

Doing it the other way

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The paper explains how - given appropriate specialisation, skill and speed - translators can as yet make a very good living and produce acceptable presentation without the need for sophisticated equipment. Modern typewriters and dictating machines can still prove adequate under certain circumstances.

If this were show-business, one could be excused for coming up with the expression 'Now follow that' in reference to the comments of the previous speakers. If I ever had any wind in my sails, there is not much of that left now. Perhaps the idea of giving me this spot was to keep the audience awake at tea-time simply by being controversial, so here goes.

One could easily get the impression that any translator attempting to survive without data banks, word processors or machine translation is doomed. There are, however, quite a number of us who, by their continuing survival without, as yet, any of the new gadgets, prove otherwise. Indeed, it can still be done the other way.

It was originally my intention to quote at this point certain developments which have taken place in the field of numerical machine tool control. This is a field in which data processing has long since been much more widely established than in word handling and about which I am more knowledgeable than data processing in general. In this particular area there are signs indicating a slight movement away from the original intention of total automation towards a gentler, 'people-involving' concept. I am mentioning this merely to indicate that computerisation does not necessarily have to go on revolutionising. A reversal or at least a retardation of the revolution is not only possible but quite likely; as I

have just said, it has already happened in the machine tool industry. When I told a friend of mine that I would make this point, he suggested that I was ducking the issue when it was clearly my age that prevented a readier acceptance of the new trends. There is probably something in that, as there is an in-built reluctance in some or all of us to accept anything with which we did not grow up. However, to show that this is not the only reason for being a stick-in-the-mud, let me go back a bit.

There was a time when translators were simply expected to produce translations in some reasonably legible form, and the translation user took it from there. When translating became recognised as a 'growth' business (a sad and slightly deplorable fact of life), presentation became rather more important. So some of us moved with the times, joined the trend and began to use more sophisticated typewriters. Now we seem to be moving into an era where presentation is all-important, even if it hides a far from perfect product. There is a risk that the wrapper is becoming more important than the contents. This must be said simply to protect translators who produce excellent work by old-fashioned means against poor work turned out on pretty-picture-making facilities. It does not, of course, suggest that using a word processor or some such equipment precludes the production of excellent translations.

Many translators feel that they work best by translating on tape and by employing typists. There can be little doubt that this is the most productive method if the translator is able to edit the tape while translating so that only a single typing and reading stage is involved. No other method is likely to be able to compete with this technique at present. Self-typing - even on a processor - has to be slower because the translator/typist has to 'stop and think' and because, in any event, typing is slower than talking. The ratio of typing to translating time is between 1:2 and 1:3, i.e. a good translator working at a good speed on tape for ten hours will produce work requiring twenty to thirty hours to type. (This assumes that the copy typed is not absolutely straight-forward page-for-page text but involves - as is mostly the case - certain layout problems.)

If one accepts that fast tape translating and audio typing is one step towards speed and efficiency without data processing, there is another ingredient to achieve rapid and successful output, and that is specialisation. It avoids the time-consuming research and dictionary wielding that holds up otherwise speedy translators.

Yes indeed, there are quite a few translators who

- (A) dictate on tape and once only
- (B) have one typescript typed once only
- (C) have the specialisation skills.

Referring to these people as 'ABC' translators, would they or would they not benefit from word processors, data banks, etc.? And at what cost could such benefits be achieved?

The common situation with ABC translators is that they run an office at home and use one or several outside typists. In my own case, there are three typists at three different locations. The installation of word processing facilities would therefore involve four systems and one printer. The typists would make no hard copy at all and the correcting and printing would take place in my office. The investment involved would at present be some £12-15,000 (tax deductible). The main benefit would be the elimination of a certain amount of aggravation caused by typing errors either uncorrected or corrected on the top copy only (the latter the result of another 'desirable' gadget, the correcting typewriter). The WP would certainly make such corrections easier, and a letter-quality high-speed printer would often take the place of the photocopier.

Naturally, the WP could rearrange layouts, justify and do other gymnastics which would no doubt turn out more beneficial than anticipated.

The biggest benefit and the one that may in due course induce me to go for at least two WP set-ups has nothing to do with translating. It is the fact that the computer could handle my accounts and invoicing. As this involves total rearrangement of any existing successfully operating accounts system, doubt raises its ugly head even in this department. A computer consultant recently said to me: 'If you have only 200 to 300 transactions a year and if you can write faster than you can type, forget about data processing'.

At present, the ABC translators do not have that much to gain from WPs and, if truly specialised, perhaps not a lot from data banks either. A home-made memory-jogging dictionary or the facility for building a brief glossary for the work in hand to avoid using different names for the same thing (often also a fault of the source text, incidentally) could be a boon, but takes quite a lot of time to establish for a 'one-off' translation. A written list of notes does the same thing quite easily and a lot more quickly.

I am beginning to sound like one of those chaps that would put the kibosh on any party, but would again like to remind you that this is only in reference to ABC translators who may in fact be a minority. There are indications however that their number is increasing.

A frequently quoted advantage of WPs is that they allegedly eliminate much hard copy. Once in a while clients suggest that they would like translations on disks. The question is: whose? There are so many variants that

whatever system a translator buys will only satisfy some of his clients. Standardisation seems a long way off.

Next we have to consider the maintenance of the equipment. It can create not only expense and problems but - much more serious - hold-ups. Maintenance contracts are costly and the small print needs watching.

There is little doubt, however, that the main factor at present holding other and especially the ABC translators back from investing in (in particular) WPs is cost.

A pocket calculator so basic no-one would buy it today cost £30 in 1970, equal to some £120 now. A similar but much improved calculator now costs about £8. If the same trends can be expected in the WP field, prices will come tumbling down soon enough. The computer and the display - the heart of any WP system - are fairly inexpensive already. It is the mechanical engineering bits that cost the money, i.e. the disk drives and the printer. Things will change. At present, ABC translators have too little to gain for the cost involved. For self-typists a WP has much more to offer.

When the equipment becomes cheaper, even the ABC translators will not be able to resist the temptation and we shall all learn the new skills, no matter how reluctantly.

In the meantime, a few good dictation machines (totally reliable, my five have had no attention whatsoever in five years), a few good electric/electronic typewriters (not quite so reliable but not bad - and a stand-by machine so affordable), one or several good typists, and an ABC translator can produce around one million words of translated copy per annum. That, depending on the rate collected, can represent a turnover of between £30,000 and £60,000 per annum. The overheads would be fairly low in view of the simple and inexpensive equipment.

While the WP and other aids may make life easier for the ABC translator, they are unlikely to raise his output or income. Hence the reluctance to invest. The one machine that I am personally waiting for, and that would certainly change my attitude both to relearning and to spending, would be a machine that could convert the spoken word into a screen display only requiring simple keyboard corrections of spelling mistakes before printing. Such a machine would be worth having at almost any price, as it eliminates many of the problems at one stroke and makes the translator totally independent and mobile without turning him into a typist (with the time losses this involves).

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