

A European Translation Network from dream to reality

by Andrew Joscelyne

Imagine the scene. As a small translation company in Spain, you have just completed a product documentation contract for a Dutch client, who then asks you to translate the same material into Portuguese — not one of your core skills. In addition, your client needs a Spanish-Dutch interpreter to be available in Buenos Aires for a visit led by head office staff. You enjoy working with the client and would like to help, but you know that the time it would take to do the necessary research to satisfy their Portuguese and interpreting needs will be prohibitive for your resources. All you can suggest to your client is a perusal of the proverbial yellow pages — in two continents and as many languages. Not the most satisfying response. Secretly you wish that someone would put together a reliable, up-to-date on-line database of translation resources throughout the world, so that you and other professionals like you can get the information they need to serve the growing cross-border communication needs of their clients.

Enter ETNA, the European Translation Network Administration. What many people in the European translation field have often dreamed of, ETNA has decided to transform into reality — a dynamic database of translators and interpreters, their language pairs, specialty fields and technological platforms — which can be accessed via almost any telecommunications entry point (modem, videotex, French minitel) to offer rapid information to organizations, translation companies and individuals who need to get more translations done under ever-decreasing deadlines. As ETNA president *Anthony Malcolm Duff* says, the network idea is a limpid, simple concept; all it needed was for someone to actually find the money, roll up their sleeves and stitch the whole thing together.

In fact the copper-core wires of the telecoms systems have already been humming with multilingual translated messages for half a decade already: *Lee Chardoyne* would rightly claim that his US-based Wordnet

organization is the first such on-line translation service, with a world-wide list of users aimed first and foremost as offering language services to US industry, business and government. Nevertheless, ETNA is certainly a European first, and has also stretched the concept of on-line service to include a full range of interfaces and linkups for all sorts and conditions of user terminals.

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The network solution emerged from Malcolm Duff's twin experiences of teaching in an advanced technology atmosphere at the French National Institute for Applied Sciences at Mont

Saint Aignan in Normandy, and running a busy translation company. Finding that his company could not easily provide the kind of additional services his clients were starting to ask for, — having highly qualified translators on-hand for non-core language pairs or supplying a specialized interpreter who could be available in a distant site at a given time for a business meeting — he and his colleagues set about drawing up a list of specifications for an on-line information system that would achieve these ends. Four years later they have an up-and-running international translator information network, using state of the art telecoms tools to put demand in touch with supply 24 hours a day.

The ETNA idea is predicated on the realization that it is quicker and cheaper to let your fingers do the walking. If the act of translation is best performed by target-language native speakers operating in their native cultural milieu, then what the industry needs is a means of finding such folk, using computer keyboards to select the search criteria needed (by language combination, by field, by site etc.) from any terminal. Apart, therefore, from what is the world's largest online database of translators (compiled from existing lists of names and addresses), the heart of the ETNA concept consists of a network of subscriber members (companies and individuals) each of whom has a detailed profile about their competences.

In exchange for the annual subscription fee, each member will have access to a number of communication tools aimed at facilitating the circulation of work. They will have an automatic telex number, for example, as well as a messaging system, access to

a terminology base created and validated by members, and eventually a file transfer system allowing translation companies to exchange work directly with their constellation of translators throughout the world. In other words, ETNA has been designed to put people who needed to get information translated in contact with the best service for doing so the world (or at least Europe) over.

Once the system requirements had been specified, the software written, and all the national telecommunications operator protocols teased out from their technical shells and made compatible with each other, ETNA started to contact the people who really mattered — translation suppliers. Out of 10,000 questionnaires sent out in 1987 to freelancers and companies in 18 European countries requesting reactions to the concept, ETNA received a standard 2.5% useful replies, plus the usual ragbag of hate n' weirdo mail from those who were either jealous of someone else having invested in the idea or, for ideological reasons, believed that the need for translation could be eliminated by using a single universal language. From the replies, a hard core of initial members was put together and by October 1989 the network was operational. Twelve months later, the network boats around 100 members in 11 European countries and a handful in North and South America.

It won't have escaped translation specialists that a key problem for this new community of professionals is what the manufacturing industry called qualification — how do you include in your subscribers only those translators who can systematically provide a quality service? ETNA have decided to overcome the difficulty by instituting a system of qualification via national and regional agencies. A company nominated as national agency for a given country will vet potential local subscribers, and as the network expands, quality control can be taken over by regional agencies. In France, where for obvious reasons the subscriber base is the largest, the network has regional

agencies in Paris, Bordeaux, Lyons and Nantes. Companies wishing to become national agencies in Germany and Greece have already been contacted.

Another bone of contention would arise from allowing translation users — companies seeking translation suppliers — to pay up as members, since they might well have poached business away from local subscribers. ETNA therefore only allows either professional translator suppliers, or purely information organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, World Trade Centers, regional enterprise support councils and the like to have access to the network, since their job is precisely to recommend service suppliers such as translators and interpreters to local business. As Malcolm Duff points out, ETNA's market position is aimed at taking the worry about quality, availability, compatibility between word-processing formats and other interoperability conditions from off demand-side shoulders. By eliminating the need to contact doubtful local intermediaries or the uncertainties of inspecting a list of 'translators' in a phone book, ETNA can claim to better serve the cause of professional translators as well as their users.

An extension of this major concern for putting the right information about translation into the right hands is currently underway at the European Commission. The DG XXIII in Brussels has encouraged the setting up of a number of info-centres throughout Europe with the aim of providing small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) with crucial information about services for helping them beef up their competitive edge in the single market ahead. The ETNA system has been declared technologically compatible with the info-centre infrastructure, and Malcolm Duff hopes that ETNA will in due course become the official translation supplier database for the European community as a whole.

Helping SME communication needs, moreover, is one of the main objectives of ETNA. Large multina-

tionals with high-volume translation requirements have usually already contracted with local translation suppliers, whereas the SME with a good product and a poor distribution network will be the first to suffer from competition in the single European market. By offering quality local services over the network, ETNA hope to improve the often poor quality of translation that often bedevils a smaller firm lacking time and resources to test translation suppliers and to make the necessary research in quality control.

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What of the future? While the basic architecture of ETNA seems sound enough, there are a number of functionalities which will no doubt have to gain a little top spin before they satisfy the wide range of quality features that any work in a language field requires. Take the case of script support. ETNA's tool box includes a utility that offers subscribers the chance to make specialist terminology lists available to others given certain conditions — a glossary should contain a minimum of 500 terms, be updated at least once a year and should not contain material available elsewhere. The system can then automatically reverse the language direction, as well as allow an interpreter to make a 5-page screen dump of a glossary to help at a given conference job. As yet, however, the system does not support non-Latin characters, putting Russian, Greek, Arabic and Chinese glossaries beyond its current capabilities.

Over and beyond the local technical constraints which might be experienced today, one of the great interests of an 'open' system such as ETNA is how it is poised to take advantage of much longer-term developments in the field of telecommunications, first in Europe and later, no doubt, in the rest of the world. For example, work is underway in the European Community to install a truly transborder telecoms infrastructure that will (hopefully) offer realistic pricing, competitive services and technical advances to business and government as a whole, and in particular, to service industries such as translation. One key feature of what has been called the new 'nervous system' of Europe is the development of integrated digital network services which will replace the current analog telephone systems that have determined our communicative lives for the past century. The effect of across-the-board digital communications will be to both speed up the rate exchanges and increase the range and complexity of

what can be exchanged — integral text and image, for example, will no doubt be arriving directly on the translator's terminal in future years, allowing

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translators in their homes to work directly on fully-formatted binary files before returning the whole document to the client.

Whatever the current difficulties of setting up a virtual community of translators over the rather fragile

spaghetti of today's phone lines, one advantage of ETNA is that it does seem geared to this kind of *évolutivité* in the telecoms sector, by virtue of its method of automating much of the leg-work formerly associated with finding and contacting translation suppliers, maintaining rapid updates on information about tariffs, terminology and qualification. In this way it lets developments in information technology release those who work in the translation from the burden of having to do their own information tracking, which as we all know, is an increasingly expensive pastime.

Translating dream into reality is no easier than any other type of translation, as the ETNA team would no doubt be the first to admit, and it will be interesting to see how the system fares.

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