

# The Translator Who Came In From the Cold

A peek behind the curtain of translation in pre- and post-perestroika Russia

INTERVIEW BY CAY DOLLERUP



Cay Dollerup

During a visit to Moscow in mid-October 1998, *Language International* Contributing Editor Cay Dollerup interviewed Professor Ivan I. Oubine, director of the Russian National Centre for Translation of Scientific and Technical Literature and Documentation.

**Language International:** How long have you been working here?

**Ivan Oubine:** I was employed about 25 years ago after having completed my PhD thesis at the Moscow State Linguistic University. I began as a research assistant and have risen through the ranks.

**Language International:** What does this Centre do?

**Ivan Oubine:** First I must stress that this is a State organization, but in the same breath I should mention that our Centre has never been supported financially by the State. We are a financially self-sustaining organization. We have always relied on our own income and paid ourselves for everything including taxes, rent, wages of our in-house and freelance translators, and salaries of the supporting personnel, equipment, dictionaries, etc. This Centre is the oldest specialized translation agency in Russia.

**Language International:** Does this mean that there were no other agencies than you before perestroika?

**Ivan Oubine:** Before perestroika in Moscow there were three large translation agencies—this translation centre, the Central Bureau of Translators, and the Translation Department of the Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Now, in addition to these translation agencies,

there are several dozen private and joint-stock translation companies. Besides, a fair share of translation—about quarter, perhaps—is done in Moscow by individual freelance translators operating with and without licenses.

**Language International:** Who are your clients?

**Ivan Oubine:** Previously they were all State-run institutions since they were the only organizations we then had who were interested in sci-tech translation. Now we translate sci-tech, legal, business, educational texts, manuals, official and personal documents for legal and physical persons regardless of their nationality—Russian or foreign.

**Language International:** Have you always done translations?

**Ivan Oubine:** Not exclusively. For a 20-year period, that is until seven or eight years ago when legislation was changed, we used to coordinate all translation work in the Soviet Union. We addressed internal needs by processing and distributing all translated articles and books to public and specialized libraries.

You must understand that, whereas academics in small countries will often command two or more languages, the situation is different in large countries such as the US, the former Soviet Union, and present-day Russia: many professionals and experts know no more than one foreign language or even only their own national language.

We made sure that engineers even in remote parts of Siberia, who knew only Russian, would be able to keep up with developments in their specialist fields. This was done by making translated books and articles available in reading rooms where, in case this was needed, people could make photocopies which they paid for themselves. Parliament

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eventually introduced legislation to the effect that 10 copies of every book published in Russia were to be sent to State libraries.

Unfortunately translation—that is translated articles, books, standards, and the like—was excluded from this regulation. To this day we continue to get calls from people who would like to have the system reintroduced. They feel that they cannot keep abreast of developments, not even in Russia, and have to order books from abroad which they can ill afford.

**Language International:** Do you have any solutions?

**Ivan Oubine:** To reintroduce the old system of coordination of translations but on a new technical level. Now there is no need to collect hard copies of translations. For example, we would be happy to be in contact with foreign firms in, for instance, Western Europe so that we could locate titles of Russian articles, standards, technical norms, legislation acts, etc. translated by us into English or German, by means of the Internet.

If ordered we could pass the translations to our clients by email. In my view there is a need in Russia for coordinating the establishment of terminology banks and for networks in virtually all legal, engineering, and scientific fields.

**Language International:** What does the agency do now?

**Ivan Oubine:** We translate texts which have also been part of our work in the past. These have always been texts commissioned by clients, not selected by us.

With perestroika, the nature of the texts has changed. Our customers used to commission mostly scientific and technical translations, the latter being manuals, instructions for installation, maintenance, repairs, etc. They made up about 90 percent of our work, but now—that means 1994, for which we have our latest figures—are down to about 55 percent.

Personal documents (e.g., birth, marriage certificates, etc.) as well as contracts and the like have increased from zero to more than 30 percent, illustrating that there are more nongovernmental commercial contacts with the outside world.

In general, there are fewer English texts (down to about 40 percent), more German (20 percent), and Spanish has increased significantly from 1 percent in 1984 to 12 percent in 1994. There is also some translation work between Russian and the official languages of the newly independent states (ex-Soviet republics). We now translate from Georgian, Azeri, Armenian, Lithuanian, and so on.

But the bulk of translation work has dropped drastically, for several reasons. First, people and institutions have little available money and must be very selective when they commission work. There are also more competitors on the market, and there are many translators and agencies that work, as we put it, "in the shade."

**Language International:** What is the background of your translators?

**Ivan Oubine:** We employ people with any kind of university education (i.e., a training of five or six years at a seat of higher learning). They do not have to be linguists, but may be engineers, medical doctors, etc. So, although we all know that we

cannot translate academic titles, our translators are, roughly speaking, MAs, MScs, and MDs. We have several PhDs and qualified medical doctors.

Potential employees are interviewed and, whatever their background, must pass a test. This is a relatively short translation, only half a page, but is enough to discourage many candidates. I should say that most of those that give up at this stage are school teachers.

**Language International:** How many people work for you?

**Ivan Oubine:** We have a total workforce (including myself) of 25, and six are our in-house translators. They cover the major European languages of English, German, French, and Spanish. They translate in this building and take care of urgent work, often in the presence of the customers—they can do a letter in 15–25 minutes.

Most in-house translators tend to be fairly young. About 80 percent of the translations are done by our freelance translators. We have a bank of 800 to 1,000 translators for all languages and subject fields, all of whom have passed the test and have sufficient translation experience. Naturally, we do not employ all of them at the same time, but I believe that in the course of one year we enlist the services of 200 to 300 different translators, depending on their specialties, language combinations, and the like.

So, when a customer orders a translation, we select the translator who is to do the job and forward it to them. The most frequently used freelance translators tend to be old hands with considerable experience—people in their forties or fifties.

**Language International:** Do you work in both directions?

**Ivan Oubine:** Yes indeed, since there are few native speakers of other languages in Russia who are also translators. It also follows from the fact that about 80 percent of our translation work is from European languages. We openly acknowledge that our translations from Russian into foreign languages are not stylistically perfect, but we know that in terms of the semantic contents and of terminology they are superior to what most native speakers can come up with.

Although there are always exceptions, we find that the best translators of scientific, technical, and business materials from foreign languages into Russian tend to have a specialist background rather than linguistic or translation-oriented training. Conversely, people with a linguistic training are better at translating out of Russian.

**Language International:** How much work do you do?

**Ivan Oubine:** We count work by the number of orders for work. We get nearly 10,000 orders per year, ranging from letters to large reports. The workload has changed. The workload of a translator has increased incredibly. In the past, a freelancer was expected to handle 24 regular pages, each defined as a total of 1,680 typographical units, in 20 calendar days. This was, of course, ridiculously low. Now a translator does the same number

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of pages in four or five days, and, if it is urgent, in two calendar days. This is about the international norm.

**Language International:** And you differentiate between text types?

**Ivan Oubine:** Yes, we do. Urgency and languages also have a bearing on pricing.

**Language International:** Do you do any research?

**Ivan Oubine:** Unfortunately not. We used to do research and we published 20 to 25 books a year. As I mentioned, I started here as a research assistant and I have published on machine-assisted translation and compiled dictionaries, but now I direct the agency and even occasionally step in to do translation.

Some of our translators—including myself—lecture at the Moscow State Linguistic University. It is important to pass on the experience we have gained from our professional lives to the next generation.

**Language International:** You have alluded to translation agencies and individual freelance translators operating “in the shade.” Do you mean to say that they deliver poor goods?

**Ivan Oubine:** Not necessarily. In order to survive, they have to be reasonably good. In terms of competition, these agencies charge the customer less and pay translators more than we can, since we and other completely legal agencies have to pay out a total of 45–50 percent of revenues in various federal and local taxes and dues. We are more expensive and pay translators less. We can only survive by doing a large bulk of translation and certified translations, which they avoid.

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**Language International:** You used to be the president of the National Association of Technical Translators?

**Ivan Oubine:** Yes. It had 800 to 1,200 members with regional branches in places such as Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Minsk, Tashkent, and Voronezh. But it quietly fell apart in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union because re-registration proved too difficult.

I do know, however, that there are some associations of translators, and I sometimes come across interviews with members of these societies. However, I do not know how they operate, and I still have to guess at their influence.

I believe the sobering truth is that translators here are not as organized as in the West. Not even members of the organization I headed enjoyed many privileges. The main problem is that there are no regular qualification certificates. Any person with a university education can declare her/himself a translator and, unlike a doctor in medicine, one needs no license to practice translation in Russia.

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