

## **The professional technical translator: new approaches to training**

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When I was first asked to submit a paper to this sixth 'Translating and the Computer' conference, and informed that it would cover the general aspect of 'Translation and Communication', the translator in me immediately asked: 'What do they mean by communication?' Chambers defines communicate as 'to impart, to reveal, to succeed in conveying one's meaning to others'. But surely this is the object of translation anyway. Perhaps the emphasis is to be on 'Communications', defined as 'a means of giving information, as the press, cinema, radio, and television'. My mind then moved on to various other definitions such as telecommunications, communications networks or satellites, etc. Aslib would certainly not turn to me if the conference was concerned with those fields! Those of you here who translate will immediately recognise this approach as typical 'déformation professionnelle', and have already anticipated my next step - read the rest of the text! And, indeed, in the very next sentence all was explained: I was being invited to speak on training translators to use new technology effectively. I certainly believe that the days when translators sat in their garrets with pencil and paper, their only aids being monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and the odd reference work, have gone for good. Even literary translators, though their specific problems are outside the scope of this paper, can no longer work satisfactorily in that setting.

I am employed in Switzerland in an institute that trains translators and interpreters, and I also work as a freelance translator from German into English. At the Institute we have been aware for some time now that in order to prepare our students for the market we must adapt our teaching

programme to present-day and, more importantly, to future needs. If we accept that translation is a growth industry, and in Switzerland this is certainly true, then more translators will be required; but they will be required to work in a modern environment using all the resources offered by modern technology.

Before considering the aids offered by new technology, I should like to take a brief look at the kind of background technical translators have today. Basically they fall into three general categories. Translators in the first category specialise in a particular subject (e.g. engineering, metallurgy, accountancy, law, etc.), probably took a degree in it, but also had a good command of one or several foreign languages. By chance they happened to be asked to translate some texts, enjoyed doing this and gradually moved into the translation field where they concentrated on their special subjects and, over the years, developed some expertise in various other technical areas. The second category is also very common: translators who first studied various foreign languages, again probably took a degree in them, and again more by chance than by design started translating because their language skills were in demand. Once started on their careers they soon found that some specialisation was necessary, and consequently took courses in various special fields until they felt competent enough to provide accurate translations in those areas. The third type of background is a more recent one, but increasingly available on the market today: these are the trained translators who chose to study translation techniques in either a university department or specialised institute. (Such training was introduced as an academic subject after the war, and has been available on a broad scale since the 1960s.) Usually, though by no means always, translators with this background started as linguists and acquired a grasp of technical subjects during the course of training. At the very start of their careers they have a good grasp of translation techniques, i.e. those skills which enable them to transfer a text from one language to another so that the text in the target language reads like an original.

All three categories have advantages and disadvantages for both translator and client. With the first type of background translators may know their subject but will not, at first, have the skills to analyse the source language nor to manipulate the target language, with the result that their early translations often appear laboured. Linguists in the second category can use words reasonably efficiently, but academic training has not prepared them for the styles and structures commonly used in the commercial world. Furthermore they may well, despite reference to special-subject dictionaries, make fundamental errors which denote

a lack of expertise in the field in which they are translating. Finally, specially-trained translators may know how to approach and translate a text and - an obvious advantage over the other two categories - be well trained in the use of the target language. But they too, like the linguists, may well fall down on technical terminology.

After a period of practical experience, however, all these translators can be relied on to do their job well, and consequently deserve recognition as professionals. It is essential that the translating profession strives towards official recognition, for once standards have been set, professional translators - whatever their background - can enjoy a status presently denied them. The fact that specialised training is available at university level should bring recognition one step nearer and, in this world of specialisation, I confidently expect the third category of translator to be increasingly in demand. Since I am concerned with training these very people, I shall concentrate on how I believe they can best be equipped for their future careers. In Zürich the training programme is spread over a period of three and a half years and is based on the two fundamentals of translation: language skills and subject matter. As can be seen from Figure 1, these two aspects form the 'peripheries' as it were within which all other disciplines are contained. Within these peripheries there are four main 'pillars' on which skills are built up. On the one hand both source and target language(s) are given very full attention, and on the other, special subjects are studied in lectures - to give a general overview - and as text - to study style, structure, vocabulary, etc. All the various disciplines are interactive, and to my mind necessary to create the finished product: the professional translator. Whatever additional training is given, this basis must be provided, for, irrespective of the subject matter, the translator will always need to be able to analyse the source language in detail, in order to render every aspect of the source text in the target language. I believe that the only target language should be the mother tongue, which I would define as the language in which a person was educated, rather than the language spoken at home as a child or adolescent. (True bilingualism in both the written and the spoken language is very rare indeed.)

This training, then, is the minimum necessary for our future translator. But since the translator does not work in a vacuum, it is necessary to study developments on the market to ascertain whether this minimum is still adequate. I would suggest that further skills are expected today or at least will be very soon. In the early 1970s, when inflation rose rapidly in Switzerland and there was a general liquidity problem, the demand for translations dropped and several

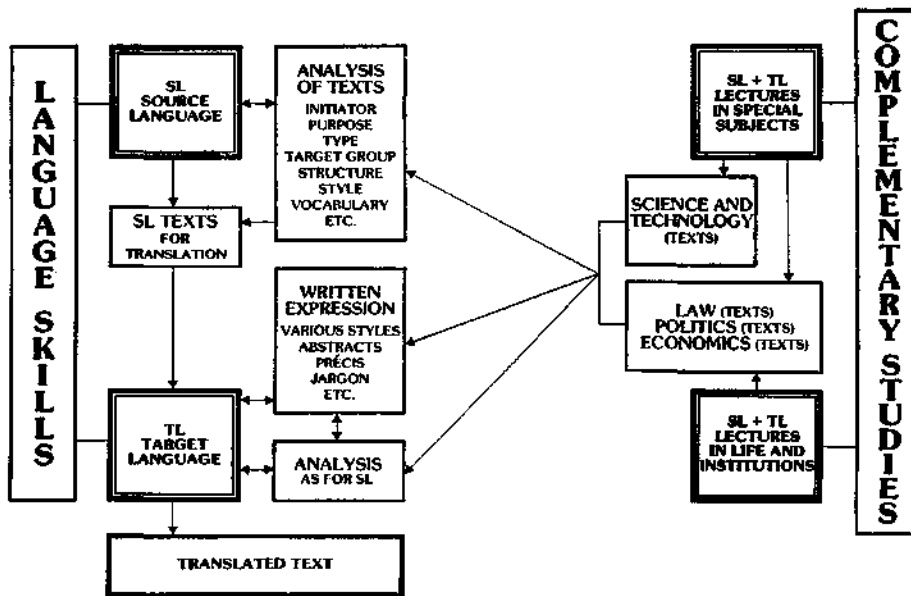


Figure 1. Translation training now

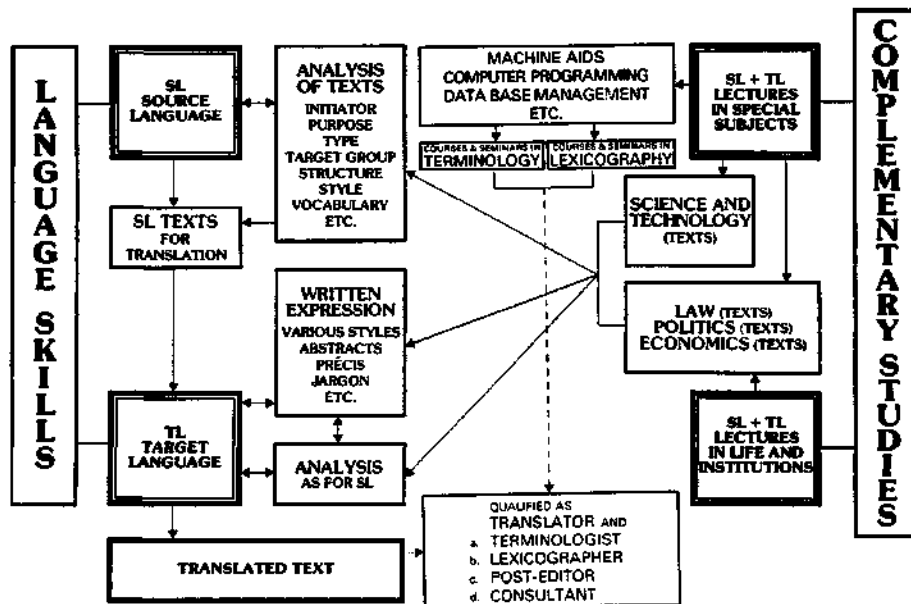


Figure 2. New translation training model

freelance translators, who had previously had more than enough to do, were hard pressed to find sufficient work. Large companies and banks cut down on staff working in their translation departments and in some cases these departments were closed down completely.

During the past few years there have been signs of recovery, and translators are again in demand, but this demand has undergone a subtle change. Whereas up to the mid or late 1970s, translated work was often retyped in the client's office in order to ensure a certain house style, the demand today is increasingly for camera-ready work or work on diskettes compatible with the client's equipment. This is clearly a result of both office automation and the introduction of new technology in the printing industry. For the freelance as for the in-house translator, this means that new standards in presentation and style have been set and must be met. Obviously, then, information about the word processing equipment on the market must be made available to students training as translators. However much the manufacturers may advance their products' merits, not all word processing software is suitable for multilingual work. The students must be advised on the kind of difficulties that can arise once they start working with such equipment, e.g. keyboard problems, footnotes, paging, etc. They should also be warned not to be blinded by facilities offered by the manufacturers which no translator will ever need, e.g. wages and salaries packages, etc. But most of all they must be aware of the difference between a dedicated word processor and a computer - a difference which may be obvious to everyone here in Britain, where there is a certain degree of computer literacy, but not in Switzerland where everything with a screen tends to be called a computer. Naturally, the fraught question of diskette compatibility is not yet fully recognised there.

Once we had recognised that some background to new technology was essential for our students, our first step was to offer an introductory lecture on computers. This has been a regular part of our programme for some years, and has created a certain computer 'awareness'. Our next step was to acquire a terminal which is linked to the Zürich University Computer Centre (RZU) in conversational mode. We have also bought several monitors so that work being done at the terminal can be displayed to the students. The present objectives have been clearly defined; the future is still open and depends on the experience we gain. For the present, the terminal is used for demonstration purposes in two computing lectures, one an introduction to computing, and the other on language data processing as a possible aid to translators. The terminal is also linked to EURODICAUTOM, so that the students can learn how to

access term banks and make the best use of the information they supply. One or two members of staff are using the Centre's IBM Script word processing facility and have joined the training courses in programming offered by the Centre. This, then, is the 'state of the art' in our training programme at present. I should like now to move on to the possibilities which I am aware may well be too optimistic but 'nothing ventured nothing gained'!

When students decide to enter a course of training as translators, they usually know very little about the job in practice; consequently they are often not aware of the fact that there are two essentially different types of employment: either as a freelance or as an in-house translator. Naturally, any course must provide training for both types of work. Obviously in-house translators will have to come to terms with the equipment provided by their company (though they may well be asked to advise on necessary aids). Freelances can choose their own equipment, but this freedom of choice is a mixed blessing, and out of pure frustration they may end up choosing expensive equipment which does not suit their requirements at all. My discussions with successful freelance translators in Switzerland have endorsed my own opinion: the most important modern aid is the dedicated word processor.

I can well imagine that many practising translators in the UK will disagree with me violently. I am aware that the most commonly used aid for the translator working in Britain is dictation equipment. (The reason invariably given is that dictating is by far the most expeditious way of working.) The point that is so often ignored, however, is that in the UK audio typists are extremely poorly paid. This does not apply in Switzerland, nor in most of the Western European countries. Furthermore, typing ability among professional people is much more common in continental Europe and the USA than in Britain. An additional problem for the translator working with dictating equipment is correcting work typed in a foreign language. I could certainly not expect a perfect English or French manuscript from a German native speaker here in Switzerland, so, ideally, even if the translator is working with a typist, the typist should use equipment with long-term storage facilities in order to correct previous errors. This does not mean, however, that learning to use dictation equipment should not be incorporated in a translation training programme. Far from it; translators in large companies commonly have typists allocated to them, as do the translators in international organisations. Consequently, all well-trained translators must be able to dictate their translations. Dictating is mainly a question of practice, and experience can easily be acquired if students are given a text to prepare and then

required to dictate their version in class. The lecturer and remaining students can then criticise every aspect of the translation, including presentation. Not only do the students learn to use the equipment to its best advantage, they also develop fluency, easy recall of what they have already dictated, and the ability to give the typist special instructions where necessary. Recognising that such training is essential does not in any way alter my previous assertion that the translator needs to be conversant with the possibilities offered by word processing equipment since, inevitably, this will be increasingly used for transcription.

Why do I advocate a dedicated word processor? The translator's job is to write, to manipulate and correct text, and however good word-processing software for computers may be, it is rarely as fast or as comprehensive in its editing facilities as is a dedicated word processor by its very nature. Furthermore, the word processor is the big brother, as it were, of the typewriter. Clearly, then, a translator already used to that medium will more easily advance to a dedicated word processor than to a computer. However, if translators are prepared to make do with the somewhat cumbersome text editing packages presently available, because of the other facilities offered by the computer, and if they wish to write some programs themselves, a micro (if they cannot afford a major outlay) or a PC will be the natural choice.

At the end of September 1984, the Swiss Translators' and Interpreters' Association, ASTI, organised a one-day seminar on 'Informatik im Dienste der Uebersetzung' (Information technology as an aid to translating). It was extremely well attended, which shows there is no lack of interest or demand. I have since talked to many translators who attended the seminar, and the most commonly expressed opinion was that they cannot spend the time and effort on learning to use new equipment to capacity, and are consequently prepared to stay with a system that is easy to use and cheap to buy, i.e. the intelligent typewriter with some disk storage. And this despite a much greater demand for camera-ready work, for which, incidentally, the client is quite happy to pay extra. This does not mean that the translators are not prepared to change their way of working, but that they are suspicious of large systems which offer too many facilities, that they can recognise the limitations of smaller systems, and that they are worried about the whole problem of compatibility.

Instead of being dissatisfied with what is available on the market, translators and, indeed, translators' organisations must define their needs, and this must be done at national and international level. Only then will it be worth approaching the manufacturers. However much some companies

claim that they offer full multilingual facilities, I have not yet seen any equipment on the market that would meet all my requirements - and my German-English version is relatively easy to cater for. This, however, is a long-term objective. What can you as a translator do, if you want to invest in equipment now? There is no short cut that I am aware of. You must study as many systems as you can (there will be a natural limit set by price and configuration, quite apart from the time this takes) and wherever possible try to use a system in your own surroundings for a period of time. Any system shortlisted must offer all the basic facilities required, together with later expansion possibilities. By basics I mean full text generating and editing facilities, some graphics, and a fast, high-quality printer. Later additional facilities might include dictionary or glossary building, OCR input, a facility for accessing outside term banks, etc. Once you have chosen 'your' system - i.e. one where you need not from the very start say 'It's not really what I wanted, but it will have to do,' - you must invest a great deal of time to learn to use it intelligently and to capacity. This may sound obvious, but it must be remembered that during the learning process your output will hardly be increasing, and yet you want to see a return for your investment. Certainly your work will look more attractive, but it will probably take longer to produce because of the temptation to re-edit repeatedly.

If, because of the pressure of work, you do not take the trouble to familiarise yourself with the non-editing facilities available, at the end of the day you may well ask yourself why you did not stay with the intelligent typewriter!

It is all very well to talk about 'on-job training', but if the training costs come out of your own pocket then this is quite another matter. And for the freelance these costs can be very high. Apart from the basic investment, there are service contracts and additional insurance to consider, not to mention more suitable furniture, increased use of paper, diskettes, etc. Leasing rather than buying the equipment in no way changes this situation. Little wonder, then, that so many translators have a 'wait and see' approach to investing in a really comprehensive word processing system.

It is at this point that I must again address the manufacturers. I said earlier that translators must define their specific needs to the industry. But I would go further than that. If translators already present a fair market for the producers of word processing systems, and if translation is a growth industry, then surely the 'translators-in-training' open up a whole new potential market. Where better, then, for the manufacturers to develop and test their equipment than in those places where the translators are being trained? I accept that this may be too idealistic, but



at the risk of being considered naive, let me propose the following training scenario. With the use of monitor screens, a number of systems could be used as full translation-teaching aids. A student in a classroom situation could type in the draft version of a translation into the target language, and the rest of the group, including the lecturer, could suggest changes to be made; once these were incorporated a final version could be printed out. Several small groups of students would then be responsible for subsequent revision, and their final copies, acceptable to the whole group, printed out. This would lead to familiarity with the product, and special difficulties for the various language pairs and/or target languages could be noted and regularly made available to the manufacturers. Ideally, of course, equipment from various manufacturers should be used, enabling students to become familiar with a number of keyboards, systems, and screens. Various other teaching aspects could be incorporated in such sessions, e.g. glossary work, writing bills and statements, and how to store them, bookkeeping, updating client files, etc. In such group sessions special demands are likely to arise: for example, students may find that particular errors recur, and that an automatic checking facility would be an advantage. In other words, group discussion is likely to generate new ideas for additional software that might be incorporated in the system. Naturally, feasibility decisions would have to be made by the supplier, but the suggestions for improvement could well come from the future users. After all, 'user-friendly' only makes sense if the user has been clearly identified.

Earlier on I mentioned the possibilities of using a terminal linked to a mainframe computer at a university computer centre. I should now like to go into further detail about my Utopian prospects for this piece of equipment. I do not believe that a translation institute or university department should expand its programme to include a qualification in linguistic data processing, but I would stress that the translator of the future should have rather more than a vague idea of what language handling involves and what advantages linguistic data processing can offer. He or she should have some knowledge of information management and retrieval, be aware of the advantages of electronic publishing, etc.

Translation and linguistic data processing are simply two different forms of language handling. And the more translators understand about language the better they will be at handling it. And it is here that the linguistic data processor certainly has a role to play in translation training. As a part of the complementary studies essential for such training I envisage lectures, seminars, and practical sessions

to familiarise the students with the bare skeleton that is then fleshed out to make up the words and phrases they have always taken for granted. Once they have had to define a word, let alone a morpheme, they will have a much fresher approach to language and meaning.

Teaching should be at the terminal with monitor display, though I doubt whether any hands-on experience will be possible in the early stages. Apart from discussing theory, the lecturer, who must be a linguistic data processor, should use his or her own programs and files to demonstrate principles of linguistic data processing. Basic notation and coding for computer linguistics and thus for dictionary generation and handling can be easily explained first in theory and then through demonstration on the screen. Once this has been grasped, the students should be ready to look at approaches to documentation and terminology work. Here again, work done in a university information sciences department could be used for purposes of illustration. This should then lead on to using linguistic 'key word in' programs to study full texts. Frequency search lists, indices and concordances could be made to show the students that some kinds of analysis can be done both faster and more thoroughly by computer than they could be done manually. Comparing the register of legal and political texts, for example, could well prove illuminating. If they are available and can be input, one might analyse texts on similar subjects but in different languages in this way, which again would show the students new ways of approaching their 'manual' translation. I would regard all work in this sector as being no more than useful theory, but it should also open up possibilities for further study in linguistic data processing for those who have become particularly interested in this aspect of language.

The second object of such a course would be to illustrate the present basis of most machine translation or machine-aided translation systems. Once students have a grasp of the linguistic principles behind these systems, they might well develop a particular interest in post-editing or, indeed, lexicography. This would seem to me to be particularly important for a translator who will later be working in a company where some form of machine translation is used.

I feel that I should say a few words about machine translation (MT) and machine-aided translation (MAT), though both are well outside the areas covered by our training programme. MT, by definition, requires quite different skills from those which our students have acquired, and even machine or computer-aided translation is only of peripheral interest in a teaching programme for translators. I consider it imperative, however, that any university department or special institute like ours training translators

keep abreast of developments in the MT field.

A future translator needs to know a little more than the principles on which MT and MAT have developed. During the course of the academic year one or two lectures should be reserved for descriptions of systems currently available on the market, and these lectures might well be followed by seminars to examine the kind of work which machines can handle and the quality they can achieve. Some stress should be laid on post-editing as a practice discipline, and here again co-operation between either manufacturers or users of MT and training establishments could be very useful. One or two companies have offered to allow final-year students to spend six or eight weeks with them as 'stagiaires'; such practical post-editing experience is invaluable since it helps students recognise the kind of job better left to the machine. During this period of familiarisation, I would also expect the student to learn to update the system's dictionaries and perhaps do some terminology work. Some translators I have talked to find this kind of work surprisingly satisfying, and it would be absurd to disregard a particular form of translation simply because the skills required are not identical with the objectives laid down in a training programme for translators. If some MT theory is introduced into the training course, the student will soon learn to regard MT as an aid rather than competition.

Those MAT systems in which there is a dialogue between the machine and the translator are rather more difficult to fit into a ready-made programme. Certainly the student must learn that such systems are on the market, and should be expected to have some familiarity with the way they are conceived. Ideally, the student should again have a period of training in a company that uses such equipment; or, alternatively, such a system might be employed as a teaching aid - again with monitors - along the lines already discussed for word processing systems. Once again, co-operation between manufacturers and users on the one hand, and translation institutes on the other, could be of considerable mutual benefit.

The aim of any training programme for translators today must go beyond ensuring that on completion of the course students can be relied upon to translate a message given in one language into another language and still convey the same information to a comparable target group. The students must have an excellent command of the languages studied (including their mother tongue), and they must be able to analyse and synthesise these languages, i.e. have a grasp of both syntax and semantics. They must have enough background information in each language to be able to locate their translations correctly. They must have acquired a

feeling for idiom and register. I believe that some products of new technology can help in their training, and I am firmly convinced that by using electronic aids translators can present their work in the best possible light. Through these aids they will also have learned to take advantage of the opportunities for rapid information access, which is so often the really time-consuming aspect of translation. On graduation, they may decide to move away from pure translation to a related discipline such as post-editing or terminology work. The broader-based their training, the greater are their opportunities for diversification. Certainly the teaching establishments should continue to aim at producing reliable translators, but an introduction to related fields must be regarded as an essential part of that training. If the human translator continues to aim for high quality, the time will surely come when the translating profession is given official recognition, perhaps along the lines of the UNESCO Recommendations of 1976. And once that recognition and the accompanying protection have been achieved, perhaps the manufacturers of word processors and other aids will take the profession seriously enough to provide the kind of equipment really tailored to the translators' needs.

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