

## **Who are the translators? The growing professionalism of translating**

*Geoffrey Kingscott*

*Director, Praetorius Ltd, Nottingham, UK*

Before we get round to considering where the technology has got to, we ought to make an attempt to fill in the background, the context. Where is translation being carried out? Who is doing the translation? How is it being done?

I have been trying to get to grips with these questions, but it is very difficult to seize on anything very definite. I will be using the phrase 'the translation profession', but in doing so I use it only as a convenient shorthand, because it is evident that while there is a distinguishable mainstream of translation, this stream does not run between clearly defined banks, but at its periphery spreads itself over, and loses itself in, a very wide area of marshland, the extent of which is impossible to survey.

We tend to underestimate the amount of translation work being carried on outside our view; outside the view, that is, of those working in the international institutions with their established structures and developing career patterns, or active in the translator associations, or marketing ourselves to the commercial world. Even in our over-compartmentalised profession, we are in touch with one another, we all know something about ethical codes, about working practices, about new developments.

The one major survey of the world translation market carried out in recent years, that by the Bureau Marcel van Dijk for the Commission of the European Communities,<sup>1</sup> stuck very much to the mainstream.

But I think that the companies selling machine translation systems, with what they have found out by bringing a new drive and a new approach to the marketplace, reaching the places which the rest of us have never reached, will bear out my own impression, that there is a huge volume of translation work being carried on out there by people we have never heard

of, and who have never heard of us. A questionnaire survey carried out by John Newton,<sup>2</sup> when he was selling Weidner through The Software Connection, showed to what extent this was the case even among the larger UK companies.

So having made the point, that we often overlook what is going on in the outer marshlands, I will try to get to grips with the amorphous problem of where translation is practised, and by whom.

### **INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

Right in the middle of the mainstream, of course, are the international organisations, the United Nations, and the European institutions: the Commission, the Council, the Parliament, the Court of Justice etc. Here we have a structured profession, an established recruitment policy, defined career paths, and ..., something often lacking elsewhere, adequate remuneration; and, perhaps even more important, status.

I am going to have to use a lot of generalisations, and no doubt there are reservations and qualifications – there was, I understand, some form of international translation structure before the Second World War – but to a great extent the profession, as practised at an international level, traces its ancestry, in common with that of conference interpreting, to the Nuremberg tribunals after the war. The profession can be said to have existed since then as a definable entity.

Recruitment to the translation departments of these international bodies is usually by competitive examination, and in certain universities and colleges there are increasingly courses which train translators, terminologists and interpreters to be the sort of employee which these bodies are looking for.

To what extent is a clearly defined translator career path, from the university to the grave, being created by the emergence of translator courses and by the recruitment policies of the international institutions?

In his illuminating chapter entitled specifically ‘Who are the translators?’ in the *Aslib Translator's Handbook*<sup>3</sup> in 1983, Jeremy Verrinder wrote that many translators only considered translation as a career after graduating. Even that is an advance on the days when you got a job as something else and only afterwards were your language skills brought into use.

I have a feeling that undergraduates choosing courses at universities like Bath, Salford, Bradford or Heriot-Watt in the UK, and similar places on the Continent, may be a bit vague when they start out as to what translation involves, but they are thinking, more and more of them, of translation as career. And a straightforward career, from university to the grave, in translation, is a comparatively new phenomenon which could modify the structure of the profession.

For example, the translator organisations might become more important. In past decades translators have become translators for haphazard reasons; many of the best and most highly organised translators have got into the profession more or less by accident. It is a fact that many well-established translators, the majority, indeed, of the leading freelancers in the UK, have never found the need to join any of the translator associations. There are always the public-spirited few, of course, but many translators had found their own way into translation, they are doing well enough, thank you, and now they have not got any time to spare for committees and associations, even when they have heard of them. But young translators entering the profession as a deliberate choice will look round to see what they can do to give weight and depth to their chosen role in life. Provided, that is, they are caught before they enter the cocoon of organisations like the European Commission, where they can feel secure and protected, and above all, valued, without the need for any outside translator body.

The project now being aired, for an Institute of Translation, which will bring together professional translators, the university trainers of future translators, and translation users, is an interesting pointer to what is happening. As far as I know, such a body does not exist in any other country.

To go back to where translation is carried on. I have looked briefly at the international and government organisations. I do not wish to dwell any longer on this activity in centre stream. Important as it is, the way the international institutions recruit, and how they operate, and how the specialist courses in universities and colleges train translators, have been described before.

Moving out from the international associations, there are of course translation departments, large or small, in government ministries, in semi-government organisations, and in other international bodies. They are in touch with one another, and they now meet in a comparatively recent association described by Peter Arthern<sup>4</sup> in an article published in August 1985. They are discussing things like recruitment, and revision procedures, whereas not so long ago such organisations were operating in near-ignorance of one another. Such conferences and associations, once again, represent a definite tendency towards a more clearly defined profession.

## **INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE**

Moving on to the industrial and commercial sphere, there are large companies, particularly multinationals, which have translation departments. In the UK there are surprisingly few of these, but those which do exist

tend to be represented, together with government departments, in the Aslib Technical Translation Group. The Shell translation department is quite well known, with its own structures, and has long been very much part of the mainstream, but elsewhere, even in quite large UK companies, translators are often scattered individuals, carrying quite a heavy responsibility on their shoulders, often for superiors who have little conception of language problems, who may even be reluctant to let them come to conferences.

It is a generalisation again, but in the Federal Republic of Germany and in Switzerland there do seem to be far more in-house translation departments, with translators there enjoying a much higher status than they do in the UK.

Company translation departments and professional translators employed by the larger companies have, partly through this series of conferences, partly through the increasing activity of the translator associations, and partly because of the comparatively recent development of a translation press, become much more aware of what is going on, are much more in touch with fellow translators, than they were a few years ago. So here again there is a movement towards a more professional profession.

It is a story we are coming across again and again. Translators who a few years ago worked in near-isolation are now in touch with one another. Is it because the nature of translation is changing? It does seem more and more that translation is increasingly a task for the specialist, the professional, rather than for the person who happens to be on the spot and who happens to know languages. Is it this which is causing a problem in the Institute of Linguists? The words 'translator' and 'linguist' are no longer synonymous, as many people once thought they were.

Take this particular series of Aslib/TG conferences. They have made their own distinctive contribution towards the promotion of a more cohesive profession, but there was an element of supply and demand; if the conferences had not existed, they would surely have had to be invented.

Returning to our theme, of where translators are to be found. We were looking at industry and commerce. Where do the translators come from?

Some translators in industry have previously had other posts in the company, but once having confessed to language skills, have found themselves doing more and more translation work. The normal method of recruitment, however, seems to be by advertisement, usually in a local newspaper, to a lesser extent in a national newspaper, and to an even lesser extent, in the language press. But times are changing. There is a greater awareness of translation as a profession; light is beginning to dawn, and some advertisements are becoming more specific and there is greater readiness to recruit from within the profession.

One point which will be familiar to many who work in companies is that

there is an increasing demand for language training in industry. This is an expanding business. Translation departments are in some cases becoming language departments, providing both translation of documentation and language training for executives. Certainly outside suppliers to industry are aware of the trend. Colleges are more and more marketing their language training services to industry and in one or two cases starting to add – tentatively at the moment – a translation dimension, while translation companies are finding it pays more and more to offer language tuition as well as translation.

Is this trend going to create a demand in industry for more of an all-rounder linguist? Jeremy Verrinder, whom I have already quoted, describes the translator in a small one- or two-person section as being at everybody's beck and call, acting as both translator and interpreter.

I fear that increasingly he or she will be called on to give language tuition to sales executives off to sell in South America, or accountants off to audit the books of the French subsidiary, to provide the 'crash courses' in which so many people still have such touching faith.

But let us now venture out into the unregenerate areas, or the areas untouched by the notion of a translation profession.

In industry and commerce the translation of a document will often be done by a person whose main job is something else, engineer, computer programmer, marketing person, whatever. Sometimes in the past, that person's work has gradually been taken over by his or her acquired translation function, and he or she has become a translator pure and simple. But in many cases this is not so, and the translator reverts to normal duties. Foreign agents for British companies often carry out translation as part of their normal service.

In some cases, of course, the work is being done badly, through ignorance and over-confidence. We in the commercial world have all met cases of this. In John Newton's report, quoted above, he found that 'an alarmingly high proportion of translation is carried out by employees with no relevant training or qualifications, and often into a language other than their mother tongue'.

But also, reluctant though we may be to admit it, the work done in this way, by non-professional linguists, has often been found acceptable. By non-professional in this context I mean not in touch with other translators, not aware of what the mainstream is doing; it does not necessarily mean incompetent.

What is bringing those firms who have used these *ad hoc* methods of translation in the past into the edges of the mainstream – and I think the machine translation companies will again bear out what I say from their own marketing experiences – is not complaints about the quality of the work, or the difficulty in finding the odd linguistic competence: what is

causing them problems now is the sheer volume of work to be translated. It is not: 'Help, we do not know how to do translation!', but 'Help, we cannot cope with the amount of translation work now being generated all of a sudden!'.

### **TRANSLATION COMPANIES AND FREELANCES**

The third main area where translation is carried on, international and government institutions and organisations being the first area, and commerce, whether industrial firms, or large firms of solicitors, patent agents etc., being the second, is that of translation companies and freelances. How many of these are there? Well, that is difficult to say as translation companies merge at the smaller end into individual freelances operating under a company-type name – you know the sort of thing: European ... or World ... or Inter-Galactic Translations, Flat 2A, 14 Acacia Drive, East Cheam. And there are some individual freelances who have made themselves into efficient little businesses, with a bigger turnover than some of the so-called companies with pretentious titles.

In the UK, translation companies have always been more prominent than in countries such as the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, or Switzerland, where more people are familiar with foreign languages. In the UK, foreign languages are something quite alien, and many people in industry are glad for companies to come along and take away the problem. In the Federal Republic of Germany, say, familiarity with language problems means they are more frequently prepared to work directly with individual translators.

How many companies and freelances are there? In 1983 at *Language Monthly* we checked the UK Yellow Pages directories for the whole country, and after eliminating duplications we came up with a figure of 555 individuals with a listed number and 472 translation companies (or individuals with a trading name). But that certainly underestimates the number of individuals earning most of their living from freelance translation.

So how many people, for example, are engaged, for a significant part of their working lives, in translation in all branches? All sorts of figures are bandied about, from the 100,000 said to be working in translation in Japan, to a figure of 13,000 recently quoted for the Federal Republic of Germany (of whom only one-third are said to have the necessary expertise and qualifications). My guess, and it is no more than a guess, is around 3,000 for the UK.

Going back to translation companies and freelances, there are some indications that the leading translation companies in each country are pulling away from the rest, partly because of their superior marketing, and

partly because translation is less and less demanded as a separate service; it is increasingly part of a chain, allied to typesetting, computer programming etc. Once upon a time, and that not so long ago, a translation company could be a cottage industry. The odd typewriter, a few dictionaries, a set of index cards and some postal weighing scales were all that was necessary. Now the business is becoming quite capital-intensive, with electronic communications and typesetting and printing equipment.

Translation companies are major users of freelance translator services, and another trend is for nearly every company to use the same freelances. It is not that the freelance pool is shrinking; far from it, the translation companies are deluged with applications from would-be suppliers. But everyone is learning to fish at what we might call the deep end, where the more experienced and more highly organised freelances are concentrated. Because, once again, everyone knows one another more than they did twenty years ago.

International and government institutions, firms large and small, translation companies and freelance translators, these are the three major areas in which translation is carried out. But of course there are other areas. Some of these are quite important in their own right.

One is that of the translation of scientific papers, sometimes cover-to-cover translation of scientific journals. Many of the translators involved do belong to the mainstream, but work directly for publishers.

Another is translation for military defence purposes; a lot of it goes on — there is a whole establishment at Cheltenham beavering away — but unsurprisingly we hear very little about it.

Literary translation is a field on its own where freelances working from home work directly for publishers. And there is Bible translation, quite a little industry in itself, with its own organisations and journals, with a great deal of activity in languages which, though commercially of no great prominence, may have millions of speakers.

Overall, just how much of a translation market is there? In its survey three or four years ago the Bureau van Dijk calculated a 10 per cent per annum growth in the market, on rather tenuous evidence, it seemed to me.

I do not pretend to know how big the potential translation market is, and there are a number of factors which need to be considered.

My own feeling is that the apparent inaccessibility of foreign language material, the delay in translation, and the cost, in that order, do discourage many people in industry and government from having material translated. If translation were a more familiar and less arcane activity, if more people knew how and where it could be done, if material could be translated more easily and more quickly, I feel that the market could expand exponentially. The sky could be the limit.

**REFERENCES**

1. BUREAU MARCEL VAN DIJK AND PA CONSEILLER DE DIRECTION. *Better translation for better communication*. Pergamon Press for the Commission of the European Communities, 1983.
2. NEWTON, John. *Survey on current trends in translation requirements and facilities*. For The Software Connection, Fareham, Hampshire (report in *Language Monthly*, (15), December 1984, p. 10).
3. PICKEN, Catriona (ed.). *The translator's handbook*. London: Aslib, 1983.
4. ARTHERN, Peter. Government translation services compare notes. *Language Monthly*, (23), August 1985, pp. 11-14.

**AUTHOR**

Geoffrey Kingscott, Director, Praetorius Ltd, 5 East Circus Street,  
Nottingham NG1 5AH, UK.