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"Now is a great time to be a translator"

Report on the 40th annual conference of the American Translators Association

St. Louis, Missouri, November 3-6, 1999

Opening session

On Thursday morning the outgoing President Muriel Jérôme-O'Keefe opened the conference and reported the year's highlights. Ms Jérôme-O'Keefe proudly mentioned some of the measurable aspects of this year's ATA conference: the 1,250 attendees, the very full exhibit hall, and a healthy list of sponsors and advertisers. As Ms Jérôme-O'Keefe enthusiastically announced, "Now is a great time to be a translator! There are over 7,000 members in the ATA and translation represents a seven billion dollar industry in the US. Our industry is HOT and translators are finally getting the recognition that the ATA has been fighting for." She went on to point out that, "E-commerce is T-commerce: 30% of the traffic and 10% of the orders on the Internet come from outside the US."

The Mayor of St. Louis, Clarence Harmon, carved time out of his busy schedule to attend the opening session and, in his address, declared, "I proclaim this week, Translators' and Interpreters' Week in the City of St. Louis"

One thing that you can always depend on at ATA conferences is an injection of a little local colour into the wrap-up of the opening session, which usually takes the form of some entertainment that reflects the heritage of the host city: Mariachis in San Diego, Native American dancers in Salt Lake City, etc. What would it be in St. Louis? A Show Boat-style dance ensemble of Mississippi gamblers and showgirls? Perhaps a genuine St. Louis Blues group, wailing

away? Or maybe even dray horses hauling a cartload of Budweiser down the central aisle? No. I think we were all slightly taken aback when the Chorus of the German Association of St. Louis, "reflecting the German heritage of the area", delivered a recital that wound up with a bilingual version of "When the Saints Go Marching In".

Presentation of candidates

Henry Fishbach spoke in favor of reducing the two-year term for president. "The long term prevents freelancers from aspiring to this leadership position, in an organisation where freelancers predominate", says Mr Fishbach, who would transfer much of the burden of leadership to ATA staff. Eighty percent of ATA's past presidents have had their own translation company, or were corporate employees. The proposed amendment did not pass, most likely due to the respected voice of Peter Krawutschke, who said "I'm really usually not a negative guy", but went on to caution that eleven months is not enough for leadership, suggesting a two year term preceded by one year of apprenticeship.

A crucial part of this session is the presentation of five-minute speeches by candidates for election to the board and to officer positions. Some highlights:

Tom West, ultimately voted in as President Elect, wants to continue to keep ATA on track with its strategic plan. Mr West had a very sobering experience at a recent US-Mexican Bar Association meeting staffed by simultaneous interpreters, where he watched



attorneys who had been cautioned about speaking into the microphone, slowing down, and avoiding buzz words known solely to other attorneys, blatantly disregard all such advice. One lawyer friend said to Mr West, "Frankly, translation and interpretation is not even on my radar screen". Aghast at such an attitude, Mr West proposes that T&I professionals must "show, not tell" who we are, and that the ATA must focus outward to the American Medical Association, Bar Association, Accounting associations. We must also decide accreditation issues such as specialised accreditation, for example "medical translator", and halt the "one-size-fits-all" approach. We should hire professionals from each field to contribute to our education in these professions. Mr West feels, furthermore, that we need to show that translators and interpreters, with our specialised knowledge coupled with language skills, are "ultimately superior to the client and therefore very valuable."

Marion Greenfield, who narrowly missed being elected but was appointed to fill out Courtney Searls-Ridge's vacated chair, believes that "ATA cannot zigzag every time there's a hot-button issue" and thinks the organisation should resist settling for a politically expedient quick-fix solution to issues.

Courtney Searls-Ridge ran unopposed for Secretary. She used her five minute address to sketch the varied constituency of ATA, each group with its own issues: translators and interpreters, company owners and managers in separate groups based on whether they have a background as translator or as monolingual business person, academicians with their own issues and concerns, in house t&i staff who deal with issues of outsourcing. Even the different languages represented have different issues in some cases, such as the Spanish and Portuguese translators who are quite concerned with testing abroad, and professionals in other languages for which ATA still has no test.

Eric MacMillan, "applying for a job" for the third time with ATA, was elected as Treasurer. Retiring as a translator, Mr MacMillan now accepts "only reasonable translation jobs with reasonable deadlines", which means he doesn't work that often! Mr MacMillan will be ATA's Washington DC liaison.

In addition to president, secretary and treasurer, three directors at large were elected. One was Scott Brennan, who wants to "put t&i on the professional map" and work toward refining the ATA credential. Mr Brennan believes that heated controversy is a positive sign. The second new director is Kirk Anderson, a French and Spanish translator, who "makes his living by the word". Mr Anderson thinks that "We are one of the most creative and thoughtful professions in existence, and should mount a major public relations campaign to get the word out." The third new director, Timothy Yuan, Portuguese

translator, referred to these unsettling times, saying that "Many of us are worried about the future." Mr Yuan supports the idea of professional help from experts in testing for our own accreditation program.

Although not elected this time, Tony Roder, as usual, had valuable comments. "ATA should set standards for translators who will soon become machine operators. ATA should be a resource for us all, and not a regulatory agency", says Mr Roder, a senior scientist-engineer and translator of vast experience. Six years as president of the Northern California Translators Association, Mr Roder set up the first working database of translators and the first job fair. With his pulse on the industry, he is a person to be listened to carefully on issues of the future shape of ATA.

Of course, five minutes, for all the candidates, is inadequate to properly address such important issues. At least one could peruse the candidates' views in the *ATA Chronicle* before voting. Perhaps the most inadequate scheduling point at this annual session is the five minutes allowed during this 1+-hour opening session for Q&A. Several hundred members have questions for a dozen or so on the dais, and there are five minutes allotted!

Conference presentations began Thursday afternoon with 14 parallel sessions.

ASTM project overview

The ASTM project overview was presented by Steve Lank, Alan Melby and Sue Ellen Wright.

For the last year and a half, ATA and many of its members have been involved in the process of developing voluntary consensus on translation quality standards for the United States, under the auspices of the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM).

This session covered the draft version of a Consumer-Focused Guide to Quality Language Translation. The purpose of this guide is to help translation consumers and providers work together to produce high-quality results. Alan Melby is confident that the initiative will produce "a dynamic, self-adjusting quality metric that works today and will work equally as well tomorrow." Based on a detailed specification of the job and the translation process itself, the only question that need be answered is, "Does the product meet the specification?" Melby hopes that the Standard will act as a 'third force' to encourage consumers to provide information crucial for delivering a quality product. A sneak preview of the ASTM project draft will be published in the next issue of *IJLD* for comment.

Technology-enabled translation

Scott Bennett continued the late afternoon sessions, discussing some myths about "automatic

translation" (a.k.a. MT). "More translators are needed than ever before with the use of MT", he said. "MT preserves formats and helps productivity of the translator. Even computer-assisted translation (CAT) is governed, however, by text types and is precluded in the fields of literature, marketing materials, and others, being appropriate only for unambiguous texts. It is also governed by the available dictionary coverage, and many language pairs are not available with sufficient quality for a translator to use. One must decide if the payback justifies the investment of time in building dictionaries. In the case of multiple clients with small pieces of work, CAT may not be suitable, as it needs volume and corporate support. It is definitely not "Plug and Play". Prices are going

"Gateway to the West", the arch which dominates St. Louis



down by a factor of ten, from \$50,000 to \$5,000. Mr Bennett's session was in large part devoted to Q&A with a large audience voicing a great deal of interest in the topic. Alan Melby qualifies Bennett as "one of the earliest level-headed MT persons on the planet."

Brian Briggs of Language Partners International offered a late afternoon session on "How TMX (Translation Memory Interchange) Standard is making translating tools better and more affordable". Approximately one-third to a half of the audience was using some CAT tool now.

Tools and technology

Friday's highlight was the Tools and Technology, Friend or Foe? session. This panel discussion, expertly chaired by Michael Cárdenas and preceded by short presentations from the panel members, Tony Roder, Katya Beall and Kurt Godden, elicited quite a few impassioned contributions by members of the audience. Tony Roder started off, saying, "The translation profession has become industrialised and translators are becoming machine operators". He observed that, "Translators resent having to use other translator's Translation Memories" and that, "Translators resent being told to use CAT if they want the work". He exhorted all freelancers, "In order to protect the future of the profession, translators must not accept work if it's based on a bad translation memory". Space does not allow us to print more of Mr Roder's presentation in this report. However, we hope to publish his paper in full in the next issue of the *International Journal for Language and Documentation*.

Katya Beall, a "Corel dissident", gave a presentation likening the various technological scenarios that might be encountered with corporate clients and translation bureaux to the different levels of sophistication that one might find on a Starbucks coffee menu: regular, espresso, cappuccino, etc.

Kurt Godden, from General Motors with a PhD in computational linguistics, completed the trio of presentations. "I like technology!", he declared. He went on to report on the current status of the General Motors CASL (Controlled Automotive Service Language) Project: For their first manual using this translation procedure, the authors wrote Service information in Controlled English to reduce ambiguity and complexity, during June to August 1999, using controlled English patterns such as maximum sentence length of 25 words, no personal pronouns, and 60 other rules which make up the CASL module. The resulting document was then Machine Translated into Canadian French. The MT output was then outsourced for postediting to produce the final deliverable. General Motors Senior Management have declared the CASL pilot a total success. GM's postediting guidelines are based on the principle of minimal postediting, requiring GM-

appropriate terminology, grammatical French and accurate content. Possibly the most controversial point for many translators is the fact that colloquial style is NOT required. GM has stated that the translation should not be 'over-engineered'. The ultimate goal, according to Godden, is "Translation in one week, for one cent (per word) at 1% (no more than one error per 100 sentences)".

Michael Cárdenas, spoke of the Multilingual Information Deployment Business (MIDB) in general and of a particular project of 26,313 words, of which he matched, at 100% matching with CAT, more than half (13, 217 words) for a 40% time saving. Mr Cárdenas definitely advocates CAT usage. Storing all Q&A about a project on a website for access by all translators is another practice which facilitates large projects.

On Saturday, the third day of the conference (if one discounts Wednesday's pre-conference workshops), a full-scale Uniscape presentation was entitled E-Commerce and Multilingual Websites: The New Challenges of Translation Automation. The presenter spoke at length on client education, suggesting 13 lessons to teach one's clients: 1. While showing the Coca Cola site in Japanese to clients to help them feel a monolingual's discomfort when confronting English-only sites, one offers the first advice: breathe deeply and consider the costs, about 10 - 50 cents per word. Lesson 2 is that there are 147 million users of the Internet and over 51% are non-English speaking at present. In 2004 this figure will be 70% (currently, 24.2% of Spanish speaking families, 22% of Japanese families, 13% of German families and 15% Latino families in US are on line). Lesson 3 is that the earth is round and the US is not its centre! Lesson 4 reminds the client of the powers above-get management to buy in. Lesson 5 is to remember what is below you. Lesson 6, Become a missionary. Lesson 7, Believe in evolution; companies are non-static, changes must be tracked. Subsequent lessons have to do with client participation, balance, limiting use of images; don't expect MT to replace HT; technology eliminates tedium; the joys of recycling. The corporate flag was then fully unfurled as the virtues of Uniscape as a job exchange format were extolled. Customers and vendors would use this portal, taking advantage of the project management software tools offered, storage of previous translations, databases, etc., in a confidential environment. Scores of stimulating questions and answers followed.

On the second day of the conference, Friday, the annual meeting of all ATA members and attendees took place. This plenary session includes the usual reports on the past year and, sometimes, special reports such as this year's summary of the international accreditation forum. We listened to a report on the forum on ATA International



Chorus of the
St. Louis German
Association

Accreditation Examinations, where 34 people spoke their opinions. Those opposed felt that the organisation should defend and protect the interests of US translators first and foremost, and that such certification could ultimately undercut rates of US translators. ATA, they felt, is not for non-residents, as the very name of the organisation implies. No other organisation offers accreditation outside its frontiers. There was some concern for quality in other countries. Some felt that certification exams abroad were simply unnecessary and should be avoided. In favour of international accreditation were those who held that denying it would be discriminatory and unfair, casting a heavy burden of travel time and costs on those not residing in the US. Protectionism, they hold, is a step backwards. At any rate, those who do pass will be few in number and will have no great impact on the translation business in the US, some thought. Indeed, it was felt that the passers would soon raise their rates to a level equivalent to US translators, based on the ATA credential. The final point of the report was that there is a need to examine the opinion of all the members of the ATA to determine the organisation's position on this matter.

Attendees can step up to the mike and comment to the hundreds of ATA members present and the new board at this annual meeting. Comments from the members included the usual complaints about tardiness of reporting test status to those who have taken the accreditation exam, cases of people falsely claiming accreditation, etc.

Although listening attentively, many on the dais and in the audience were anxiously awaiting the results of the election held the previous morning, for Directors and Officers of ATA.

After announcing the results of the balloting of the previous day, Ms Jérôme-O'Keefe closed with an admonition to fellow Board Members as she ends her term as President: "Don't forget to laugh, it's not that bad!" We hope it's not that bad, the hurricane forecast, that is, for Orlando, Florida, in September 2000 at the next ATA annual conference. ■