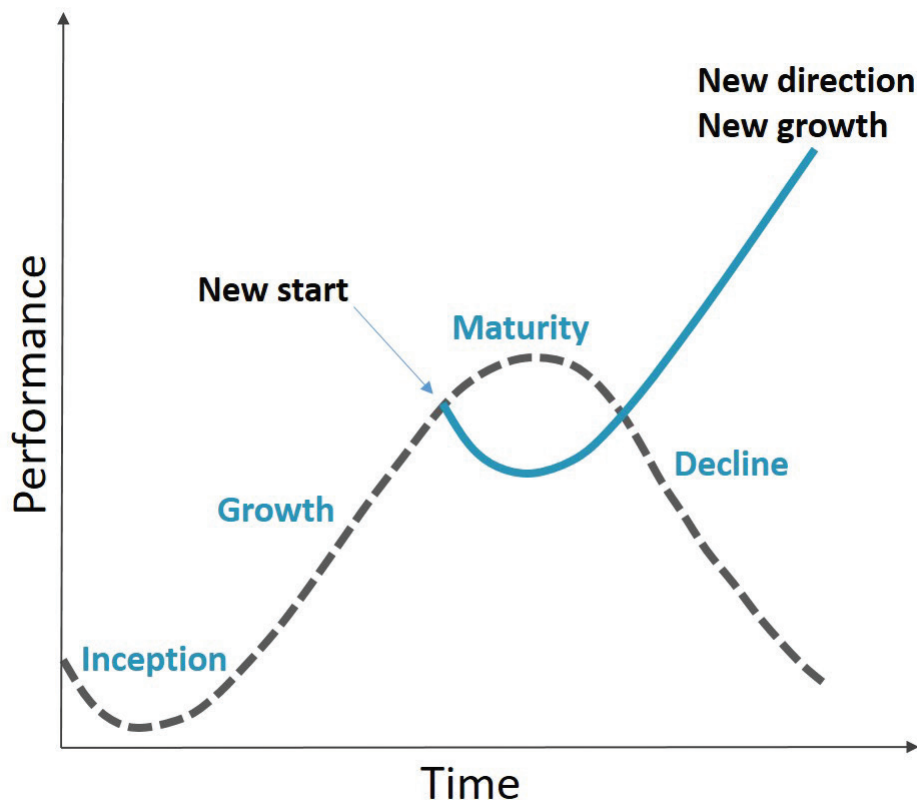

Figure 1: The Translator's Second Curve

don't need to change anything about the way we work, we tend to underestimate change. We feel complacent.

Stagnation: Complacency is dangerous in business because it leads to stagnation. When we underestimate competitors who are innovative, we run the risk of being overtaken by them. As translators, we are small business owners, so complacency is an attitude we need to avoid if we want to remain successful. There are better and more productive ways of dealing with change.

Transformation: In the worst-case scenario, if we don't like the way things change around us, we always have the option of "quitting" and doing something else. The outcome will depend largely on our attitude at the time of our decision. I know a translator who decided to quit and become a therapist. She was happy with her decision, so her transformation was a positive move.

Adaptation: If "quitting" isn't an option—and I expect it isn't for most of us—then adapting to change is the only way we can

ensure sustainability. This can be achieved in several different ways or a combination of the following:

1. **Adoption:** We can embrace new technologies and integrate them into our current practices. For example, we can use social media for marketing purposes, or create our own MT engines from our translation memories using applications like Slate Desktop.

2. **Specialization/Premiumization:** We can become experts in specific niches and target the higher end of the market where our skills as professional human translators are increasingly valued.

3. **Diversification:** We can offer new products and services through intra- or extra-linguistic diversification. For instance, online technologies have made it easier for people to create secondary or additional revenue streams, often from the comfort of their own homes.

4. **Collaboration:** We can work with developers and help them build applications that truly enhance translators' working conditions and boost productivity.

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Unlike stagnation, transformation and adaptation require that we change ourselves. William Bridges, a change management expert, calls this process transition.[2] Transitions are the internal process through which we deal with external change. They usually happen over a period of time.

THE BUSINESS SIDE OF CHANGE

In nature and in life, things tend to progress in cycles, which is also true in business. All businesses experience change throughout their lifecycles, which can be represented as a curve showing their performance over time.

The first phase in the lifecycle of a business is called inception. It often involves a dip in performance due to a period of learning and hard work, where an initial investment can be necessary. This is usually the case at the start of a translation business.

If all goes well, the business then enters a growth phase. As freelance translators, this is a time when we feel energized and confident as our client base expands.

The curve then reaches the maturity phase, where the momentum of the growth phase begins to slow down and energy levels begin to drop. The business gets comfortable and reaches a plateau. Things start to stagnate. As freelance translators, this could mean working full-time, with no capacity left for new clients, which means no growth.

The curve finally enters a decline phase, which can be caused by a number of factors. For freelance translators, this could mean being superseded by a competitor who charges less or uses technology that is better suited to the market's needs. A decline is not always negative. It could mean simply that the business owner is scaling back activity in preparation for retirement.

THE SECOND CURVE

According to social and business commentator Charles Handy, there is no need to worry about the decline phase, as we can always start a second curve[3] with a new product or service, new business practices, or a new life project. (See Figure 1 on page 23.)

If the first curve represents our current situation, then the second curve could represent the transformation approach (a new career) or the adaptation approach (embracing technology, specializing, diversifying, etc.), as described above.

IS IT THE RIGHT TIME FOR CHANGE?

With this concept of the second curve in mind, many of us may be asking ourselves: "Should I change?" As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus pointed out around 500 BC, change is the only constant. Change happens and will continue to happen with or without us. Therefore, the question we should ask instead is: "How can I change in a way that will work both for me and for my clients?" As the world keeps evolving, we need to keep evolving as well. ◯

NOTES

1. For more information, please visit bp16conf.com/video to access a recording of my presentation.

2. Bridges, Williams. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (New York: Gildan Media, 2nd edition, 2007), Audible edition.

3. Handy, Charles. *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society* (London: Random House, 2015), Audible edition.

Christelle Maignan has been working as an English>French translator for over 15 years, and freelancing since 2004. She specializes in psychometrics, employee training programs, and information technology. She is also a trained and qualified coach and the founder of Coaching For Translators. She helps translators and interpreters reach their goals via her blog, her online course ("The Future-Proof Translator"), and one-on-one coaching sessions over the phone and on Skype. She is a member of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting and the International Coach Federation. Contact: info@coachingfortranslators.com.