

WP AND THE TRANSLATOR - "IT ALL DEPENDS....."

by Robert Clark

It is some time since I put fingers to keyboard on the subject of word processors. Readers may be interested to hear what I have learned in the two years since I bought a Data Recall Diamond 5.

Is it worth it?

The first question I am asked when WP comes up is 'Does it pay for itself?' How does one answer this? I am not an accountant, and cannot give the sort of answers an accountant would give. (Incidentally, I am not convinced that the conventional approach of most accountants is entirely appropriate to freelance translators - comments, anyone?) Nor do I openly discuss or write about my annual turnover figures or profit and loss account. (I am sure most members would agree that this would not be proper.) The only answer I can give is: 'It depends how you look at it, and it also depends on what would have happened if I had not taken the step of buying the machine.'

There is no way of telling how much work I would have done in the past two years if I had stuck to the previous method (dictation, typing by typist on IBM Golfball, checking, corrections, despatch). But annual turnover has almost doubled, and I doubt whether that would have happened if I had not made the change.

So we are left with: 'It depends how you look at it.' This answer embraces many others, such as: It depends on whether you are a freelance or staff translator or run an agency, on your presentation standards, on your working methods, on your ability to adapt, on the nature of your work, on your clients, on your work load, on your attitude to 'silicon chip technology' and so on.

WP and translation agencies

As this article is mainly intended for freelance translators, I shall not comment at length on WP in agencies. (I have some experience of this, as I have occasionally helped out a good friend of mine, who is also an active and highly productive translator, and who runs an agency which has four word processors on the premises.)

Here too, the usefulness of WP depends on the 'work profile'. An agency which relies largely on numerous outside freelance translators, and which passes the work on to the client with little or no change, would not appear to be likely to benefit (though even this is not certain, if the policy of the agency is progressive and adaptable). On the other hand, an agency which:

- 1) has principals and/or staff translators who dictate (or type!) translations;
 - 2) uses freelancers who submit drafts or (even better) dictation;
 - 3) types/retypes most work on the premises;
 - 4) has specialist checkers on the premises, or who come in as needed,
- could benefit enormously by prudent and well planned introduction of WP, and if there are any such agencies (I suppose there must be) they have probably already taken the decision.

For those who have not, the benefits arise mainly from the almost total elimination of paper, faster typing, speed of access, ease of checking, correction, alteration and revision, speed of printing and reduced filing space. It may also be possible to deliver work to the client on disc for further processing on the client's WP system (if compatible! - another story) or for the recorded work to be used for phototypesetting, for example (pace print unions!). Demand for services such as this is growing. Recently I have had to quote for supplying two different clients with work done on two different makes of WP, neither of them the Diamond. In cases like this I have used a WP bureau that

uses the make of machine in question, but this defeats the object of my having my own machine. There are firms who offer a conversion service, and I am in the process of trying out this at the time of writing.

A great deal more could be said about WP in different kinds of agencies, but I feel I should leave it someone with first-hand experience.

WP and staff translators

Having been a staff translator for ten years in a variety of firms (one technical publishing firm, two industrial concerns, and one translation agency) and even now having occasional short assignments equivalent to being a staff translator, I am sure a suitably-used WP system would benefit both employee and employer. Staff translators who dictate can access their work on a screen for checking as soon as it has been typed, and the typist need not be involved unless there are major additions. Those who type benefit by increased typing speed and by the ease with which text can be altered, so that they can incorporate 'second thoughts'. This enhances a translator's job satisfaction enormously. However, few employers are enlightened enough to offer their staff translators their own terminal, and the WP equipment is usually kept strictly within the typing department - a highly misguided policy. Again, a great deal more could be said about this, but it will have to await another occasion. To sum up: the system must have good editing facilities and each translator should have a terminal.

WP and freelance translators

On page 24 of the Autumn 1981 TGNL, a member describes his working method. It is worth reproducing here: 1) Read through original quickly. 2) Put paper in machine, start at page 1 and thump away ... until you reach the end, ignoring all immediately insoluble problems. 3) Research into those problems. 4) Careful re-reading of the English, cross-checking with the original and polishing up style. 5) Typing up the final copy.

This translator - no name is given - attaches great importance to Stage 5, saying 'This is when the final stylistic touches appear ... my mind is for the first time thinking entirely in English and as a result I discover many improvements to the draft English, making it more natural and fluent ... final typing is an essential part of the translation process, enabling me to produce more idiomatic and stylistic texts.' He then goes on to make the extraordinary statement that 'None of the elaborate aids is any use - not even a **word processor** (my emphasis - REC), since the final checking of the displayed text cannot replace stage 5.'

This reveals alarming ignorance of what can be done with a WP. Why on earth cannot Stage 5 be replaced by checking on the screen? For the translator, this is precisely the forte of WPs. It is what I bought mine for, and what I do with it almost all the time. But you do need a machine on which editing is easy - and that is far from true of all word processors.

If the translator who wrote that had a suitable WP (and they are not all suitable - more of that later) his working method would look like this: 1) As before. 2) Start at page 1 (not necessarily) and tap (not thump) away leaving 'flags' (and even messages to oneself) in the text where those 'immediately insoluble' problems arise. 3) Research the problems and go to the 'flags' to make the necessary additions/alterations to the text. 4) Read through on the screen, cross-checking with original and polishing up style, including the old Stage 5. 5) Print out the translation for despatch to the client.

The virtue of this system is that the text need only be typed once. Besides, the previous function of Stage 5 'stylistic touches' can now be applied at any time from Stage 2 onwards. In other words, if, while typing, the translator becomes aware that a sentence (not just the current one, of course) needs improvement, he can alter it straight away, while everything relevant is fresh

in his mind, not hours or days later. Similarly, in Stage 3, he may notice something that needs improvement; it can be done on the spot - all without retyping. By the time Stage 4 is reached, the standard of the translation done with WP is bound to be better than it would have been using the typewriter method, so that Stage 5 dwindles, and can be incorporated in Stage 4, which, by the way, can be repeated over and over again until the translator is finally satisfied.

After proudly describing his working method, the translator concludes: 'This all sounds very old-fashioned and unproductive in time-wordage terms (you can say that again! - REC) but it's up to us to ensure that the rates make it worth while.' I disagree. It is up to us to be as efficient as possible, and the paleolithic working method described by this translator is far too widespread for the good of the profession.

I would be happy for him (or indeed any TG member) to visit me (by prior arrangement of course) with some actual unprepared work and translate it on to my Diamond. Of course the full benefit can only be experienced when you have become adept at the editing keystrokes needed for deletion, insertion, substitution and so on, but allowing for this, I am sure anyone would be converted, even the other TGNL contributor (pp 24/25) who feels that 'due to the enormous diversity of work, (the WP) can only have limited uses, restricted to a few organizations run possibly on the lines of the "bureaux de services" ...'. What has the 'enormous diversity of work' to do with it?

This person (again unnamed; can the Editor not make a point of identifying D&C contributors?) goes on to say 'Unless I got it wrong (sic) it seems that a word processor is best adapted to work which is to some extent repetitive ...'. This reveals a widespread misconception, which one often comes up against in discussions of WPs, and which is perpetuated by the media, who define a WP as a 'typewriter with a memory which can produce hundreds or thousands of apparently personal letters with different addresses and salutations'. This facility, though present, need not be used, and that is not a WP's only ability. I hardly ever use mine for that purpose, nor do any of the WP-owning translators I know. However, some machines are better at some functions than others, which is why it is important to make the right choice.

In the same TGNL (Autumn 1981), pp 4/5 there is an article by an English freelance in Sweden, Anthea van Santen, who admits to being 'totally hooked!' (on WPs, of course - REC). Her article speaks for itself, and I share her enthusiasm, although I disagree with her about the single-line display strip; for me only a decent screen display will do.