STOP REINVENTING THE WHEEL

Bob Clark
Praetorius, Suite 7A, Joseph's Well, Park Lane, Leeds LS3 1AB

This paper will look at the problems which isolated translators and language workers have in accessing vital information. Although some of this information is already in manuals available to the translator, we are increasingly finding that the translators are unable either to identify such information or successfully implement the instructions. Translators have special problems which cannot always be answered by product helplines, but which they unknowingly share with other translators. Some way needs to be found of overcoming this isolation. This paper sketches out what, in an ideal world, could be the solution.

The paper I'm going to give this afternoon is actually verging on the ecological. Nowadays, being green is a very fashionable thing to do and, quite rightly, we are very concerned with the conservation of the world's natural resources. Water, fossil fuels, gas and electricity are all precious commodities and we manage to use less and less every day. But very little attention seems to be paid to the conservation of human energy. We seem quite prepared to let people run around in circles, duplicating effort and wasting time. Maybe this is a result of apparently having more people than work. I don't know. Let's take freelance translators for example. They usually work alone and, as a result, tend to deal with problems in a vacuum. It is estimated that there are three to four thousand translators in this country. Given that most of them now use computers running similar software, if estimates are correct, we have a potential situation of approximately three to four thousand people going through exactly the same motions, solving the same problems at the same time. Does this make any sense? Problems should only have to be solved once, not over and over again. We must find a way of networking this army of people so that problems are shared. And not just problems, there should be a sharing of information. We must get away from this protectionist, "I'm alright Jack" attitude. We must realise that, by looking inward and protecting what we may perceive as being an investment in our own time and training, we are actually missing out on the knowledge and experience that others have to offer.

What sort of information do translators need in order to do their jobs? They obviously need terminology. They need enough technical information to keep their equipment running and up to date. They need to know which software is best suited to the work they do and they need to be kept informed of new software as it comes on the market. That's a lot of information for any one person to acquire, let alone assimilate.

First let's look at terminology. Every translator has his or her own working glossaries and, as new terms are coming up all the time, a lot of people are probably trying to find the same words at the same time. More duplication of effort. What is wrong with exchanging these glossaries with other translators? There are many computerised terminology management systems available nowadays so swapping terminology files is easier than ever.

Now let's talk about getting the computer to do what we want it to do. Again we have this vision of three to four thousand people sitting alone in their workplace, scratching their heads, staring at their computers trying to figure out what's wrong with the thing. Why won't it work? I could go on all afternoon about the sort of problems translators are likely to encounter. We've all been there. I remember, what seems many years ago, finding myself locked out of WordPerfect 5.1. Every time I tried to load it up I got the message "Are other copies of WordPerfect currently running? (Y/N)". I duly pressed the "N" for "no" and the message appeared again, and again, and again... So I rang the WordPerfect helpline. I'm happy to say that WordPerfect run a very efficient, fast helpline service now, but in those days you could go grey before someone answered the phone. Once I got through I explained my symptoms but no-one could help. I called in my local supplier who was equally baffled and I ended up having to reinstall the program. I retraced my movements and managed to do the same thing again. This time I realised exactly what had happened. Those were the days before language modules and I had been creating a Cyrillic keyboard to access the extended Cyrillic character set. So, naturally, when I tried to exit the program nothing happened because, since I hadn't switched back to the English keyboard, I was, in effect, speaking Russian whilst the program was speaking English! I had switched the computer off thinking that there was a bug of some kind and when I tried to get back into WordPerfect, instead of getting an English "N" for "no" when I responded to the prompt, the program was receiving the Russian equivalent. Of course, once I understood what was happening, I could enter Alt+78 to access the program and then switch to the English keyboard. This experience may seem laughable now, but in those days it was a real mystery and I certainly could have used a little support to get through it. I doubt that I was the only one to find myself in that situation but this sort of thing should only happen once.

As Software Editor of *Language International* I often get letters and telephone calls from people having problems accessing the more exotic character sets. A Czech woman was recently referred to me because she was having problems printing Czech characters. Now this woman is, in fact, not a translator and what I'm saying today does not only apply to translators. She is an Information Systems Consultant and had developed a library database for use in Czechoslovakia. She had done her homework and had upgraded to MS-DOS 5.0 so that she could access code page 852 which handles Eastern European characters. As she quoted from page 333 of the MS-DOS 5.0 manual, "MS-DOS version 5.0 can use language conventions, keyboards, and character sets for the following countries, regions, or languages..." The table following this statement includes Czechoslovakia. She prepared the code page and was able to access the appropriate characters and display them on the screen. However, she could not print the data. Again she referred to the manual and on page 343 she read, "MS-DOS has an installable device driver called PRINTER.SYS that enables you to use prepared code pages with certain types of printers..." It names three IBM printers including the IBM Proprinter. She telephoned the Microsoft Product Support service, explained her problem and asked whether there was any likelihood of additional drivers being produced to support code page 852 on other printers. They said that such drivers were the responsibility of the printer manufacturers. At the time, she had an OKI printer and her client had an Epson. She telephoned both firms and was told that drivers for the operating system were not their responsibility. Having no other choice, she decided to buy a Proprinter. When she finally found one she discovered that the 4208.CPI driver that should have supported code page 852 in fact did not. This was the point that she contacted me and I'm afraid I was little help because she had already done all there was to do. According to the information available it should have worked. She then rang Microsoft again and they apparently confirmed that the driver did not support code page 852. I rang Microsoft myself and they told me that they were aware that this was a shortcoming of the current version of MS-DOS which they hoped would be rectified with the next version. I cite this problem in particular because here we have a classic example of the most frustrating and time-wasting scenario - "the wild goose chase". These are just two examples of the sort of problems any one of us can come up against and we can multiply them by a thousand to get some idea of what is going on out there. We could say that this is all part of our own understanding of the learning curve, but couldn't the time spent in trying to solve these problems be more constructively applied elsewhere?

So where can a translator find help when he or she has a problem with hardware or software? Most of the major software products have their own helplines and the better local suppliers can provide a great deal of support, but, as we can see from the examples I just gave, this support is often limited to problems of a general nature.

Translators also need to keep abreast of developments in software, especially multilingual software and computerised translation tools. How do they find out what there is? There are computer magazines. Lots and lots of magazines. There must be a hundred in this country and there are equivalents in many of the other major languages. It is impossible to wade through all this information yet we could be missing many valuable nuggets by not doing so. Reviews appear in the journals, newsletters and bulletins of translators associations. *Language Industry Monitor* does an excellent job of reporting the latest developments in natural language processing and we do our best at *Language International* to provide our readers with the sort of information we feel they need. But things are moving so fast that, even in the journals, we find it very difficult to keep pace with developments. Fortunately, we are now getting specialist publications like Ian Tresman's *Multilingual PC Directory* as well as the *Language Engineering Directory,* which was commissioned by the EC's DG XIII. They list hundreds of companies engaged in the field of natural language processing along with descriptions of the products they are developing.

There are user support groups out there to help us and we can find one for practically every operating system and software package on the market. We've got the IBM PC User Group, the Windows User Group, The Ventura User Group, the list is endless. Is it really a practical consideration to join all these groups? Could anyone afford it?

Now before anyone gets upset, I would like to acknowledge the valuable work that the ITI have done in addressing these problems. More often than not, when all else fails, a translator will turn to a colleague for assistance. Colleagues are often the most fruitful source of information because they share a common experience. ITI networks give translators the opportunity to meet with colleagues and exchange information. Practical demonstrations and tutorials on a wide range of software products for translators are available at *infotech* seminars which are held throughout the year. Every edition of the *ITI Bulletin* offers valuable advice in its Technology Corner section from Nick Rosenthal, Bill Maslen, and Bruce Carroll, amongst others, and we mustn't forget the *Professional Translator & Interpreter's* The Mean Machine section, which does a superb job of demystifying software and hardware issues so that anyone can understand them. This is fine for the seventeen hundred members of the ITI, but what about translators who are not members? No-one knows exactly how many there might be but estimated figures are anywhere between two and three thousand. The answer may be that they should join the ITI but the fact is that they haven't. And what about non-translators like the Czech woman I mentioned? Shouldn't they be able to access this information if they need to? The question of timeliness also comes up. People need to solve problems they are having with software or hardware there and then. They can't afford to wait.

What we badly need is a central point of reference. One-stop shopping, if you like. My excitement when I read about Graeme High and Gerald Dennett's efforts to set up an ITI Bulletin Board last year was only matched by my disappointment when I discovered that it had been put on the back burner owing to a general lack of interest. A questionnaire had been sent out to members and sixty seven percent of the responses were in favour of ITI setting up its own bulletin board. However, less than twenty five percent of all members actually responded. But was this really a lack of interest or was it a lack of awareness? Could it be that people still do not realise the implication of having a single point of contact where information could be stored, managed and exchanged? Instead of threading our way through the maze of widely dispersed information that we now have available, wouldn't it be wonderful just to be able to switch on a modem and access any information whenever we want it? Software problems could be rectified by a colleague who had experienced the same problem. Terminology questions could be discussed with other translators, anywhere in the world. Gateways would enable us to access remote databases. Product information on new software of particular interest to translators could be stored for reference along with reviews on these products. These reviews could be augmented by comments from other subscribers who have actually used the software. An on-line version of the ITI Directory could be available. And what about all the events that take place in the translation world? The *Language International* Calendar of Events is generally considered to be one of the most comprehensive available, but because of the fact that we find out about certain items too late to meet publication deadlines, about ten percent of events taking place do not even make the calendar. If there were an on-line calendar of events deadlines would not be a problem. And this is the vital difference between having information available on-line as opposed to the familiar paper-based approach. *All* information can be current and up to date. It can be fed into the system on a daily basis and is not governed by traditional publica-tion restrictions.

Many translators who are now equipped with modems do, in fact, access on-line information. They are able to chat with colleagues on CompuServe's Foreign Language Education forum. But numerically, those people are still in a minority. Like many translators who still think of their computers as fancy typewriters, there are some who have modems but think of them only as a speedy means of sending and receiving files. The unfortunate fact is that most translators do not have a modem at all.

Several members who responded to the ITI questionnaire suggested that a dedicated Bulletin Board Service was too parochial and that CompuServe was more than adequate to meet the needs of translators. I would certainly question the wisdom of limiting participation in a dedicated Bulletin Board Service to ITI members. CompuServe is a valuable service and, in general, offers all the benefits of on-line access. But, whereas a dedicated ITI Bulletin

Board Service may be too parochial and inward looking, CompuServe, in its current format, is far too general to cater for the specific needs we are discussing here today.

It might be that a dedicated Bulletin Board Service is not the ideal solution. It might be that CompuServe could be approached to create a special interest group within their existing service specifically for translators along with an appropriate database which we could maintain ourselves. These are all points for discussion and I'm sure that a solution could be found. The important thing is to recognise the need for a common on-line facility that will be used by all translators. The important thing is to recognise the need to educate translators to the fact that a modem is not just another gadget created to complicate their lives even further, but that it represents a link to the rest of the world, without which they will eventually find themselves decidedly disadvantaged.

I've used this Aslib Conference as a platform to air my views on this subject because I feel that there must be people here who are concerned enough to make it happen. People who would be prepared to meet and investigate the possibilities further. I certainly would be willing to participate in any initiative, so if anyone is interested, please see me later. Thank you.