

Thriving or Surviving Motivation, Satisfaction, and Existential Sustainability in the Translation Profession

Joseph Lambert & Callum Walker
Cardiff University, University of Leeds

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Abstract

Despite the health of the language industry in general, the translation profession(al) faces a range of sustainability challenges. Against a backdrop of key disruptors that are transforming workflows and working conditions, and ongoing concerns over status, pay, and wellbeing, industry reports flag an intensifying ‘talent crunch’, making it increasingly difficult to retain vital human capital. And yet, despite a range of rather bleak industry and academic data, many translators are still happy. In this paper, we use Maslow’s influential theory of motivation to draw together key concerns and to analyse this motivation-satisfaction paradox. We identify worrying deficits in all and even the most basic needs and contend that translators’ self-actualisation – in this case, their sense of fulfilment through translation itself – acts as a ‘pull’ factor that can compensate for these unfulfilled needs, to a degree. Ultimately, however, these deficits are clearly taking an increasing toll, and, in the interests of long-term professional conservation, we must focus further on the lived experience of the individual translator to build towards a thriving professional environment.

Keywords: motivation, satisfaction, sustainability, professional translation, translation industry

1 Introduction: The Motivation-Satisfaction Paradox

The title of Maeve Olohan’s (2014) article on volunteer translation asks “Why do you translate?”. While her focus is on the motivations of volunteer translators, we turn the question to the wider profession. We do so because the motivations of professional translators are complex and appear to be independent of wider questions of job satisfaction in some cases, a point well captured by Douglas Robinson:

One would think that burnout rates would be high among translators. The job is not only underpaid and undervalued by society; it involves long hours spent alone with uninspiring texts working under the stress of short deadlines. [...] That [rapid burnout is not common],

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that one meets [...] translators who are still content with their jobs after thirty years, says something about the operation of the greatest motivator of all: they enjoy their work. They must – for what else would sustain them? Not the fame and fortune; not the immortal brilliance of the texts they translate. It must be that somehow they find a sustaining pleasure in the work itself. (2020: 44)

As Robinson notes, facets of freelance translation are unsatisfactory for some practitioners, with pressures on finances, time, and general well-being, yet many translators remain relatively happy despite these shortcomings (Courtney & Phelan 2019).

In this paper, we offer some preliminary thoughts on this apparent motivation-satisfaction paradox among professional translators. We begin by considering the sustainability challenges facing the industry, building upon John Elkington's triple-bottom-line model to highlight the rather worrying picture painted by both academia and industry, with a specific focus on the United Kingdom. We then turn to Maslow's theory of motivation as an orienting framework to further uncover a range of threats and challenges felt by translators on a micro-level drawing on data from academic sources and an array of industry surveys. This model also highlights the "higher level" role of self-actualisation and allows us to reflect upon translators' paradoxical satisfaction when many "needs" and "wants" are not met. We go on to consider the impact of continuing deficiencies on the health of the industry and conclude with a brief discussion of means to further these vital conversations, with sights set on a thriving professional environment.

2 Existential sustainability in the wider industry context

While the fuzzy concept of sustainability continues to evolve across all fields, in business contexts Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line remains an influential framework. His ubiquitous "three pillar" conception of sustainability (Purvis *et al.* 2019) covers the three interdependent, porous and, dynamic pillars of "economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice" (Elkington 1997: vii). The meaning of environmental sustainability is relatively clear, and continues to preoccupy TS scholars and the industry, particularly in relation to resource-intensive technologies (Cronin 2017; Moorkens 2022: 133-134). Social sustainability, meanwhile, addresses social, ethical, and cultural issues, and the ability to create and maintain social capital, both in terms of human capital (public health, skills, and education) and wider measures of a general societal health. In translation, this could include social aims of living better together or wellbeing concerns (Hubscher-Davidson 2018). Finally, economic sustainability refers to financial and physical capital, as well as human capital as "a measure of the experience, skills, and other knowledge-based assets of the individuals who make up an [industry]" (Elkington 1997: 74). Though all three of these pillars are of course vital, owing to space constraints, we focus on social and economic sustainability in this article. This is by no means meant to downplay the necessity of tackling vital environmental issues. Indeed, these concerns in many ways sit "above" the areas we address – there is little hope for translators at all without a planet to live on – but this sits beyond the scope of our explorations of motivation and satisfaction, and we do not have space in this article to do justice to the prevailing socio-political discourse on this theme.

Within this wider outlook, which blurs social and economic concerns, a key sustainability question could be “how can we ensure that human or intellectual capital does not migrate out of the organization?” (ibid.: 75). This is a crucial question in the translation industry today and the focus of our attention. Indeed, industry trends explored below are already prompting talented translators to leave the profession (Moorkens & Rocchi 2020: 326). Among members of France’s SFT association, 38% are dissatisfied with their current professional situation, with a substantial number considering a complete career change (SFT 2022: 30). This is already causing a skills shortage in some areas amid increasing demand for translation. For instance, reports have remarked on wider pipeline issues, including recruitment to translator training, positing additional reasons such as poor work-life balance, lack of educational opportunities, and a generation of translators retiring on top of usual industry churn (CIOL 2020; RWS 2023), as well as noting that these issues are intensifying (Nimdzi 2022). The severity of these issues of human capital call into question the overall existential sustainability of the profession. Despite the global language services industry being valued at \$69.3 billion in 2023 and forecast to grow to \$90.8 billion by 2027 (Nimdzi 2023: 26), there are increasing concerns about the long-term viability and attractiveness of the freelance translation profession, especially in the UK, which we attribute to three primary factors: rates of pay, status, and industry disruptors.

According to a recent survey, “almost 2 out of 3 translators struggle with low rates of pay”, and this sentiment is expressed most acutely in relation to language service providers (LSPs) (Inbox Translation 2023). This situation has not gone unnoticed in academia, with a growing number of scholars taking an interest in the pressure from rates (Courtney & Phelan 2019; Lambert & Walker 2022). Some have highlighted stagnation, or even decline, in rates amid inflation and increases in the cost of living (do Carmo 2020; Doherty 2016), while others (Nunes Vieira 2020; Sakamoto & Bawa Mason 2024) have commented on the impact of technology on rates. This picture – while not uniform across the industry (as noted in Nunes Vieira 2020: 5–6) – sits in stark contrast to the wider health of the industry and LSPs’ growing profitability (Carreira 2023). Extensive research has shown that translation is widely seen as a low (or, at best, middling) status enterprise (Barabé 2021; Dam & Zethsen 2008; Pym *et al.* 2012; Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018), in part due to information asymmetry in terms of what translation involves and what it is worth. Despite academic engagement, the situation has not changed much on the ground, and the (lack of) regulation of the profession has played into the growing ease with which ‘non-professional’ translators can enter the market (see Jiménez-Crespo 2017; McDonough Dolmaya 2012, *inter alia*). The multifaceted impact of technological change on the translation industry is widely understood: developments in CAT tools, and now neural MT and PE, are having both positive and negative impacts across working conditions, quality standards, productivity, and the very nature of translation itself (see Ciobanu 2022; Gambier & Kasperé 2021; Sandrini 2022), while we also cannot yet gauge the impact of large language models (LLMs). Another disruptor is the growth of translation platforms (see Firat 2021; Jiménez-Crespo 2017; Moorkens 2020). The all-pervasive nature of the aforementioned factors, which are indicative rather than exhaustive, makes it difficult to disentangle one from others, but rates, status, and

technological disruptors have undoubtedly had mixed impacts (often negative) on working conditions.

3 Maslow's Theory of Motivation applied to the translation industry

The foregoing discussion paints a relatively bleak picture of the industry, and this raises an important question in terms of translators' motivation to continue to work under these conditions – as many of course still do – when satisfaction may not be guaranteed. Motivation can be defined as “an unobservable force that directs, energizes, and sustains behavior over time and across circumstances”, and in a work context it “directs attention towards work-related goals, energizes the expenditure of effort towards those goals, and leads to persistence in the pursuit of goals over time” (Diefendorff *et al.* 2022). In turn, satisfaction refers to the extent to which these goals are met, and can operate on various levels (professional, social, economic, existential, etc.). In the professional context, job satisfaction “refers to the positive attitude that an individual derives from the work itself [...] in conjunction with the multidimensional contextual aspects that affect individual work behaviour” (Rodríguez-Castro 2015: 32), and we can distinguish between *task* and *job* satisfaction. The former refers to positive attitudes experienced during or upon completion of a task and can include satisfiers and dissatisfiers such as task complexity, autonomy, pride, and variety, as well as self-actualisation (the possibility for individual growth and feedback) (2015: 33). The latter refers to the set of work tasks performed over a longer period of time (2015: 35), and encompasses job fit (the nature of the job, workload, remuneration, deadlines, work-life balance, job turnover), individual-team fit (skills of team members, performance appreciation, support, flexibility), and individual-client communication, relationships, and involvement (2015: 35).

Motivation has captured the attention of just a few TS scholars and studies tend to cover specific practices, such as the motivation of volunteer translators translating for journals (Olohan 2012), TED (Olohan 2014), the Rosetta Foundation (O'Brien & Schäler 2010), and Wikipedia (McDonough Dolmaya 2012), and not more utilitarian angles of earnings or existential sustainability. In works addressing professional translation work more explicitly, motivation features less prominently and often only indirectly. Sakamoto & Bawa Mason (2024), for instance, explore the ways LSPs use pricing models to motivate translators to undertake MTPE work, revealing that practices such as edit distances and discrepancies between MTPE speed exigencies and issues such as well-being, quality, and autonomy can have a negative impact on translators' work motivation and recruitment for MTPE. Meanwhile, in one of the most comprehensive works on motivation and satisfaction – alongside that of Rodríguez-Castro (2015), who adopts the same underlying framework – Moorkens (2020) draws on Herzberg's “motivation-hygiene theory of job attitudes” (Herzberg 1987 [1967]), while also considering the place of satisfaction. Applying these ideas to the translation profession, Moorkens cites commodification and a “lack of care about motivation and satisfaction for translators” (Moorkens 2020: 18) on the back of new conditions and rates imposed by LSPs. Moorkens poignantly notes the demotivating effect of translators not seeing the full

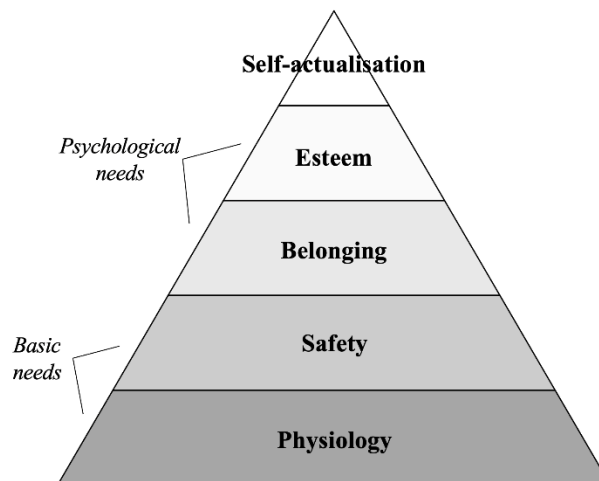
picture behind their contribution due to fragmented work practices (especially via platforms). Offering an interesting counterpoint to Robinson’s earlier quotation, he notes: “even the most worthy or beautiful text, when decomposed, is likely to seem meaningless” (ibid.: 21). Moorkens concludes with a plea to consider of the value and sustainability of the profession, with “translation employers bearing some responsibility for the satisfaction and motivation of workers, as a sustainable industry will ultimately benefit all stakeholders” (ibid.: 28), a view that we endorse wholeheartedly.

Turning to Maslow, it was in his 1943 *A Theory of Motivation* that he first laid down his famous hierarchy of needs. The focus here was on individuals, and on how individuals not only survive, but also grow, develop, and feel satisfaction in their growth and development. In describing his hierarchy, he wrote:

It is quite true that man lives by bread alone [...]. But what happens to man’s desires when there is plenty of bread [...]? At once other (and “higher”) needs emerge and these [...] dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still “higher”) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency.” (ibid.: 375)

The hierarchy begins with two levels that Maslow dubs *basic needs*: *physiological* and *safety* needs. Once these needs are met, next come two *psychological needs*: *belonging* and *esteem* needs. At the top of the hierarchy, we find the umbrella term *self-actualisation*. While Maslow never conceived of this hierarchy as a pyramid, it has since been widely modelled as such (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model of Maslow’s theory of motivation conceived as a pyramid



This model forms the basis of our discussion in the sections that follow as we work through each layer, explaining Maslow’s conceptualisation in light of secondary data from the industry and academia to explore the extent to which these motivations are satisfied in industry practice. We then cover the complex concept of self-actualisation, before considering critiques of the model and theorising the aforementioned motivation-

satisfaction paradox, whereby translators appear satisfied despite clear deficiencies across the lower levels of this hierarchy in particular.

3.1. Basic needs

At the bottom of Maslow's pyramid, we find basic needs such as breathing, food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. Maslow stresses that these take hierarchical priority over all others if unfulfilled, and this is the starting point for any motivation. As he puts it, when we are dominated by the physiological needs, "all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background" (1943: 373). While most translators in the UK satisfy their most basic physiological needs – we have food, water, etc. – there are still concerns even at the lowest level of the pyramid. For instance, consider the impact that current work practices could have upon a translator's ability to get adequate rest. There is constant pressure to adapt to rapid technological change and to undertake CPD to remain 'ahead of the game'. We see a push for round-the-clock availability, pressures from the seemingly impossible combination of high-speed, low-cost, high-quality translation, and the 'feast and famine' cycle experienced by many freelance translators (ELIS 2020: 20). Equally, inadequate pay could jeopardise a translator's ability to fulfil further basic needs. This potential lack of base-level fulfilment raises immediate concerns and also points to a porous relationship between the different needs.

The next level – safety – can of course mean physical safety, but also includes more psychological constructs of safety, such as security of our jobs, resources, family, health, property, etc. Maslow bases this level on a desire for a "predictable, orderly world", and "something that can be counted upon, not only for the present but also far into the future" (1943: 377). These desires also extend to the socio-economic sphere in terms of a "job with tenure and protection, the desire for a savings account, and for insurance of various kinds" (ibid.: 379). These are particularly relevant to the sustainability of an industry dominated by flux.

While concerns over physical safety are thankfully rare, there are pressing concerns in relation to emotional wellbeing and financial and job security. Indeed, over 70% of surveyed translators in the ELIS survey listed money as a key stress factor (ELIS 2020: 73), and 41% needed additional income (ibid.: 70), dropping slightly to 36% in 2022 (ELIS 2023: 44). 59% of those surveyed by UK-based Inbox Translation (2020) highlighted "low rates of pay" as the main challenge of freelance translator life, and 76% of those surveyed by SFT (2022: 30) listed "inadequate income" as the primary reason for dissatisfaction with their current professional situation. In many cases, this dissatisfaction has been enough to force translators to leave the profession, as noted above. These concerns over pay are intertwined with emotional health and increasing attention has been paid to the emotional impact of our work and the prevalence and perniciousness of stress. Clearly, the nature of translators' work tasks and working conditions can pose real threats to our health and bodies, making apparent once again the porous link between the different levels in Maslow's hierarchy. Discussing the emotional impact of interpreting for trauma survivors (admittedly an intense example, but a useful prism

through which to magnify these concerns), Marjorie Bancroft describes interpreters becoming, “dizzy, nauseated or fearful after sessions with survivors” and “having nightmares or disturbed sleep”, commenting of the worrying number of interpreters that simply burned out (2017: 209). Beyond drawing our attention to a range of symptoms and effects, the mention of disturbed sleep directly relates once again to the needs outlined at the bottom of the pyramid, pointing to the porous nature of the divisions between layers on the pyramid (see Section 4).

3.2. Psychological needs

Maslow calls the next level *love needs* (Maslow 1943: 381), with others referring to them as *belonging*. These needs relate to friendship, family, and a sense of connection. Maslow says little about this level but highlights a “hunger for affectionate relations with people in general” and “namely, for a place in his group” (ibid.: 381). The final remark is most pertinent in professional translation, where membership of social groups brings up questions of isolation (hinting at the importance of mental health again) and belonging. As a typically isolated activity and with inconsistent regulation in different geographical areas, this sense of belonging can be fractured, feeding an inability to fight for and negotiate better conditions (Moorkens 2017: 467) and find emotional, ethical, or professional support. Of course, translators often connect via social media, association regional groups, etc. to facilitate communication and ease this burden, but concerns remain. Deficiencies in this level can manifest themselves in “lower rates of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being” (ibid.). These questions also allude to the issue of status, though this most clearly finds its basis at the next level.

Above belonging, Maslow lists *esteem needs*, which he describes as a “need or desire for a stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others” (1943: 381). He subcategorises this level into, firstly, a desire for strength, achievement, and confidence, and, secondly, a desire for “reputation or prestige [...], recognition, attention, importance or appreciation” (ibid.: 381-382). Satisfaction of these needs can bring a sense of self-confidence, worth, and “being useful and necessary in the world” (ibid.: 382). As noted above, concerns over poor status and low recognition are common themes in TS and in the profession more widely. Another aspect of esteem that Maslow raises in his model is that of strength and freedom. In TS research, there are parallels here with Koskinen’s notion of agency, i.e. a translator’s “*willingness and ability to act*” (2010: 165). While modern PE practices, growing integration of automation, and LSPs’ predilection to adopt a ‘fastest-response-wins’ approach to outsourcing projects have a negative influence on translators’ agency, limiting their ability to act and potentially even eroding their willingness to stay in the profession, translators and scholars cite the autonomy of their work as an important motivator behind their job satisfaction (Cukur 2023; Moorkens 2020). Nonetheless, tension remains in the lower end of the market over areas where restricted agency has an appreciable impact on objective wellbeing, such as in rate- and deadline-setting. Both of these contribute to deficiencies in lower-order needs due to industry pressure to adopt

questionable practices that reinforce a poor work-life balance. For those working the premium segment of the market, autonomy and agency are less likely to be problematic.

3.3. Self-actualisation

Self-actualisation sits at the top of the pyramid. Maslow wrote that “a musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization” (1943: 382). By extension, translators must translate if they are to be ultimately satisfied. However, with the growing decomposition of texts and creep of PE into translators’ day-to-day work, for instance, to what extent is the simple pleasure of ‘just’ translating now being infringed? Maslow describes self-actualisation as a desire for self-fulfilment, a desire “to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (1954: 46), noting that in some people this may take on a creative bent. Although his conceptualisation of self-actualisation has been criticised for separating deficiency needs so jarringly from growth imperatives, the ability and motivation to focus on furthering oneself can only happen if subordinate elements are at least *partially* satisfied. How, for instance, can translators consider dedicating themselves to CPD (which often require time *and* money, both precious to freelancers) if they are struggling to pay the bills?

While explicit data on self-actualisation has not been collected, we can infer from other studies that many translators do ‘experience’ self-actualisation. Of the ~6,000 respondents surveyed for CSA Research’s *The State of the Linguist Supply Chain* report (Pielmeier & O’Mara 2020: 63), “diverse work” was the highest-ranking response (75%) to the question “What do you like about this profession?”, and “sense of purpose” was ranked lower (43%, only just above “pay” with 33%). For others, the self-actualisation that is experienced in the profession through an ability to do what they love outweighs lower-level deficiencies (income, notably). The same report quoted one respondent who stated: “Alas, I earn too little to allow a decent life. But what would we not do for the *passion and love of the profession?*” (ibid.: 50, our emphasis). Alongside a passion for translation, another takeaway from the report was that translators enjoyed the ability to pursue “continuous learning – both on the language and world knowledge fronts” (ibid.: 62). Maslow (1967: 99) would argue that translators identify their “calling” with their self, “a defining characteristic of the person”. In the section below, we look at the translatorial self in more depth, drawing up a revised hierarchy of needs for the translator reflecting these discussions and further critiques of Maslow’s model.

4 A Revised Hierarchy for Translators

For a model of motivation that is eighty years old, Maslow’s work has largely stood the test of time well. That said, Maslow did anticipate a number of criticisms, recognising that the satisfaction of lower-level needs is not a prerequisite for higher-level needs to emerge, and individuals can be both partially satisfied and unsatisfied in their needs

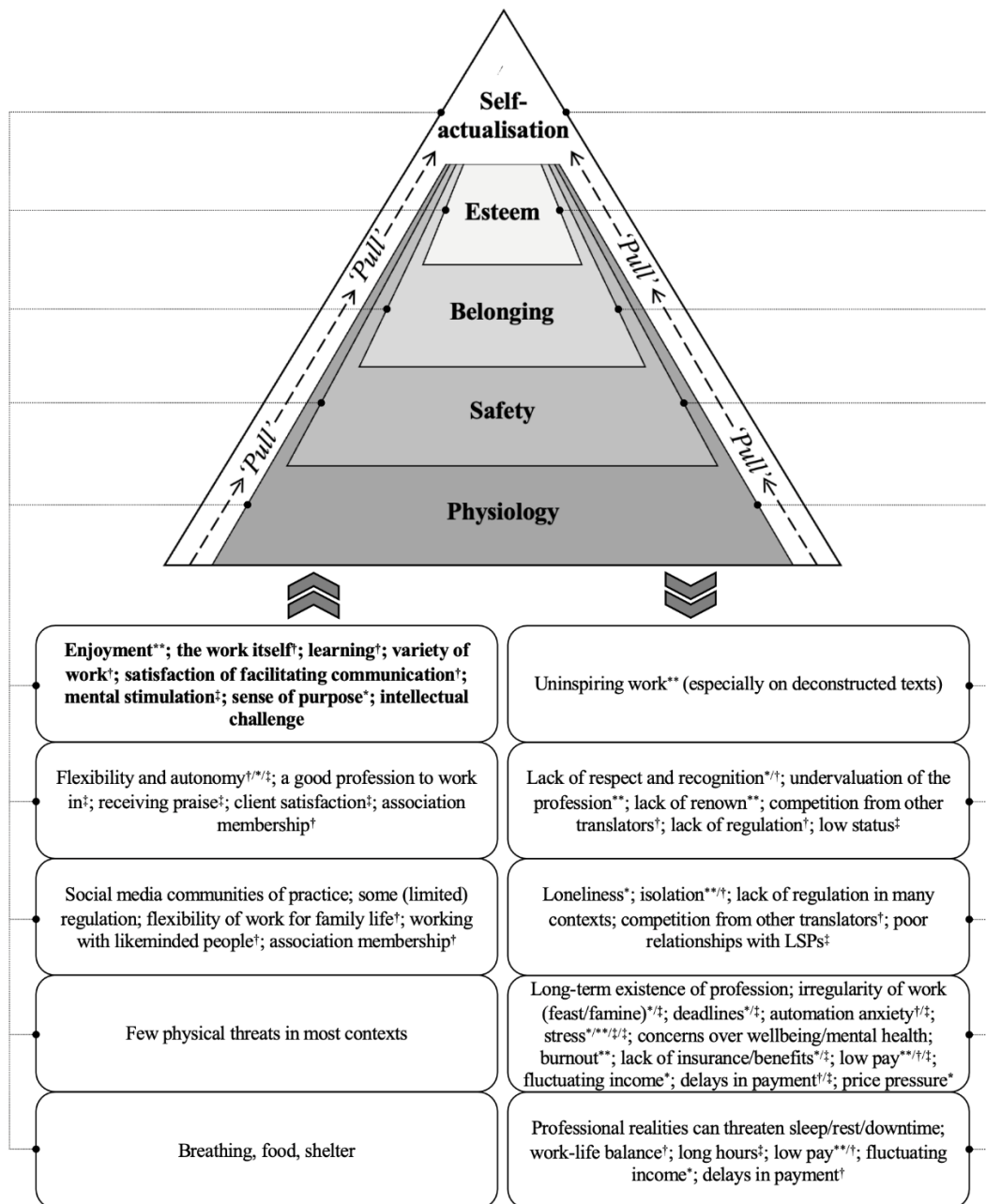
simultaneously (1943: 388). For most translators in the UK at least, basic needs are likely met, but they may be simultaneously dissatisfied with their income, for example, which affects the degree to which their safety needs are perceived to be met. To offer another example, they may be members of an association, but interact little with other members, and therefore have a poor sense of belonging. Hence, aspects of each motivational level may be satisfied, but not in their entirety. Similarly, translators need not satisfy all lower-level safety needs before they can proceed to address their belonging, esteem, or self-actualisation at the top of the pyramid. Motivations are not only concurrent, but can also dominate other motivations in different ways in different people. Maslow (1943: 386) acknowledged that self-esteem can dominate other needs: “there are [...] creative people in whom the drive to creativeness seems to be more important than any other counter-determinant”. This point is significant as translation is conceived by translators as a creative endeavour, and this reveals one of the more fascinating paradoxes of Maslow’s theory: “creativity might appear not as self-actualization released by basic satisfaction, but in spite of lack of basic satisfaction” (ibid.). In other words, for translators who lack satisfaction on more basic levels, they may seek satisfaction through pursuits that would, in others, be deemed psychological needs or self-actualisation. Indeed, Courtney and Phelan (2019) indirectly support this view, noting that, despite negative aspects to their work, translators reported high to extremely high job satisfaction. Respondents to both Inbox Translation surveys (2020; 2023) also supported this view, ranking the nature of translation work as the second key perk of working as a freelance translator, after freedom and flexibility. One respondent (2023) notably commented that they loved “the unique challenges that come with each different project; they appeal not only to my language skills, but my creativity”.

Maslow’s model is typically presented as a simple five-layer hierarchical pyramid despite him recognising that the layers were not quite so neatly delineated and overlap in various ways. Scholars have subsequently produced revised diagrammatic representations of Maslow’s model to better highlight Maslow’s own acknowledged simultaneity of different hierarchical needs. Furthermore, recent empirical research has found his model to stand up to scrutiny in terms of the needs identified. Tay and Diener (2011) analysed data on 60,865 participants across 123 countries and uncovered supporting evidence for achieving generalised well-being in spite of unsatisfied lower-order needs (ibid.: 363). Furthermore, while they found that universal human needs transcended cultural differences, the plasticity of the hierarchy was dependent on different factors, including country effects. They found, in particular, that “needs tend to be achieved in a certain order but that the order in which they are achieved does not strongly influence their effects on [subjective well-being]” (ibid.: 364). Kenrick et al. (2010) upheld Maslow’s argument that lower-order needs take precedence, but instead described Maslow’s hierarchy as a series of overlapping motivations, indicating that lower-order needs can become dominant at any time depending on life stage and circumstances (for a summary and modernised diagrammatic conceptualisation of the hierarchy, see Deckers 2018: 324-326).

As we have seen from our discussion of different challenges at each level of Maslow’s hierarchy, for professional translators, needs can overlap, fall under multiple layers, and

rise or fall in dominance at different times for different reasons. Nonetheless, echoing the empirical research presented in the previous paragraph, the situation for translators is such that lower order needs may remain a priority, while also interacting simultaneously with higher level needs. Building on this conceptualisation and echoing Deckers' (2018: 325) own interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which emphasises the interdependence of the different levels, Figure 2 shows our theorised hierarchy reflecting the above critiques as well as our analysis of the idiosyncratic and porous nature of motivation and satisfaction in translation specifically.

Figure 2. A proposed hierarchy of overlapping needs for professional freelance translators, highlighting the upward 'pull' of self-actualisation



(*Pielmeier et al. 2020; **Robinson 2020; †Inbox Translation 2020; ‡Courtney & Phelan 2019)

In this figure, we have included examples of needs that are generally satisfied and others that are not based on a range of industry and academic sources, though this is far from exhaustive, nor representative of the entire range of sustainability or satisfaction challenges facing translators. Technology, for instance, can have a positive and/or negative impact on translators' sense of esteem, belonging, financial wellbeing, and wider professional-existential concerns, making it a fitting inclusion at several levels.

Plotting industry data against each level indicates that there are clear deficiencies at every level, even the most basic, which impacts translators' willingness to enter into, and remain in, the profession. In Robinson's quotation at the start of this article, he cites a wide range of negative facets to a translator's work, which cut across multiple layers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: burnout (physiological and safety), low pay and stress (safety), working in isolation (belonging), the undervaluation of the profession by society and lack of renown from translation (esteem), and uninspiring work (cognitive/self-actualisation). Yet, on reaching his comment about enjoyment, which would also fall under self-actualisation, this proves to be a considerable driver – a 'pull' factor – behind many translators' propensity to remain in the profession. While there is the potential for misreporting via toxic positivity, and current workflows risk removing the joy that translators take from their work, it is clear that this is a significant motivating factor for translators in spite of other shortcomings. In Figure 2, this is represented by self-actualisation being placed not only at the peak of the pyramid, but also as a transversal scaffold supporting all other layers and "pulling" translators up in spite of lower-level deficiencies. Yet, to what extent is the translators' willingness to work out of love for the job 'papering over the cracks' that exist further down the pyramid?

5 Reinforcing professional conservation

As noted in the most recent ELIS survey (2023: 46) and in an earlier publication (Lambert & Walker 2022), research into the sustainability of freelance translation is urgently needed. This reflection on Maslow's model highlights a range of factors involved in the sustainability challenge of retaining human capital in the translation industry. His core interest in individual experiences is an important starting point, while broad and basic deficiencies underscore the fundamental need to ensure that translators can pay for meals and shelter and enjoy safety and security in their job, as well as highlighting the importance of research into fair rates, job security, status, regulation, wellbeing, etc. Though the pull of self-actualisation and the satisfaction derived from the job itself is enough in many cases to convince practitioners to remain in their roles, it is clear that these deficiencies are taking their toll.

Steps are now required to address this situation, for the sake of professional conservation. If translators continue to leave the industry and there is insufficient draw for new translators to enter and stay in the industry, then the very foundations will begin to crack. Happy and healthy translators who feel motivated and respected form the basis of a happy and healthy industry that motivates its agents and commands respect.

Translators showing signs of stress will place the industry under stress. As Moorkens noted (2020: 28), all stakeholders benefit from the wellbeing of these crucial agents. These conversations must take place between a range of educators (Lambert & Walker 2022) – professional associations, LSPs, higher education institutions, translators themselves. Indeed, the often inaccessible nature of academic publishing means that coverage via this channel alone is not enough. Industry-academia collaboration is improving, but TS researchers need to ensure that findings filter through to the industry more quickly and comprehensively, via different modes of engagement (association publications, podcasts, industry conferences, etc.). In the UK higher education context, these sorts of initiatives are referred to as “impact” or “knowledge exchange”. More impactful research co-designed and co-created with the industry will have far greater ability to effect change than academia acting in isolation. Of course, translator training remains a powerful channel through which to elicit change. We have written elsewhere on the challenges of addressing rate-based issues in the translation classroom (Walker & Lambert forthcoming), and those calls for greater transparency apply equally well to the context of sustainability. Indeed, we have a moral duty to provide aspiring translators with a realistic image of the industry landscape and the potential challenges they may face.

Ultimately, amid the wide range of sources cited in this paper and industry-level challenges that we have addressed, there is a risk of the individuals – the translators at the heart of the industry – being forgotten. Survey data, commentary on the economic prosperity of the industry, and claims of technological breakthroughs are masking the lived experience of professionals, who are the metaphorical pillars on which the industry pediment rests. Though admittedly flawed in certain dimensions, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs allows us to consider how the individuals at the core of the industry can not only survive, but also thrive in future.

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About the authors

Dr Joseph Lambert is a Lecturer in Translation Studies and Director of the MA Translation Studies at Cardiff University, UK. His primary areas of research interest are the ethics of translation and sustainability in the translation industry. In 2023, he published a textbook with Routledge entitled *Translation Ethics* and he has written widely on the translation profession, questions of pay, status, and regulation in the UK, and translation codes of ethics.
E-mail: lambertJ3@cardiff.ac.uk

Dr Callum Walker is an Associate Professor of Translation Technology and Director of the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Leeds, where he teaches computer-assisted translation technology, project management, translation theory, and specialised translation. His research interests relate to translation industry studies, with a specific focus on project management (culminating in the Routledge textbook *Translation Project Management*), micro- and information economics, and the interaction between technology and translation workflows.
E-mail: c.m.walker@leeds.ac.uk

