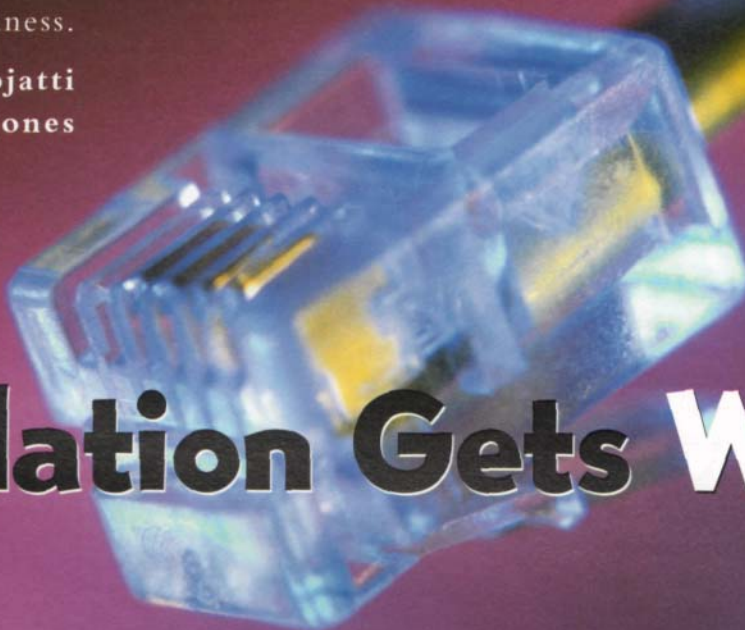Gone are the days of technophobes in the language business.

by Raffaella Rojatti and Brendan Jones

Translation Gets Wired

One clear message emerged from the conference on "Translation and Multimedia: from the Monitor to the Big Screen," organized by the Italian Association of Translators and Interpreters (AITI) in Sicily this past June. The arrival of new information and communication technologies is rapidly and inevitably transforming the world of translation.

At first glance, this observation may hardly seem earthshaking news, especially for those of us—localizers in particular—who have long had to adopt (and benefit from) increasingly complex and advanced technical tools.

Nevertheless, there is a large body of professional translators who, either because they work in sectors less obviously connected to technology or because they translate documents and texts with a large intellectual component and little repetition, still live and work with more traditional tools, observing technological developments from the outside and exploiting only the simplest and most immediate applications (who doesn't use email and the Internet?). The more advanced tools are frequently misunderstood or avoided, being considered useless or, most commonly, unnecessary.

We can already delineate a hierarchy of translators composed of a "nobility" (those who work with and for new technology and are fully conversant with the new tools and are paid accordingly), a "bourgeoisie" (primarily employees of multinational companies and institutions), and a "proletariat" (who work with a large number of customers on small-scale projects and struggle to keep up with technological developments).

The conference sought to focus attention on the idea that technology is having an impact and, most importantly, that this impact is being felt in an increasingly broad range of spheres, including among translators who until very recently considered themselves immune to change.

One of the key events was a roundtable devoted specifically to the impact of technology on translation, moderated by Fabrizio Megale (an expert in copyright law as applied to translation), with the participation of Roberto Ganzerli (president of the Lexis translation company, the Italian distributor for the product Déjà Vu), Mario Spoto (head of localization for Synthema, the distributor of IBM Translation Manager), and Urs Hinterman (representing Trados Schweiz, which produces the Translator's Workbench suite of translation tools).

The theme emerged repeatedly in various guises in nearly every session of the conference, notably in the keynote speech—addressing translators for multimedia—by Yves Gambier of the University of Turku, the address by Johan Norberg of the SDI Media Group, and many other presentations.

There is no question that the impact of the Internet and the developments in ICT is first and foremost a quantitative phenomenon. As Ganzerli noted, globalization exists because we translate it. In fact, the ability to communicate and trade at the global level has a corollary in the need to translate an increasing volume of documentation, messages, and information in at least one foreign language.

A study by the American Translators Association estimates that the demand for translation in 2004 will be double the level recorded in 1999. This increase in volume is paralleled by a rise in large, often multilingual translation projects that require the joint efforts of many translators and hence for coordination and specialization. Translation is thus increasingly a team-oriented process, one which individual translators are poorly equipped to handle. Even translation agencies and companies risk being made redundant if they are unable to offer adequate value-added benefits in terms of revision, coordination, and, increasingly, DTP and other services to provide a finished product.

At the same time however, perhaps the most far-reaching change (albeit one that is less visible than the explosion in volume) regards the characteristics of the texts and messages that must be translated in today's globalized environment. As emphasized by Megale, technology simplifies the production and diffusion of the message, which also makes the act of communication less significant and unique. In the Internet age, information flows swiftly around the world and communication increasingly relies on short texts and non-texts (such as images, tables, diagrams, etc.) whose main characteristic is immediate comprehension.

In a world where information has become abundant and easily available, it is the user's attention that is now the scarce resource. The message (and hence its translation) is designed for rapid use, forcing translators to shift their perspective and approach (never mind the constraints imposed by ever shorter production times). This is especially true for messages intended for the screen, but given the spread of audiovisual communication in contemporary society, these developments engender habits that necessarily have an impact on communication by more traditional means.

The ease of producing new texts and updating or modifying existing messages is also imperceptibly changing the nature of texts intended for translation, broadening the scope for computer-assisted translation

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software, especially translation-memory programs, even in sectors that only a year or two ago could quite easily do without them. This is the main direct impact of technological development.

Translators are increasingly finding themselves forced to adjust to these new tools (CAT first and foremost, but also Web-based authoring tools and, sooner than we might expect, machine translation). While it may be true, as Ganzerli argued, that in the future freelance translators will have to equip themselves with the technological instruments that hitherto have been reserved to larger companies, we can already delineate, as Gambier provocatively did, a hierarchy of translators composed of a "nobility" (those who work with and for new technology and who are fully conversant with the new tools and are paid accordingly), a "bourgeoisie" (primarily employees of multinational companies and institutions), and a "proletariat" (who work with a large number of customers on small-scale projects and struggle to keep up with technological developments).

This situation has other effects as well. Globalization, time-to-market considerations, and the new economy all impose different patterns of interaction between the players in the translation market (translators, experts responsible for producing content, translation companies), and thus modify the profile of the typical translator.

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At the same time, technology does not replace the human contribution, but rather, *exalts* its importance. In the future, the translator will increasingly work as a cultural mediator, taking a more active and equal position with respect to the other specialists involved in the production of documents. This will perhaps be a more stressful role, one with greater responsibility, but for this very reason will be more gratifying and less obscure.

We can therefore join Hinterman and Spoto in affirming that while the future is already with us and poses great challenges, we must not forget that the ultimate purpose of technology is to enhance and simplify our work. Paradoxically, by eliminating the automatic, repetitive elements of the translation process, technology will force us to focus on the more creative and human aspects of our job, shining a penetrating light on translation skills in their purest state—that is, the ability to mediate between cultures and make appropriate choices.

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