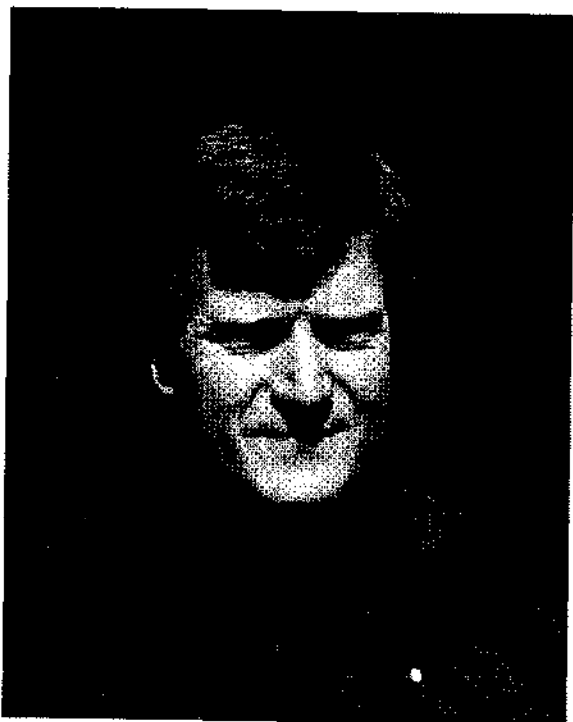


# Jaap van der Meer

## Apostle of change in the translation world

One of the key figures behind the new European Association for the Translation Industry, the formation of which is reported elsewhere in this issue, is Dutchman Jaap van der Meer, who first came to prominence as a partner in the innovative INK translation company chain.



It was 15 years ago, in April 1980, that two former Netherlands journalists, *Jaap van der Meer* and *Simon Andriessen*, established the INK company. They had learned how to do rush translations when earlier in their career they had worked for the Amsterdam bureau of the Associated Press news agency.

Their original idea was to set up a journalistic and editorial service, providing every possible service related to text, including proof reading, copy editing, translation or writing. In a throwback to the pre-computer age, they claimed to do everything that involved ink — hence the company name.

The first major technical translation assignment was to translate into Dutch the instruction and operating manuals for the IBM *Displaywriter*. The *Displaywriter* was something of a market leader in word processors. At that time, before the era of the personal computer, dedicated word processors were the latest thing in office technology.

The personal computer then burst on to the market place, and almost overnight a new demand for translation of the documentation and screen messages was created. INK was already well poised to provide this service for the Dutch market. Their formula, of training their own in-house translators, and of specialising in the office technology field, was exactly suited to the new requirements. Translation for office technology has certain specifics which differentiate it from conventional translation, and increasingly a new term — localisation — came to be used.

But INK was now getting inquiries for its services in languages other than Dutch, and this led to what became the INK network. The Paris office was established in December 1985, and other offices serving local markets were established in Madrid (September 1986), Oslo (September 1987) and Stuttgart, Uppsala and Lisbon (October 1988). Franchised companies were established subsequently in Barcelona and Modena, and subsidiaries in England and Luxembourg.

The basic formula was that all offices strictly followed the same operating procedures, system and pricing structure, which were set out in an imposing document called the INK Network Operations Manual. The market was divided into territories with INK International (based in Amsterdam) taking responsibility for the international marketing.

Being a pioneer in the use of computers in translation led INK to think about language engineering developments. In October 1989 it launched a new activity, INK translation tools, marketing to translators throughout the world software they had developed in-house for text analysis and dictionary management.

Jaap van der Meer next had the idea of bringing together its customers from the information technology industry to discuss common problems. In November 1990 the first INK Round Table was held, with representatives from IBM, Microsoft, Rank Xerox, Lotus, DEC, Hewlett-Packard, Ashton Tate, Oracle and others. There was broad support for the idea of establishing a localisation industry association,

bringing together both vendors and buyers of localisation services. This association eventually became the Localisation Industry Standards Association (LISA), which today, through its conferences, publications and harmonisation activities, is a major force in the language world. Today it has more than 60 member companies who are active in the localisation market.

The next initiative was to launch the industry magazine *Language Technology* (later known as *Electric Word*). The INK company was investing heavily in this and in the development and marketing of its own text tools, when the recession hit hardware companies in 1991, and later software companies. By this time INK, which had led the way in localisation work, was facing heavy competition from start-up companies which also specialised in this field. Mr van der Meer and his partner faced squarely up to these problems, and re-aligned the company to meet the changed circumstances. This entailed a series of drastic moves, including reduction of permanent staff by 25%, closure of the UK and Luxembourg offices, and stopping the software marketing and the publishing of *Language Technology*. The new strategy was called 'service integration' meaning upstream and downstream integration of services for the large customers.

The company still remained, however, the leading company in its field, and in 1992 recorded 15 million Netherlands guilders worth of sales in its group companies in the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Luxembourg, where some hundred people were employed. Outside the group INK International had minority shareholdings in its franchising network, which had offices in Sweden, Norway, Germany, Spain and Portugal, and this network had sales of around 21 million guilders that same year.

In December 1992 negotiations were completed with the giant US printing company R.R. Donnelley for the acquisition of INK International by Donnelley and the integration of INK's activities into the Donnelley corporation. This process was completed in July 1993 when Donnelley acquired 100% of the shares of INK International.

In March 1994 Jaap van der Meer wrote a business plan for developing a global translation service based on easy access and fast turnaround. He finished this plan, for what he called Translation XPress, based on three major components: a standard operating system for independent translation suppliers, advanced communications infrastructure, and global marketing through added value resellers.

This gave an indication of how Jaap's mind was now working. In September 1994 he became the chairman of a Netherlands based foundation called *ITALICS* (International Trade and Language Industries Consortium), which he established with a small international group of like-minded individuals. The

first task of the new organisation was to organise the *ITALICS 95* conference on global business communication, supported by the European Commission and a number of information technology companies, which is due to take place in Rotterdam May 28-30.

"However," he told *Language International*, "my interest in *ITALICS* goes beyond this conference. So much is changing in the translation market. First of all we will see a tremendous growth in translation work from a new generation of customers, the small and medium sized companies.

The *Infobahn* will allow information to travel across borders so easily. The companies that manage the *Infobahn* will come to the natural thought of offering a translation icon to the customers. Tele-translation, or the 'translation highway' as I call it, is the future for translation companies and translators. Every user can be linked to every translator around the world. The added value of *ITALICS* could be the establishing of the 'Translation Highway' (on-line translations) and industry promotion.

At the end of 1994 Jaap van der Meer finally separated himself, amicably, from Donnelley and his old company, leaving himself free to pursue his new interests.

Having bombarded the European Commission and anyone else who would listen with memoranda on the future direction of the translation industry in the latter part of 1994, he was invited by the Commission to assist in a process of consultation which they had initiated. In January 1995 he became directly involved in the establishment of the European Association for the Translation Industry, a project which emerged from this consultation process.

"Looking back on 15 years in the translation market", Jaap van der Meer muses, "I personally experienced it as a turbulent and most exciting time. I think I could not have imagined a more interesting career, especially in my university days, when I was studying Dutch literature in Amsterdam and trying to figure out what one could do to earn a living with such an education.

"Looking back I also realise that one of our failures at INK was maybe that we were too early and too fast. Good timing is essential for a successful business.

"Still, I would not be able to do this differently, I think, in the future. I always like to think ahead.

"It is very rewarding to see the enormous success of the *WIRED* magazine, for which we laid the foundation with *Language Technology*. I am also happy with the success of LISA and the flourishing of the localisation industry in general.

"Now I am a great believer in the 'Translation Highway' and I hope to be involved in building the infrastructure for this together with some of the key players in the translation industry."