

ASSOCIATION OF DUTCH TEACHERS IN FRANCOPHONE BELGIUM

DISCUSSION ON *TRANSLATING PROFESSIONALLY*

7 October 2000

Cooremans Institute – Brussels

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Working in a subsidiary of an international translation agency



1. The 40 languages that make the economy go round

When I tell people who are not familiar with the world of translation that I work in a translation agency, sometimes their eyes start to sparkle and they will ask me: "you must translate a lot of books?" or "which authors do you translate?". In reality, books only make up a very small percentage of the orders I have seen in the four years I have been with Eurologos.

So perhaps you will wonder what we do and more particularly how we do it?

Maybe I can start with a short introduction of the company I work for. Eurologos was founded in 1977. The translation agency that started out small has turned into one of the most important ones on the Belgian market and includes a small army of in-house translators of all nationalities. With the years however, the need to "translate where the languages are spoken" became clear and this was the first step towards forming an international group, which currently counts 14 offices. The idea is to reach at least 40 offices, since the world economy is kept alive by 40 languages, although Unesco works on the assumption that there are 6,500 languages across the entire world.

2. Mother tongue translators who have not emigrated

When I then state that I am a Dutch-French-Italian-English translator, the first comment is that Italian is such a beautiful language, and then they ask if it is not difficult to translate into Italian. No, it is not difficult because I don't do it at all. At Eurologos no translator works into another language besides his own mother tongue. Why would you? Even as an educated, experienced translator it is not always simple to faithfully translate a text from a foreign language into your own language with respect for the text's tone. Why would we want to work into the foreign language? Many think that everything is in the dictionary, but I don't have to tell you that the dictionary can sometimes lead you astray. I remember a text the client had translated and that we had to proofread. It was about "filing a document" (déposer auprès du tribunal). In the translated text they had put "we had to shelve the document at the court". A text full of such mistakes eventually even becomes totally unintelligible. Perhaps some of you have seen the letter from a Chinese restaurant, which in addition to a whole bunch of other mistakes, is signed by the "the direction", as a translation for "La direction". I suspect that all translators have forwarded this one to each other.

When I have to have a text translated from Dutch into Italian, German, or Spanish, I e-mail, or in the worst of cases, fax it to our Eurologos office in Milan, Cologne, or Madrid, where they know exactly what to do with it.

Or the other way around, I translate or proofread, together with my Antwerp colleagues, their texts into Dutch. This way we know all there is to know about

sofas because Milan has to translate everything into Dutch for an Italian sofa manufacturer.

For some combinations however, there still is a problem. The number of Greeks (in Greece) who know Dutch is still very small. A quick revision in Athens of a text translated in Belgium is always possible. All things considered, sending a text only takes a few seconds. Suppose I want to have one sentence translated into Arabic. I e-mail my sentence to Casablanca, where it arrives a couple of minutes later and within a half hour I can get my sentence back in perfect, contemporary Arabic. With the stress on contemporary, because this is where the shoe pinches for “emigrated translators”. Suppose I decide to go live in a more exotic or richer area, how can I keep abreast of neologisms such as “pay-as-you-go, noise reducing surface, rainbow coalition, etc.”. Not to mention technological development, which constantly creates new words, for example “wide-screen TV”. I remember an Italian contract that I had to translate into Dutch. I didn’t have time myself and I outsourced the job to a Fleming who had lived in Italy for some ten years. I can assure you that her Dutch abounded with Romance constructions. In such cases only a thorough revision can bring comfort.

3. A country’s/translator’s own style, relocalization, and pre-press of language production

As you all know, there is a difference between northern and southern Dutch. It is with some regularity that Flemish texts have to be “Dutchified” and vice versa. This is what linguists call geo-style and this is also the reason why we eventually want to open a Eurologos subsidiary in the Netherlands: Dutch companies, even though located only a few dozen kilometers away from Antwerp, are not very fond of Belgian Dutch/or texts that have been translated in Flanders. The opposite is also true for that matter.

Let’s talk practical now. How does a job progress concretely with us?

This is the outline that is usually followed.

About 10% of orders arrive by fax, the other 90% by e-mail. Regular mail is practically obsolete. Each job immediately gets assigned a number, which it will carry through invoicing. The project manager looks at the job as it were in all its facets and selects the best translator for it. To this end we take several criteria into account. First we look at a text’s technical character. Then we look at who did the previous translation. For example, an engineer will never translate a lingerie folder. If the text is medical, it will go to a doctor or at least someone familiar with the subject. But most often the text will go to an in-house terminologist or translator (Antwerp or Brussels for French or Dutch), an external translator, or straight to a subsidiary abroad where the job is followed up through to the revision. Each translation is checked by a second translator. Only this way can errors be reduced to almost zero.

Antwerp and Brussels, the offices I am obviously most familiar with, produced several publications on history, geography, history of art. For such publications there are checks and more checks. Which comes with a price tag of course. In

translation everything has its price too. Requirements for an internal working document are different from a brochure printed in one hundred thousand copies.

Is it difficult to translate technical texts? Sometimes it is, sometimes a bit less. This was the case for the translation and the pre-press for this catalog for electrical equipment that at first sight looked quite impressive. It was my very first job for that matter, which kept me busy for two months. For a lot of things I could rely on the previous catalog and the glossary that had been compiled for that purpose. When problems came up, a phone call to one of the company's engineers was often the best solution (in order to introduce a neologism for example). This job was produced straight into Quark XPress: these days a translator has to wear many hats. The client likes to get a finished product, which he can just hand over to his printer. That is why our Head Office has a graphics department, which if necessary, can handle DTP and multimedia publishing (CDs, Web publishing in several languages, etc.). Since we have an office in Tokyo, we can even deal with Japanese. We often deliver finished catalogs or brochures in several languages. The kind of clients you have of course strongly influences the things you are working on. One of our bigger accounts is a lighting manufacturer. If you have been translating press releases, mailings, letters, catalogs, internal and external newsletters for years, you become thoroughly familiar with the company culture and jargon. And before you know it you are walking around with your eyes on the ceiling looking for lighting. Or you go to an exhibition and you immediately take a look at the final catalog.

4. Office/working hours and delivery times

Does it get hectic at Eurologos? You can count on it, we can easily bear the comparison with the most productive advertising agencies. Most jobs come unannounced and must be done by yesterday. Authors often work at local train speeds, but the translation agency and the printer must deliver at bullet train speeds. Which sometimes results in evening, night, or weekend work. This spring a client decided to attend a fair. His brochure had to be changed at the last minute in a major way. The light was on for long hours at night at Eurologos at that time. And coffee flowed ...

Other clients have weekly recurring translations. You may have heard of the Focus on Flanders Project, which the Flemish Community puts out in cooperation with a publishing house. Each day an editor reads the Flemish newspapers and summarizes the week's news in about 700 lines. This is turned into a booklet that is sent to all foreign journalists, embassies, and consulates. They obviously don't speak Dutch there and that's why it gets translated. On Tuesdays we get the first part, which must be translated by Wednesday into three languages, on Wednesday we get another part for Thursday, and Thursday afternoon one that has to be ready first thing on Friday, so that it can be printed on time. This can of course only happen when translators know exactly when they will get copy, the reviser is lined up to check the translation, and the project manager reprimands every person involved who is late, and works out emergency scenarios.

5. Automatic translation

Perhaps you wonder if these days a lot is automatically translated. It has indeed happened that a client calls to ask if I can translate his 800 pages in three days on the computer. I had to bring him back to earth, from a dream fed more by the media than by our own sector.

Automatic translation is more of a support for human translation. We use Systran, the world leader (also used by the EU). But language combinations do not always work out well. The Russian-English pair for instance is one of the best and that is the result of the Americans translating Russian military conversations for years during the Cold War for espionage purposes. Because an update of the old Systran was later developed, that particular language pair, only into English, not into Russian, has become very strong. We will have to wait until these systems are more efficient. In any case, the translator remains the final person in charge of the text.

Translation memories such as Trados and Déja Vu (free demo for one month at www.atril.com) are on the rise. Most of our in-house translators work with Trados. Trados recognizes text sections and words that appeared in previously translated texts and translates them. For texts with lots of repetitions a timesavings of about 20% is created. This is very interesting for example for brochures for which a yearly update is printed.

But rest assured, our noble translator task is not yet in jeopardy. Whoever has Dutch in his combination, should not be afraid to lose his job anytime soon.

Thank you for listening. I also want to thank my colleagues who have assisted me today.