

The Current Situation in the United Kingdom

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THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

EWALD OSERS

The translation scene in the United Kingdom has, over the past 10 to 15 years, undergone a perceptible if undramatic change. This change is marked by an increasing realization, both on the part of publishers and users of scientific-technical translation, that adequate translation requires a good deal more than acquaintance with, or even complete mastery of, two languages. In other words, that translation is a skilled craft or profession, an activity best left to trained and experienced professionals.

Although this gradual shift in the attitude of translation users — and it is only that, not a dramatic conversion — is due primarily, or perhaps solely, to the endeavours of the two professional translators' organizations in the UK, the Translators' Guild and the Translators Association, it is a regrettable fact that only a small percentage (variously estimated between 20 and 50 per cent) of professional translators belong to these organizations, whereas the majority (while happily enjoying the fruits of their organized colleagues' labours) remain outside them.

In Britain the title "translator" is not protected by law and there is no control over access to the profession. This renders it difficult to make statistical statements: who is to be regarded as a translator? Neither the Inland Revenue (responsible for Income Tax) nor the Customs and Excise Department (responsible for Value Added Tax) lists translators under a separate heading: they are grouped together with librarians, information officers, indexers, etc. It has been suggested that "translator" should mean a person who derives the whole or a "substantial part" of his income from translating. But this definition, especially if evened out over a number of years, would exclude the translators of the best modern versions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, of Homer's *Odyssey*, and perhaps of Shakespeare's plays into German. A more useful criterion than earnings share would, I suggest, be regularity. On this basis it would probably be true to say that — with the important exception of salaried (staff) translators — the majority of regular translators belong to one, or sometimes both, of our professional organizations.

The *Translators Association* (84, Drayton Gardens, London SW10 9SD), set up in 1958 as a sub-group of the Society of Authors, has at present about 200 members. These are all "literary" translators, though it should be remembered that in the UK (unlike, for example, in Unesco statistics) this term includes the translators of non-fiction (biographies, memoirs, sociopolitical and

economic books, collections of documents, etc.) as well as of plays, film dialogue and even operatic texts. Admission used to be on the strength of two published books but is now based on one full-length book (or equivalent) bearing the translator's name. A recent survey suggests that few if any "literary" translators can live by translating alone: frequently they hold university or other teaching posts, or they are also journalists, or authors, or translators of non-literary texts, or, if literary translation really is their only gainful occupation, they do not have to live by it.

The Translators Association (TA) is governed by a Committee of 12, which elects a Chairman and a Vice-Chairman. The term of service on the Committee is three years, so staggered that four Committee members retire and are replaced each year. Re-election is possible after a minimum of one year "in the wilderness".

Over the years the TA has been much concerned with the formulation of a publisher/translator contract which would protect the translator's interests to a far greater extent than earlier publishers' contracts or "letters of agreement" did. About three years ago its text found enough favour even with the Publishers Association for it to be included, in a slightly amended form, in the Publishers' Association's *Publishing Agreements: A Book of Precedents* (ed. Charles Clark, George Allen & Unwin 1980). This version incorporates many of the points made in the Unesco "Recommendation on the legal protection of translators and translations and the practical means to improve the status of translators", in whose preparation the TA, both directly and through its membership in the International Federation of Translators (FIT), played a vital part. More recently this model contract, with only minor modifications, has been adopted by CISAC/CIAL (the International Confederation of Authors' and Composers' Societies / International Committee of Literary Authors) and by FIT.

The TA publishes a twice-yearly bulletin, *Translators News*, as well as advisory leaflets on such matters as copyright for translators, etc. Members can consult experts at the office on such topics as contracts, rates, etc. Disputes in which members may be involved are brought before the Committee, and the TA will often conduct negotiations and legal proceedings of behalf of members.

The TA also initiated and now administers three annual translation prizes — the (very highly endowed) Schlegel-Tieck Prize for the translation of a book published in the Federal Republic of Germany, the Scott-Mocrieff Prize for a translation from French and the John Florio Prize for a translation from Italian.

The *Translators' Guild Ltd.* (24a Highbury Grove, London N5 2EA), now, in terms of company law, a daughter company of the Institute of Linguists, has a membership of a little over 400. It developed from the "old" Translators' Guild which was a semi-autonomous group within the Institute of Linguists, originally established to unite those Institute members who were translators (others are language teachers, etc.) and to become a member society of FIT. The great majority of the membership are scientific-technical (or, as we now prefer to call them, "specialized") translators, their fields ranging from the different areas of engineering, through chemical, medical, pharmaceutical, to legal, administrative, economic, and even theological. Admission is by a strict

but highly diversified system of examinations, a system which has frequently excited the admiration and indeed the envy of sister organizations in other countries. In brief outline, there are two levels of examinations, the Translators' Intermediate Examination, leading to Associate status, and the Translators' Final Examination, qualifying for full membership. In the Final Examination, which is accepted as equivalent to a BA degree (though few would dispute that it is a lot harder and has a much higher failure rate), the candidate is examined in a language/subject combination of his choice. With almost any language being examined (often by drawing upon outside examiners) and with some 30 subject categories there are, in theory, some thousand possible combinations.

There is, of course, little doubt that these very demanding examinations are largely responsible for the fact that a considerable number of competent and professionally successful specialized translators have so far failed to join the TG. Apart from a sense of moral obligation, a conviction that professional translators should join with their colleagues in a professional body, there is little economic inducement, for the successful practitioner, to submit himself or herself — usually well beyond student age — to a series of university-type exams. Nor can it be denied that translators' organizations abroad without an admission hurdle, such as the West German BDÜ, attract virtually all the working translators in their countries and, because of their greater numbers, wield much more influence in their dealings with the authorities and the legislators. The policy-makers of the TG are aware of this conflict of interests but so far have always (if a times regretfully) opted in favour of keeping the qualification hurdles high.

Sci-tech, or specialized, translators as a rule command higher fees than literary translators in the UK — the situation in the East Bloc countries is the reverse — and a very large proportion of them live solely by translating. In the past there used to be a graduated spectrum of going rates according to "rarity" of language but this has largely disappeared with regard to the languages of Europe — or else the language differentials are far less than the differentials between one translator and another. Substantially higher rates are, however, paid for translation from — and especially into — Arabic, Turkish, Japanese and Chinese.

The governing body of the TG is its Board. Of its 10 members four are nominated by the Institute of Linguists (the "parent company"). The term of office is three years; outgoing officers may be re-elected for a second term (in competition with new candidates) but after two terms they must have been out of office for at least one year before standing for election again.

The TG publishes a *Newsletter* (known as the TGNL), which appears six times a year and has been so successful that it is now available to non-members (on subscription — TG members receive it free of charge). The Guild organizes a number of events for its members, ranging from purely social "pub evenings" through translation workshops (lately also at university centres outside London) to high-level seminars on topics associated with machine-aided translation (in conjunction with Aslib, the Association of Specialized Libraries). These seminars, held in the late autumn, have in the past three years attracted

participants not only from Western and Eastern Europe but also from Japan, the United States, and Canada.

There is close and friendly co-operation between the Translators Association and the Translators' Guild. For a number of years now there has been a formal joint meeting of their controlling bodies (the TG Board and the TA Executive Committee) once a year. Both are members of FIT, and a Joint TG/TA Committee for International Relations has recently been set up to ensure British translators proceed hand in hand and speak with one voice in their foreign contacts.

Although the membership of the TG includes many staff translators — and especially staff translators who are also willing to undertake freelance commissions — it is obvious that the exclusively salaried translator has little to gain either from a listing in the Translators' Guild Index or from recommendation by the TG office in response to user enquiries, or indeed (since his salary is governed by his firm's salary structure) from the TG's various endeavours in the field of fee enhancement.

Many staff translators are therefore members of the Technical Translation Group (TTG) of Aslib (the Association of Specialized Libraries). This holds occasional meetings and talks for its members.

What effect, one is often asked, has the Unesco Recommendation of 1976 had on the position of translators in the UK? Certainly H.M. Government — which voted in favour of the Recommendation in Nairobi — has taken no steps whatever, and is most unlikely to take any steps in the foreseeable future, to make any part of it legally binding in the UK. (Some of its provisions, of course, such as those in the field of Copyright, are already part of the law of the land.) At the same time, a great many literary translators, and a few sci-tech translators, have found the mere existence of the Unesco Recommendation to be useful in negotiating better terms.

What of the future? In the field of specialized translation the economic recession has probably given rise to two opposing forces: on the one hand, business had increasingly become aware of the need to employ competent professional (even if slightly more expensive) translators, as well as the need, in the manufacturing industries, to intensify exports, thus generating more translation work. On the other hand, the large number of bankruptcies, also among firms engaged in international trade, must inevitably entail a shrinkage of the translation market. Which of these trends will prevail in the long run is difficult to predict at present.

In literary translation there is little doubt that the market has shrunk. Publishers in the UK are going through a difficult period. With book sales declining they are bound (1) to hesitate to publish a translated book which will cost them between £2,000 and £3,000 more than one written in English (unless, of course, they think they are on to a bestseller) and (2) with a reduced list they will, quite legitimately, feel that their first duty is to their own authors. So far these considerations do not seem to have too disastrously affected the publication of translated books, largely because a variety of subsidies is available either from foreign governments anxious to see their literature

translated into English, or from the European Community, or occasionally from Unesco, the Arts Council, or other sources. The outlook is far from rosy but — touching wood — it is not as black as many of us thought it would be a couple of years ago.

Meanwhile the translation and interpreting departments of UK universities continue to enrol and to graduate would-be translators and interpreters, and most of these young people seem to find jobs — often abroad, where their native-English is a more highly-prized commodity than in England.

The next few years are likely to see a closer co-operation with translators' organizations in the other EEC countries with a view to — using EEC jargon — harmonization of steps taken at national level to enhance the standard of translation and improve the economic and social status of the translator.