

# Translating for the Publishing Field

By Enrique Torner

Less than two weeks after I joined ATA and one of its local chapters, the Upper Midwest Translators and Interpreters Association (UMTIA), Dr. Lawrence Bogoslaw, UMTIA president, contacted me to ask if I would be willing to offer a presentation on translating for publishing companies at UMTIA's 2004 regional conference. He told me he was impressed by my resume, which showed eight book translations, and that perhaps I could provide some needed insight on the subject, especially considering that this field remains a mystery to many freelance translators.

Being a college Spanish professor whose translation work had mostly been a side job completed during vacation time (even though I had been a translator for a publishing company in Spain for about one year before I came to the U.S. as a fellow and graduate student), I was both flattered and surprised by Dr. Bogoslaw's invitation. Such an offer rarely happens in the field of languages and literatures, and it certainly had not happened to me before. Of course, now I have been asked twice in the span of one year to talk about this subject. Because I am a "Borgean" (I do not believe in accidental coincidences!), this seems to verify what Dr. Bogoslaw and other translators at the UMTIA conference told me: freelance translators are very interested in translating for publishing companies and encounter great obstacles in their pursuit. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to demystify the realm of publishing companies and the process of becoming a translator for them.

## Introduction to the World of Publishing Companies

According to Publishing-Guide.com, there are three types of publishing

companies, categorized by the manner in which they fund their publications: commercial/traditional; subsidy; and companies that publish on demand. Commercial/traditional publishing companies are the largest ones and "work by investing their capital into the development and production and promotion of certain authors." Subsidy publishers work "by charging the author a fee to edit, typeset, proofread, and manufacture a specific number of books from the

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"...High quality translations are one's best advertising..."

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author's manuscript." Finally, companies that publish on demand start "with the author submitting a digital manuscript to the publishing company, who then sets the text pages, designs an original cover, and then (upon approval by the author) submits a copyright application to the Library of Congress and puts the book up for sale, typically in an online store. The work is then usually available for purchase in paperback or e-book form..." (Dessauer).

For obvious financial reasons, the potential book translator should first approach commercial and traditional publishing companies before the other two markets. The reason for this is that commercial and traditional publishers tend to be comprised of the largest companies, including Random House, Penguin Putnam, HarperCollins, Holtzbrinck, Time Warner, and Simon & Schuster, so this group would most likely have the resources to pay for translators. There are also medium-sized and small/self publishers. According to Dan

Poynter, there are 300-400 medium-sized publishers and 86,000 small/self publishers. Poynter also notes that between 8,000-11,000 new publishing companies are established each year. Also keep in mind that several opportunities might exist within a single company, since many of the larger publishing houses have various divisions that are each responsible for specific publications. This presents a huge selection from which a translator may choose!

Whatever market they decide to approach, translators interested in offering their translation services to publishing companies should first consider the following questions: What subject areas need more translators? What publishing companies are the best match for their expertise? Which companies will be most receptive to the idea of hiring a professional translator? Who is the contact person at each of these companies?

As mentioned above, from a financial standpoint, large companies might be in a better position to offer translators a job. However, it is important to remember that there is more competition to do business with these companies, especially with popular (hence, more profitable) subject fields.

According to John Dessauer, "religious [books], professional books, and children's books are among the most profitable categories in the industry" (Dessauer, 78). Another advantage is the fact that many religious and children's publishing companies are either mid-sized or small, so one can be quite successful. In fact, religious and children's books experienced the most growth in 2004: the latter, which comprise 10% of the sector, grew by 19%; the former, which comprise 5%, "grew by an astounding 37%" (Poynter). ➡

Personally, all the books I have translated belong to the professional and religious categories, so I can attest to the fact that there is a need for professional translators in these areas. As a father of a bilingual three-year old, I have been reading a great many children's books in both English and Spanish, and it is sad to see how poor these translations tend to be.

Regarding professional books, as Morry Sofer states, "many publishers turn to academia for translators...others turn to established translators with name recognition" (Sofer, 144). This is why professional translators with a specialized field will have a better chance of finding a publisher willing to look at their credentials, especially if the publishers have paid the price for substandard translation work in the past. As an academic, I can attest to a certain degree of success dealing with publishers who needed a translator who is very knowledgeable in a certain area. On one occasion, an author asked me to retranslate an anthropology book that dealt with Spanish history because the project required substantial familiarity with the subject, which the previous translator had lacked.

It is surprising, particularly in the publishing industry, that many companies do not take the time to hire professional translators. As a matter of fact, according to Gerald Gross, "there are only a few publishers who do translations with any degree of regularity...There are comparatively few editors, then, who approach translations with knowledge and conviction and concern for the translator's contribution... Publishers all too often have to grapple with poor translations. Good [translators] continue to be at a premium. They are heavily booked up" (Grossman, 156-7). Even though Grossman wrote this in 1970, and the situation has improved somewhat

since then, there is still a great deal of work to be done in this regard.

### Translation As Research

Translating books is different than translating technical short texts. Book publishers are more demanding in terms of the translator's expertise on the subject at hand, and require a translation that is as fluent and natural as the original. As a general rule, book translators should be excellent writers in the target language. They should also be knowledgeable of the cultures of both the source and target languages. Style is also extremely important, even more so than translation accuracy.

Translators who work in this area need to hone their researching skills. Many professional books delve into subjects that will require even the most specialized translators to consult library books (often through inter-library loan services) and/or people who are highly specialized in a specific area. When I was translating a history book dealing with the discovery of America into Spanish, I encountered quotations from 16th-century Spanish books that had been translated into English by the author. I could not retranslate the quotes into Spanish, and the project was made more difficult by the fact that the quotes came from extremely rare and hard to find manuscripts that even the best inter-library loan service would have a hard time obtaining. My solution? I contacted the publisher and asked for permission to contact the author (I even asked for his address and phone number). After explaining the situation over the phone, the author agreed to provide me with all the original quotes. The time and effort he saved me were enormous!

From the above, it should be apparent that translating books can be

quite labor-intensive, requiring the translator to be highly organized and to have ready access to various resources and contacts to overcome obstacles to clarity.

### The Process of Becoming a Translator for a Publishing Company

Anybody wanting to translate for publishing companies will first have to decide whether to become an in-house or a freelance translator. I started working as an in-house translator for Crítica Publishers when I lived in Barcelona, Spain. I became a freelancer after I relocated to the U.S., without asking for the job or even knowing what a freelancer was! Word-of-mouth references were the sources of my first jobs. Later, as I added more book translations to my resume, I found jobs easier to obtain.

The main difference between being an in-house translator and a freelancer is that one has much more control over what he/she translates and how to charge if he/she freelances. In-house translators are all paid the same, with few exceptions. However, being an in-house translator guarantees one a steady job.

Regardless of the type of translator one wants to become, the process for finding a job is very straightforward. First, one needs to select the publishers one wants (a Google search will quickly lead to several). Second, one needs to send their editors a letter of inquiry and a resume. After that, one needs to wait a reasonable length of time for a response. If one has not received an answer in a month or so, it is very important not to give up, but, instead, follow up by phone. There is nothing like personally discussing one's interests, skills, and experience to land this kind of job. Many publishing companies will request that one complete a sample translation (usually

a page or two) for free in order to assess his/her skills. It is very important to treat this assignment the way one would any other project. Quality work is crucial if one wants to be considered for the job. After receiving an offer, one may then discuss the fees.

### Payment

It might take one quite some time to translate a book, usually anywhere from several weeks to a few months, depending upon length and complexity. Payment methods will also vary. Most publishers pay translators after the whole book has been translated, though some may be more flexible and offer partial payment after the first few chapters have been translated. When I was a full-time translator in Spain, the publisher I worked for issued checks once a month, and translators would submit whatever finished chapters they had translated by a certain date in order to

be paid for the work they had done until that date. Some publishers pay by the word or by the page. Translators may be able to negotiate payment.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, translating books can be a challenging and time-consuming job, but it can be very rewarding. Depending on the publisher, the financial payoff can be handsome. As an added bonus, the translator is generally publicly acknowledged on the inside cover of the book. Of course, there is also the pride one feels in having done an important job. Finally, it is important to develop a reputation for excellence. After all, high quality translations are one's best advertising.

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[www.publishing-guide.com](http://www.publishing-guide.com)

[www.publishers.org/industry/index.cfm](http://www.publishers.org/industry/index.cfm)

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## 2004 Tax Year: Mary Q. Translator Continued from p. 32

- **Form 1040:** Basic form to figure taxes owed to U.S. Treasury.
- **Schedule C:** Basic form for self-employed individuals who are not incorporated and operate a business.
- **Schedule SE:** Form used to calculate self-employment tax.
- **Form 2210:** This form is used to calculate whether Mary underpaid her estimated taxes, and if so, what the penalty is.
- **Form 4562:** This form is used to calculate the depreciation deduction for assets that Mary bought for her business or transferred to her business.
- **Form 8829:** This form is used to calculate the deduction for Mary's apartment home office.

- **Form 8863:** This form is used to calculate education credits for Mary's night school class. There are too many pages of these tax forms and schedules to print the sample federal income tax return here, but you can refer to my website ([www.JohnMatthews.us](http://www.JohnMatthews.us)) to view the entire return.

### Conclusion

Form 1040, Line 62, shows Mary's total tax for Year 2004 as \$10,122. If we were to recalculate Form 1040 without any of the above schedules and forms so she would not be deducting any business expenses, the total tax would have been \$15,302. By deducting her business

expenses, Mary has saved \$5,180 in taxes. She has reduced her tax burden by one-third and increased her business profit.

There are probably more business deductions that Mary could legally claim, and a smart tax preparer would interview her about her business to find out what those deductions might be. Mary will probably contact her tax preparer from time to time in 2005 to ask questions as they arise to find even more legal deductions.

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