

Profile of a multilingual documentation specialist

Sam Dassoon interviews Professor Sue Ellen Wright

Written by:

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Sue Ellen Wright is one of the world's foremost experts on terminology management. At present she is an associate professor in the Institute for Applied Linguistics at Kent State University in Ohio, USA. She currently specialises in consulting activities involving the establishment of in-house terminology database management systems. She has long been active in the terminology committee (EO2) of the American Society for the Testing of Materials (ASTM) and is head of the US delegation to the TC37 committee – terminology (principles and coordination) – of the International Standards Organisation. Her husband, Leland ('Lee') D. Wright, is a prominent member of the American Translators Association, and a former editor of the ATA Chronicle.

Sue Ellen Wright started her languages career as a straightforward German scholar in the traditional mould. She acquired a PhD in German language and literature from Washington University in St Louis, and did her main research into Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, who is today best known as the author of *Der Rosenkavalier*. She took on some part-time teaching work at local universities, but at that time she just did not see a long-term future in teaching for academia. This was the period (early 1970s) when the Vietnam war was winding down, and all American universities were looking for 'relevance'. And 'relevance' in those days did not seem to include languages.

Her husband Lee (they had been married out of college) took a job with an engineering firm, as the all-round language expert and translator, coping with various languages, among them Spanish, French and Italian. When the language was German, Lee brought the work home for Sue Ellen to do, and it was then she discovered an aptitude for technical work.

This probably derived from her relationship with her father. He was actually a chemist by profession, but he was also heavily involved in mechanical and electrical engineering. He would wire houses, for example. From an early age Sue Ellen was his assistant, and this gave her a taste for handling materials and seeing how mechanisms work.

So both Lee and Sue Ellen were now translators, and both became active in the American Translators Association (ATA).

The next step resulted indirectly from a part-time teaching job, as an adjunct, which Sue Ellen obtained at Cleveland State University. If you were an adjunct, your post depended on maintaining class numbers. In order to safeguard her position Sue Ellen embarked on a major marketing effort, writing to all local firms asking if they had any employees who might benefit from instruction in language and translation. One company responded more energetically than she had expected. This was a company called LuK, which represented the major German firm of Bühl, Baden Baden. The company's representatives actually showed up on the Wrights' doorstep, asking for assistance with German translation. So Sue Ellen started working for them on a freelance basis. Then came the time when they wanted her to work full-time, which she did for five years. Even after she left the full-time employment she continued to do a lot of work for them again as a freelance.

By this time Sue Ellen had become involved in teaching at Kent State, where a programme in applied languages had been established. Now Kent State University had a long-standing relationship with the University of Leipzig in East Germany, part of which involved an ongoing exchange of professors. One year the choice fell on Gregory M. Shreeve, professor of computer science, partly because he spoke German. Gregory Shreeve, though his qualifications were in computer science, was essentially a linguist, and had made a study of anthropological linguistics. While he was at Leipzig he became a close friend of one of the world's leading figures in translation studies, Professor Albrecht Neubert. This was to have repercussions when the president of Kent State University visited Leipzig as part of the inter-university relationship. He was shown the applied linguistics programme and decided to launch a similar one at Kent State. So when Gregory Shreeve returned to Ohio, such a programme was launched, though to begin with on a small scale. Gregory Shreeve then recruited Sue Ellen and Lee Wright to come to the university to do some teaching on the programme. Eventually the programme was to grow and today Kent State University is known as one of the USA's leading trainers of translators.

The Wrights were early into the computer management of terminology. When Lee was still working for his engineering company, he came home one day and said that the building was full of

boxes, labelled with this strange four-letter word: WANG. So computers were installed. Although Lee was still expected to dictate his translations, he took an immediate interest in the new machines, and was able to persuade the secretaries in the word processing pool to let him come and use their equipment. He found the computer a particularly useful tool for recording and handling the terminology records he had assiduously been building up.

Before long the Wrights were writing about computer handling of terminology in the ATA Chronicle and giving papers on the subject at ATA conferences. This brought Lee, through Lyn Tyler, a friend of Professor Alan Melby of Brigham Young University, an invitation to speak at a conference in Utah. Alan Melby was of course another pioneer of the application of the computer to language and linguistics. The coming together of the computational side and the practical translation side, together with character set expertise brought in by Mark Fredriksen, proved an exciting experience for all concerned. It was to result in Mercury, the first practical terminology handling tool to hit the market. Because of trade name protection, Mercury could not be used in Canada or Europe, and therefore the product was marketed in those regions under the name of Termex. Later the name MTX was introduced to try to find a worldwide name, though the Termex name was too well-established to be discarded altogether.

Mercury/Termex was a true breakthrough, and can be regarded as the forerunner of the many systems now on the market. Unfortunately the team which originally developed it did not have the capital resources to continue development. Like many pioneers they were too early for the market, but the launch of their product paradoxically helped to create the market that developed subsequently.

Meanwhile Sue Ellen Wright had been researching what other initiatives were going on in the world of terminology, and had linked up with the European Commission term bank (Eurodicautom) and with the international terminology organisation Infoterm in Vienna. It was Infoterm who introduced her to the American Society for the Testing of Materials (ASTM) and to the terminology committee of the International Standards Organisation.

She has been an apostle preaching the idea of consistent terminology, both to translators, who use terminology every day, and to industrial enterprises, for whom accurate and consistent communication is now a must. There is no substitute for terminology management. Without terminology management, she points out, translation memory may be just recycling the same old garbage.

Having already been involved in standards, Sue

Ellen Wright became interested in the whole question of interchange formats. A group consisting of Alan Melby, Sue Ellen Wright, Gregory Shreeve and Richard Strehlow became part of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), a huge project covering the field of corpus management. Funding came from various sources, including the European Commission. This meant they were involved in the development stage of SGML, although at the time everything had to be hand-coded.

The thinking behind the TEI led to the development by the group of an exchange format for terminology. This was not without its problems. Many people were jealous of the terminology they had carefully built up, and were at first reluctant to share. And there was certainly opposition to being compelled to use the same format. It is also important to recognise that everybody's needs differ considerably. There is a broad user profile. But it is still highly useful and desirable to be able to leverage the information which is in different systems. For example, there can be advantages in leveraging terminology from translation memory systems for use in a machine translation system. Then there is the question of cross-platform work.

The exchange format which the group developed was originally called TIF (Terminology Interchange Format). The group took it to the International Standards Organisation where it was developed into MARTIF (Machine Readable Terminology Interchange Format), and was formalised as ISO standard 12200.

Currently Sue Ellen Wright and her colleagues, together with a number of panels in different European countries, are involved in the SALT project for lexical terminology.

Another standard which has been produced is a new version of ISO 12620 Data Categories, this being a list of the data categories used by anyone doing terminology management. It is in the form of a metadata registry. This field is moving forward, so this registry is going to grow. The group is now trying to develop a system of high level meta-model that will allow more than one interchange format.

Meanwhile the teaching programme at Kent State University has also been developing. The programme concentrates on translation, and disregards interpreting since there is not a large industrial market for this in America. Because of the programme's involvement in language engineering issues, it was decided to fix on localisation as the core. The course is therefore very computer-intensive. The aim is to make the students adaptable. For example, although Trados Multiterm might be demonstrated, the aim is not to introduce a particular product, but to make the class familiar with one terminological management tool. Then when they go into employment they can,

if required, re-orient to another tool such as Star, or to an in-company customised system. Students carry out case studies rather than write theoretical theses. The students who come out of the programme are very market oriented. There is constant interaction with graduate students who have entered the world of work, to ask them "what they wish we had taught them".

Once again Sue Ellen Wright and her colleagues have tried to take a development and make it universal. The Localisation Industry Standards Association has backed the idea of teaching localisation in universities with its LEIT initiative, which is led by Alan Melby and Sue Ellen Wright. In the USA there is a long standing tradition of close cooperation between industry and technical departments in universities. But unfortunately this is not yet happening in the language industry. The industry, Sue Ellen Wright believes, should realise that the universities must be supported if the next generation of localisers is to become available. The LEIT programme is worldwide, and one country which is responsive to the need to train localisers is Ireland.