

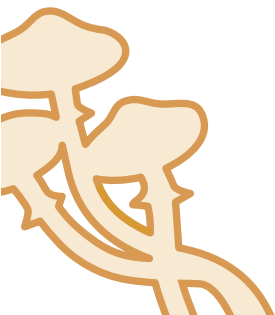
# Using Language Services

by JOSEPHINE BACON

2003 EDITION

Pholiota Publishing

---



Published in 2003 by Pholiota Publishings  
179 Kings Cross Road, London WC1X 9BZ  
Tel: 0171 278 9490 Fax: 0171 278 2447

Text copyright © 2001 Josephine Bacon  
Illustrations copyright © Pholiota Limited

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner and publisher.

Second edition ISBN 1 901

Editor: Philip Carr

Design, Page Layout, Typography & eBook:  
Akybo Digital Studios Website: [www.akybo.com](http://www.akybo.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain

CONTENTS	page
An Introduction to Translation and Interpreting.....	1
Interpreting .....	4
Types of interpreting .....	5
Translating .....	10
Why use a translation agency.....	18
Specialist Language Agencies.....	19
Translation Resources .....	19
Machine Translation and Translation Memory .....	20
Cheap Translations on the Net? .....	22
MT AIDS for Interpreters?.....	23
No Free Samples .....	27
Samples and tests .....	25
Professional Translation and Interpreting Associations in the United Kingdom .....	35

## USING LANGUAGE SERVICES

---

by JOSEPHINE BACON

The world's leading scientists and philosophers met recently in Paris to discuss the similarities between our century and the time of Columbus. Among the conclusions reached was that, despite all the vast technological leaps forward, our ability to conquer language barriers has made little progress over the past 500 years. The report they issued stated bluntly that even today, at the dawn of the third millennium, with all the technical wizardry of machine translation, translation memory and simultaneous interpreting equipment at our disposal "a Dane and a Japanese, each speaking only his own native language, will still be unable to communicate with each other in real time".

The English language is generally accepted as the language of international business and has largely replaced French in many fields, such as the Universal Postal Union, diplomacy, and so on, but this does not mean that everyone involved in interantional communication is proficient in English. To get an important message across — even to someone whose English is fairly fluent but for whom it is not the

first language — it is far better to approach the target audience in its native tongue. For a start, it is a basic courtesy, one that is often extended to the British abroad but rarely reciprocated. How often have we heard “foreigners” – from Pierre-Yves Gerbeau to Hans-Göran Erickson – interviewed on radio or television and expressing themselves fluently in English. Even our own European Members of Parliament rarely speak foreign languages. Recent research among employment agencies has shown that British people are losing prestigious international jobs due to their inability to master foreign languages. A recent survey by the Department of Trade and Industry\* showed that the proportion of British executives in small-to-medium-sized companies who could negotiate in a foreign language was the second-lowest in Europe. Even where a British executive “speaks” a foreign language, he or she is unlikely to have the breadth and depth of knowledge needed to negotiate in the language or even to read a simple business letter.

Cultural differences are equally important. These are sometimes underplayed, or it may be assumed that only cultures that are very remote from.

The 'quick-fix' solution which government departments have promoted in the past and appear to be continuing to promote is in-house language training. This is a gravy-train for language teachers and schools, who no doubt lobbied civil servants to promote their services in the first place but it is quite impractical to expect to be able to train English-speaking staff to become fluent in a foreign language in a few simple lessons. The depth of knowledge and specialist vocabulary of a translator or interpreter cannot be acquired in weeks or even in months.

It must be said, however, that it is particularly well received when an English salesperson makes an attempt, however feeble, to communicate in the vernacular to a potential customer. However, the most time- and cost-effective solution for companies with a need to communicate in foreign languages (even when some employees speak the language in question) is to engage the services of professional translators and interpreters.

As more companies explore multinational opportunities and as communications technology further shrinks the world, the importance of communicating — not merely words but also ideas and nuances — will continue to grow apace. However, the ignorance

of and lack of interest in foreign languages and everything connected therewith, which continues to plague the British psyche, means that choosing the appropriate language service is a very hit-and-miss affair.

Merely being able to understand another language does not make a person a translator or an interpreter. In fact, most linguists specialise in either translating (written documents) or interpreting (spoken language). Although some linguists are proficient in both tasks, the skills required for translating and interpreting differ quite substantially. Although both translators and interpreters need an extensive general knowledge and a thorough familiarity with both the source and the target language, good translators also need literary skills and a strong sense of accuracy and precision. They should have the proof-reader's eye for spotting mistakes (especially their own!) and for editing their own and other people's work.

## ■ INTERPRETING

---

Good interpreters, on the other hand, have to convert mentally from one language to another and to do so simultaneously, a mental process which even the most brilliant neuroscientists have yet to analyse successfully. Translation and interpreting seldom

require the literal transposition of one word in one language to the equivalent word in another. That is the kind of task that is increasingly being taken over by Machine Translation. Interpreters have to transpose strings of words into another language and then “interpret” the meaning within the culture of the target language. This whole mental process must take place within seconds and may even involve grappling with words which are unfamiliar or which have been spoken in an accent that is almost incomprehensible! A translator, who shuns interpreting work like the Plague for this very reason, once put it thus: “If we translators come across a word we don’t know, we can a) consult a dictionary, b) consult a colleague or c) burst into tears. The interpreter has no time to do any of these!”

## ■ TYPES OF INTERPRETING

---

There are generally recognised to be three types of interpreting: ad hoc, consecutive or liaison, and simultaneous interpreting.

Ad hoc interpreters work in informal settings and function more or less as interpreter-guides. For example, they may be official tourist guides or interpreters used at sporting events to liaise with competitors or with contestants in the Eurovision Song Contest. They are not required to have the kind of specialist knowledge of

both languages that other types of interpreter need and, in practice, they are more often chosen for their looks than their linguistic abilities.

Consecutive interpreters work in business meetings or in front of an audience. They are required to have an in-depth and extensive knowledge of both languages. When interpreting an official speech, they may need to remember entire passages at a time and reword them accurately in the target language. If a consecutive interpreter is allowed to take notes, he or she may be able to repeat up to 20 minutes at a time of the speech in the foreign language! Although consecutive interpreters sometimes perform guiding functions similar to those of ad hoc interpreters, they work in surroundings which require greater expertise, such as conducting trade visitors around factories. As liaison interpreters, they attend business meetings and other semi-official gatherings which require a sound knowledge of the subject-matter and language.

Simultaneous interpreting is the quasi-instantaneous, oral translation of a speech as it is being delivered. It was originally “invented” just after World War II by a skilled United Nations interpreter, Monsieur Kaminker (incidentally, the father of the French actress,

Simone Signoret). He realised that the “whispering” technique, whereby a translation of a speech is whispered simultaneously into the ear of a person close by, could, thanks to the advances in audio technology, be used to convey the interpretation to a much larger number of people, even if they were scattered around a room. All that was needed was for the interpreter to sit in a soundproof booth, hearing the speech through headphones and interpreting it into a microphone linked to headphones in the hall. Such headphones would be worn only by those who wished to listen to the interpretation. The earliest equipment got its first major airing at the Nuremberg Trials. That is why in films of the event, so many of those present are wearing headphones.

Of course, simultaneous interpreting equipment has improved considerably in reliability and sound quality since it was first introduced. It now benefits from solid state technology and micro-components as well as from infra-red technology; infra-red signals remove the need for a lot of trailing wires, but the principle remains the same. The listener wears a headphone through which he or she hears the interpretation (and nowadays several languages can be interpreted at once on different channels). The interpreter sits in

a soundproof booth some distance away, wearing headphones through which the speech being interpreted must be clearly audible and loud enough to drown out the sound of the interpreter's own voice.

There is another simultaneous interpreting equipment system, but one that does not require booths. The interpreter listens to the source language without wearing headphones and carries or wears a super-sensitive microphone into which the translation is whispered. Listeners have portable cordless listening devices that run on rechargeable batteries. This system, though much less expensive, can only be used in informal surroundings and in confined spaces. It is employed by tourist guides and for seminars and courses. Even this system can handle several languages at once and needs minimum on-site attention, merely requiring someone to ensure the batteries are kept on charge when not in use. However, the constant murmur of whispering interpreters can be irritating to those who do not require interpretation and to the person who has the floor in the meeting.

Television is making increasing use of simultaneous interpreters who now interpret international events which may be taking place

thousands of miles away, while listening to sound fed through earphones and watching the events on a monitor. Interpreters are being used for teleconferencing in the same way. Unfortunately, since the broadcasting or audiovisual company involved rarely understands what equipment interpreters require, problems often arise. At the BBC, engineers refuse to remove limiters from the headphones used by interpreters, using health and safety regulations as an excuse. This is because the engineers normally work with broadcasters, who need to hear the sound at a lower level than their own voices. Interpreters need to hear incoming sound more loudly than their own voices. The author has had even more disastrous experiences when working with private clients who not only do not understand what is required but refuse to make any effort to find out.

Most simultaneous interpreters work in two or more language directions. Their “best” language is referred to as their A language and their second-best as their B language. Languages of which they have some knowledge but not to interpreting level are referred to as C languages. There is much argument among simultaneous interpreters as to whether they should work into their A

language or from it. The official line among the Russian interpreters is that they should work from their A language, most others think interpreters should work into their A language. The author's view is that when English is one of the languages, the interpreter should have English as an A language due to the enormous diversity of accents and the breadth of vocabulary used. An interpreter has very little time to think, so it is vital that he or she is able to grasp the meaning as fast as possible. This is particularly important when conference organisers insist that all papers should be delivered in English even when the participants in a conference have minimal English and their speeches were written for them by someone else. Unfortunately, this is a frequent occurrence at academic conferences in the English-speaking world, and one that is to be deplored.

The strain of simultaneous interpreting is great and cannot be kept up indefinitely. That is why simultaneous interpreters work in pairs (in the European Parliament, for instance, they even work in teams of three). Each person works for 20–30 minutes at a time.

## ■ TRANSLATING

---

Translators produce their work exclusively in written form. They may translate from a written or spoken version of the source language.

There are two ways in which translators can be employed: staff and freelance.

Staff translators may be part-time or full-time employees. They may work for multinational companies, government departments or news networks. A few are employed full-time by large translation agencies with a heavy requirement for a particular language. Many staff translators are also required to do some administrative work, such as commissioning translations in languages that are not covered in-house.

Working as a staff translator is by far the best start for anyone who wants to make a career in translation. It ensures plenty of feedback from veteran translators, access to the best dictionaries and other reference material, and the opportunity to benefit from being allowed to familiarise oneself with the background material in a way that freelance translators cannot do. Pay and conditions for staff translators are generally satisfactory and above all, they get the chance to gain valuable experience. Staff translators who listen to broadcasts and translate them are called foreign language monitors.

The 1980s saw a heavy reduction in private in-house translation services, many of which were disbanded on the advice of consultants, accountants and other so-called experts. Many such companies have continued to use the very people they made redundant, though on a freelance basis, realising that these translators have all the requisite background knowledge and specialist vocabulary that an external translator would lack. However, such translators will want to retire and will be unable to pass on their knowledge to their juniors. Large companies have realised the mistakes they have made caused by listening to the advice of highly paid outsiders who advocated “downsizing” at all costs, regardless of the company’s real needs, and are beginning to reinstate in-house translation services.

Freelance translators are independent contractors or are employed under short-term contracts. If they work from home, they are required by the translation companies using their services to invest in the latest computer equipment, which they must know how to use properly. They also need substantial reference material, including dictionaries. Nowadays, a modem is essential and email very desirable. Freelance translators operate as one-person businesses or they may work in pairs or groups; there are also a

few translator/interpreter cooperatives. Freelance translators may work directly for the end-users of translations (whom I shall refer to here as “direct clients”) or they may work for translation agencies and other intermediaries, such as typesetters, design companies, advertising agencies and even printers.

Most reputable translators and interpreters belong to a professional association. Such bodies can be consulted by anyone wanting to use the services of individual translators and interpreters who are available for freelance work. Professional associations maintain high standards by having entrance criteria and requiring individual candidates to pass examinations.

Unlike many countries, the United Kingdom has no official accreditation system for translators and interpreters. Translators and interpreters may have taken professional accreditation examinations — such as the Diploma in Translation and the Diploma in Community Interpreting offered by the Institute of Linguists — but this is not compulsory. There is no universal bar on any person, however unqualified, working as a translator or interpreter, even in court.

The press occasionally seize on the absence of a system of sworn translators and interpreters as some sort of shocking revelation. That is because in many countries, only “sworn” interpreters may work in the courts, leading to the closed shop and the domination of the profession by people who are not necessarily the most skilled or competent but who simply graduated from the “right” institution.

In practice, the British system works well. In important cases, solicitors and barristers will interview one or more translators or interpreters to assure themselves that they are getting the best service. This means that very few unsuitable people can get past the first hurdle of court interpreting, and those who are competent are not excluded merely because they are newcomers. Furthermore, the courts are not inconvenienced by an absence of sworn interpreters in an unusual language or in an emergency situation.

Although Scotland Yard maintains its own list of interpreters, who have to pass an examination (consisting mainly of a background check), the courts do not prevent the defence from hiring their own interpreter if they wish to do so, even in criminal cases, provided both sides and the judge approve the person chosen. In civil matters such as divorce, business or family, the interpreter is hired

by the side which needs one, although other parties may have case documents translated on their own initiative or may use a translator to check translations produced by another party to the case.

The only situation which is to be deplored is that in the UK, no clear demarcation line is drawn — as it is in the United States, for instance — between interpreters who work for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service and those who work for the defence. Although interpreters and translators are theoretically strictly neutral, there is a clear conflict of interest between someone who may be working for the prosecution one day and for defence counsel the next.

Some form of official certification is required for translations of important legal documents, such as birth and marriage certificates, so as to ensure that the translation is universally accepted. Such documents are translated by an individual or company with some sort of accreditation, such as membership of a professional body, and then “sworn”. This means that a declaration or affidavit is made by the translator to the effect that the translation is a true and accurate one and this document is affixed to the translation. Where a translation agency has commissioned a translator to produce the document, this attestation may be produced by a responsible

person on the agency staff. In the case of educational documents and other semi-official documents that are not required for court or for government bodies such as the Home Office, a simple declaration on headed paper is sufficient. In the case of documents for official use in the United Kingdom and the European Union, a declaration or affidavit need only be sworn before a solicitor; if the document is required for anywhere outside the EU, the document must be sworn before a Notary Public. Some embassies have lists of translators who are recognised by them or who have some other form of official approval. Documents translated by these people may be sworn at the embassy itself, and this may cost less than using the services of a solicitor and will certainly cost less than a notary public.

Whether the requirement is for an interpreter, a translator, or both, the client will always want to use competent professionals. The way to be sure of getting the best service is for the client to work out its needs before approaching a service-provider. For instance, a client should be able to decide whether he or she needs a translator, an interpreter or both.

Providers of translation services, whether individual translators or translation agencies, advertise in directories and on the Internet,

send out mail shots or promote their services in other ways. In their advertising, translation agencies may call themselves “translation companies”, “translation agencies”, or even “translation consultants”. All are all brokering translations and will be referred to as “agencies” in this publication, whatever else they may call themselves.

The best way to determine the competence of an individual translator or interpreter is to ask for a c.v. and names of other clients. It is also worth asking whether the translator or interpreter is a member of a recognised translation body. However, it is important not to set too much store by membership of a professional body, as already explained. In fact, an interpreter or translator with impeccable references who is not a member of a professional body may simply be kept too busy to need the kind of employment contacts such membership offers.

When a client is looking for specialist services, such as voice-over, subtitling, typesetting or conference interpreting, the need for specialists becomes vital. Unfortunately, in today’s competitive climate, too many translation agencies are frightened to turn away work of which they have no experience and which they are unqualified to undertake. An agency may even believe itself to be

capable of handling a particular assignment because it has done a much simpler job in the same field in the past. For example, an agency may have had a job consisting of a few words typeset by a professional typesetting firm in the past, but that is very different to typesetting a whole book. A similar difference exists between producing a few lines of typeset copy in French or German and supplying the same thing in Arabic or Japanese.

### ■ WHY USE A TRANSLATION AGENCY?

---

Some clients avoid translation agencies altogether when seeking specialist services. They assume they will get a more cost-effective service, and one which is just as good, if they ask a design company or typesetter to produce all their foreign language work, use a provider of simultaneous interpreting equipment to find their conference interpreters or a theatrical agent to supply foreign language voice overs. This is not a good move firstly, it adds to the cost because these intermediaries will simply sub-contract the work to translation agencies. Secondly, only translation agencies are truly expert in matching the translator or interpreter with the job to be done. They understand their sub-contractors and offer them help and support that no supplier, whose primary interests lie outside the language field, will be capable of giving.

## ■ SPECIALIST LANGUAGE AGENCIES

---

When a client has material for translation into an unusual language or one which does not use the Latin alphabet (such as Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, etc.) it is advisable to try to find an agency that specialises in the language. Even if the work is not performed in-house, there will be facilities for checking the work which a general agency will not possess.

A mistake made by many seekers of translation services is to assume that the nearest agency will be able to provide the entire range of services. Even in the past, this was not necessarily the case, but with the globalisation of communications, it is no longer necessary even to use a company in the UK. For a huge project in an unusual language, it may be an idea to surf the Net and see what is available. This is a useful technique when the material for translation is not country-specific, and especially if it is to be used exclusively in the foreign country, but is not advisable if the material is very UK specific, e.g., a booklet about local authority services.

## ■ TRANSLATION RESOURCES

---

Only 15 years or so ago, most translators could call themselves professionals if they owned a couple of dictionaries and a manual

typewriter. Today's individual translator is expected to have at least one computer, a high-quality printer, a fax machine, a modem and email. Even the most exotic alphabets are now available on computer and hand-written texts are no longer acceptable.

Translation agencies generally have more resources than individuals, including a range of technical and specialist dictionaries, multi-platform computing, databases, and word-processing conversion programs. Some agencies may even be capable of producing in-house foreign language typesetting in exotic languages.

### ■ MACHINE TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION MEMORY

---

There are many misconceptions about computerised translation whose abilities are constantly exaggerated for commercial reasons. Some customers have been fooled into thinking that translations are now produced simply by feeding a piece of paper into the computer at one end and waiting for it to emerge, translated, at the other end! Machine Translation (MT) and the less costly Translation Memory (TM) software is useful for repetitive translation tasks. These include such items as weather forecasts, lists of share prices, catalogues of paintings, and so on, all of which contain repeated, stock phrases such as "winds light to variable" and "oil on canvas"; etc.

However, in any kind of creative translation endeavour MT and TM software are of little use.

MT and TM programs require huge amounts of memory and are only just becoming available for personal computers (originally only mini- and mainframe computers were powerful enough to be able to accommodate them). Few, if any, are available for the Macintosh computer.

Certain translation agencies have introduced MT and TM for large projects. Others, unfortunately, are trying to cut costs by finding translators who have already made this expensive investment themselves and using them for repetitive tasks.

The latest versions of Machine Translation programs still require extensive editing by humans. Translation Memory is a useful tool for beginner translators with limited vocabulary who are working on large documents, but there are several very good reasons why experienced translators do not use them — at least, not yet.

Some translators claim to find online dictionaries and on-screen dictionaries helpful. However, until auxiliary computer screens are

in common use, on which an on-line dictionary can be opened so that it does not add to all the other "stuff" on the already cluttered screen, the author will reserve judgement.

MT and TM do not come cheap. There is not only the cost of the program itself but one also needs an extremely powerful computer on which to run it, one costing several thousands of pounds. A large screen is also needed, to accommodate the text to be translated, the source text and other material. And here lies the main disadvantage of MT, namely, that it can only be used if the source text is in electronic form. Even today, the average translation agency or individual will not receive more than one in ten translations in electronic form.

### ■ CHEAP TRANSLATIONS ON THE NET?

---

Compuserve, Internet providers and even search engines such as Alta Vista, have begun advertising their ability to provide machine translations at a fraction of the cost of translations produced manually. Like all machine translation untouched by human hand, the quality of such translations is such that they can only be used for getting a very rough idea of what the text means. A recent example gleaned from such a service, a text about a French chess competition, translated the word "chess" as "failure." "Echec" in French

means “failure” as well as “chess” so the translation appeared to be about the International Failure Championships!

For a technology that has been in development since at least the 1960s, Machine Translation has made surprisingly little progress, especially if one considers the vast sums invested in research and development. If this were the case with, say, a cure for cancer, it would be considered a scandal and a disgrace. It seems as though here, as in other areas, there is such a drive to be rid of the human element — translators and interpreters — and their cost so begrudged them, that no amount of money is considered to be too great to be spent in order to be rid of them.

### ■ MT AIDS FOR INTERPRETERS?

---

Hitherto, interpreters have had no computer aids to help them in their demanding task. However, hand-held devices no larger than a marker pen have recently come on to the market and purport to be electronic dictionaries containing 400,000 words or more. Such devices could be useful for interpreters lost for a word, especially if the search functions operate quickly.

The first time you employ a particular language service provider how can you be sure the job will be done properly? The best way is to give out a short initial assignment — 1,000 words or less. But before assigning the work, it is advisable to take an objective look at it. Is it written in straightforward, everyday language, or is it technical? What may not seem technical to someone who works in the field may seem quite technical to an outsider. Then there are areas which are not technical but which require specialist vocabulary, such as sports, fashion and menus.

It is important to check the quality yourself (for instance, if the translation is into English, you are likely to be able to tell if it is accurate and well-written) so that you can take steps to ensure that there are no serious mistakes. However, there are also pitfalls in having a job checked. Sometimes the checker (another translation company, for example) may claim there are mistakes where there are none or even add mistakes where they did not occur. Try to use as skilled and expert a checker as possible, but one who has no vested interest in “rubbishing” the work.

Here are four basic rules for getting a translation job done well:-

- 1) Allow as much time as possible. In the case of individual translators, it must always be borne in mind that good, accurate translating takes time, especially when the material is technical or when tables, formulas or diagrams are involved. To be sure, deadlines are important, but the problems caused by a rushed translation could easily take much more time to repair than an extra couple of days allowed for a thoroughly checked translation.
- 2) Provide enough background information. Translators and interpreters rightly fear the “parachute syndrome”, a complicated situation into which they are pitched without adequate background information, making it next to impossible for them to do an accurate job.

Often, a company will telephone a translator or agency and offer a highly specialised and technical piece of work, but claim “Oh, it’s not technical!” Perhaps the person commissioning the translation really believes what they are saying or perhaps they just fear that admitting that it is “technical” means that it will cost more. Whatever the truth, the client is familiar with their own terminology, way of working and environment. Yet a perfect stranger, the translator, is

expected to write documents or interpret conversations perfectly in matters which even employees of the company might not be familiar with.

When it comes to withholding useful information, solicitors are among the worst offenders, despite the fact that painstaking accuracy is essential in a legal context. Legal interpreters have been denied vital information because the solicitor or barrister for whom they were working informed them that the case was “confidential”!

The rule of thumb is that the more thorough the briefing, the better the translation or interpretation will ultimately be. If confidentiality is a concern, it should be remembered that all translation companies and professional associations maintain a code of confidentiality, and that professional linguists are all too well aware of the repercussions of breaching their code of ethics.

- 3) Ensure that the source text is accurate. If translators are given material to translate that is incomplete or contains spelling errors or omissions they cannot produce a top-quality translation.

Misspellings of proper names, for example, will be copied verbatim.

For interpreters, as much background material as is available should be provided in advance, and the text of any speeches. It cannot be stressed too strongly that it is the responsibility of the conference organiser to ensure that texts of speeches are available in advance. The secretariat at many conferences insist on receiving speeches in advance due to the need to produce abstracts, but rarely does anyone think of providing the interpreters with these speeches. There are even interpreting agencies whose terms and conditions stipulate that no responsibility can be taken for the quality of an interpretation if insufficient background material was supplied in advance.

### ■ NO FREE SAMPLES

---

The occasional work-provider considers that he or she has a perfect right to ask a translator or translation agency to produce a sample translation free and gratis. This may appear to be a cost-saving but will ultimately be counter-productive for both the client and the translator.

There are a few areas of creative endeavour (architects and advertising agencies, for instance) in which the practice of asking for “free samples” is accepted, but translation is not one of them. Translators and translation agencies do not need to “pitch” for work, and pricing is so competitive that most agencies and individuals simply cannot afford to operate in this way. Those that do will be charging a premium rate so the client who thinks he is getting “something for nothing” will be sorely disappointed.

No language service provider ever minds showing a sample of their previous work to a potential client and no one minds producing a sample translation as a test-piece, providing it is paid for in the normal way.

It should be noted that under international copyright conventions, any work that is not paid for but is “published” without permission and within the meaning of the law (i.e. used without authorisation) remains the copyright of the creator and anyone making use of such translations could find themselves on the receiving end of an action for breach of copyright.

There are certain exceptional circumstances in which a client might be justified in asking for a free sample, for instance, in a major project, where the final text is not yet ready but the client needs to be satisfied as to the competence of the translator. The Institute of Translation and Interpreting has laid down guidelines for such samples and has ruled that they must not exceed 500 words in length and should not involve any layout or design work. They should always be paid for. At the rock-bottom rates charge for translation in the United Kingdom, there is no justification whatsoever for a client to get a translation for free, even if it is not the final text required.

- 4) Do not leave the task of finding a translator or interpreter to the lowliest member of staff. Language services are not like plumbing services. The business image of a company will not suffer or an expensive law suit will not be lost if a tap is dripping in a company wash-basin. Translators and interpreters are horrified at how even household-name companies will use a junior typist to telephone as many translation companies as she can find in the various classified telephone directories, and merely ask about price, regardless of the importance of the job, thus putting the whole reputation of the firm at risk. Again,

solicitors are the worst offenders in this respect. Solicitors' clients may be parsimonious, but they would be a lot less parsimonious if they realised what harm it can do to get a vital legal document translated "on the cheap".

Many businesses are afraid of the potential cost of language services. Compared with every other image-enhancing service (marketing, advertising, etc.) language services cost a pittance. Furthermore, they vary very little from one part of the country to another, simply because translators and interpreters live and work nationwide (and now with the Internet, they may even live outside the UK).

As a rough guide, languages such as Finnish and Portuguese will cost more than French, German, Italian and Spanish (the most commonly translated languages) and those which use diacritical signs that are not part of the standard character set, such as Vietnamese and Czech, are also more expensive. Languages that do not use Latin letters, such as Greek and Russian, are dearer. So are Hebrew, Arabic, Farsi and the languages of the Indian sub-continent, some of which use scripts that read from right to left and thus require investment in expensive software. The ideogram languages – Chinese and Japanese – will cost even more, since the characters are typed

slowly due to their complexity. Typesetting, design and page layout will also be an extra cost, especially in Oriental languages, such as those mentioned above.

Almost all the UK translation agencies have kept their prices steady for at least three years. Despite the current over-valuation of sterling, British prices compare favourably with those outside the UK, especially with those in Scandinavia. Prices are slightly lower only in Spain and Italy. Prices for translation are higher in the U.S.A. except in languages for which there is a large pool of competent professionals not found in Europe, such as Korean, Chinese and Japanese. However, American translators may not always understand British English terminology. Translations produced in the United States into English will be in American style, spelling and punctuation and will need substantial editing for British consumption.

Prices in the Third World (including eastern Europe and Russia) are currently lower, but the quality leaves much to be desired.

The same applies to interpreting. For instance, market research companies who employ an interpreter for a foreign client to listen in on focus group discussions, or a translator to read the results of

market research, will need someone who is familiar with the local culture and who can explain obscure references to people of whom the client has never heard. While working on such an assignment recently, the author had to explain to her client, who came from a leading Paris couturier and perfume house, references being made by focus group members to such personalities as Liberace or Quentin Crisp. The client had never heard of them.

Even in the case of technical subjects, when sourcing translations outside the UK, the user is advised to ask for a sample translation and have it checked thoroughly beforehand. A translation of a manual for a chocolate-enrobing machine performed in Italy into what a British company fondly believed to be Italian would certainly have killed anyone who might have been rash enough to follow the instructions!

It is not only technical subjects that need careful checking. A list of stock phrases which the Vancouver, British Columbia police were supposed to show to motorists was translated into Hebrew by a local translation agency who knew nothing about the language and used someone whose Hebrew was rudimentary. The sentence

“Are you carrying a weapon?” was translated into Hebrew as “ Give me a kiss”!

Despite these two rare examples, it must be emphasised that the standard of translation and interpreting — in the UK and throughout the EU — is constantly improving. This is largely due to the increasing number of high-quality training opportunities of all types available to would-be and practising interpreters and translators, in the United Kingdom and abroad.

Whenever I am on the receiving end of services — from plumbing to the supply of window blinds — I always compare the kind of service I get with the kind of service a translation agency (mine and most of the others I know) would provide under the same circumstances. I have asked for quotes countless times from potential suppliers who could not be bothered to get back to me, and needed a form to be sent to me as a potential customer, yet the form did not arrive until after I had made two follow-up phone calls. Due to the fiercely competitive nature of the translation business, translators and translation companies are among the most efficient people they will ever have to deal with. Quotes are dealt with promptly,

deadlines are met, and the service is friendly and efficient. What a pity that we are so little appreciated!

\*\*\*\*\*

## Professional Translation and Interpreting Associations in the United Kingdom

### Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI)

Fortuna House                      Tel: 01908 325250                      Fax: 01908 325259  
South Fifth St                      www.iti.org.uk  
Milton Keynes                      info@iti.org.uk  
MK9 2EU                      UK

### Institute of Linguists

Saxon House                      Tel: 020 7940 3100                      Fax: 020 7940 3101  
48 Southwark St                      www.iol.org.uk  
London SE1 1UN                      info@iol.org.uk

### Translators Association

84 Drayton Gardens                      Tel: 020 73736642                      Fax: 02073735768  
London                      www.societyofauthors.org/translators  
SW10 9SB                      DSym@societyofauthors.org

### Aiic (Association Internationale d'Interprètes de Conférence)

Conference Interpreters Group Secretariat

10, avenue de Sécheron                      Tel: 0041 22 908 1540                      Fax: 0041 22 732 4151  
CH-1202 Geneva, Switzerland                      www.aiic.net  
info@aiic.net