a Profile of Current Translation Practices

By David Smith

Imagine receiving the following telephone call.

"Good morning. We are designing a computer product for professional translators. To better plan our product, we'd like to know who translators work for, how they work, and their attitudes toward computers, in general, and computer-aided-translation, in particular. And we'd also like to know what they want incorporated in future products for their sector."

Until recently, answering those questions might have proven virtually impossible. Knowledge of the actual practices of the translation industry has been fragmented and anecdotal at best. But now with the publication of Digital's "Translation Practices Report," a more complete profile of the translation community is finally available.

We distributed 1800 questionnaires, all in Europe, and received 300 replies from 18 countries. The respondents described themselves as not only translators, but also as revisers, editors or interpreters. The vast majority — 72% — work on a freelance basis, and the remainder work either in industry, with translation bureaus or for governments. Translation is, thus, still chiefly a purchased service.

The sample group reported quite high levels of training: more than three-quarters boasted formal qualifications, and many speak at least three languages. More than half of all the translation work they do is for business — technical/scientific texts and sales/marketing documents. The smallest share is literature, amounting to 4%.

Seventy-seven percent of translators felt that searching for terminology chewed up too much of their time. Almost all translators used specialized dictionaries, but less than 15% used terminology reference banks. Few professionals took the time to mark passages previously translated. The percent of a translator's time spent actually translating varied between 58% for freelance translators to a low of 33% for government translators; the rest of the time was spent in terminology look-up, client relations, pre- and post-editing, and accounting and administration.

One of the survey's most interesting discoveries concerns the use and attitudes toward advances in computer aids for translators. A slender majority of the respondents (51%) have been won over by the word processor or PC and use them in their work. Still, users are not entirely happy with their new tools — only 47% expressed satisfaction.

One of the most frequent complaints was about the chronic lack of scientific characters and mathematical symbols. Another was the discrepancy between what translators saw on their screens and what actually printed out — in other words, lack of WYSIWYG. Others complained about the inability of small computers to handle text mixed with graphics, or even with tables and diagrams — entirely understandable since translators report encountering them in over 80 percent of the texts they translate.

Attitudes in the translation community seem be confused as to the benefits of the newest technology. Some translators are afraid that computers will put them out of business, while others fear for the creativity of their trade. When asked about the use of machine translation (MT) and computer assisted translation (CAT), not many translators admit to having any substantial experience with them. As a matter of fact, 44% did not even bother to answer the question about their attitude towards MT.

Managers of large companies are, logically enough, more informed about MT than freelance translators who are as yet not very interested. The controversial nature of this subject is reflected in the fact that nowhere in the survey are attitudes so polarized as around the MT and CAT developments.

Instead of looking forward to CAT or MT, most translators are interested in more basic improvements in their equipment. High quality output devices are most often mentioned. Access to a screen editor also scores high on the list, as do such things as search and replace and on-line dictionary look-up. Interestingly, computer-based grammar and spelling checkers do not rank very high on the list of desired features, perhaps because they can only be used most effectively with computers with more memory and/or a hard disk.

Some surprises: 48% said they always translated into their native language, leaving an incredible majority of translation that is not translated into the target text by a native speaker. Pen and paper is still widely used in large corporations, while it is freelance translators who make widespread (80%) use of PCs, word processors or electronic typewriters.

Finally, there is still surprisingly little use made of modern data transmission methods between translator/agency and client. Only 2% of those questioned report using network data communication, while a similar number use floppy disks and magnetic tape — actually fewer than the 7% who still send handwritten text back and forth.≪