

The new technology and the translator: a personal view

Josette Guédès

Legal and technical translator, London, UK

To be of any interest, my appraisal must necessarily reflect my personal experience. However, I have tried to be fair and objective in order to give you some useful pointers.

First of all, my appraisal of the new technology covers essentially the word processor — I use a CPT 8510 - and electronic mail with TEXTNET and my experience of these up to now.

THE WORD PROCESSOR

It would seem that for a translator, the word processor should be the ideal machine. After all, a translator spends most of the day ‘processing words’ in one way or another. And my word processor is a wonderful tool. I love it, but even after three years, I feel I have yet to find ways really to make the most of its potential.

I am not alone in having misgivings about some aspects of the new technology. The improvement brought about by the WP is linked to the efficiency — or lack of efficiency — of the previous office set-up.

My typing has always been of the multifingered, but unorthodox, variety. For short spells, I can type as fast as my typist, but as I never trained as such, my sustained speed is not impressive. Consequently, since I left the Central Office of Information (where I had worked as technical translator/editor until 1972) to become a full-time freelance translator, I have always dictated my work and had someone else to type it for me.

From 1972 to 1983, I had a French audio-typist working full-time with me. She typed as fast as I could dictate — more or less — and the arrangement was as near-perfect as possible. Until November 1982, I was using

IBM Selectric typewriters with English and French keyboards, plus French golfballs, and Grundig Stenorette equipment. However, with the advent of the word processor, it became clear that one could not stand still and ignore those machines and that I would have to get one and master it.

At the time, I had a very efficient typist but she had set her mind against computers and all the new office machines. Nevertheless, I acquired the WP, thinking it would be easy to find a French audio-typist who would share my enthusiasm for the new technology.

Here, I must say something about the equipment I use now. It is as follows:

Current equipment

CPT 8510 word processor

Ricoh VIII printer

BUZZBOX modem

DATA LINE

(plus Grundig Stenorettes and IBM Selectrics)

My dictating set-up has not been altered by the new technology. My WP is a dedicated one. It is a CPT 8510 with one-disk drive, with the French, the maths and the communication programs, and I use it with a Ricoh VIII printer with acoustic hood and a good assortment of daisy wheels.

I occasionally wish that I had a second disk drive but, without it, I can still organise a long job to have the minimum of disruption at the editing stage. It is much more convenient to record the original draft and the corrected version both on the same disk but, with only one disk drive, one must anticipate and keep checking that the draft does not fill the disk beyond the half-way mark, at which point one must switch to a second disk.

The main factors in this choice of set-up were:

1. the white A4-sized screen with black characters, which helps to finalise the lay-out very accurately. The CPT screen seemed to be the best WP screen available, with no flickering, and there is also a brightness control
2. the fact that CPT offers a French program, giving a French keyboard lay-out and the text with accents both on the screen and on the printer
3. that the printer uses daisy wheels and is a serious piece of equipment, giving letter quality in 10, 12 or 15 pitch.

I think it is also what one calls 'user-friendly' and I thought any typist would love it. However, I was mistaken in thinking that, having found a

new girl who was very keen and having sent her on the CPT training course, the office would run smoothly ever after.

She was not used to my type of work — I hesitate a little to say that, as practically all my jobs are one-offs, of course — and she just could not cope with getting used to both the work and the WP at the same time, without a lot of help. If one has, for example, a legal text with a lot of subparagraphs and indents, it is a very ambitious task to print it with a justified right-hand margin.

Having struggled to understand my tapes and corrected the mistakes, she then spent an inordinate amount of time trying to get a perfect layout, to impress me. As I had not been on the CPT training course then, I could not help her, except with some common sense advice, which must have seemed quite irrelevant to her. I tried to be patient, but deadlines must be kept and things became very difficult for me.

That disastrous experience came to an end after a few weeks; I found myself with a machine which I could not use and without help in the office. I then decided to go on the CPT course myself and I found it extremely well planned and useful. The first part of the training is a two-day course, followed by another two days of ‘advanced training’ a few months later.

Later on, I also acquired the CPT maths program and went on the special one-day course to use the maths keys. With this program, one can use the computing capacity of the machine and write accountancy programs. For example, I have written a simple one to calculate the balance on an account once the debits and credits have been keyed in. It should also be possible to write one to convert imperial measurements to metric on the screen as one goes along.

Whilst on the subject of programs, I used to be irritated by the default to 10 pitch and the automatic hyphenation *à l'Américaine* that one gets immediately when starting up. Splitting words the American way would not improve my translations. In fact, I prefer not to cut words at all, except on rare occasions. I have therefore included an additional program on my French program disk to give 12 pitch and ‘wraparound’ (i.e. no hyphenation) and I use it quite regularly instead of going through the Print sequence and changing the type of hyphenation separately. With this new program, it is only necessary to touch the Prog key once to make both changes. But, if it is touched again by mistake, it will naturally do the same operations as before, but from a different starting point. As it was already on 12, it will now give 15 pitch instead. The first inkling I have that something is amiss is when I can't write beyond the right-hand margin any more, the system having defaulted to manual hyphenation. In that case, the only course of action is to go back to the slightly more lengthy Print Sequence and Code + H for the hyphenation.

With the CPT, there is a spelling option in English, and also in French. The English program disk contains a 10,000-word dictionary to which one can add up to 2,000 words of one's own choice. On the French program disk, it is possible to store the same amount of words to give a spelling check as one types, or after a page has been typed.

However, I feel that the amount of work that would be needed to incorporate in the dictionary all the French words I might want to use and all their possible endings would not be cost-effective, as I would still need to check the typist's draft. The bleep which announces any word 'not in the dictionary' would probably not be enough to deter the typist from carrying on without checking. If, however, we were producing a lot of work in English — and as I only translate into French that is unlikely — I would probably make use of the Spelling option. Anyway, it is nice to know it is there.

Once I knew how to operate the machine, I trained several girls to do the keying-in. As they are part-timers, I have made several cards in French to remind them of the routine procedures like starting-up, recording a page, the use of the Insert function for repetitive groups of words, how to do superscripts and subscripts etc. These cards have been very useful. One of them is shown in Figure 1. (They are in French of course, and rather battered by now, but I thought this translation would give you an idea of what I found useful. As the manuals are a bit daunting to the translator, they are even more so to a French typist and I thought I should do something about it.)

TO START A PAGE

- Left-hand margin: code + margin
- Right-hand margin: margin only
- Code + M (with 'tabs' if needed)

TO CENTRE A TITLE

- Type the title normally from the left-hand margin
- Leave the cursor just after the title
- Code + C

Figure 1. Examples of routine procedures on the CPT 8510

The WP also created the need for another type of card. An example is shown in Figure 2. This one enables the typist to know on which cassette I have dictated a particular job, which label to record it under and on which

Job	:	3088
Cassettes	:	H ... 231
Disk to be used	:	40
Label	:	JIG
Margins	:	0-75
Number of lines/page	:	60
lines/inch	:	6
Daisywheel	:	Lettergothic
Typed by	:	CD
Date	:	6.11.85
Number of words	:	1,872
Remarks/Inserts	:	See list

Figure 2.

disk. As the job number at the top is in sequence according to my day-book, I can locate any job easily, provided, that is, I have filled in the card conscientiously in the first place!

Now for a comparison of the two systems. The main advantage of the WP is that it makes it a lot easier to do corrections.

In the old days, I used to dictate all my work and concentrate on producing a version as close as possible to the final one in one go. However, it sometimes happens that some explanation towards the end of a text will put a different slant on something which recurs throughout twenty or maybe thirty pages. In those days, the correcting key was mainly useful to the typist when she was doing the first typed version, as she could correct her mistakes as she went along.

If I wanted to make changes later, I was always aware of the boredom of the poor typist having to retype page after page of text in which she had not the slightest interest and, also, of my own boredom at having to recheck those newly retyped pages. Besides, it was also very wasteful.

We became very good at putting the paper back in the machine to make it fall just right, to use the correcting key facility yet again. These kinds of problems generated a feeling of team-work and 'give and take' and I must admit that, once or twice, I did not have the heart to get something retyped yet again.

With the WP, one could use the Search & Replace function to cope with a repetitive change, but I probably would use Insert since, in French, as you know, a change often means several changes in fact, unless the swap involves words of the same gender and both in the singular or both in the plural.

But — and it is a big but — human nature being what it is, it has adapted very quickly to the WP. The ease of editing means that, when dictating a very lengthy legal sentence, for example, if I get interrupted by the telephone, I will sometimes indicate in pencil on the original that this is a point that I shall have to look at very closely at the editing stage and I just carry on.

As for the typist, since she does not do the corrections any more, she also becomes more relaxed about leaving mistakes, all the more readily, as she thinks that correcting is no longer a problem. And it really is not a problem, but it is time-consuming and therefore wasteful.

Up to now, I have done all the editing and printing myself, as so many little things can go wrong, like a line being skipped inadvertently, and a good translation is very much a matter of attention to detail (after one has dealt with the not unimportant matter of meaning, of course!).

Since I do the editing, I need fewer hours from the typist. This would go into the category of economic advantages, if one were to forget about the high cost of leasing the equipment in the first place. Whereas I used to have on average 150 hours of typing help per month, I reckon I now use about half that amount. But no help with answering the door or the telephone, making the coffee, and no little chats either!

But, I have come to realise that mistakes at the editing stage can't be totally avoided and that one should allow for another complete proof-reading. In that case, one has to allow yet more time from the typist and from the translator. Thus, on a run-of-the-mill job, the economic advantage of the WP vanishes.

The efficiency of the office is firmly in the hands of the translator and the typist. If both are efficient and conscientious, the WP should, theoretically, give more productivity than the typewriter. And the quality of the presentation is definitely much improved.

There are not many jobs where one is asked specifically to produce the work on a WP, and even fewer jobs where the client is prepared to pay extra for it. I suspect, though, that both agencies and clients are very pleased to get a camera-ready job at the standard rate. If generating

goodwill is important — and I believe it is — then there the WP scores.

With the WP, one will sometimes get asked to keep some special jobs on disk for future amendments. Making amendments is not the most fulfilling type of work there is, but one does learn from them and, at least, the WP's advanced functions are being used and the client is appreciative.

As a translator, one is nearly always dealing with one-offs. But the WP can eliminate some tedious jobs like complicated tables. If a particular client comes back regularly with the same spreadsheet to up-date, it can be kept on disk and the job can be done much more easily — and with much better results — than on a typewriter. One can also, in such a case, take advantage of the 15-pitch option to get more text into the same space, which is a definite plus point, as the French text tends naturally to be longer.

ELECTRONIC MAIL

Now for a few words about electronic mail. My experience is limited and probably affected by all the practical difficulties of establishing a working system in the first place. But I am sure this must be a lot easier in 1985 than it was even a year ago, and I look forward with great interest to Nélide Depiante's paper on this same subject.

I have been a member of TEXTNET for about twelve months now and my feeling is that the paperless office is not a likely development for a long while yet. TEXTNET is a brilliant concept; I think Robert Rooke had a wonderful idea when he thought of using the technology to link the translators to their would-be clients and agencies. His French program is excellent and one can easily transmit and receive texts in French with all the accents.

I feel at present that several aspects are not yet fully developed but that, in the future, it will become a real possibility.

Initially, I liked the futuristic aspect, the idea of worldwide links straight from the keyboard and the use of a mainframe as a clearing-house for messages. What put me off were the repeated failures of the equipment, the costly and lengthy debugging and the unreliability of payments for work done over the telephone. If speed — both in the reception of the original and in the transmission of the translation — is to be the main advantage, then the financial aspect of the transaction must follow suit.

I could only work 'on trust' for people in this country that I know already or through personal recommendation. Otherwise, the only way I can feel reassured about starting a job is with an order form on headed paper. Very old-fashioned maybe, but still essential to my mind even in 1985. If one insists on an order on paper, then the job itself might as well come by post or be brought by a messenger.

Between people who have a long-established working relationship, electronic mail does away with messengers for urgent jobs and can transmit telexes and give a word count, provided the job is available on a word processor and can be sent to the mainframe in the first place.

The use of WPs and modems is not widespread enough at present to enable electronic mail really to take off yet. Although some of my major clients are also on TEXTNET, the amount of work I do on electronic mail is minimal.

Besides, the equipment I use for communications has been the least satisfactory so far. Even now, though my system is in working order, I sometimes need to dial five or six times to get through to the main computer. When I finally manage it, I might have to repeat my ID and my password so many times that I have been known to give up in despair. So much for time-saving. I must admit I also find the typing 'online' very irritating and I should probably avoid it altogether.

The debugging of the installation has been costly. Many cables were tried and replaced and I even went as far as installing a separate data line, as I was led to believe that my Ambassador telephone system was at fault, but without any positive results. The failure was probably due in fact to a loose connection at the back of the modem.

Having struggled to establish the communication system at great cost in time and money, I must admit to being disappointed. The communication package from CPT includes a connecting cable for the modem, the program disk and also a manual. It does not include any formal training and I can't help feeling that, if CPT were to provide for communications as much assistance as for word processing and maths, some of my discontent would probably vanish.

My conclusion would be that until more offices use WPs and electronic mail, the pioneers will not be reaping the full benefits of their investment in effort and monetary terms. But it is only a matter of time.

Anyway, the new technology is a fascinating field in itself and I, for one, am totally hooked on it. In fact, I keep thinking up new ways of making the most of it.

AUTHOR

Josette Guédès, Legal and Technical Translator, 42 Whitehall Park,
Highgate, London N19 3TN, UK