Translation practice in Europe

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I intend to give a summary of the findings of our questionnaire on translation practice in Europe. Full details of the various tables which I shall be discussing can be found in the full report which can be obtained from David J. Smith, Digital Equipment Co. Ltd., Engineering Division, P.O. Box 121, Reading RG2 0TU (Tel. (0734) 868711).

The carrot we dangled to encourage people to take part was entry into a draw for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* We would like to thank all those who replied, particularly those who sent detailed replies, articles and offers of help.

To start at the beginning. . . why has Digital run this questionnaire? First of all, who is Digital? Digital is one of the world's largest manufacturers of minicomputers, employing some 90,000 people worldwide. Its computers are to be found at work in many industries, office automation, finance and computer-aided design and manufacture being some of the main areas. In order to sell into these markets, products have to be translated from English — for Digital is an American company — into the local language. If we look at the types of translation work handled within the company a wide and varied workload emerges. Keyboards, manuals, software, training materials, marketing aids — all these and more. Now, this may not be any more complex than the work in other companies and industries but there are two clear trends for us.

1. The volume is growing — and we already employ translators in 15 countries. Groups range in size from one to 15.
2. The number of language pairs is growing. Once all the work was from English into other languages, but now we see ever-increasing volumes into English and language pairs not involving English. What that says

to us is this: we need to have effective techniques and systems for translation in order to keep cost and time under control — and of course being a computer company we want to make maximum use of computers themselves in our work.

At last year's Aslib conference, a speaker from the floor during the Friday concluding session issued a cry from the heart. If I remember him correctly his message was:

> the computer industry goes off and develops systems allegedly intended to benefit us, that is the translation profession, but they never come to ask us what we want. That is bad enough, but on the other side of the coin, the translation profession is notoriously reluctant in coming forward and saying to computer manufacturers: this is what we want, in this shape, in this design — and not that.

These two factors — our own interest and the Aslib question — gave rise to the idea of the survey. Later discussions with Geoff Kingscott *of Language Monthly* led to our joining forces.

If we at Digital are looking to use computers for our own translation workload, let us at the same time be aware of the needs of translators in other industries and professions. The final products will then, we hope, meet a genuine need. At the same time, the findings will be of general interest to the profession as a whole.

Let me start with a personal comment. I entered the computing world some four years ago and I think my feelings at the time can best be described as shell-shock. I would guess that many people still feel that way about it.

We sent out 1,800 questionnaires and received 280 replies. The 253 received by our cut-off date were used for this first analysis. We decided to split the profession into four categories in order to help to build a number of profiles (see Figure 1) (13 replies were assigned to a category 'other'). From my own background in translation I felt that these were distinct categories, with differing needs, methods and procedures.

The next stage was to classify respondents by type of job (see Table 1). The figures in Table 1 add up to 100 per cent, across the horizontal line. So, for example, the split for manager/head of department is 3 per cent, free-lance, 30 per cent, agency, 20 per cent, government department and 47 per cent, industrial/commercial.

This analysis, we felt, would help to show the different needs and attitudes according to whether someone was, for example, a full-time freelance translator or a head of department in the Civil Service who combined translation work with managerial tasks.
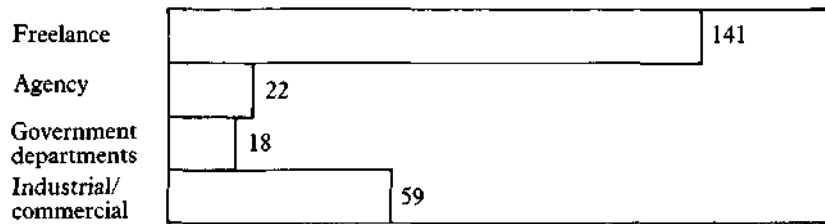
Freelance	—individuals working typically on their own for a number of customers
Agency	—commercial translation agencies offering their services to trade and industry
Government departments	—groups of translators working in the Civil Service or for international institutions
Industrial/commercial	— translation departments set up within commercial undertakings to service their internal translation workload

Figure 1. Response to questionnaire by category

	Employment categories			
Job types	Freelance (%)	Agency (%)	Government department (%)	Industrial/ commercial (%)
Editor/ translator	83	0	0	17
Manager/head of department	3	30	20	47
Translator/ interpreter	92	4	0	4
Translator/ reviser	0	0	60	40
Translator	72	5	4	19

Table 1. Classification of respondents by type of job

Table 2 goes back to the four categories and shows what time is spent on the various tasks that go to make up a translator's job. A fairly consistent picture emerges for terminology and glossary work — all the figures being around 10 or 11 per cent. — but there are some interesting differences.

Task	Employment categories			
	Freelance (% of time)	Agency (% of time)	Government department (% of time)	Industrial/ commercial (% of time)
Terminology research/ glossary compilation	11	10	11	10
Administration/ accounting	4	10	16	8
Customer liaison	3	13	5	3
Getting background information	6	5	6	6
Pre-trans- lation edit	3	3	3	4
Translation	58	39	33	44
Post-trans- lation edit	10	14	16	14
Preparation for typesetting	3	3	3	4

Table 2. Time spent by translators on each task

Why, for example, is four times as much time spent on administration and accounting in government departments — 16 per cent. — compared with the 4 per cent, for freelances? To the people who have employed me in the past in government departments — sorry, only joking.

Another interesting line is that showing the time spent on translation (see the third task from the bottom in Table 2). Just look at these figures: 58, 39, 33 and 44 per cent. This dispels the myth that translators do nothing but translate. Some 50 per cent, of their time may be spent on associated tasks. When considering ways of using modern technology to improve translator performance, this is surely an area that requires as much attention as the translation task itself.

Table 3 is another way of looking at the same information. This time respondents are classified between managers and translators. There is a high level of consistency, again probably accounted for by the fact that managers and heads of department do still have to spend much of their time on actual translation — 34 per cent. You will find further information on page 17 of the report.

Task	Manager/head of department (% of time)	Translator (% of time)
Terminology research/ glossary compilation	8	11
Administration/ accounting	17	5
Customer liaison	8	3
Getting background information	5	6
Pre-translation edit	3	3
Translation	34	56
Post-translation edit	15	11
Preparation for typesetting	3	3

Table 3. Time spent on translation tasks (by **classification between manages and translators)**

That rounds off the profile of the profession.

The analysis now goes a stage further (Table 4): what types of text are all these industrious translators busy working on?

This information is useful in showing where the bulk of the work lies. The heavy concentration among technical/scientific, marketing/sales and legal — with figures of 32, 23, and 21 per cent. — gives some indication of where computer tools will find their largest market. That said, translators in these three areas will, to my mind, have different needs. Some working in the technical/scientific field will probably be more dependent on term banks than, say, a colleague working on marketing and sales literature where digitised artwork may be more valuable.

Type of text	Total (%)
Technical/scientific	32
Marketing/sales	23
Legal	21
Government material	8
Educational	6
Literature	4
Other	6

Table 4. Subject-matter of text worked on by translators

Table 5 shows the figures for the way in which the text arrives on the translator's desk. Traditional media still dominate — 54 per cent, typewritten, 33 per cent, printed and 7 per cent, handwritten — while only 4 per cent, arrives by some computerised means. And yet, in Table 6, which shows how texts leave a translator's desk, we find that computers are actually being used on 52 per cent, of translated texts. What this surely indicates is that the advantages of communications between computers have not yet been fully exploited. One of the major benefits of a computer is that it need not stand alone. Translations created on a computer can be transmitted electronically to other parts of the world almost as easily as to the next room.

This leads us on to the question of what equipment is currently in use for translation. Word processors and personal computers are now in fairly widespread use (see Table 7). What is more, the figures are high across all types of employment category, but lowest in government departments. It would have been interesting to see the figures for this in 1980 and to revisit this scene in 1990. It is perhaps surprising still to find such a large figure using pen and paper, considering that the questionnaire went out to people earning their living from translation.

I would also recommend that you look in the full report at some supporting tables on satisfaction with the existing equipment as these shed some light on the likely developments over the next few years.

Form of text	*Input (%)*
Typewritten	54
Printed	33
Handwritten	7
On floppy disk or magnetic tape	2
Over a computer network	2
On audio disk	0.5
Other	0.4

Table 5. Form in which text arrives on translator's desk

Form of text	*Output (%)*
Printed on WP/PC printer	52
Typewritten	39
Typeset and printed	6
Other	3

Table 6. Form in which text leaves translator's desk

| Equipment | Employment categories | | | |
	Freelance (%)	Agency (%)	Government department (%)	Industrial/ commercial (%)
Pen and paper	9	5	11	17
Manual typewriter	5	9	11	2
Electronic typewriter	13	5	6	12
Electronic typewriter (with memory)	14	5	0	3
Dictating machine	7	18	33	12
Word processor or personal computer	53	59	39	54

Table 7. Equipment in use for translation

What then about areas in which computers might assist translators? We asked questions about the types of tasks involved in pre-translation editing and post-translation editing. Tables 8 and 9 are very revealing on this point. First, pre-translation editing. Just to explain the figures: 80 per cent. against terminology means that 80 per cent. of the people who said they did pre-translation editing actually do a terminology check.   We saw in a

Type of edit	Frequency (%)
Check terminology	80
Mark previously translated text	46
Clarify ambiguities	58
Mark sections for special treatment	32

Table 8. Tasks involved in pre-translation editing

Type of edit	Frequency (%)
Accuracy check	91
Style check	82
Terminology check	74
Spelling/grammar check	74

Table 9. Tasks involved in post-translation editing

previous table that pre-translation editing is not a major task, but the main activities are clearly checking terminology, clarifying ambiguities and marking sections for special treatment. These are areas in which computer-assistance might be beneficial.

Table 9, showing post-translation editing, includes even higher figures. Computer tools may never replace the translator, but aids such as spell-checkers can help as an additional filter on a text.

One question that occurred to us was this: what percentage of texts are similar or identical to previous translations (see Figure 2)? For here, too, there are ways in which computers could save effort.
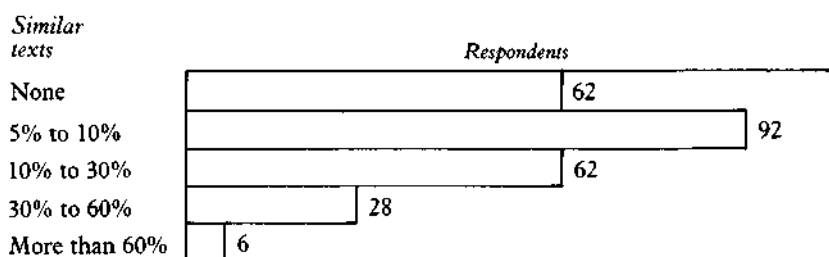

Figure 2. Percentage of texts similar or identical to previous translations

The finding was as follows: the proportion is not very high — the bulk falling below 30 per cent. — but a high proportion of respondents do deal with texts similar to previous texts. These figures would appear to indicate that there would be value in having effective means of recalling and editing previous translations.

We have spoken of computers and translation — and that of course means we did not overlook the question of machine or computer-assisted translation. We wanted to know people's attitudes on this subject (see Table 10). Did they see advantages as well as risks — shown in the 'both' column — just drawbacks — shown as 'negative', or just advantages, the

	Attitudes			
Employment categories	Both (%)	Negative (%)	Positive (%)	None (%)
Freelance	20	28	12	40
Agency	18	27	12	41
Government department	17	5	28	50
Industrial/commercial	19	20	17	44

Table 10. Attitudes to machine- or computer-assisted translation

	Job titles	
	Managers	Translators
Attitudes	(%)	(%)
Negative	27	26
Positive	20	11
Both	18	19
None	36	45

Table 11. Attitudes of managers and translators to machine- or computer-assisted translation

'positive' column? ('None' indicates no opinion given.) In the 'both' column, the figures are consistent — 20, 18, 17, and 19 per cent. But government departments emerge as having a much more positive attitude — 28 per cent. — than freelances at just 12 per cent.

Table 11 shows the division of attitudes between managers and translators. This confirms the previous table. Consistency in seeing pros as well as cons —18 and 19 per cent. — but translators at 11 per cent, seeing fewer positive effects.

That then was a brief summary of the findings. The full report contains many more interesting details. I would also be pleased to receive any comments on the findings and on the value of this report.

I said at the outset that there is an obvious question of what Digital is going to do with the findings. First of all, we have made them public on behalf of the translation profession at large — and other manufacturers are free to make use of them as well. I would also invite them to carry out further investigations.

We at Digital will now take the findings, study them and certainly take them into account in designing tools for translation. At this stage I can say no more than that we are interested in this area — otherwise we would not have carried out the questionnaire — but are not at a stage to make any formal announcement. So my message is quite simply: watch this space.

At the end of it all, what I hope to see happening is that translators and computers continue to develop a closer relationship by better design of hardware and software. It is computers that must adapt to people — not people to computers!

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