

Emily Stewart

A Black Swan Experience in Translation: The V Congreso Latinoamericano de Traducción e Interpretación

Not long ago, I came across the notion of the Black Swan in an e-mail. In my bad habit of erring on the side of efficiency in place of curiosity, I failed, at the time, to find out what those two words really meant.

A few weeks later, the e-mail came up in a different conversation, and I mentioned my ignorance of the term's meaning. Though I had once dismissed it as some off-the-cuff reference of little significance, at a colleague's suggestion, I looked into the implications of the words.

A few keystrokes and clicks later, I found myself on Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>) and had the answer to my question.

The Black Swan.

The Black Swan Theory is one used to explain the existence and occurrence of high-impact, hard-to-predict and rare events that are beyond the realm of normal expectations. Though used generally for history-changing, world-magnitude incidences, I found the term extremely applicable to a small situation of my own – my story with translation.

If ever anyone came into the world of translation by surprise, it is me.

Two years ago, I found myself living in Buenos Aires, Argentina, having translated my life to a different continent post-college. My Columbia University degree in Comparative Literature & Society was certainly something I appreciated in academic terms. In the working world, however, the career paths to which it led were less-than-clear.

The job search began, and as survival must in the end trump interest, I began sending resumes by the bulk, offering my services in virtually anything, anywhere – as long as it paid.

One day, I received an unexpected reply, a personal Black Swan Event that changed the course of my professional life.

I'd sent my resume to Ediciones Lea (<http://www.edicioneslea.com/>), an Argentine publishing house, in reply to the company's search for a receptionist. The answer I received was the following: though I was not fit for a receptionist position, I may be interested in a different type of work.

The editors were looking to publish a bilingual version of the classic Argentine epic poem *Martín Fierro* (<http://www.edicioneslea.com/libro.php?id=255>). Would I be bold enough to approach it?

Had I known at the time what the project would entail, I probably would have said no. Thanks to my ignorance, however, I accepted.

Nine months later, I found myself in the position of published translator. One year later, a freelancer with a respectable amount of experience. Two years later, an employee at a well-respected Argentine translation and localization agency. And two weeks ago, attending my very first industry conference – the V Congreso Latinoamericano de Traducción e Interpretación (<http://www.vcongreso2010.org.ar/>).

Prior to the conference, I honestly was not sure what to expect. What would it be like? Who would I talk to? Would anyone notice that I was a rookie?

On day one, my impressions were general ones. Beautiful hotel. Lots of people. Tables of translation books. Little gathering space. Expensive refreshments (no freebies).

Along with a colleague, I marked off the seminars I wished to attend, and with that, I was off!

The issues covered by the different chats and speeches were wide-ranging, falling anywhere from Borges to machine translation and rates. I personally leaned towards the modern-themed talks about technology, business and trends – my newness to the industry rendered a lot of the more “historical” discussions a bit obsolete for me.

What I found in most of what I encountered was a unique blend of the contemporary international localization industry and the Latin American translation scene.

What do I mean by this Latin American flare?

First of all, the conference was held in Argentina, where the translation community is quite close-knit (though not small). Translation is a popular field of study here, and most of those who choose it attend a few select schools – the number one among them, the Universidad de Buenos Aires (<http://www.uba.ar/homepage.php>). This fact, coupled with the Colegio de Traductores de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (<http://www.traductores.org.ar/>) to which most certified translators in the area belong, means that many of the attendees already knew one another. In other words, breaking into the already-formed groups was not impossible, but definitely not easy.

Networking was rendered increasingly difficult by the lack of common space in the hotel itself. Where there was space, there were tables and chairs with a café-like set-up that required an investment in food or drink to occupy (here in Argentina, nothing is for free).

I did manage to make some contacts – one in particular sticks out in my mind – the owner of an interpretation agency in the Midwest with whom I'd had contact prior to our personal meeting at the conference. She seemed much more interested in finding out how a girl from a farm town in Wisconsin could manage to end up in Buenos Aires than discussing business, and I was happy to oblige. However, when personal questions about my work visa and rent prices came up, I was quite surprised.

Another underlying Latin American aspect of the Congreso beyond tight-knit peer groups and pricey snacks was politics. Prevalent all over the world, here in the regional translation industry, the issue is inevitable.

Prior to my attendance of the conference, I was warned of the common politics of translation and localization in Latin America and specifically in Argentina, much of which revolves around the rivalry between agencies and freelancers. I was told that many translators and industry bodies fight rigorously against localization agencies, which they believe do more harm to the profession than good.

I took this commentary with a grain of salt until I found myself confronted with it during a chat about rates. The speaker blamed translation companies for what he considered a gouge in rates for deserving freelance translators. The remedy? A call for political action and legislation to combat the charging of unfair rates. For the speaker, the agency was not a friend or vehicle for the freelancer – it was a foe.

Beyond politics and age-old rate debates, however, were some very intriguing seminars that I had never imagined finding at what I had been told may be a stuffy, out-of-date agenda.

One chat I attended covered Cloud Computing – something of which I had heard some rumbles but upon which I had no real grounding.

The speaker was a self-deprecating young man, sure that he was the only person even remotely interested in the topic about which he was speaking. While the 40-minute time slot he was given hardly gave him a chance to delve into the matter, he mentioned a number of online tools worth looking into, ranging from Ziddu (<http://www.ziddu.com/>) to BaseCamp (<http://basecamp.com/>). And though he seemed convinced that his theme of choice would be brushed off, it certainly wasn't – especially in the Argentine translation climate that has in the past been somewhat resistant to technology.

The seminar that really caught my attention, however, came as a complete shock – that which covered game localization.

I walked into the room to find a small Japanese woman with glasses standing at the front – unassuming, approachable, and unable to hide her bubbling love of the subject. I'm not sure whether it was her enthusiasm or my unawareness, but I found myself entirely engaged by what she had to say. My favorite part? A slide showing the protagonist of the same game localized for four markets – the United States, Germany, Korea and Japan. While the U.S. protagonist was a soldier holding a machine gun and surrounded by blood, the Korean version was a robot, the Japanese a little girl in a dress, and the German one, a clown!

My final take on my Black Swan experience at the V Congreso Latinoamericano de Traducción e Interpretación? Another introduction to the industry through a Latin American veil of expensive pastries and begrudging peers accompanied by awe at all that I do not know and have yet to learn...

Emily Stewart is employed at Win & Winnow Communications (<http://www.winandwinnow.com/>) and writes regularly for the W&W blog (<http://www.winandwinnow.com/blog/>).