REMOTE SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING: THE UPSIDE AND DOWNSIDE
FROM THE PRESIDENT
CORINNE MCKAY
president@atanet.org
Twitter handle: @corinnemckay

Continuity and Renewal within ATA

ATA has many strengths—including every one of our 10,500 members—and one of our greatest is certainly our mix of continuity and renewal. To keep an association like ours going from 1959 to 2018 and beyond requires both steadiness and adaptability—a willingness to embrace the new and the old, especially when we think of the changes our professions have undergone since ATA’s inception. Fun fact: ATA predates the IBM Selectric typewriter by two years. The Selectric has since fallen from a 75% market share to...well...the realm of museum cases and eBay auctions, but ATA is still here and thriving, and we’re committed to continuing on that track.

When we think of continuity, ATA’s Annual Conference is a great example. As we approach ATA59 (let the good times roll in New Orleans in October!), it’s awe-inspiring to think of 58 conference planning teams, 58 groups of attendees, 58 slates of presenters, and 58 venues that have made our conference one of the top events in the world for the language professions. We have introduced changes to the conference over the years, but we’ve also stuck with it. As other industry conferences have risen and fallen, we’ve kept firmly on the path, and that stick-to-it-iveness has paid off.

At the same time, part of ATA’s success lies in our willingness and ability to innovate. Had we remained stuck in the Selectric era, ATA would also now be a museum piece. Since the time that I joined ATA’s Board, we’ve introduced programs and services such as:

- The ATA YouTube channel, which now counts over 700 subscribers, and features video versions of our podcasts (more on that later), free webinars, conference highlight videos, and even some sessions from the ATA58 Virtual Conference. The YouTube channel helps us present material about ATA in an engaging format, and it helps us expand our reach to people who might not yet know about ATA.
- The ATA Podcast, hosted by our dynamo “radio voice” Matt Baird. Episode 19 of the podcast focuses on our first-ever Advocacy Day, featuring interviews with ATA Past President David Rumsey and current Secretary Karen Tkaczyk. You can listen to the podcast on ATA’s website or subscribe to it on iTunes. Past episode topics include how ATA works, ATA’s Public Relations Program, and meeting the candidates for the 2017 ATA elections.

To keep an association like ours going from 1959 to 2018 and beyond requires both steadiness and adaptability.

- ATA social media channels: With over 12,000 Twitter followers and over 27,000 Facebook fans, ATA is using social media to help keep current members informed, engage with new members, and spread the word about news and events in our professions.

With your support, we hope to continue thriving through ATA100 and beyond (hopefully I, at age 87, will see you there!). Whatever the 2059 equivalent of the IBM Selectric is, we promise to be ready for it! 

STAY CONNECTED WITH ATA!

ATA 59th Annual Conference Website
www.atanet.org/conf/2018

ATA58 Virtual Conference
www.atanet.org/conf/2017/virtual

ATA on Facebook
www.facebook.com/
AmericanTranslatorsAssociation

The ATA Podcast
www.atanet.org/resources/podcasts.php

ATA on Twitter
https://twitter.com/atanet

ATA YouTube Channel

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Remote simultaneous interpreting in conference settings is becoming a widespread practice in Spain as it is elsewhere. Seasoned interpreters used to the traditional conference environment may see it as a threat to their working conditions, but is it?
Attending ATA59: An Investment in Your Professional Future

Planning for ATAs 59th Annual Conference—October 24–27, 2018, in New Orleans—is well underway, so now is the time to start making your plans to attend. Come meet with about 1,600 of your fellow translators and interpreters, agency owners/representatives, and exhibitors so you can learn, network, and be more successful in your profession.

But maybe you’re skeptical about the benefits of attending an ATA conference. Maybe you think the conference is too expensive or not worth the money, or just too big of a hassle to justify the time you’ll lose from actual paid work. Nothing could be further from the truth!

I remember that before attending my first conference in 2003 (ATA44 in Phoenix, Arizona), I had been very skeptical about the benefits of attending a conference, and even ATA membership. I couldn’t see a positive “cost-benefit ratio” or return on investment. I was wrong! The people I met there and the things I learned literally changed my life. If I hadn’t attended, I would never have developed into the successful translator I am today. I owe my career and livelihood to ATA, ATA conferences, and, of course, to my fellow ATA members.

But don’t just take my word for it. Check out the videos and read testimonials from past attendees at the conference website (www.atanet.org/conf/2018) to learn how an ATA conference benefited them, professionally and personally. And be sure to book your hotel room early before the room block sells out. At $239/night, you’ll be hard-pressed to find a better rate in The French Quarter (even at AirBnB due to new restrictions on short-term rentals imposed by the city). To get a sense of what’s to be gained by attending, make sure to watch some sessions from ATA58 to see just how good the learning opportunities at an ATA conference are. (You can find these on ATAs YouTube Channel at http://bit.ly/ChannelATA.)

As for this year’s conference, we received 382 session proposals on a wide range of topics. Division administrators and assistant administrators, as well as other subject matter experts, are completing their review and rating of the proposed sessions. Unfortunately, we only have 174 slots available.

Rating session proposals is an extremely difficult task for volunteers. I reviewed 35 proposals last week and there was not a single one that I didn’t consider interesting and of potential value to our members. The range of topics offered by highly experienced and esteemed translators and interpreters tells me that ATA59 may be one of the best conferences ever in terms of professional development opportunities. It was no easy task to select just 16 of those 35 proposals. While I was doing my review, I was wishing that the conference were seven or eight days long so that I could accept every proposal!

By the time this column appears, the final selections should be completed and the preliminary program almost finalized. You’ll have no better opportunity to stay up to date concerning developments in your language pair, specialization, and other aspects of our profession then by attending ATA59. From advances in technology, such as neural machine translation and remote interpreting, to sessions on medical, patent, legal, and financial translation, or tips on dealing with peculiarities in your source and target languages, every day of the conference will be packed with learning opportunities.

Of course, there’s more to attending the conference than just professional development. There will be networking opportunities, where you can meet prospective clients and fellow translators and interpreters. To help you obtain work and meet new clients, the very popular Job Fair will be extended to two nights this year. That way, if you have a scheduling conflict with another social event such as a division dinner, you will not have to make the hard choice of choosing one over the other. (Speaking of division off-site events, while there are more restaurants in New Orleans than you can shake a stick at, it’s never too early to find a venue for your off-site event.) Also on tap again this year will be the popular Brainstorm Networking and Buddies Welcome Newbies events.

Whether you’re a relative newcomer or a seasoned veteran, attending the conference is an investment that pays dividends for years to come. From meeting your first client or “bagging the whale” that will give you thousands of dollars of work each year for years to come, to finding a colleague to collaborate with, to learning a tip that increases your productivity, every hour of every day at the conference is an opportunity to learn, grow, and advance in your career. Or maybe even find the love of your life! That, too, has been a “success story” from an ATA conference. I know—I was at their wedding recently.

Whether you’re a relative newcomer or a seasoned veteran, attending the conference is an investment that pays dividends for years to come.
Risto Siikarla’s Letter to the Editor | March–April

While it’s true that “raising rates will negatively affect the volume of translation requests,” any translator can only do a certain volume in a given time. If the volume of jobs offered exceeds the time available for satisfying all requests, there is no reason for not raising the price charged. The law of supply and demand applies to our industry/business/profession as it does to any other, except that we cannot increase the volume we produce beyond a certain point, even if we lower our price to zero and consequently receive a huge amount of work offers. The individual translator is better served by the principle of “charge what the market will bear,” also keeping in mind the volume you are willing and able to do.

Gabe Bokor | Poughkeepsie, NY

‘A translation can only be as good as the translator’

“[A] translation can only be as good as the translator, and the author cannot realistically compensate for any serious deficiency. At any rate, all translations are provisional and there is always scope for another translator to produce a better translation of the same work.”

Read more—www.sundayguardianlive.com/books/translation-can-good-translator

How peer feedback helps languages students:
https://t.co/p9vWfwyULt
APR 18 / @ATANET

Canada school adds Filipino bilingual program | CBS:
https://t.co/e3cKyvXj4p
APR 17 / @ATANET
The American Translators Association’s Board of Directors met April 14–15, 2018, in Alexandria, Virginia. The Board met in conjunction with the Certification Committee and Language Chairs meetings. (Each exam language combination has a language chair administering the passage selection and graders. ATA currently offers testing in 30 language combinations.)

Here are some highlights from the Board meeting.

**Working Budget:** The Board approved the July 1, 2018–June 30, 2019 working budget and the 2019–21 draft budgets. The approved budget of $3.32 million is a slight increase over the current budget of $3.22 million. The working budget provides an interim financial framework. By using this interim budget, changes and revisions can be made based on the actual year-end figures. The final budget will be approved at the next Board meeting.

**Presentation of Candidates:** The Nominating and Leadership Development Committee, chaired by Past President David Rumsey, presented the slate of candidates for this year’s elections for three directors for a three-year term: Eve Bodeux, Melinda Gonzalez-Hibner, Diego Mansilla, Meghan McCallum, Tianlu Redmon, and Kyle Vraa. In addition, there will be an election for a director for a one-year term. (The vacancy occurred with the election of Director Karen Tkaczyk to secretary.) Tony Guerra has been put forward.

**Law Division:** The Board approved the establishment of the Law Division (LawD). The Board also approved the appointments of Amanda Morris, as acting administrator, and Ana Gauz, as acting assistant administrator. They will serve until the division election in October 2019. Information about joining will be forthcoming. ATA members may join any or all of the Association’s now 21 divisions at no additional charge.

**Certification:** The Board approved January 1, 2020, as the date to open the certification exam to nonmembers. The Board also approved an Ad Hoc Decoupling Committee, chaired by President Corinne McKay, to oversee the process. In addition, Certification Committee Chair David Stephenson briefed the Board on developments in the Certification Program.

**Proposed Bylaws:** The Board approved putting forward a bylaws revision for the membership to vote on at the October 2018 elections. The proposed revision recognizes interpreters who have been granted Credentialed Interpreter status by the Association and gives those ATA-approved Credentialed Interpreters voting member status. (More information on the Credentialed Interpreter designation can be found at [http://bit.ly/ATA-credentialed-interpreter](http://bit.ly/ATA-credentialed-interpreter).)

**2023 Annual Conference:** The Board Approved the Hyatt Regency Miami as the host hotel for the 2023 Annual Conference. The Hyatt Regency Miami hosted the 2015 Annual Conference.

**Gode Medal Award Committee:** The Board approved the appointment of the members of the 2018 Gode Medal Award Committee: Past President Caitilin Walsh (chair), Past President Nicholas Hartmann, President Corinne McKay, Director Cristina Helmerichs, and Honors and Awards Committee Chair Lois Feuerle. The Gode Medal is ATA’s highest and most prestigious award that recognizes outstanding contributions to the translating and interpreting professions. (Nominations are still being accepted.)

The Board meeting summary and minutes will be posted online once they are approved. Past meeting summaries and minutes are always posted online at [www.atanet.org/membership/minutes.php](http://www.atanet.org/membership/minutes.php). The next Board meeting is set for August 4–5, 2018, in Portland, Oregon. As always, the meeting is open to all members, and members are encouraged to attend.
ATA President Corinne McKay presents Roshan Pokharel with a certificate of appreciation for his 25 years of service to the Association. Roshan is the assistant executive director, IT and operations. Many of you have also seen him managing the registration counter at the Annual Conference.

ROSHAN POKHAREL HONORED FOR 25 YEARS OF SERVICE

CANDIDATES ANNOUNCED
ATA Elections | 2018 Annual Conference New Orleans, Louisiana
ATA will hold its regularly scheduled elections at the upcoming 2018 ATA Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, to elect three directors for a three-year term. In addition, there will be an election for a director for a one-year term. (The vacancy occurred with the election of Director Karen Tkaczyk to secretary.) Further nominations, supported by acceptance statements in writing by each additional nominee and a written petition signed by no fewer than 60 voting members, must be received by the Nominating and Leadership Development Committee by June 1. Acceptance statements and petitions should be submitted to Nominating and Leadership Development Committee Chair David Rumsey (ata-hq@atanet.org). Candidate statements and photos of the candidates will appear in the September/October issue of The ATA Chronicle and on ATA’s website. The candidates proposed by the Nominating and Leadership Development Committee are:

Director (three positions, three-year terms):
- Eve Bodeux
- Melinda Gonzalez-Hibner
- Diego Mansilla
- Meghan McCallum
- Tianlu Redmon
- Kyle Vraa

Director (one position, one-year term):
- Tony Guerra

ANNOUNCEMENT
ALLIANT: ATA’S PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY INSURANCE BROKER
Alliant is the broker for ATA-sponsored professional liability insurance. The underwriter is Lloyd’s of London.

Why choose the ATA-sponsored professional liability insurance?
The policy is specific to the translation and interpreting professions. This is not a one-size-fits-all plan, but a plan that is specific to the work you do.

What does the ATA-sponsored professional liability insurance cover?
- Broad definition of translation/interpreting services: Covers nearly all activities relevant to a translator or interpreter, including editing, publishing, and proofreading.
- Coverage for contingent bodily injury and/or property damage: Covers errors in providing translation/interpreting services that result in bodily injury and/or property damage. These types of claims are typically excluded by generic professional liability policies.
- Coverage for cyber liability, including HIPPA and HITECH breaches: Covers breaches related to the provision of professional services in violation or breach of the HIPPA and HITECH Acts.

Visit ata.alliant.com for additional information.

Questions? Contact Alliant at +1-703-547-5777 or ata-questions@alliant.com
ATA Joins Language Advocates to Lobby Congress for Language Education and Industry Priorities

On February 15–16, 2018, the Joint National Committee for Languages-National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS), the authority on language policy in Washington, DC, hosted its annual Language Advocacy Day and Delegate Assembly. Every year, ATA lends its voice as one of the advocates from the language professions to meet with Congress and request legislation and funding in support of language education and industry priorities. In addition to numerous language educators, several translator and interpreter (T&I) sister organizations participate in the event.

As ATA’s representative to JNCL, I joined nearly 125 participants from 32 states who conducted over 175 meetings with congressional and executive branch offices. During these meetings, advocates made requests for Congress to fund federal language programs. This year, for the first time, educators added their voice to T&I professionals to ask for an examination and ultimate elimination of the federal government’s use of the Lowest-Price Technically Acceptable bidding model for the procurement of language services. This was a direct outgrowth of the messaging developed for ATA’s own Advocacy Day, held in conjunction with ATA’s 58th Annual Conference last fall in Washington, DC.

Continuing the rate of growth of the past few years, Language Advocacy Day in 2018 set a record for the number of congressional and executive branch meetings held. Moreover, 2018 featured a Thunderclap, a social media amplification tool, which sent the same uniform post in support of language advocacy to over 600,000 recipients. In essence, this means that the collective message delivered during Language Advocacy Day reached a substantially larger audience than previous years, opening more doorways to influence policy in support of language priorities throughout 2018 and beyond.

I would encourage all ATA members and supporters to sign up to receive policy alerts from JNCL-NCLIS (https://languagepolicy.org). These contain specific actions and templates/scripts you can use to make advocacy easy. Follow #LanguageMatters and @JNCLinfo on Twitter for opportunities to amplify others’ messages. The current political climate means we have a stellar opportunity to make meaningful changes happen to the benefit of all.

NOTES
ATA’s Certification Exam Preparation Workshop in Boston

ATA’s Certification Exam Preparation Workshop presented opportunities for participants to learn how the Certification Program works, including the general characteristics of exam passages and how exams are evaluated and graded.

ATA held a Certification Exam Preparation Workshop on January 20 at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Training has always been an important part of ATA’s mission, and organizers wanted to see if a full-day workshop led by graders of ATA’s Certification Program could successfully benefit both exam candidates and the program.

The workshop consisted of two sessions designed to help participants understand how the exam is graded and the common errors candidates make. The morning session was for those interested in taking the exam from English into Spanish, while the afternoon session focused on those interested in taking the exam from any language into English. The two of us (Rudy and Diego) were in charge of the English>Spanish session (aside from grading, we work in the English>Spanish workgroup in ATA’s Certification Program). The other two graders, Bruce Popp and Andy Klatt (who work in the French>English and Spanish>English workgroups, respectively) led the into-English session.

SESSION I: PREPARING FOR THE ENGLISH>SPANISH CERTIFICATION EXAM

To develop and tailor this session, participants were mailed a sample practice test to translate and given about 10 days to complete and return it. These tests were then graded applying the same criteria used for the actual certification exam. The purpose of this exercise was to target each participant’s common—and not so common—errors. The results were then discussed during the session, although any specific examples used were kept anonymous.

The main benefit of this exercise for participants was that they were able to learn from comparing each other’s translations and discussing why one rendition worked and another didn’t. It allowed participants to gain a better understanding of where errors happen and identify if they are word-, sentence-, or passage-level errors. This analysis also allowed participants to see how errors impact the comprehension of the entire translated passage. There was plenty of back and forth discussion, including participants’ explanations of their choices and decisions. Each participant received his or her own marked-up practice test at the end of the workshop.

Comments after both the morning and afternoon sessions were positive, as were most of the comments made in the post-event evaluations.

SESSION II: PREPARING FOR THE INTO-ENGLISH CERTIFICATION EXAM

Just like the morning session, the afternoon session began with an introductory talk with visual aids to provide a detailed explanation of the nature and expectations of the certification exam, the error categories and what they mean, and grading criteria and standards. Participants were introduced to the common criteria for grading into-English tests regardless of language pair. The Into-English Grading Standards (IEGS), which are available on ATA’s website, form an essential basis for grading all language pairs in which English is the target language.

The concept of evaluating errors based on the extent to which they detract from the usefulness of the translation to a potential client was also covered. The discussion then switched to some of the essential characteristics of an effective translation, the principles for exam preparation, and test-taking skills. After this, participants were divided into two groups.

Since a large proportion of the into-English group was composed of Spanish>English candidates who had taken the morning session, that group met separately to review the errors on the sample Spanish>English practice test that many of them
had taken in preparation for the workshop. The second group was composed of candidates who work from a diverse set of languages into English. The presenters at this session were able to use materials that had been provided by several into-English certification workgroups to exemplify some of the challenges faced by candidates, including carrying over the linguistic organization of a text into a very different, sometimes unrelated, language. As was the case in the morning session, candidate participation was strong and enthusiastic.

A FAVORABLE RESPONSE

The workshop proved to be a success, based not only on the number of attendees (the workshop sold out), but also on the diversity of the participants: people from as far away as the West Coast, Texas, Florida, and even Venezuela attended. With its maritime view, the University of Massachusetts Boston proved to be an attractive venue, even in winter. We were fortunate that the weather was cooperative that day, as Boston was experiencing a particularly rough winter. Many people signed up for both sessions, and while the content of the morning and afternoon sessions was different, they built upon each other.

Comments after both sessions were positive, as were most of the comments made in the post-event evaluations. As with any pilot program, some kinks need to be worked out. For example, one comment indicated that too much time had been spent on the administrative aspects of the testing and grading process, forcing presenters to rush through the more interesting part where passages were put under a magnifying glass and reviewed in detail.

As a direct result of the evaluation comments, we prepared a video that explains many of the generic details regarding the exam and presented it at a subsequent workshop that took place as part of the “Spring Into Action” conference co-sponsored by ATA’s Spanish Language Division, the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Florida, and Florida International University. In this way we were able to devote the entire workshop to analyzing the candidates’ proposed translations. The event in Miami was not part of ATA’s Certification Program, but the changes implemented for the workshop demonstrate that the Association and its graders respond to membership feedback to make its programs as rewarding, informative, and fun as possible.

ATA’s Certification Exam Preparation Workshop presented opportunities for participants to learn how the Certification Program works, including the general characteristics of the passages and how exams are evaluated and graded. In addition, participants were able to learn from the graders about the specific challenges found in exam passages and gain a better understanding of the common and individual mistakes that arise.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ATA’s Certification Exam: Introduction

ATA Practice Test: Benefits

Explanation of Error Categories

Flowchart for Error Grading

Framework for Standardized Error Marking

Into-English Grading Standards

Rudy Heller, an ATA-certified English>Spanish translator, has been a grader for ATA’s English>Spanish certification exam for over 12 years. He is a federally certified court interpreter and has been a professional translator for over 40 years. He is a former ATA director. Contact: rudyheller@gmail.com.

Diego Mansilla, an ATA-certified English>Spanish translator, is a grader for ATA’s English>Spanish certification exam. He is the director of the Translation Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where he also teaches advanced courses in translation. He is a member of the board of directors of the New England Translators Association. His areas of research are translation pedagogy, collaboration in translation, and online education and assessment. Contact: diego.mansilla@umb.edu.
Miami Spring into Action 2018

What made the “Spring into Action 2018” conference in Miami such a success? Teamwork!

In March, ATA’s Spanish Language Division (SPD) partnered with ATA’s Miami-area chapter, the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Florida (ATIF), and Florida International University (FIU) to present the “Spring into Action 2018” conference. I was one of those lucky enough to attend.

Although the tragic FIU bridge collapse occurred the day before the actual conference, when many attendees and presenters were arriving, thankfully nobody involved with the conference was injured. Attendees were notified via email that the conference would go on as scheduled, but were told that they would have to allow more time to get back and forth to the main conference venue, the School of International and Foreign Affairs Building at FIU, due to traffic detours around the accident area.

A FULL PROGRAM

The conference attracted an estimated 225 attendees from 27 states and nine countries. From what I could determine, the majority of attendees were freelancers like myself. There were also four corporate sponsors in attendance, three of them with tables in the registration lobby: Cross Cultural Communications, the International Medical Interpreters Association, Natural Languages, and the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators.

The three-day conference was designed to provide those interested in acquiring or perfecting their skills in translation, editing, and interpreting with the opportunity to learn from experts in these fields. And the program of speakers certainly didn’t disappoint, with 35 educational sessions, a sold-out ATA certification exam sitting, and a Friday night networking reception at the famous Biltmore Hotel (compliments of ATIF).

The featured presenters were four gentlemen comprising the collective called Palabras Mayores (which has many meanings in Spanish, such as “greater words,” “big words,” or “tall order”). Antonio Martín Fernández, Alberto Gómez Font, Xosé Castro Roig, and Jorge de Buen Unna joined forces in 2010 with the goal of sharing their combined knowledge of the Spanish language with everyone by teaching courses and workshops in America and Spain. The group offered attendees several sessions on topics such as the proper use of Spanish style and grammar; search engine optimization; and using our computers’ embedded tools to work more efficiently. Although they focused more on English-Spanish translation, I still got a great deal from the material presented, especially the workplace efficiency session. It was also great fun to “geek out” during high-level language-specific sessions, including seeing photos of ancient Latin manuscripts showing the use of diacritical marks that resemble what most European languages still use.

Other sessions I attended dealt with public health translations (given by an employee of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta), interpreting in mental health settings, the translation of audiovisual material, quality assurance, subtitling, and taking the Romance-language style out of into-English translations. Many speakers...
listed good references throughout their presentations for us to copy or had them available on their websites.

Unfortunately, as with any conference, I couldn’t get to everything. Here is just a small sampling of the jam-packed program:

- Avoiding Anglicisms When Translating into Spanish
- Language as a Jigsaw Puzzle
- Limited Liability Company Certificates of Incorporation
- Macro Tricks
- Machine Translation Post-Editing
- Proofreading and Subtitling in the Cloud
- Eponyms, Exonyms, and Toponyms

The program also included a number of interpreting workshops (some 90 minutes and others 180 minutes):

- Consecutive, Simultaneous Interpreting Skill Building
- Sight Translation Exercises
- Using Ethnographic Analysis for Interpreting Assignment Preparation
- Note-Taking Techniques
- Mexican Legal System and Related Terminology
- Memory Improvement Techniques

A three-hour ATA exam preparation workshop was also given on Friday for the Sunday exam sitting.

EDUCATIONAL CREDITS

I was impressed by the fact that the conference website had a tab called “Educational Credits” that led to a page listing the per-session credit hours that had been pre-approved by the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters, International Medical Interpreters Association, and the State of Florida for professionals certified by those bodies. Certified ATA members received the maximum of 10 continuing education points for attending the entire conference. Attendees’ name badge holders contained paper “passports” with all the sessions listed on them.
traveled from Argentina to present, because the only time we see each other at ATA’s Annual Conference is at the 6:15 a.m. Zumba classes, during which we’re not looking as professional as we are later in the day!

MORE! MORE!
A big thanks is necessary to all those whose hard work and dedication made this successful event possible. I’m looking forward to seeing some of these colleagues again in October at ATA’s Annual Conference in New Orleans and/or at the next SPD collaborative event. If the unofficial show-of-hands taken by ATIF President Andrés Messulam during the closing session is any indication, hopefully we can come together again in the same beautiful location!

Anne Connor is chair of ATA’s Professional Development Committee. She is also a member of ATA’s Public Relations and School Outreach Committees. She has 25 years of experience running an independent translation firm. She served as the president and secretary of the Delaware Valley Translators Association, an ATA chapter. She has a BBA in business law from Temple University’s Fox School of Business. Contact: anbrec@cs.com.

These were collected and stamped at the beginning of each session and returned to us only after we signed in and out of the session on separate sheets. These stamped “passports” functioned as proof of attendance that attendees could then send to the specific organization from which they were seeking approval for educational credits.

MEETING COLLEAGUES
The hallways and lunch breaks were abuzz with attendees chatting and comparing notes on the fascinating workshops we attended. In fact, my sister (who recently decided to return to the language profession after years of working in the financial field) and I are still trading notes via email with our colleagues, some of whom we had never met before. (You can check out what attendees were talking about via the conference Twitter feed at the link provided in the sidebar above.) I almost didn’t recognize three other colleagues, one of whom traveled from Uruguay to attend and two of whom traveled from Argentina to present, because the only time we see each other at ATA’s Annual Conference is at the 6:15 a.m. Zumba classes, during which we’re not looking as professional as we are later in the day!

DIDN’T MAKE IT TO MIAMI?
CHECK OUT THESE LINKS FOR SOME GREAT INFORMATION!

Conference Program
http://springintoaction.info/program

Continuing Education Credit Information

Spring into Action (Main Site)
http://springintoaction.info

Palabras Mayores
www.palabrasmayores.org

Presenters’ Handouts

Testimonials from Attendees
http://springintoaction.info/testimonials

Twitter Feed
Is There a Future in Freelance Translation? Let’s Talk About It!

While the demand for translation services is at a record high, many freelancers say their inflation-adjusted earnings seem to be declining. Why is this and can anything be done to reverse what some have labelled an irreversible trend?

Over the past few years globalization has brought unprecedented growth to the language services industry. Many have heard and answered the call. Census data shows that the number of translators and interpreters in the U.S. nearly doubled between 2008 and 2015, and, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the employment outlook for translators and interpreters is projected to grow by 29% through 2024.¹ In an interview with CNBC last year, ATA Past President David Rumsey stated: “As the economy becomes more globalized and businesses realize the need for translation and interpreting to market their products and services, opportunities for people with advanced language skills will continue to grow sharply.”² Judging by the size of the industry—estimated at $33.5 billion back in 2012, and expected to reach $37 billion this year³—it seems the demand for translation will only continue to increase.

Many long-time freelance translators, however, don’t seem to be benefitting from this growth, particularly those who don’t work with a lot of direct clients. Many report they’ve had to lower their rates and work more hours to maintain their inflation-adjusted earnings. Also, the same question seems to be popping up in articles, blogs, and online forums. Namely, if the demand for translation is increasing, along with opportunities for people with advanced language skills, why are many professional freelance translators having difficulty finding work that compensates translation for what it is—a time-intensive, complex process that requires advanced, unique, and hard-acquired skills?

Before attempting to discuss this issue, a quick disclaimer is necessary: for legal reasons, antitrust law prohibits members of associations from discussing specific rates.⁴ Therefore, the following will not mention translation rates per se. Instead, it will focus on why many experienced translators, in a booming translation market inundated by newcomers, are forced to switch gears or careers, and what can be done to reverse what some have labelled an irreversible trend.

THE (UNQUANTIFIABLE) ISSUE
I’ll be honest. Being an in-house translator with a steady salary subject to regular increases, I have no first-hand experience with the crisis many freelance translators are currently facing. But I have many friends and colleagues who do. We all do. Friends who tell us that they’ve lost long-standing clients because they couldn’t lower their rates enough to accommodate the clients’ new demands. Friends who have been translating for ages who are now wondering whether there’s a future in freelance translation.

Unfortunately, unlike the growth of the translation industry, the number of freelance translators concerned about the loss of their inflation-adjusted earnings and the future of the
profession is impossible to quantify. But that doesn’t mean the problem is any less real. At least not judging by the increasing number of social media posts discussing the issue, where comments such as the ones below abound.\(^5\)

- “Expenses go up, but rates have remained stagnant or decreased. It doesn’t take a genius to see that translation is slowly becoming a sideline industry rather than a full-time profession.”
- “Some business economists claim that translation is a growth industry. The problem is that the growth is in volume, not rates.”
- “Our industry has been growing, but average wages are going down. This means that cheap service is growing faster than quality.”

Back in 2010, Common Sense Advisory, a market research company specializing in translation and globalization, started discussing technology- and globalization-induced rate stagnation and analyzing potential causes.\(^6\) Now, almost 10 years later, let’s take another look at what created the crisis many freelance translators are facing today.

A LONG LIST OF INTERCONNECTED FACTORS

The causes leading to technology- and globalization-induced rate stagnation are so interconnected that it’s difficult to think of each one separately. Nevertheless, each deserves a spot on the following list.

1. Global Competition and the Rise of “Supply”: Globalization, internet technology, and the growth of demand for translation services naturally resulted in a rise of the “supply.” In other words, an increasing number of people started offering their services as translators. Today, like all professionals affected by global competition, most freelance translators in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Western Europe find themselves competing against a virtually infinite pool of translators who live in countries where the cost of living is much cheaper and are able to offer much lower rates. Whether those translators are genuine professional translators or opportunists selling machine translation to unsuspecting clients is almost immaterial. As the law of supply and demand dictates, when supply exceeds demand, prices generally fall.

2. The Sheer Number of Language Services Providers and the Business/Competition Model: The increase in global demand has also led to an increase in the number of language services providers (LSPs) entering the market. Today, there are literally thousands of translation agencies in a market dominated by top players.\(^7\) Forced to keep prices down and invest in advertising and sales to maintain their competitiveness, many agencies give themselves limited options to keep profits up—the most obvious being to cut direct costs (i.e., lower rates paid to translators). Whether those agencies make a substantial profit each year (or know anything about translation itself) is beside the point. There are many LSPs out there that follow a business model that is simply not designed to serve the interests of freelance translators. Interestingly enough, competing against each other on the basis of price alone doesn’t seem to be serving their interests either, as it forces many LSPs into a self-defeating, downward spiral of dropping prices. As Luigi Muzii, an author, translator, terminologist, teacher, and entrepreneur who has been working in the industry for over 30 years, puts it: “The industry as a whole behaves as if the market were extremely limited. It’s as if survival depended on open warfare […] by outright price competition. Constantly pushing the price down is clearly not a sustainable strategy in the long-term interests of the professional translation community.”\(^8\)

3. The Unregulated State of the Profession: In many countries, including the U.S., translation is a widely unregulated profession with low barriers to entry. There is also not a standardized career path stipulating the minimum level of training, experience, or credentials required. Despite the existence of ISO standards and certifications from professional associations around the globe, as long as the profession (and membership to many professional associations) remains open to anyone and everyone, competition will remain exaggeratedly and unnaturally high, keeping prices low or, worse, driving them down.

4. Technology and Technological “Improvements”: From the internet to computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools to machine translation, technology may not be directly related to technology- and globalization-induced rate stagnation, but there’s no denying it’s connected. The internet is what makes global communication and competition possible. CAT tools have improved efficiency so much in some areas that most clients have learned to expect three-tier pricing in all areas.

Machine translation is what’s allowing amateurs to pass as professionals and driving the post-editing-of-machine-translation business that more and more LSPs rely on today. Whether machine translation produces quality translations, whether the post-editing of machine translation is time efficient, and whether “fuzzy matches” require less work than new content are all irrelevant questions, at least as things stand today. As long as technologies that improve (or claim to improve) efficiency exist, end clients will keep expecting prices to reflect those “improvements.”
5. Unaware, Unsuspecting, and Unconcerned Clients: Those of you who’ve read my article about “uneducated” clients may think that I’m obsessed with the subject, but to me it seems that most of the aforementioned factors have one common denominator: clients who are either unaware that all translations (and translators) are not created equal, or are simply unconcerned about the quality of the service they receive. These clients will not be willing to pay a premium price for a service they don’t consider to be premium.

One look at major translation bloopers and their financial consequences for companies such as HSBC, KFC, Ford, Pampers, Coca Cola, and many more is enough to postulate that many clients know little about translation (or the languages they’re having their texts translated into). They may be unaware that results (in terms of quality) are commensurate to a translator’s skills, experience, and expertise, the technique/technology used for translating, and the time spent on a project. And who’s to blame them? Anyone with two eyes is capable of looking at a bad paint job and seeing it for what it is, but it requires a trained eye to spot a poor translation and knowledge of the translation process itself (and language in general) to value translation for what it is.

Then there’s the (thankfully marginal) number of clients who simply don’t care about the quality of the service they receive, or whether the translation makes sense or not. This has the unfortunate effect of devaluing our work and the profession in the eyes of the general public. Regrettably, when something is perceived as being of little value, it doesn’t tend to fetch premium prices. As ATA Treasurer John Milan writes:

“When consumers perceive value, they [clients] are more willing to pay for it, which raises a series of questions for our market. Do buyers of language services understand the services being offered? What value do they put on them? […] All these variables will have an impact on final market rates.”

6. The Economy/The Economical State of Mind: Whether clients need or want to save money on language services, there’s no denying that everyone always seems to be looking for a bargain these days. Those of us who have outsourced translation on behalf of clients know that, more often than not, what drives a client’s decision to choose a service provider over another is price, especially when many LSPs make the same claims about their qualifications, quality assurance processes, and industry expertise.

7. Other Factors: From online platforms and auction sites that encourage price-based bidding and undifferentiated global competition, to LSPs making the post-editing of machine translation the cornerstone of their business, to professional translators willing to drop their rates to extreme lows, there are many other factors that may be responsible for the state of things. However, they’re more byproducts of the situation than factors themselves.

**A VERY REAL CONCERN**

Rising global competition and rate stagnation are hardly a unique situation. Today, freelance web designers, search engine optimization specialists, graphic designers, and many other professionals in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Western Europe must compete against counterparts in India, China, and other parts of the world where the cost of living is much cheaper—with the difference that product/service quality isn’t necessarily sacrificed in the process. And that may be the major distinction between what’s happening in our industry and others: the risk posed to translation itself, both as an art form and as a product/service.

While some talk about the “uberization” or “uberification” of the translation industry or blame technology (namely, machine translation) for declining rates, others point a finger at a business model (i.e., the business/competition model) that marginalizes the best translators and creates a system where “bad translators...
are driving out the good ones.”12 The outcome seems to be the same no matter which theory we examine: the number of qualified translators (and the quality of translations) is in danger of going down over time. As Luigi Muzii explains:

“The unprecedented growth in demand for translation in tandem with the effect of Gresham’s Law [i.e., bad translators driving out the good ones] will lead inexorably to a chronic shortfall of qualified language specialists. The gap between the lower and the higher ends of the translation labor market is widening and the process will inevitably continue.”13

Between 2006 and 2012, Common Sense Advisory conducted a regular business confidence survey among LSPs. During those years, there seemed to be an increase in the number of LSPs that reported having difficulty finding enough qualified language specialists to meet their needs.14 Since the number of translators varies depending on the language pair, the shortage may not yet be apparent in all segments of the industry, but the trend is obviously noticeable enough that an increasing number of professionals (translators, LSPs, business analysts, etc.) are worrying about it. And all are wondering the same thing: can anything be done to reverse it?

ARE THERE ANY “SOLUTIONS?”
In terms of solutions, two types have been discussed in recent years: micro solutions (i.e., individual measures that may help individual translators maintain their rates or get more work), and macro solutions (i.e., large-scale measures that may help the entire profession on a long-term basis).

On the micro-solution side, we generally find:

■ Differentiation (skills, expertise, productivity, degree, etc.)
■ Specialization (language, subject area, market, translation sub-fields such as transcreation)

As long as technologies that improve (or claim to improve) efficiency exist, end clients will keep expecting prices to reflect those “improvements.”

■ Diversification (number of languages or services offered, etc.)
■ Presentation (marketing efforts, business practices, etc.)
■ Client education

Generally speaking, micro solutions tend to benefit only the person implementing them, although it can be argued that anything that can be done to improve one’s image as a professional and educate clients might also benefit the profession as a whole, albeit to a lesser degree.

On the macro-solution side, we find things that individual translators have somewhat limited power over. But professional associations (and even governments) may be able to help!

Large-Scale Client Education: Large-scale client education is possibly the cornerstone of change; the one thing that may change consumer perception and revalue the profession in the eyes of the general public. As ATA Treasurer John Milan puts it:

“Together, we can educate the public and ensure that our consumers value us more like diamonds and less like water”15

Most professional associations around the globe already publish client education material, such as Translation, Getting it Right—A Guide to Buying Translation.16 Other initiatives designed to raise awareness about translation, such as ATAs School Outreach Program, are also helpful because they educate the next generation of clients. But some argue that client education could be more “aggressive.” In other words, professional associations should not wait for inquiring clients to look for information, but take the information to everyone, carrying out highly visible public outreach campaigns (e.g., advertising, articles, and columns in the general media). ATAs Public Relations Committee has been very active in this area, including publishing articles written by its Writers Group in over 85 trade and business publications.

Some have also mentioned that having professional associations take a clear position on issues such as machine translation and the post-editing of machine translation would also go a long way in changing consumer
perception. In this regard, many salute ATAs first Advocacy Day last October in Washington, DC, when 50 translators and interpreters approached the U.S. Congress on issues affecting our industry, including machine translation and the “lowest-price-technically-available” model often used by the government to contract language services.17 However, the success of large-scale client education may be hindered by one fundamental element, at least in the United States.

Language Education: I’m a firm believer that there are some things that one must have some personal experience with to value. For example, a small business owner might think that tax preparation is easy (and undervalue the service provided by his CPA) until he tries to prepare his business taxes himself and realizes how difficult and time consuming it is—not to mention the level of expertise required!

Whether clients need or want to save money on language services, there’s no denying that everyone always seems to be looking for a bargain these days.

Similarly, monolingual people may be told or “understand” that translation is a complex process that requires a particular set of skills, or that being bilingual doesn’t make you a translator any more than having two hands makes you a concert pianist. But unless they have studied another language (or, in the case of bilingual people, have formally studied their second language or have tried their hand at translation), they’re not likely to truly comprehend the amount of work and expertise required to translate, or value translation for what it really is.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the vast majority of Americans (close to 80%) remain monolingual, and only 10% of the U.S. population speak another language well.18 In their 2017 report on the state of language education in the U.S., the Commission on Language Learning concluded that the U.S. lags behind most nations when it comes to language education and knowledge, and recommended a national strategy to improve access to language learning and “value language education as a persistent national need.”19

Until language education improves and most potential clients have studied a second language, one might contend that the vast majority of Americans are likely to keep undervaluing translation services and that large-scale client education may not yield the hoped-for results. This leaves us with one option when it comes to addressing the technology- and globalization-induced rate stagnation conundrum.

Industry-Wide Regulations: In most countries, physicians are expected to have a medical degree, undergo certification, and get licensed to practice medicine. The same applies to dentists, nurses, lawyers, plumbers, electricians, and many other professions. In those fields, mandatory education, training, and/or licensing/certification establish core standards and set an expected proficiency level that clients have learned to expect and trust—a proficiency level that all clients value.

Whether we’re talking of regulating access to the profession itself or controlling access to professional associations or online bidding platforms, there’s no question that implementing industry-wide regulations would go a long way in limiting wild, undifferentiated competition and assuring clients that they are receiving the best possible service. While some may think that regulations are not a practical option, it may be helpful to remember that physicians didn’t always have to undergo training, certification, and licensing to practice medicine in the U.S. Today, however, around 85% of physicians in the U.S. are certified by an accredited medical board,20 and it’s safe to say that all American physicians have a medical degree and are licensed to practice medicine. And the general public wouldn’t want it any other way! Is it so implausible to expect that the same people who would let no one except a qualified surgeon operate on them would want no one except a qualified professional translate the maintenance manual of their nation’s nuclear reactors?

SO, WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR FREELANCE TRANSLATORS?

Generally speaking, most experts agree that the demand for translation services will keep growing, that technology will keep becoming more and more prevalent, and that the translation industry will become even more fragmented. According to Luigi Muzii:

In the immediate future, I see the translation industry remaining highly fragmented with an even larger concentration of the volume of business in the hands of a bunch of multi-language vendors who hire translators from the lower layer of the resource market to keep competing on price. This side of the industry will soon count for more than a half of the pie. The other side will be made up of tiny local boutique firms and tech-savvy translator pools making use of cutting-edge collaborative tools. […] The prevailing model will be “freeconomics,” where basic services are offered for free while advanced or special features are charged at a premium. The future is in disintermediation and collaboration. […] The winners will be those translators who can leverage their specialist linguistic skills by increasing their productivity with advances in technology.21

The future of freelance translation, however, may be a bit more uncertain. Indeed, many argue that even with acute specialization, first-rate translation skills, and marketing abilities to match, many freelance translators’ chances at succeeding financially in the long term...
Anyone with two eyes is capable of looking at a bad paint job and seeing it for what it is, but spotting a poor translation requires a trained eye and knowledge of the translation process itself (and language in general) to value translation for what it is.

may be limited by the lack of industry regulations and the general public’s lack of language education/knowledge (i.e., the two factors that feed wild, undifferentiated competition). But that’s not to say there’s no hope.

At least that’s what learning about the history of vanilla production taught me. Growing and curing vanilla beans is a time-intensive, labor-intensive, intricate process. It’s a process that meant that for over 150 years vanilla was considered a premium product, and vanilla growers made a decent living. When vanillin (i.e., synthetic vanilla flavoring) became widely available in the 1950s, however, most food manufacturers switched to the less expensive alternative. After only a few decades, many vanilla growers were out of business and the ones who endured barely made a living, forced to lower prices or resort to production shortcuts (which reduced quality) to sell faster. During that period, the only people making a profit were the vanilla brokers. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, nutrition education and consumer demand for all-natural foods started turning things around, and by 2015 vanillin had fallen from grace and natural vanilla was in high demand again. By then, however, there were few vanilla growers left and climate change was affecting production and reducing supply significantly. Today, vanilla beans fetch 30–50 times the price they did during the vanillin era.

For those who may have missed the analogy: professional (freelance) translators are to the translation industry what the vanilla growers are to the food industry. Those who endure the current technology- and globalization-induced rate stagnation may eventually (if the forces at play can be harnessed) witness a resurgence. In the meantime, the best we can do is to keep doing what we do (provide quality service, educate our clients, fight for better language education in the U.S., and support our professional associations’ initiatives to improve things), and talk constructively about the issue instead of pretending that it doesn’t exist, that it won’t affect us, or that nothing can be done about it. If you’re reading this article, things have already started to change! 💪

NOTES


Christelle Maginot has over 20 years of experience as a professional translator. For the past 15 years she has been working as an in-house translator for a major consumer goods corporation, where she supervises the translation of corporate, technical, sales, and marketing material into multiple languages. She has a master’s degree in English, French, and Spanish translation from the University of Aix-en-Provence, France. Contact: Christelle_maginot@conair.com.
Jessica Cohen, winner of the 2017 Man Booker International Prize, shares her thoughts on literary translation, including what it’s like to collaborate with one of Israel’s finest writers.

Jessica Cohen, a freelance English<>Hebrew literary translator born in England and raised in Israel, has come a long way since winning ATA’s Student Translation Award in 2000. Jessica started her freelance career in 1998. Her first book-length translation was published in 2003, and over the years she devoted more and more time to literary translation while maintaining a commercial translation business. Since 2012, she has focused exclusively on literary and creative translation. She has worked with some of Israel’s finest writers, including Assaf Gavron, David Grossman, Amir Gutfreund, Yael Hedaya, Etgar Keret, Ronit Matalon, Rutu Modan, and Tom Segev, as well as prominent screenwriters such as Ari Folman and Ron Leshem. Her translations have been published in English by leading U.S. publishers.

In June of 2017, Jessica and David Grossman won the Man Booker International Prize for the year’s best-translated work of a fiction novel. Grossman and Cohen shared the £50,000 prize, which was awarded to Cohen’s English translation of A Horse Walks into a Bar, Grossman’s novel about a standup comedian’s public breakdown. This was only the second year the Man Booker International Prize was awarded to a single book. (The 2016 prize was awarded to South Korean novelist Han Kang and translator Deborah Smith for The Vegetarian.)

Jessica was kind enough to allow me the opportunity to speak with her about working with David Grossman, her thoughts on the process of literary translation, as well as some upcoming projects.

You and ATA go back quite some time together. I remember when you won ATA’s Student Translation Award in 2000. I was one of the readers for the award that year and was so blown away by the quality of your translation that I still remember the title of the book from which your translation was taken, Milk Teeth by Yehonatan Geffen.

I was working on my certificate in literary translation as part of my master’s degree at Indiana University at that time. Breon Mitchell, a charter member and past president of the American Literary Translators Association, was the chair of the Comparative Literature Department and my husband’s dissertation advisor. It was under Breon that Indiana’s Certificate in Literary Translation Program had all but faded away, but it was under Breon that it was resuscitated. He put together a combination of classes for me, including some from other...
departments, to make up a full certificate program.

How did you get started in translation? I had actually started translating at Microsoft when I lived in Seattle, Washington, but became a freelancer when I moved to Indiana. I had envisioned that I would continue with commercial translation for the foreseeable future. I started literary translation as a hobby and discovered I had a real liking for it and wished I could do more of it from Hebrew into English.

Did winning ATA’s Student Translation Award have a particular impact on your career? That’s hard to say, but it’s very important to get that type of recognition early on. It did give me a push to make a serious commitment.

Have you translated other novels by the author of Milk Teeth? Yehonatan Geffen is more of a songwriter, poet, and lyricist than a novelist, but I did translate a number of his poems, which were published in Source, the newsletter of ATA’s Literary Division.

I was delighted when it was announced that you had been shortlisted and then that you and David Grossman had been awarded the 2017 Man Booker International Prize for A Horse Walks into a Bar. I know you translated another Grossman novel I read a few years ago, To the End of the Land. Have you translated other works by Grossman?

Yes, I’ve translated five books by David Grossman from Hebrew into English, including Falling Out of Time, Her Body Knows, and Writing in the Dark. I also translate speeches, correspondence, essays, op-ed pieces, and theater adaptations for him.

How closely do you work with the authors you translate? When you work with the same authors again and again, you meet with them, correspond with them, and develop friendships. You become familiar with the way the writer thinks and with their language habits. In this way their writings become more accessible.

That must be a rare privilege. David Grossman is exceptional in his appreciation of his translators. For his last two books he organized a meeting with several of his translators (myself included) during the translation process at the Straelen Translation Centre in Straelen, Germany, an international center for translators of literature and nonfiction. We met with him for four days, and it was like a retreat where everyone sat down at the table and went over the text. Our translations of the book into our respective languages were all at different stages of completion, so we came with our drafts and our questions.

David wants these meetings to be a helpful and enriching experience. It’s an opportunity to rethink what you’ve translated so far, exchange ideas, hear what he has to say about the book, and perhaps arrive at better solutions. There’s also a certain efficiency to this process, since David can deal with all the questions posed by his translators at once instead of having to answer them piecemeal. Since everyone is working on the same text but not at the same pace, hearing the answers to questions from those further along in the translation process is extremely helpful.

When we scheduled this interview, you mentioned you were preparing for the arrival of a Hebrew-English translator colleague with whom you were going to be working on a joint project. What kind of project will that be?

I was approached by the widow of Hanoch Levin, a very controversial Israeli playwright, cabaretist, and writer of popular songs who had some success in Eastern Europe. She wanted to commission the translation of some of his theatrical works into English. I didn’t feel sufficiently connected to theater translation, but I was willing to work on the project with Evan Fallenberg, who has experience translating plays and musical works and is a writer in his own right. We decided to do our co-translations in person instead of trying to work together via email. This is a bit complicated since Evan lives in Israel and I live in Denver, but with planning we do manage to get together to work. We’re having our fourth in-person meeting to work on our fourth play for a Hanoch Levin anthology. We normally spend a week together and translate an entire play. We’ve found we get much better results working this way.
How long are these plays?
The plays are approximately 6,000 words. We work on the entire translation together, rather than each working separately and then discussing our versions. It has been a good strategy.

David Grossman is exceptional in his appreciation of his translators.

Can you imagine working this closely with someone else?
I can’t think of anyone else I would like to work with, but I would be willing to give it a try. Evan and I work well together. We come with our own ideas and see things in different ways, and I think this method of working together has made both of us more open-minded and flexible than just working on our own. Evan and I don’t have big egos, but we’re both pretty confident. We do argue about things, but there are never any hurt feelings. I actually miss it when I’m working on my own without a sounding board.

Had you ever worked as part of a translation team previously?
After graduate school, I attended a two-week summer literary translation workshop at Skidmore College with John Felstiner (1936–2017), who was professor emeritus of English at Stanford University and an award-winning poetry scholar and translator. [Felstiner was the 2001 recipient of ATA’s Ungar German Translation Award for his translation of the Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan.] There were translators participating who worked in several different language pairs. We would meet for a few hours each day and workshop each other’s texts. It was a good experience, but it wasn’t really the same as working with a co-translator.

How do you envision life after the Man Booker International Prize?
It took a while for me to become an established literary translator, but now I’m booked out a year in advance. I can pick and choose the projects on which I want to work, but even now I can’t support myself with literary translation. Last year the Authors’ Guild sent out a survey seeking information on the working conditions of literary translators. The results of this survey show that literary translators are underpaid and struggle financially. If my husband didn’t have a good job, I couldn’t afford to be a literary translator.

Thank you, Jessica, for making the time for this interview. I know that Evan is arriving tomorrow and you two have to start working on your co-translation project immediately, so we are especially grateful that you were willing to make yourself available. And once again, congratulations on the Man Booker International Prize!
Remote Simultaneous Interpreting: The Upside and Downside

Remote simultaneous interpreting is relatively new and still needs a lot of enhancement. The good news is that we, as interpreters, can be involved in the process of the development of this technology.

There are many experienced interpreters who are reluctant to try remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI), viewing it as a hindrance to good performance. However, there’s no getting around the fact that RSI is becoming a widespread practice. So, should we resist, or get on board and contribute our know-how to enhance this new method of working?

I would like to present an objective view—should one exist—about the upside and downside of RSI, regardless of my own preferences. The following is based on my own experience with RSI, and that of several experienced interpreters with whom I usually team up.

GREETING TECHNOLOGY WITH AN OPEN MIND

I was in awe the first time I heard about RSI. I had been a professional conference interpreter for 25 years at that point, but had never witnessed such a dramatic development in my working environment. I must admit I felt both skeptical and curious about RSI, but I allowed curiosity to prevail and guide me through into this new world.

I wanted to learn more about this new technology, so I contacted the only RSI provider in Spain, where I live and work as a freelance interpreter. When I visited their facilities in the center of Madrid, I found myself looking at several built-in booths, each equipped with its own sound and interpreting equipment and one big LCD screen. The company owner started his sales pitch by describing the system as a replica of an onsite setup, despite the obvious differences to me. But since sometimes differences or similarities are in the eye of the beholder, I listened attentively to his explanation without prejudging.

“So, this is how the system works,” the owner told me. “On the screen sitting on the table inside the booth, the interpreters can see the speaker at the venue where the event is taking place, as well as any PowerPoint presentations or visual aids being used. The interpreters can choose if they prefer to have the screen display both the speaker and his or her presentation material, or just one or the other.” This fact may seem like a minor detail, but it’s really not, because if both the speaker and the presentation material are shown simultaneously on the same screen, chances are that neither one can be seen clearly enough by the interpreter. With this thought in mind, I continued to look around the facility. However, despite the company owner’s efforts to persuade me about the beauty of the system, this type of work setting seemed completely alien.

WHAT ABOUT THE HUMAN FACTOR?

The closest I had ever come to RSI was videoconference interpreting. Videoconferencing was always applied to specific situations and rarely used at large events and, when used, it was always part of an overall onsite conference setting. In

I must admit I felt both skeptical and curious about RSI, but I allowed curiosity to prevail and guide me through into this new world.
other words, videoconferencing would normally be used to feature a speaker who was unable to attend the conference in person, but whose participation was deemed important, or to allow a company employee who was unable to travel to connect to a specific meeting remotely.

I was academically trained in the belief that interpreting is not only about verbal language but also body language. A good rendering depends on the interpreter's capacity to convey denotation and connotation (the latter usually coming from gestures), tone, movements, and even the audience's overall mood. When working onsite, the interpreter can "feel" what's happening and adjust his or her delivery accordingly. With RSI, I had the impression that being in a booth miles away from the conference venue, looking at bodies moving on a stage with a camera placed at a relatively long distance, was going to deprive me of a host of nuances I believe are critical for a good performance. Much of what we understand from a speech or conversation (about 60%) comes from what we see, and in the case of RSI, I felt that such a percentage was going to be much smaller.

What about being able to talk to the speaker before the conference starts? The importance of this was also emphasized during my formal training, even though meeting a speaker beforehand isn't feasible in many instances. Having the chance to talk to the person you're supposed to interpret enables the interpreter to "bond" with the speaker, who must see you as a necessary partner during the presentation. A five-minute face-to-face meeting with the speaker can have a huge impact on the output. Speakers often have no previous experience working with interpreters and need some basic guidance on how to partner with the interpreter to ensure that the intended message is conveyed effectively to the entire audience, regardless of the number of people who are using simultaneous interpreting at the event.

In addition, meeting in person gives the interpreter the opportunity to ask questions and give the speaker some tips for delivery according to the characteristics of the target audience. It's also important for the interpreter to learn in advance if the speaker plans to show any unsubtitled videos, make cultural references, or tell jokes. Also, being able to get a client's feedback during coffee breaks might help the interpreter change things on the go once the conference resumes. Not being onsite prevents the interpreter from gaining insight into the target audience and the speaker's style and intent. A screen showing someone speaking doesn't provide a sufficient means of gathering all the information an interpreter needs to do a good job. To make this possible during RSI, at least two screens would be required: one showing the speaker of the moment, the other showing either the agenda, the meeting room, or the screens on which something is being projected. Someone may argue that meeting with the speaker before an event where RSI will be used would solve any issues, but we know how unfeasible meeting with speakers beforehand is most of the time. Still, the interpreter would have a better chance of doing so if they were onsite.

**TRYING IT OUT**

Despite the obvious disadvantages I saw with not being at the same location as the speaker, once I had a clearer picture of how RSI worked after visiting the RSI provider, I had to try it firsthand. The first conference I worked where RSI was used was a two-day seminar on tourism. The venue was situated in southern Spain, in Andalusia, but the interpreters were in sitting a room in Madrid. There was a technical staff person at the conference venue and another one at our end in charge of controlling the sound and camera systems. At that point, I couldn't help feeling a certain sense of powerlessness and anxiety about the technical aspects involved. What if the sound goes out unexpectedly, the camera stops working, or the speaker's microphone fails? Of course, technical failures can also occur onsite, but in an RSI situation it might take several minutes for the sound engineer on the interpreter's side to contact the sound engineer at the meeting venue to fix any issues. The big question is what happens with the interpreter's performance during that timeslot?

Interpreters often joke about feeling like robots, but there are times when clients actually believe we're machines somewhere in the backdrop. I once worked at a conference where the top executive of a multinational whom we had been interpreting for several days came into the booth and said, "So, you're human beings of flesh and bone!" And he wasn't kidding. Seeing the inner workings during that first RSI assignment somehow enhanced the feeling of being a cog in a large machine, but I kept trying not to be overwhelmed by this new technology and continued to explore the possibilities.

Being onsite at a conference venue gives us a greater feeling of control. We're not just someone who is supposed to turn a microphone on and off to interpret simultaneously. We feel we're part of the overall communication event taking place by facilitating interaction. In an RSI setting, however, our job may seem much more restricted to delivering messages mechanically.

Perhaps the work situation where the interpreter may miss human interaction the most is at a meeting where RSI is used by a small number of participants. In this kind of setting, when the interpreter is sitting next to the people who require whispered interpretation or when doing consecutive, it's possible to somehow "guide" speakers through the discussion so that they speak in an orderly fashion by taking turns without overlapping. The interpreter can set the pace based on his or her experience to ensure that communication flows...
smoothly and achieves the objective. By working remotely, the interpreter loses all control over the situation and is compelled to work under certain conditions that cannot be changed or fixed on the go. Also, since the interpreter is not onsite, attendees will be unaware of their presence and the focus and order the job requires. As such, the conversation can become noisy and chaotic. Such noise and chaos may be even more predominant according to the cultural background of the audience and the languages being spoken. If interpreters are onsite, they can use their skills as cultural liaisons to help bring order to the flow of conversation to make sure each party is heard. The interpreter is unlikely to perform this function when RSI is used.

So, how did my initial experience with RSI turn out? Overall, the output was good because the interpreters could leverage their experience to do the job and offset the technical challenges. But how would a junior interpreter who has not yet built up enough resources cope with so many unexpected factors?

At the beginning of this article I said I wanted to approach RSI with an open mind. I guess that being used to working in a completely different environment for so many years somehow impaired my open-mindedness at first, but I truly made an effort to see the upside of it. And RSI does have an upside.

I don’t think all innovations necessarily improve our quality of life, but once they become real, they force us to make a decision: whether to adapt or not.

WHY RSI CAN BE A GOOD THING?
The 2008 financial crisis affected the world economy at large, and interpreters were no exception. We saw the number of assignments drop markedly, with international conferences that usually lasted five days being cut to two days or even just one day. In the private sector, multinational companies holding internal events with employees from around the world began to force everyone to speak “English” by default to save on the cost of interpreters. Interpreters were then hired only when deemed absolutely necessary or when the difficulties people had communicating in English became too evident. The financial crisis also shrank companies’ budgets for travel expenses, pushing the market to provide new solutions.

Like any other product or service, RSI arose to meet a specific demand: allowing communication in different languages at a lower cost. The economics of this solution are pretty evident, RSI being nearly half the price of traditional interpreting. The price difference doesn’t lie in the interpreters’ fees—which are the same regardless of the work setting—but in the cost of hiring the technical equipment. Needless to say that developing and deploying RSI technology requires a significant investment, but once amortized, it enables vendors to offer highly competitive prices.

Another argument in favor of RSI is that it can help avoid consecutive interpreting, which is often viewed as a time-consuming technique that makes communication less dynamic. I agree that simultaneous interpreting is usually more agile and effective for small meetings where people don’t have the time or the patience to wait for the interpreter to deliver his or her speech, or when only a few people require interpreting services.

RSI can also help clients schedule last-minute meetings with people in different parts of the world, therefore increasing the number of potential assignments.

Webinars, in turn, have become a common learning tool that can also open new opportunities for RSI, allowing people to attend online webinars in real time or access them any time afterwards without the hassle of subtitles.

ADDITIONAL READING


Also, in a digital world there are many companies that want to be at the cutting edge. Recently, I worked at an RSI conference where a Spanish online bank was launching a new app for their clients. RSI was the best partner for the occasion, as it helped emphasize the sponsor’s image as a modern and top-notch company. Many other companies may follow suit and decide to hire RSI more often.

ACCEPTING INNOVATION WHILE TAKING AN ACTIVE PART IN GUIDING CHANGE

RSI is clearly a response to new market demands where people seek quick, agile, and cost-effective solutions. However, interpreting has to do with “human communication.” Can human communication be quick, agile, and cost-effective all the time? If so, it might become an automated process, just like many others, for the sake of cutting costs. If human communication is subjected to economic considerations only, then the raison d’être of our profession could really be at stake.

RSI is here to stay like so many other innovations flooding our everyday lives. I don’t think all innovations necessarily improve our quality of life, but once they become real they force us to make a decision: whether to adapt or not. Interpreters won’t have a choice and will have to get onboard with RSI if they want to remain active in the market. Junior interpreters will perhaps get used to it must faster or be born RSI natives already. Those of us who have been interpreters for many years, however, will have to rewire our brains to accept this new way of working.

However, we don’t need to just accept it without any criticism. Our extensive experience in the field should serve to improve the channels of RSI so that the essence of our job remains unaltered and effective communication prevails. We can make a positive contribution to raise client awareness about the interpreter’s mission at each assignment. Here are some actions that we could take:

- Provide RSI vendors with our feedback regarding the technical set-up.
- Clearly explain the differences between RSI and conventional onsite interpreting so that end clients know what to expect.
- Prepare a checklist for the client to complete before the event to gather information, including: subject matter, target audience, goal of the conference or meeting, register (formal/informal), what visual aids will be used, specific terminology or ideas that need to be emphasized, and the location of remote attendees.
- Draft a quick guide for speakers in an RSI setting. It should be kept short and concise so clients can read it quickly before their presentations.
- Ensure that interpreters receive the agenda and any PowerPoint presentations in advance so they can rely on some supporting documentation on their laptops or tablets. Having supporting materials is a great asset in case the screens in the booth don’t display the speakers’ presentations.

This technology is relatively new and still needs a lot of enhancement. The good news is that we, as interpreters, can be involved in the process of the development of this technology. In the end, we can still pave the way for future generations of interpreters to keep faithful to the spirit of our profession—helping people communicate effectively regardless of the channel used.

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Four Truths about Court Interpreting

Both my interpreting students and beginning court interpreter colleagues pursing certification ask me regularly what it’s really like to be a working court interpreter. In this column I will answer this question (partially, of course) with four cold, hard truths that you might not have learned in college or during your training.

1. **You will be scared and/or intimidated at times.**
   It’s fine. Tennis great John McEnroe is not known for his deep insight, but rather for his tantrums on the court (tennis court, not justice court!). However, he did once say something along the lines that if you don’t have butterflies in your stomach before a match (or in our case, a court hearing) you simply don’t care enough. I still have occasional butterflies, and the situation usually merits it. A lot is at stake in court, and the proceedings are somber and serious occasions with real consequences for people who are right next to you. It’s not for the faint of heart. Embrace the butterflies. Your work is important and relevant, and sometimes the weight of it will affect you. If you don’t feel any sort of nervous tension at all—ever—you may have become complacent.

2. **Sticking to a code of ethics can be a significant challenge.**
   Codes of ethics are key, but they can also be confusing and too general, and they are open to interpretation. Being impartial is one of the key aspects of the codes of ethics for court interpreters in all states, but this can be harder than it seems. Its also about avoiding the appearance of partiality, which includes not talking to non-English speakers unless you’re interpreting. It takes three people for interpreting to take place, and you’re not to have side conversations with anyone. This is oftentimes difficult, as witnesses and defendants may want to have a friendly chat. Avoid it. If an attorney asks you to explain something to his or her client, say you’ll interpret anything they want, but you’ll never explain. (The lawyers do the explaining, while the interpreters do the interpreting.) When in doubt about the code of ethics, go for the strictest interpretation possible.

3. **It will be heartbreaking and difficult.**
   You’ll see grown men cry, teenagers get sentenced to 10 years in prison, and families get ripped apart. You’ll witness injustice, incompetent lawyers, petty disputes between the prosecution and the defense, needless motions, angry judges, overworked bailiffs, upset family members, and much, much more. The American justice system is very much imperfect. As a court interpreter, your job is not to change it or advocate for anyone, but to interpret. You do it if everyone is crying (but you don’t cry). You do it even if it’s hard or if something is happening with which you completely disagree. You soldier on and do your job. And, yes, you may be asked to interpret for child molesters, wife killers, and those who deal meth by the kilos. Be ready.

4. **Respect is earned.**
   As a new interpreter, you might find the pace impossible. I hate to tell you this, but no one will slow down for you. Attorneys, courtroom administrators, law clerks, and all other players in the courtroom are busy people and their dockets, desks, and calendars are full. The last thing they need is a struggling interpreter, and while that seems unfair for beginners, that’s the way it is. Be ready to perform at a high level after getting certified, and don’t rush into interpreting in open court until you really are ready. Being certified is great, but it’s the minimum requirement. All parties usually have high expectations of court interpreters, as they should. Earn their respect by going above and beyond. This includes arriving early and impeccably dressed in business attire, putting away your cell phone, being prepared for your case, knowing where to sit or stand, handing in your paperwork, being respectful to everyone, not taking sides or giving advice, and introducing yourself to attorneys you don’t know. Court interpreters are an integral part of the American judiciary and of everyday court proceedings, but oftentimes we hear interpreters complain that they don’t get the respect they deserve. The flip side of this coin is that attorneys oftentimes complain that interpreters are late and poorly dressed, which is unacceptable. Who’s right? I don’t know, but I have certainly witnessed plenty of tardiness and (yes, really) completely inappropriate apparel. When in doubt, wear a black suit.

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This column is not intended to constitute legal, financial, or other business advice. Each individual or company should make its own independent business decisions and consult its own legal, financial, or other advisors as appropriate. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of ATA or its Board of Directors. Ideas and questions should be directed to judy.jenner@entrepreneuriallinguist.com.
I’ve been testing and writing about interpreting technology since 2015. Until now, all the technologies I’ve reviewed have been software. This review, however, takes us into new territory. We’re going to take a look at one of the first wearable speech-to-speech translation devices available on the consumer electronics market—the Lingmo Translate One2One.

You may wonder why a professional interpreter would take the time to review a wearable translation device designed for use by travelers. The reason is simple. No one, to my knowledge, has given one of these new devices a thorough review to see what they can do. Do they live up to their claims? Will they actually help people communicate? Do they live up to all the hype about them in the media? And perhaps most importantly, will they put professional interpreters out of business? (That is the question lurking in the back of many an interpreter’s mind.)

I wanted to find out for myself. So, in June of last year, I plunked down $229 of my hard-earned cash and ordered a pair of Lingmo Translate One2One headsets. They were supposed to ship within a few weeks, but they didn’t arrive until late December.

This is the first wearable translator I’ve reviewed, but I hope to review a couple more in the coming months because I want to be able to say authoritatively, based on my own experience, what these devices can and can’t do and if they truly perform as promised. As they say, knowledge is power. Let’s get started!

**HOW DOES IT WORK?**

The Translate One2One concept goes like this: you wear an earpiece over one ear while participating in an interpreted dialog. When you want to say something, you tap the screen on the earpiece with your finger and speak normally. Once you finish speaking you tap the screen again and the IBM Watson artificial intelligence processes the speech, converts it to text, runs it through a machine translation algorithm, produces the translated text in the target language, and then uses speech synthesis to pronounce the translated text. The person who speaks the other language wears a similar earpiece and goes through the same steps when she or he wants to reply.

Currently, the One2One can translate between any combination of Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), English (U.S. and U.K.), French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese (Brazilian), and Spanish.

How do the earpieces accomplish this? Like every other speech-to-speech translator I’ve seen, the Lingmo device requires an internet connection either by Wi-Fi or mobile data networks. One of the things that attracted me to the Translate One2One earpiece is that it didn’t have to be tethered to a cell phone (like the Google Pixel Buds or the Waverly Labs Pilot) to work. To make that possible, Lingmo just included the mobile phone in the earpiece. So, in essence, the process is the same, but the presentation is different.

One of the earpieces is designed for use with mobile data technology in the Americas (1900 HMz) and the other for Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (2100 HMz). The catch is that you have to purchase a micro SIM card for use in the earpiece designed to work with the mobile data networks in the part of the world you’re in and pay for the mobile data used by the earpiece once connected to the data network. If you live in the Americas and travel to Asia, you’ll have to purchase a micro SIM card in Asia and insert it into the appropriate earpiece for data network access. So, you still have to pay for access to a mobile data network even though it doesn’t go through a mobile phone.

The earpieces also work with Wi-Fi, but Lingmo notes that this will slow their reaction time. Lingmo uses Bluetooth technology to connect the mobile or Wi-Fi-enabled earpiece to the second earpiece, which is not directly connected to the internet. The second earpiece sends all its data back to the first, which in turn sends it to the Lingmo IBM Watson servers for processing. Once processed, the data is sent back to the first earpiece and then relayed to the second through the Bluetooth connection. Wait times for translations were usually between four to six seconds—definitely not real time, but...
PRODUCT DESIGN, FIT, AND FINISH
The Translate One2One earpieces are designed to fit over your right ear, and are quite bulky by today’s minimalist earbud standards. Each earpiece has a square touchscreen (three centimeters square) and two mechanical buttons at the top (the on/off switch and the back button). Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the folks at Lingmo had repurposed a smartwatch form factor to create the earpieces. The watchband lugs (where the wristband usually attaches to the watch) are secured to a plastic frame that allows the earpiece to rest over the top of your right ear once it’s attached to a soft rubber headband that comes with the earpiece. That’s right, you are basically hanging a smartwatch over your ear.

All this gives the earpiece a thrown-together feel. The on/off and back buttons are so close to the plastic frame that they’re not easy to find and press without looking at the earpiece (especially for someone with big fingers), which is hard to do when it’s hanging on your ear. The one-size-fits-all headband is not very comfortable. It didn’t fit my head very well and didn’t keep the earpiece in the right place over my ear when I turned my head. It constantly felt like I needed to readjust it so it didn’t slip off the back of my head. Also, only being able to wear the earpiece over the right ear is problematic. What happens if you prefer your left ear or are deaf in your right? These observations aside, the earpiece generally stayed over my ear, and wearing the earpiece and headband was comfortable enough to wear for 10- to 15-minute stints. On the positive side, each earpiece comes with magnetic charging points that make it easy to connect the charging cable.

USER EXPERIENCE
User experience is the single most important factor of any piece of consumer technology, especially speech-to-speech translators. If the technology hopes to wow the end user, it has to work right out of the box, be extremely simple to use, and require almost no training to make it work. What’s more, the device needs to turn on quickly and require as few steps as possible to provide the service.

If the technology hopes to wow the end user, it has to work right out of the box, be extremely simple to use, and require almost no training to make it work. What’s more, the device needs to turn on quickly and require as few steps as possible to provide the service.

SOFTWARE PERFORMANCE
Let me start with the positives. The speech recognition in the languages I was able to check (English, German, Portuguese, and Spanish) was very good. It isn’t perfect, but I didn’t expect it to be. That said, it’s more than adequate for the application. The speech synthesis was also quite impressive in the languages I tested. It was clear and easy to understand. The U.S. English was a standard midwestern accent, the Spanish a strong Peninsular accent, and the Portuguese was notably Brazilian (even though the earpiece displays the Portuguese flag, which is something I’m sure any Portuguese user will note immediately).

The IBM Watson Language Translator was spotty at best. Although it did produce an accurate sentence from...
time to time, most of the translations were off, many terribly so. The software has no ability to recognize and process intonation for meaning. As a result, most questions are translated as declarative sentences. This is problematic because the most likely use case will be to ask questions to solicit information. Polysemic words are frequently mistranslated. In addition, the four-second time limitation allows for almost zero context, so the entire setup just isn’t very practical. Lingmo claims that Translate One2One is 85% accurate, but what does that even mean? Does that mean that 85% of each sentence is accurate and 15% is totally wrong, or that the translations are completely accurate 85% of the time? I went through the Lingmo website and the instruction manual, but found no basis for that statistic. It’s unclear whether the 85% accuracy rate is based on BLEU (Bilingual Evaluation Understudy) scores or some other company-specific metric.

SUMMING IT ALL UP

This is not the review I wanted to write. I spent several weeks testing and working with the One2One earpieces to learn to use them and creating test dialogs to see if they would deliver as promised. Dialogs included conversations with doctors and taxi drivers, hotel check-ins, and being pulled over by police for speeding. The One2One earpieces struggled with every scenario. Not necessarily because of translation problems, but often because of technical problems like the Bluetooth connection failing between the headsets or the app crashing. Even so, the IBM Watson machine translation was still comically poor when all other technical processes worked appropriately. You can watch the Translate One2One earpieces in action and see for yourself how they performed.

The target market for the One2One is the world traveler who needs to communicate as she or he goes from one country to the next. That’s the right target market for this kind of consumer electronics. Unfortunately, Lingmo severely underdelivers for its own target market mainly because of product design flaws and frustrating user experience, not necessarily because of the machine translation software.

What’s the bottom line for professional interpreters working in legal, medical, and conference settings? Don’t expect this technology to take away your job anytime soon. If anything, the proliferation of these translation devices reflects a huge demand for interpreting services—a demand that we, as a profession, still haven’t figured out how to meet adequately.

Remember, if you have any ideas and/or suggestions regarding helpful resources or tools you would like to see featured, please e-mail Jost Zetzsche at jzetzsche@internationalwriters.com.

NOTES

1 Check out the Lingmo Translate One2One website at http://bit.ly/TranslateOne2One.
2 I recently obtained a “Travis the Translator,” a handheld speech-to-speech translation device designed in the Netherlands, and am preparing a review of this device as well.
4 BLEU (Bilingual Evaluation Understudy) scores, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BLEU.

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The Care and Feeding of Graders

You can find a lot of information about ATA’s Certification Program on the website and in past articles of The ATA Chronicle, but not much about the people who make it work. In this month’s column we’ll take a look at the human side of certification grading.

WHO MANAGES ATA’S CERTIFICATION PROGRAM?
Caron Mason manages the program at ATA Headquarters. She answers your calls and emails, mails exam packets to sittings, sends completed exams to graders, and processes the results. David Stephenson is chair of ATA’s Certification Committee. He manages the approximately 130 graders working in the 30 language pairs and directions for which ATA currently offers certification exams, and reports directly to the Board of Directors. He is assisted by two deputy chairs: Larry Bogoslaw, who doubles as the grader trainer, and Michèle Hansen, who also serves as the secretary of the Certification Committee. They’re joined by the rest of the Certification Committee, composed of up to 12 experienced graders, which helps guide the program’s development and coordinate exam-related decisions.

WHO GRADES THE EXAM? ARE THEY ALL TEACHERS?
ATA certification graders are your colleagues. They’re all practicing translators with years of experience. Some teach, while others do not.

DO GRADERS RECEIVE ANY SPECIFIC TRAINING ON HOW TO MARK CERTIFICATION EXAMS?
Absolutely! Live training is offered twice every year, once in the spring and once in the fall at ATA’s Annual Conference. The grader trainer prepares full- and half-day sessions that keep graders’ skills sharp and consistent across the language groups. The Certification Program also uses an online platform where training materials are available to those who can’t make the live sessions, and where the various committees and language groups convene to discuss issues. Most language groups also schedule regular conference calls to make sure everyone is up to date.

SOUNDS LIKE FUN. CAN I APPLY TO BE A GRADER?
Yes, but you should know that turnover is low so new positions don’t open up frequently. You can contact Caron Mason at ATA Headquarters (caron@atanet.org), who will pass your request along to the appropriate language group. Graders must have passed the exam and are selected based on their exam score, background, professional reputation and experience, and demonstrated commitment to the profession. This last factor is taken into consideration because, even though practice tests and certification exams are remunerated, graders perform a significant amount of volunteer work for the program.

SO, GRADERS DON’T JUST GRADE?
In fact, the majority of the time graders spend on certification is not spent on grading exams! The process of passage selection alone is long and involves many steps. Every potential exam passage is vetted by the members of the language group and by its counterpart group (a group working in the same language pair but in the opposite direction—for example, Spanish>English and English>Spanish). Graders in a group translate all the sample passages individually and then discuss the challenges and difficulty level with each other. Passages are frequently discarded at this point and the process begins again. If the passage fulfills internal requirements, it’s sent to a separate taskforce for further review. Graders also work with their groups to come up with guidelines for every passage to ensure that everyone marks consistently.

Many graders also serve on a subcommittee. These groups work on a variety of activities related to certification, such as helping those interested in creating an exam for a new language pair or direction, developing candidate preparation materials for workshops, reviewing and approving the use of anonymized exam data by academic researchers, or collaborating with ATA’s Public Relations Committee.

Finally, graders also work together collaboratively under the grader trainer’s guidance to implement changes and updates to the tools they use, such as the Explanation of Error Categories, the Framework for Standardized Error Marking, and the Flowchart for Error Grading. Most recently, a major effort went into updating the Into-English Grading Standards in 2017. These materials and others are reviewed periodically to ensure that the process is fair and consistent and that standards are current. All of this work is done on a volunteer basis by graders.

So, while myths will always circulate about the certification exam, we hope that this information provides some insight into the hard-working people who make the program possible.

NOTES

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