

Continuing training for the language professions: a survey of needs

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BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEY

This paper discusses a survey carried out by Bradford University Modern Languages Centre with the principal goal of assessing, on the one hand, the current level of use of machine aids among today's translators and, on the other, the perceived need for familiarisation with such tools. While this aim reflected the general focus of Aslib's 'Translating and the Computer' conference series, the particular theme of 'A Profession on the Move' suggested that the survey should encompass other aspects also of post-experience training for professional linguists. Under this broader heading the question of courses on English was specifically addressed and an open-ended section on other skill training for translators elicited a wealth of interesting responses.

The ambition was, then, to obtain a picture of an increasingly important facet of translating practice to which the questions on aspirations would add an implicitly dynamic dimension. Any discrepancy between actual use and actual interest — for which read potential use — would be indicative of a rate of movement along a particular axis. Naturally, the hypothesis was that such a gap did in fact exist and that there would be a sizeable expression of interest in training in machine aids, signalling a measure of inadequacy of existing provision. In this sense the questionnaire was one part of an on-going market survey designed to sound the echoes which the Modern Languages Centre had already picked up from its contacts among translators and technical authors.

The initial step was to distribute — via *Language Monthly*, the *ITI Newsletter* and direct mailings — a brief questionnaire which could be followed up by other surveys targeted at more specific groups. This paper reports on the results of the first questionnaire only. It gave rise to more

than 600 replies from the United Kingdom, continental Europe and Scandinavia: UK-based translators represented approximately 55 per cent, of the total. This population could be thought statistically small in relation to the size of the profession in the countries concerned, but the high degree of overall concord in the responses suggests that they characterise the situation fairly accurately. A more detailed set of questions would doubtless reveal local variations, whether on a national or a categorical basis, but the intention here is to highlight the trends and needs which unify the profession as a whole.

INTERPRETATION OF RESPONSES

Current use of machine aids

The questions in this section of the questionnaire related to the extent of word processing, computerising terminological and other records, accessing online databases and using machine-assisted translation (MAT).

The prototypic UK respondent is a freelance translator equipped with a word processor. Indeed, the use of word processors appears to be widespread in that two out of three responses overall give an affirmative answer to this question. UK national and local government organisations would seem, however, to be a notable exception to this general rule. For the great majority of users the computer is made to function exclusively as an enhanced typewriter; the facilities it offers for running other translation-oriented packages or for data communications appear under-exploited. For example, whereas only one in 10 UK respondents routinely manages terminology in a computerised database, the figure is twice as high for continental Europe as a whole and reaches one in three for private sector translators in Germany. Similarly, only one UK respondent in 25 regularly accesses commercial databases, while one in seven of their European counterparts does so. These findings may be attributable in part to the preponderance of freelances in the UK sample and of in-house translators in the European set. Three sites — other than the CEC — using machine-assisted translation were identified in Europe; only two (freelance) translators in the United Kingdom reported experience of this mode of working.

In sum, although the computer as word processor is fast becoming commonplace, its use in other roles is rarely encountered outside an institutional framework and even there it occupies a rather marginal place.

Perceived needs

In discussing the responses given to this part of the questionnaire I shall deal in turn with results relating to machine aids, subject knowledge and linguistic knowledge.

Within the first class it is possible to make a distinction, albeit fuzzy, between accessing information, organising it and manipulating it. An online database provides access to information; a word processor manipulates text; creating and using a personal database combines all three activities.

Given the already extensive usage of word processors, the very high demand for (further) familiarisation seems somewhat surprising. Speculatively, it may be that this is a fairly new venture for many translators and that they are working with relatively unsophisticated and inflexible systems. While there is undoubtedly a call for introductory courses in word processing, there is certainly an expressed need also for non-partisan advice on the comparative merits of the many systems available.

Some replies from those involved in the triangular exchange of text between client, agency and freelance requested assistance on data communications.

For the post-editor a MAT system is primarily manipulative, while for the dictionary manager the task is above all organisational. Virtually all employers of translators voice a desire to learn more about machine-assisted translation, and the overall figure runs at around 50 per cent, in the United Kingdom and 60 per cent, in Europe and Scandinavia. Particular interest is shown in France and the Federal Republic of Germany. For reasons which can only be guessed at many of the UK respondents indicating a wish for familiarisation with MAT expressed no interest whatsoever in any other machine aids. The level of demand suggests nonetheless that it is to be taken seriously and not dismissed as mere curiosity — morbid or otherwise.

The desire for post-experience training rises to about 65 per cent, and 70 per cent, for computerised terminology management and online database interrogation respectively. The interest in becoming better acquainted with the principles and practice of terminology work registers a high in the same percentage range. Taken together with the frequent request for help with filing techniques or, more generally, classifying and retrieving not only terminology but also sources of reference, the responses underscore the premium placed on locating relevant and reliable background materials. Whether the terms, titles and texts culled from these sources are better stored in a computer or in a conventional filing system is open to discussion case by case. What is paramount is the ability to gain access to them in the first place and to adopt an efficient classification system. The techniques are those of library science and information science. There is an awareness that access and manipulation presuppose a knowledge of organisation.

Insofar as information and storage medium can be viewed as separable, the survey invites the conclusion at this point that a fundamental competence in information retrieval which in itself has little to do with high technology is underdeveloped. It is the sudden proliferation of available information which has exposed in the training of many translators a weakness which they have recognised and wish to remedy.

Of course, even before the store of factual information amassed by an individual translator reaches a typical volume the computer is going to prove the most powerful and versatile means of (re)organising it. General purpose relational database software and specialised terminology management packages are now widely available. Software systems designed for libraries have been split into modules to enable, for example, thesaurus construction. Similarly, scaled-down document handling systems exist to meet the library management needs of the individual translator. The respondents acknowledge the utility of the computer while explicitly recognising the need for this manipulation of data to have a sound conceptual underpinning.

As a final point concerning machine aids it is noteworthy that even young translators with a specialist qualification are as numerous as older translators in wishing for in-service training. The implication is clearly that the establishments at which they gained their qualifications are failing to keep pace with the admittedly rapid changes in professional practice.¹

Although the question of subject knowledge is not explicitly mentioned in the questionnaire, it emerges from the open-ended section on useful complementary skills as being the single most important desideratum of the practising translator. While the domain preferences vary from one individual to the next — with a fairly strong bias in favour of law and new technologies — the principle of the demand remains intact. Even if by some miracle the relationship within the educational system at all levels between language teaching and other disciplines were to be rethought so that it became no longer essentially antagonistic, this would be of little comfort to the vast majority of translators today, who have learnt their specialisms on the job. The problem, for it is one, must be addressed.

Under the heading of linguistic knowledge came questions designed to assess the extent to which non-native speakers of English work into this language and the demand for familiarisation with the conventions of technical writing in English and the differing norms of British and American English. First, it is apparent that a not insignificant number of translators whose first language is not English do in fact offer it as a target language. This is true of the United Kingdom as well as of Europe and applies to the private sector employee as much as the freelance. Secondly, many non-native speakers of English who work only into their mother-tongue nevertheless show interest in attending short courses with the above objectives. Finally, and less expectedly, many English mother-tongue translators — especially expatriates — are eager for an opportunity to remind themselves of current usage and minimise linguistic interference. Contacts outside the scope of the survey indicate that there is a large pool of technical authors equally interested in similar courses.

In brief conclusion to the interpretation of the questionnaire returns it can be stated that translators have certain clearly definable and now clearly articulated needs which are not adequately catered for by existing training.

MEETING THE NEEDS

There are many possible ways of taking up this challenge and I do not pretend here to offer a blueprint for post-experience training in this field. I will, however, outline the rationale for an option which in my opinion is particularly valid.

This outline takes into account three further observations which can be made on the basis of the questionnaire. The first is that the great majority of respondents are interested in several of the activities mentioned above. The second is that despite frequent allusions to pressure of work most say that they can be away from their desk for three or more days at a time. Finally, translators appear a sociable group — the Europeans more so than the British — anxious to meet other translators in their field with a different mother-tongue.

These facts point to an opportunity for integrated courses which do not fragment the inherently complex task of contextualising, understanding and translating a text and updating one's knowledge base in the process. Moreover, the computer's potential role as an integrated work station — accessing glossaries (whether resident in the same machine or from a remote host), moving items between terminology and text windows on screen — will be all the more evident in a multi-task situation which simulates translating practice.

This pattern of training has been proven in the context of the Postgraduate Diploma/MA in Translating and Interpreting offered at the University of Bradford.² Texts for translation are set in their subject context by resident specialists who have in addition an often considerable linguistic competence. At this stage there is the intervention of library specialists who introduce the techniques of information retrieval, including online searching, and provide the students with practical exercises. The subsequent translating may be done either manually — but always using a word processor — or using MAT, Bradford having been, in 1984, the first UK educational establishment to acquire an MAT system for use in translator training.³ The draft translation is submitted to the subject specialist who commissioned it and who then gives feedback on terminological accuracy, comprehensibility and appropriateness of style. The draft can easily be edited on the word processor to conform to the requirements of a client-oriented translation. Other software is available for student use, including the term bank package developed by the Centre for Computational Linguistics at UMIST and a thesaurus construction package.

I am convinced that it is both desirable and feasible to mount intensive, integrative courses on the lines just sketched out. A university is the ideal host for such an enterprise since it can assemble the substantial multi-disciplinary expertise and physical resources which need to be deployed and provide a forum for exchanges between translators from different national and professional backgrounds. Some establishments, Bradford

among them, will continue to ensure that the profession moves forward thanks to and not despite the initial and post-experience training available.

REFERENCES

1. For a list of establishments offering initial but not necessarily post-experience training for translators see Picken, C. (ed.) *The translator's handbook*. London: Aslib, 1983, which addresses most issues of relevance to the profession.
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