

Quill pen, typewriter, word processor ...

by Peter Cholas

Last month's article by Lanna Castellano on the Ergonomics of the translator's office dealt with the optimum way of arranging the working environment. This month's article looks at the principal tool, the writing implement. It derives from experience in the UK, but *mutatis mutandis* this is also largely applicable to other countries.

Within living memory there were translators who submitted their work to the customer in a handwritten form, but in the Western world they are practically extinct. The choice today is mainly between dictating and keyboarding. Leaving aside the problems and techniques of dictating to a future article in this series on The Translator's Office, let us look at the choice of keyboard instruments.

In the 1950s and 1960s the most widespread form of implement used by the translator was the portable typewriter, low-slung, stylish and easy to move about, compared with the heavy office manual machine which had hardly changed in appearance since the early years of the century. Then the electric machines began to take over the market, particularly when golf-ball (detachable sphere) and daisywheel (detachable printwheel) models became widely available. Translators who had always prided themselves on their presentation acquired the new machines, and used the facility offered by the detachable typing heads to insert, where appropriate, text in italics or other styles.

It also became easier to produce work in a variety of languages. In the old days it had been necessary to have keys (usually accent 'dead' keys) specially fitted or to import a typewriter from another country, a very costly business, and one awkward to arrange. Now it was just a question of changing the golfball or printwheel.

Other improvements included the introduction of erasing papers and fluids (often referred to as Tippex after the market leader in this line) so that only the older translator will now remember the days when rubber erasers had to be carefully used. Soon automatic eraser ribbons were being fitted to electric typewriters, making life easier still.

Then came word processing. Word processors were first installed by the larger translation companies and by a handful of the more enterprising freelancers, and by some of the translation departments of companies and ministries. They were usually "dedicated" machines, which means that although they were a form of microcomputer they were designed primarily for text handling. But events began to happen quickly, with the rapid development of microcomputers designed for business use, and with increasingly sophisticated word processing packages. At the same time electronic typewriters were being developed.

And this brings us to the present day. The first decision the translator has to make is which machine to get, an electronic typewriter, a microcomputer with a word processing package, or a dedicated word processor. Determining factors will be the price he is able to afford, his working methods, the nature and volume of work he hopes to produce, and the expectations of his customers. Recent developments have tended to blur the once clear distinction between the three types of machines. The earlier clumsy microcomputer word processing packages are, as stated above, more sophisticated, and the limitations of the electronic typewriters have been mitigated by add-on memory devices and screen upgrade possibilities.

Those readers who hope from this article clear guidance as to which machine to purchase will be disappointed. You will have to make the decisions yourself. Clear advice is not easily available. Your colleagues who have acquired machines will normally only know their own machine (and will frequently be uncritically enthusiastic about it). Information from salesmen should be treated with considerable reservation. All we can do is to give some pointers about what factors to take into consideration, but the checking out of the machines will have to be done by you.

The first word of advice is, don't believe the sales talk. All the salesmen will prattle on about the wonderful facilities of their machine, and are practised in putting it through its impressive tricks before your eyes. But ask a very pertinent question and you will often be met with evasions.

The second piece of advice is, do not be made to feel inferior because you know next to nothing about word processors or computers. Salesmen are practised in glib jargon. But if the salesman cannot, or will not, explain in terms you can understand, ask to speak to another salesman.

Next, make sure you look at more than one machine, preferably three or four. Even if you have decided beforehand on, say, an IBM PC or an Apricot, perhaps to be compatible with a customer, it is worth getting an idea of what all machines do, and what they do not do.

And when you have a machine demonstrated, insist on "hands-on" experience. If you are particularly interested in alphabetic sort, or need accented characters, or are likely to want to move text around a lot, insist on doing it yourself. Salesmen hate you "having a go" yourself, because all the problems they skim over with their prepared texts may come to light. The alphabetic sort will perhaps sort lower-case and upper-case characters separately, and will probably have some peculiar way of dealing with accented characters; to get an accented character may be possible, but it may require such a combination of key strokes as to be a nightmare; the "move" facility on one machine may be much more difficult than on another, and if you accidentally delete text when doing it yourself, it's the program that is at fault, not yourself.

So, what range of machine does one look at? Individual circumstances play a part here, but we can work by process of elimination. It is unlikely that an individual translator will need a dedicated word processor. The dedicated machine is better suited to intensive use by trained typists, who can benefit by not being delayed by the few extra function keys that would need to be pressed if a microcomputer were used. But if you are not a fast, trained, touch typist churning text out all day, a microcomputer will serve just as well, will be less costly, and more versatile.

By the way, in any case it is worth taking the trouble to type properly. Indeed with computer keyboards now becoming ubiquitous in our lives, typing is as much an everyday universal skill as driving a car.

Having eliminated, in most cases, the top end of the market, let us look at the bottom end. If you have not got much money to spend, and if you do not normally revise the text you produce but are in the habit of typing clean copy first time (this is the case for many experienced translators), then a good electronic typewriter is probably the best solution for you. If, however, it is going to be your main machine for several years to come, it is worth ensuring that it has a communications facility (some have, some haven't): although you may not need it in the very near future, my hunch is that "comms" is going to become increasingly important in the years to come. Your customers, whether agencies or direct clients, will more and more want texts to be sent to them over the phone lines, in one form or other of electronic messaging.

But translators who do revise extensively, or find they have a lot of processing of text to do (cannibalising previous texts, revising repetitive texts), will want to get a microcomputer with a good word processing package if they can afford it.

Many translators who when they used to use a typewriter got into the habit of producing clean copy first time find that their technique changes when they use word processing. The idea is to let the machine do the work. If there is a complicated passage, especially in a language like German, it is quite possible to tease the meaning out on screen, and then go back later and knock the ludicrously stilted phrasing into idiomatic English. You no longer have to work it all out in your head, because screen editing is so easy. It's like using a pocket calculator instead of mental arithmetic. When you come to a word that you are not sure about, put anything down (it is a good idea to flag the term in some way, with an * or some other indicator, so as not to forget it) and then go back later and put in the definitive translation.

There are many microcomputers on the market. If you do not know where to start, the best objective general surveys that I have seen have been in the publication *What to Buy for Business* (back issues 45 and 47 particularly relevant).