**Globally Speaking**

**Podcast 79 Transcript**

**The Localization Contrarian**

**Featuring Luigi Muzzi**

Renato I’m Renato Beninatto.

Michael And I’m Michael Stevens, and today on Globally Speaking, we have a contrarian view.

Renato The author of *Upstream: The Everyday Observation of the Translation Industry from an Overly Critical Standpoint*. It’s a collection of all the articles and presentations written by our guest. He is a person who loves to write and writes long copy and has articles in several blogs. You’ve probably read some of his articles and I’ve always admired the fact that he’s against everything.

Michael I wore my referee shirt because I thought it may get intense between you two today. Our listeners will have to decide as to whether it was truly contrarian, or were there some things where we found common ground?

Renato Let our guest introduce himself.

Luigi My name is Luigi Muzii. I’m Italian. I’m an independent consultant in the field of specialized communication, specifically multilingual specialized communication. But I started as a translator, then converted into a localizer, then a terminologist, then again, a company manager because I was hired by two companies in my life.

And then in 2002, I started a career in university teaching, which lasted a decade or so. And finally, I got back to where I started, and so I came back writing and consulting for customers of the localization industry. Mostly for customers who are willing to enter the localization industry or to grow from a technological point of view within the industry, or to a lesser extent, for customers who are interested in understanding localization and translation providers. Because they are mostly, especially in Italy, they are a very peculiar kind of company.

Michael Luigi, you’re the first guest to have introduced themselves by their nationality. That’s really cool.

Renato And it’s a pity that this is not a video interview because you probably would be using your hands. “I’m Italian,” right? And so am I. So, big deal. Anyway…[laughs]

Luigi What’s impressive in Renato is that he almost never says that he has three passports.

Michael Right.

Renato Never.

Luigi He’s like a spy, you know.

[Laughter]

Renato But anyway, Luigi, I’ve followed you for many, many years, we’ve become friends over the years, and one of the things that I admire in you is your prolific writing. You’re one of the few people in the language space that writes what we call today long copy. You write very long articles, very detailed, well researched. And what drives you to put so much effort in writing and analyzing the industry?

Luigi Writing is something that specifically requires a curiosity and research for everything I’m going to describe or tell. I’m not storytelling, but I like to see every piece I write as a part of a larger picture. Something like a tapestry.

Michael One of the premises of this collection of writings you have out: you start with this idea of selling translation is hard.

Luigi Yeah.

Michael Why is it hard?

Luigi Because there’s a fundamental difference in the way the two sides of a transaction concerning translation are involved. The customers are not interested in how the translation is done. They are only interested in receiving a product because translation, every translation, is a product in itself. It’s not a service.

On the other side, the translator or the service provider is mostly interested in making the customer understand how the translation is done, the intricacies of the job and so on and so forth. And so, these are two parties that will never get to know each other enough to agree on a common ground, to reach an agreement, even on the valuation of service, on the appreciation of the product, and etcetera and so on.

When you are selling translation, you have to use a totally different approach than the usual approach you would be following when selling an automobile or a piece of machinery or whatever. It is something that I admire in people who sell translations and translation services, because I’m really not capable of doing this. I think of myself as a good negotiator but definitely not as a salesman.

Michael Is this only tied to the commoditization within the industry? Because when I think about ice cream, for instance, I have my local supermarket ice cream and I pay a few dollars for a gallon, and our family has it after dinner when we’re sitting at home. But here, where I live, if I want something special, I go out and I pay three or four times as much for gelato because it’s a different product, but also there’s a story behind the artisan gelato shop in downtown where we go and we sit outside together. Is that something that can help solve that divide between the buyer of localization services and the person who wants to talk about the beauty of the process? Or is it something completely different?

Luigi There are so many flavors in ice creams that you really have a problem in choosing one. I always have the same kinds of ice cream, the same flavors. I don’t like to change because this is how I can pick the best provider every time.

I live in Rome and I can’t really say how many ice cream shops we can count in Rome. But I, after many, many years, I now have my two or three spots in town to buy the ice cream I like the most. I always buy the same flavors.

Renato Let’s go into something a little bit more serious. How does ice cream relate to blockchain? We have done a couple of podcasts on blockchain and I know that you have a very strong opinion about this topic. You have written about it; I recommend our listeners to read Kirti Vashee’s blog, the [eMpTy Pages blog](https://kv-emptypages.blogspot.com/), about your opinion of blockchain. Tell us something that we don’t know.

Luigi Blockchain is really hard to grasp, not only as a technology, even as a concept. You know, the hash behind a blockchain is hard to grasp for people without a solid, sound knowledge of basic maths. It is also something that has to do with the primary function of blockchain.

I read on Wired an article about the breach of a blockchain, for the weak passwords used by users due to a problem in the engineering of the underlying software. So, when you get things much too complicated, you are increasing the risk of violations. I like one of the most quoted quotes of Albert Einstein, which is “Get things as simple as possible, but no simpler,” and blockchain is something that cannot get simpler. It’s uselessly complicated.

Michael Is that the number one factor that is limiting adopting in the localization industry?

Luigi Yeah, yeah. Yes. Because most of the things we can do with blockchain with regard to selling of translation can be done with a simple distributed database. That is easier to understand even for laymen.

Michael Yep, that’s interesting because it does seem like the access we have to data within our industry and making it publicly aware and distributed is an achievable goal. Adding blockchain and some of the measures involved with blockchain, like coin offerings and things like that, tend to take it to a point where it becomes a hindrance for adoption, and for some people, even just understanding.

Luigi Blockchain is an overkill for translation, but this is the very simplest explanation.

Renato I strongly recommend that people read your in-depth analysis of the flaws when it comes to the way that people look at blockchain in the translation industry. What other topics do you think are being overblown in this industry these days, Luigi?

Luigi Definitely, neural machine translation is overhyped. I attended a fantastic webinar by our common friend Kirti on the metrics for machine translation. These metrics, twisted for marketing purposes, do not help at all in understanding quality within machine translation. We don’t understand quality in translation anyway, but this is a totally different kettle of fish.

NMT is definitely a major issue. Another issue is data. There’s a lot of talk about exchanging data, data marketplaces and so on and so forth, but the real problem is that we, as an industry, we don’t have enough data to be competitive in any aspect with other sources of data. I can’t see anyone in the industry that may be interested in getting data from any LSP. Not even from the larger ones.

The third hype in this industry is innovation. We are still struggling around translation memories, which is an old technology based on an even older technology. I could quote Evgeny Morozov here: “We are living in a sort of amelioration orgy.” We are ameliorating older and older technologies, and every innovation has been coming from outside the industry. We are not keen to innovation.

Renato And well, so these are very interesting key points that you bring. I’d like to ask you another question. You educated professionals for the localization industry. There are many of our listeners who are very successful executives in localization departments in large corporations around the world that were your students. In your opinion, after teaching for so long and seeing the results, what is the key attribute for a successful professional in the localization industry?

Luigi Open-mindedness. You have to have an open mind, and never give anything for granted.

Renato Why is that important?

Luigi The simplest example is that you will never have two translations the same, even if they are made by the same person. I can do a translation today, and if I translate the same text let’s say, in two months, it would be different. It’s the context.

Renato The nature of the profession.

Luigi And the environment, yes. We are constantly under the influences of many, many elements, and this is the most important element of the human mind. This is what allowed us to, as a species, to evolve. This is why we are the dominant species on earth, because we can always see things in different ways. Experience is the other key element in our life. Never forget what you learn from experience.

We have wise people who are learning from their experience, wise people who are learning from others’ experience and fools that never learn from any experience.

We have to rely on experience to grow, to develop, to improve, and this is something that has to do even with machine learning. We have reached the point of making machine learning so strong, such an important development, because we understand, based on our experience, how we can benefit from collecting data and learning from it, and mimic this approach through software, through algorithms. So, this is what I always tried to tell my students.

Renato Keeping an open mind, being ready to learn, constantly learn and advance that way.

Luigi And change.

Renato And change. Luigi, this has been a fantastic conversation. Thank you so much.

**End of conversation**