

## **Translators from Amsterdam: an informal history of the translation course at the University of Amsterdam**

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Amsterdam's greatest painter, Rembrandt, was insolvent. So was its greatest poet and contemporary of Rembrandt, Joost van den Vondel. He tried to supplement his income by translating.

The subject of this paper is not solvency or, as the case may be, insolvency of translators then and now, but translators from Amsterdam. It was in Amsterdam that the Netherlands Association of Translators (Nederlands Genootschap van Vertalers) was founded in 1956. And it was in Amsterdam that the first academic training course for translators in the Netherlands was established in 1964.

The main points covered are:

- the history of the course
- the degree programme
- personal appraisal
- the new generation of translators.

### **HISTORY OF THE COURSE**

The present training course for translators owes its existence to the initiative taken by the Netherlands Association of Translators (NGV). Together with the University of Amsterdam, NGV established the Translators' and Interpreters' Training Course at the University of Amsterdam in 1964. The training of interpreters never really got off the ground. It was found that the costs involved were not in proportion to the opportunities for employment of interpreters who have Dutch as their mother tongue. In 1971 the name Instituut voor Vertaalkunde (Translation Training

and Research Institute) was adopted. In 1983, following its full integration into the Faculty of Arts of the University of Amsterdam, its name was changed to Instituut voor Vertaalwetenschap (Institute for Translation Studies). This 'evolution' of names at least shows that translators practise what they preach in that no mistake should be made about names!

The original teaching staff of 1964 had made inquiries about the training programmes at various translators' colleges in Europe, e.g. Geneva, Paris, Antwerp, Brussels and Heidelberg. Throughout the years these programmes were put to the test, a process known in educational jargon as curriculum development. It soon became apparent that the theory of translation was indispensable to the practice of translation. Likewise, the need was felt for scientific research in the field of translation.

The training programme gradually began to develop along academic lines. Emphasis was given to translation theory and to working groups studying and reporting on specific translation problems, for example. For the sake of brevity, the Instituut voor Vertaalwetenschap student shall be a 'he' from now on. At the end of my paper I shall give you the exact male/female ratio of the current student population at the Institute and other facts and figures.

The Institute for Translation Studies (head: Professor Dr Raymond van den Broeck) is now fully integrated as a teaching and research department in the Faculty of Arts. It is a three-year course to which students are admitted who have passed their *propaedeuse* examination. This is the preliminary examination a student has to pass when he has successfully completed the first year of any graduate course at a Dutch university. Aspiring translators are required to have passed the preliminary examination of a general language course in English, French or German. The second, although informal, requirement is that the students have Dutch as their mother tongue or language of habitual use.

### **DEGREE PROGRAMME**

The foreign language taken at preliminary level is referred to as the student's first foreign language. On completion of the Translation Studies course, the student graduates in either the Theory or the Practice of Translation. In view of the wide selection of subjects to be studied, the student has to choose between the two orientations on gaining entry to the course.

The basic curriculum during the first two semesters includes advanced study of the first foreign language, translating and translation theory, as well as usage and stylistics of Dutch (the student's mother tongue). Dutch occupies a key position in the degree programme and is a required subject throughout the three years of the course.

In addition, the student starts on his second foreign language. He may choose from one of the three main foreign languages at the Institute — English, French or German — or from Italian, Russian or Spanish, which are also taught as the second foreign language at the Institute. Or, for that matter, he can choose a language that has to be studied in another department of the Faculty of Arts, e.g. Portuguese or a Scandinavian language. The student may even study at another Dutch university, e.g. Indonesian at Leiden University.

After the first two semesters the students are prepared for their graduation in either the Theory or the Practice of Translation. In the practice-oriented programme emphasis is given to the development of translational competence, both into and out of the first foreign language, and out of the second foreign language. The theory-oriented student likewise learns the skill of translating but his programme is mainly aimed at acquiring theoretical knowledge and knowledge of research methods. He may drop his second foreign language but he must choose from general linguistics or text linguistics as his required subject.

For their optional subject students are free to choose from any of the disciplines taught at the University of Amsterdam. On the whole they are advised to take a subject that will enhance their translation ability and their chances of getting a job. Disciplines such as economics, law, political science and environmental studies are currently in favour with student translators. Finally, all students are required to write a thesis on translation, terminology or translation criticism.

### **PERSONAL APPRAISAL**

Before 'bringing on' the new generation of translators I would first like to discuss the old generation of translators from Amsterdam. 'Old' but by no means superannuated translators — I know because I am one of them.

I am one of the Institute's first group of alumni, having completed my studies in 1969. In those days the course had different entry requirements. An open, competitive entrance examination was held each year since only ten places were available for each of the three foreign languages: English, French and German.

The tutorial system was employed. During meetings between a tutor and a student intensive face-to-face teaching and discussion took place, based on translations done by the student. It was a four-year course at the time and the student had to take a special subject during the course, to become a subject specialist. I was lucky to be exempted from acquiring the specialised knowledge. Before I did my course in Amsterdam I had trained and worked as an SRN (State Registered Nurse) in London. So willingly or unwillingly, I was considered an 'instant' medical translator.

When I was a second-year student translator, a major achievement in the medical world gave me an incentive and I started my own medical terminology bank. On 2 December 1967 Professor Christiaan Barnard performed the first heart transplant at Groote Schuur Hospital, Cape Town, South Africa. A new era of spare-part surgery had started and I knew that my modest collection of specialised words and expressions would one day be very useful to me. More recent examples of new medical topics which I now come across as a freelance translator are AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and the Björk-Shiley heart valves affair. From the terminological point of view the latest developments in medicine tend to keep medical translators on their toes!

When I was asked to present this paper I was told that, ideally, my subject should essentially be a personal appraisal of my training in Amsterdam. Did it really put me on my feet as a translator when I exchanged my college desk in Amsterdam for an office desk in London?

On completion of my studies in 1969 I started as a technical translator with Shell in its translation division — Foreign Language Services — in Shell Centre, London. I ended up as head of the Dutch Section there. This fact may suggest that my training in Amsterdam paid dividends, but it does not really answer the question whether the course made one a competent staff translator.

In the past, training of translators had largely consisted of on-the-job training. Usually language graduates had entered translation offices and picked up the technical background and translating experience as they went along.

Some form of technical background, ideally a university degree in a science subject or in engineering, is a great asset to the technical translator, who should have specialised knowledge in his subject field. But as with language knowledge, the potential range of the average person is limited. A translator claiming to be an expert in several disciplines should be regarded with suspicion.

The great advantage of team-work in translation — as I experienced when working for Shell — is that a large range of languages and subjects are dealt with adequately. It also allows for a greater degree of specialisation in translation proper. The functions of documentation, establishment of terminology, translating, revising and editing can be shared out.

To my mind my on-the-job training with Shell in London, after my course in Amsterdam, was more in the nature of continuing education (*formation permanente*) in which my training at the Institute proved to be of considerable value to me.

Did the training in Amsterdam correspond to the demands made of its translators by British industry? I can only speak for myself when I answer the question in the affirmative. Did the training in Amsterdam correspond

to the demands made of its translators by Dutch industry? Graduates from the Institute for Translation Studies are to be found in institutional translation units such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in The Hague, Dutch television and Radio Netherlands International (Radio Nederland Wereldomroep) in Hilversum, and the EEC in Brussels.

My experience as a staff translator in Dutch industry proved extremely useful when I became a freelance three years ago. Having worked for a pharmaceutical company — Gist-Brocades N.V. in Delft — I found that my combined specialisation of medicine and pharmacology aroused the interest, or perhaps curiosity, of a number of drug companies looking for freelance translators.

### **THE NEW GENERATION OF TRANSLATORS**

During my last visit to the Institute in Amsterdam, one fact struck me as a little unusual and I wondered if it was typical of the situation in the Netherlands. I said earlier on that I would let you know the male/female ratio of the student population at the Institute. The present number of students is 212 (academic year 1985/86) and the ratio is 1 male to 9 female student translators.

The overall male/female ratio at the University of Amsterdam, which with its 25,000 students is the largest university in the Netherlands, is 3:2. Has the growing professionalisation of translating raised the threshold for one sex whilst lowering it for the other? I should like to leave the matter open now.

Two male students, Rien Verhoef and Jacques Commandeur, were a great credit to the Institute in 1982. They were awarded the Martinus Nijhoff Prize for their translations into Dutch of Anthony Burgess' *1985* and Saul Bellow's *The adventures of Augie March*. The Nijhoff Prize for literary translations had also been awarded to three tutors at the Institute — James Holmes, Alexander Brotherton and Peter Verstegen — on three separate occasions in previous years.

Although coming at the end, not least in importance is the following fact. Having mentioned the literary prizes awarded to students and tutors, I should like to emphasise that during the course the students' attention is equally focused on literary translation, i.e. fiction, poetry, plays, essays etc., and on technical translation.

It is in a literary vein that I should like to conclude my paper. Having 'brought on' the new generation of translators, I feel I should now quote the very 'old' translator from Amsterdam whom I mentioned at the beginning of my paper: Joost van den Vondel. A contemporary of Shakespeare, Vondel is famous for, among other things, the following quotation:

De weerelt is een schouwtoneel  
Elck speelt zijn rol en krijght zijn deel

It is reminiscent of an equally famous quotation from Shakespeare. It is not supposed to be a rendering of Shakespeare since Vondel did not translate from English, but from French, Latin and Greek.

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances ...

#### **FURTHER READING**

*Studiegids Vertaalwetenschap*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1985/86.  
PINCHUCK, Isadore. *Scientific and technical translation*. London: André Deutsch, 1977.

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