Word Processors and Academics

by Ian PRESS

Andy Vincent's nice article in *Language Monthly*, No 38, prompts me to follow it with an outline of my own experience, for what it's worth and for all its undoubted, but real-world, mistakes.

The arrival of word processors has prompted many people to assume that the whole process of writing and publishing books and articles somehow becomes easy. This need not be true. First, books and articles are written by people, not machines. Secondly, you need to be able to type. And we might add that real publishing requires true professionals: it is too much to expect an academic to match the specialist knowledge and years of experience of a publisher and printer. Long hand, an 'old-fashioned' publishing house, and patience may well still be best for many people.

But word processing is without doubt invaluable if you realise that your electronic text will never be more than a sequence of dark marks on paper, or digital information on a disk, for YOUR benefit, and which your publisher will work with to produce the REAL THING. It allows us to revise, to keep our work up to date: moving text around, inserting new ideas, deleting blunders, copying often-used phrases here and there, finding every instance of a misspelling, on some systems creating indexes and footnotes, and so on. And it may give us access to special characters and symbols, so often needed by scientists and linguists.

Over the last 18 months I have spent a good deal of time preparing publications using word processors. Until then I had used a manual typewriter, then an electronic one which, with its international keyboard and daisy wheels, gave me excellent results and access to most of the accents and symbols used in Western European languages. Text prepared on the electronic typewriter did, in some cases, even appear, unchanged, in print. However, there was always the strain of not being able to change one's mind without having to retype the whole page, or more. The word processor seemed to hold out the prospect of an end to my worries. As regards articles and reviews, this was no problem. Most often these would be published 'properly', so the word processor was simply an invaluable way of preparing, for a publisher, an error-free manuscript (errors do still slip through, though, however hard you try) which he would then work with.

Books seemed to be something quite different. Before giving the history, let me summarise the results. In March, 1986 the computer prepared text of one 416 page book went to a publisher and came out at the beginning of June. Then, at the end of July, the computer prepared text of a 334 page book went to another publisher; it came out at the end of August. I hope that provides irrefutable evidence for the speed with which such manuscripts can, once ready, be turned into published books.

But was using a micro-computer a good idea overall? My answer is: certainly, particularly for those of you who have, as yet, little or no experience and who are reading this piece. I may well have suffered for you!

Some details on the books. The first was a linguistic work, requiring, as I

originally visualised it, a small number of accents. I prepared it on my BBC (see the Glossary for potencially unfamiliar terms), fitted with the VIEW word processing programme. Printed out, and submitted to a publisher with the accents added by hand, it was accepted *within about a week*. However, the publisher wanted proper accents, and the editor wondered whether a few texts in an appendix might not be a bad idea. After a month or so that was ready, but there remained the problem of accents, now compounded by the need for a host of extra symbols to provide a phonetic transcription of those texts. The BBC could not do this, and an exchange with my Berlin publisher made it clear that even the edition of symbols by hand would not do (four months later they said they had not meant to insist so, but by then it was too late; need I say how I felt?)

What to do? With patient and very valuable advice and help from the QMC Computer Centre over one hundred VIEW files were painfully transferred to the mainframe computer, then equally painfully extracted and placed on disks designed for the word processing programme Vuwriter working on a Sirius. Then followed four months (those four months I just mentioned!) of editing the text, inserting accents, setting pages, basically doing all that a publisher should do and running the risk of losing sight of the all-important content in a mass of tab stops. Then it was ready. However, it wouldn't print out properly: the letters were proportionally spaced, but not the accents, so the accents tended to look as if they were about to fall off the letters. Only the writers of the software had the ability to solve this problem, so, heartily fed up, I went to them, Vuman at the University of Manchester and, having transferred the thing from a Sirius to an IBM PC, printed the whole work out in about seven hours (and paid for the paper). From then on I hardly looked at it; I had had enough, I sent it off, and after three months the delighted (!) publishers brought it out. So far it has been very well received, but every time I look at it, I realise how much better it would have looked if I had *retyped* the whole thing with a different word processing programme, and I bewail the unprofessional look of some pages. In fact, I think it is typographically appalling. Anyway, such things may be secondary; I am, as author, almost certainly over-

critical, and I am already planning the second edition. And it *is* up-to-date, and it *is* the first comprehensive description of the Breton language in English, even if the very nature of Breton and the task I set myself mean that I am doomed to some highly critical reviews – after all, that's what it should all be about!

The lesson to be learned from this first experience, if you want to use a word processing programme for a rather long text, is make sure you know exactly what your needs are likely to be, and input direct into a suitable word processing programme. Do not, if at all possible, transfer files if they are typographically complex – at the time I reckoned file transfer had saved my life, but four months later I was beginning to have serious doubts. And see if the publisher can recommend a machine; if he can, then you can send him disks and he can set the book from them, adjusting the size of tables to give a really good appearance. And have the assistance of a professional, a secretary, if you can – I hate to think how much of my life went into every typed and retyped letter of that book. To be absolutely fair, though, I did accept the contract, and my publishers were helpful.

The other book I had prepared on my BBC too. Having added some memory to it to allow me longer chunks of text at a time, I combined all the little chunks I could, and as meaningfully as I could, to give me less editorial headache. My first printout was accepted, with a few suggestions for changes, by the editors in *about three weeks*. I made the changes. It was April and I had decided that no way was I going to transfer this text – the watchwords from now on were simplicity and sanity: a ragged right-hand margin, one and a half line spacing, and diacritics added by hand, using a draughtsman's pen. But there were two problems: first, how to get a pretty good-quality printout, and secondly, what to do with a word processor, VIEW again, which didn't offer one and a half line spacing and which gave me underlining rather than italics in the printout. The problems were all solved at one fell swoop with the help of the Computer Centre. I had, however, to simulate one and a half line spacing on my BBC in order to set my pages properly, avoiding, for example, the absurdities of section titles at the bottom of the pages and split tables -

something I avoided int the other book, but at the expense of some startlingly shortened pages. For some incredible reason this was simple, and I ended up with hardly any such pages.

The book was then printed on a LaserWriter, which gave very good quality. I checked through the text, created new files so as to reprint pages where I had found misprints, and completed the printout. A weekend was enough to add the accents by hand. The result was, I have to say, very good. I still, however, feel somewhat sheepish whenever I meet certain people in the Computer Centre, whose LaserWriter I seemed to monopolise for rather too long, even if it was only a few hours. The text was sent to Amsterdam in late July and, to mine and the editors' (but not the publisher's) amazement, was published in late August. I had a letter from my editors inviting me to what was to have been a meeting to celebrate the publication, at the beginning of October! For information, this book was on the phonology (sound system) of the Slavonic languages.

There can be no doubt that word processing has massively simplified for me the publication of quite a large number of reviews, articles, and, so far, two books. I have one substantial chunk of a co-authored book ready to put on to computer (the other authors are American, and we will probably all use a Macintosh), one book already three-quarters on a computer (this one still my trusty BBC), one book started on the Sirius with Vuwriter (here I am already having second thoughts, given my problems with the Breton grammar; but all those problems could have been due to pressure of work and inexperience), and one book which will soon go on to either a Macintosh, which seems to promise me all the fonts and accents I will ever need, or an IBM or IBM-compatible, so I can try a new word processing programme, *Notabene*, which looks as if it may be useful. Is that a risk? We need to stop **trying** things some time. And I'm resisting an Amstrad, which I'm still not convinced about, even if multilingual facilities are becoming available.

What have I learned? First, one rarely learns in easily perceptible jumps. I am still quite happy to be typing away at a book on my BBC. At least I have almost unlimited access to it. Secondly, I would, before taking any

irreversible decision, carefully set out all my real and potential format and font requirements, then go in search of the software to do the job **from start to finish**. *You* may be lucky enough to have a publisher who will set your text, but the disadvantage may be in the time it takes to get the book out.

If you do not have a secretary and you can type, then try word processing by all means. If you do have the assistance of a secretary and you cannot type (or cannot type well), then the answer is pretty obvious to me, but you may be a rather extraordinary person. If you're in between, I leave it to you. As for me, I think my ambition would be to have a book *properly* printed and published, one day

Glossary

Amstrad: need one say anything about these highly popular machines? My misgivings are probably unfounded, particularly as high quality printouts are becoming possible.

BBC: the BBC microcomputer, not common in its B model form, now replaced by the B+ and the Master. Manufactured by Acorn, rather expensive as a "workhorse", and now being increasingly rivalled by the more immediately relevant, e.g. word-processing, qualities of the Amstrad models, of which the latest are largely IBM-compatible (see just below).

IBM (PC): in many ways the standard personal computer (that's what PC stands for); at least, the one everyone tries to copy, improve upon, and sell more cheaply, thus creating...

IBM-COMPATIBLE computers or clones.

LaserWriter: a very high-quality (if not high enough for the most professional finish) printer from Apple Computer, Inc.; it produced the camera-ready text of the second book. The first book mentioned above was printed out using the LaserJet laser printer from Hewlett Packard, Inc.

Macintosh: the portable (if you have a good back) personal computer from Apple Computer, Inc., with a great deal of space for text, unlike the BBC in its basic form. It is very easy to get used to, though immediate miracles should not be expected. As with many computers, its makers were not fully aware of its good, and bad,

points when they released it. Absolutely excellent for alternative fonts: Hebrew, phonetic transcription, Cyrillic, Japanese, and so on. And it's used extensively – always important when co-authoring or hoping to pass disks on to a publisher. The Macintosh Plus, with more memory, is perhaps the current standard model.

QMC Computer Centre: the Computer Centre on the Queen Mary College (University of London) site, where I work. Tireless assistance to many doubtless tiresome people.

Sirius: a personal computer, now known as a Victor (there are various models). If Vuwriter is used on it, then transfer to an IBM or an Apricot (another machine) is relatively straightforward, though page breaks may be altered and funny things happen to the longer lines (the less said about all that, the better).

VIEW: one of the most popular word processors for the BBC. Its major rival is Wordwise Plus. People usually like the one or the other, not both. They are set up on the computer by plugging in a ROM chip, which may be better done by someone who has experience.

VIEW Files: digital recordings on floppy disk, or magnetic tape, of text which has been typed on the computer keyboard (here using VIEW). Using various commands, you can easily edit the text.

Vuwriter/Vuman: Vuwriter is a word-processing programme for the Sirius/Victor, Apricot, and IBM produced originally as a project by a postgraduate at the University of Manchester. As a result the University set up a Vuman Computer Services. I used the scientific version of the word processing programme; it had all I needed, except for the bugs (= faults). There is also an Arts version and a general languages version. The bugs which plagued my work have now been removed – so I'm assured, and I was grateful for their making machines available to me that day, even if I had to pay for the paper.

The books, if you're interested, are:
Press, J. Ian, *A Grammar of modern Breton*, in *Mouton Grammar Series*. *Volume 2*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin – New York – Amsterdam. 1986. x – 406 pp. ISBN: 0-89925-1135-8. Press, J. Ian, *Aspects of the phonology of the Slavonic languages. The vowel u and the consonantal correlation of palatalisation*, in *Studies in Slavic and general linguistics. Volume 7*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1986. xiv + 320 pp. ISBN: 90-6203-848-4.