

Continuing education and training for translators

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The title of this paper is a very heartening one, since it contains an implicit acceptance that translators have to be trained in the first place. This was not always the case and most active translators with twenty or more years' experience will certainly remember – as I do – the awful 'sink or swim' beginning when we were faced with obscure texts, often without adequate dictionaries or reference material, typewriters which were inevitably 'cast-offs' from the typing pool and, worst of all, people who did not understand and did not want to understand our problems. How we actually coped in those days I do not know, but cope we did in the end in spite of (rather than because of) such an inauspicious beginning. I suppose we always knew that it was not enough to arrive with a piece of paper proclaiming language skills and a lot of good will. There had to be more; there had to be an approach or some kind of method that translators could resort to. But there was no-one to tell us and I suppose we managed in the end with a certain amount of intuition and an even greater slice of good luck.

The problem of training clients as to what they can and cannot expect from a translator is a topic that has been rehearsed on many occasions. Suffice it to say here, however, that the marketplace — for want of a better term — is growing increasingly aware of the status of translators and nowadays actually stipulates that candidates for translator posts have some kind of specialist training as an alternative to a number of years of actual experience.

We have two debts to acknowledge here in my view: firstly to the recent internationalisation of translators themselves. This has really happened as a consequence of developments on the European scene and has opened up a wide range of career possibilities involving working with top-flight

translators from other countries. The net result is that our standing as a profession has been considerably enhanced and translators are seen to be playing a full part in high-level international circles instead of being merely useful people to have around to handle foreign language problems. The second debt is the advance of the new technology. New technology has meant a far-reaching change in the working life of translators. It has played a great part in redefining the sort of work that they do and the tools that they have at hand to do it. It has meant higher and more professional standards. It has meant that translators have had to become more thinking and more responsible in their work. They have had to shake themselves out of their earlier apathy and learn to keep up with the ever-changing world around them. In brief, it has made them more professional and aware of standards.

BASIC TRAINING

Today's accepted approach into the profession starts, as before, with the modern language graduate. Modern language degrees, however, are not what they used to be and most universities and polytechnics tend to follow a more 'applied' path in their approach to language teaching. This is so widespread that most students have studied the principles of translation theory and have done practical work with both literary and technical texts by the time they have graduated. This means that the small proportion of modern language graduates who go on to choose a career as a professional translator do so having had first-hand experience of what it is all about. I do not need to point out the difference between this kind of trainee translator and the graduate of a generation before, who more or less stumbled into the profession.

Today's graduates then have to undergo a further course of study to prepare them for their career. I am often asked how I choose a mere handful of candidates from the huge number of hopeful applicants for the postgraduate translator course that we run at the Polytechnic of Central London. Although it is true to say that the individual skills in foreign languages are very important, our first impressions are of the way in which applicants use their own mother tongue. I believe that if people have innate problems in the way they use their own language, they are going to have a lot more problems if they have to make a living in this way. The number and the range of subjects studied — even as far back as O level — can be very indicative of the applicants' range of interests and skills. Clearly most modern arts graduates abandon thoughts of a scientific career at a very early stage in their school lives, but even the remoteness of an occasional O level can be invaluable when preparing trainee translators to come to terms with scientific and engineering texts.

I think it is generally agreed that basic training for translators consists of giving them as many insights as possible in a very limited period of time into the way professional translators work. They have to have first-hand experience of a wide range of technical, commercial, scientific, financial etc. texts, so that they learn how to approach new and sometimes strange subjects. They have to be shown how to follow well-trodden paths of research and cross-referencing. They have to be brought into contact with different registers of English, so that each text can be correctly 'pitched' for the readership and they have to learn not to be satisfied with a standard that falls short of perfection.

FURTHER TRAINING

The question of further training is more complex and differs from basic training inasmuch that candidates for basic training are still working at first principles. At the basic training stage, mechanisms for tackling technical and specialised texts are covered. Very few of the trainees will know at this stage where they will eventually end up or even whether they will get a job at all in today's uncertain climate. Further training on the other hand assumes that the translators are practising translators and that they know that to succeed they have to keep up to date. This may come from the translators themselves, or alternatively, it may come from employers. Many companies are very aware of the need for on-the-job training (not only for translators, I should add) and organise regular training visits or sessions. I am sure that all translators worth their salt will want to become involved in the kind of work that their company does and to familiarise themselves with its products. Good translators have shown themselves to be extremely adept at grasping the bare bones or the underlying principles of even complex technical topics. Employers have a responsibility here too, however. It is a question of mutual advantage for them if their translators are able to assimilate new developments and new jargon, in the same way, for example, as the sales representatives are expected to do.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional translators can be expected to develop in different ways. On the one hand, they must learn to keep abreast with developments on their own immediate working surroundings as far as subject matter is concerned, and on the other hand they may find they are required to widen their portfolio of languages to meet changing market or other requirements. The one-language translator is nowadays a very rare bird indeed and would be an expensive luxury for most employers. On the other hand,

the enlargement of the Common Market, for example, and the general increase in international trade and communications, has meant an upsurge in the amount of translation work from other languages, which — with all due respect to them — have not been in very great demand on the commercial scene. Translators are first and foremost professionals. In their employers' eyes, they are the people who actually understand all about languages, and surely there can't be very much difference between French and So the translators develop their skills and very soon learn to adapt their translating techniques to other — perhaps cognate — languages. We accept the fact that translation is essentially a linguistic skill, or even a linguistic exercise and, given adequate knowledge of the source language, for a given text the result should be no different. (Would one really expect to find much difference, for example, between a commercial letter translated from French by an experienced French graduate and a commercial letter from Spanish translated by the French graduate who has in the meantime built up a knowledge of Spanish? I think not. What is important is the technique and the ability to reproduce a 'proper' English business letter.)

The third area of development is coming to terms with the new technology. Outward-looking translators will by now have progressed from the old manual typewriter, the dictating machine and even from the smart new electric — or even electronic — typewriter. They owe it to themselves and to the profession to develop the best in themselves and if this means that every decade they have to start from scratch in order to familiarise themselves with new developments in information technology this is something that they have to take on. Never before have translators had to be so much aware of the changes going on around them. But if they can manage to keep abreast of all these technical developments and at the same time develop their language skills, they will find themselves very valued members of a very respected profession.

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