



Where have we come from? Where are we going?

by Geoffrey Kingscott

In October 1983 I launched a magazine called *Language Monthly*, which ran for 53 issues from 1983 to 1989. It was, I like to think, a new departure in the world of translation, since, although there were earnest newsletters put out by translator associations, and some excellent learned journals, no-one had tried to produce an independent, commercial, news magazine for this sector before.

But I will admit that *Language Monthly* made comparatively little impact. It was not until the publishers John Benjamins BV came along, and *Language Monthly* was subsumed into their new publication, *Language International*, that the world of translation and multilingual communication started to sit up and take notice.

What changes have we seen during the 19 years of the two publications?

The biggest change, of course, has been the application of computer technology to the production of multilingual documentation. In the very first issue of *Language Monthly* the front cover featured a man, dressed in 18th century costume, sitting at a *word processor*. The message, of course, was that translators, accustomed to working in a very traditional way, were about to face a change in their working practices.

You will note that the term used above was *word processor*. In 1983 the personal

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computer had not yet burst on to the scene. How many readers of *Language International* today, I wonder, remember those behemoth machines, and names like Wang, CPT, IBM Displaywriter, all long since gone to the Computer Graveyard.

When future historians of translation want to research what happened in the early years of the application of technology in our field, their first point of call must be the back numbers of *Language International*. And *Language International* has made a significant contribution to the widespread take-up of that technology. It was, for example, in the pages of *Language International* that the first tentative experiments in translation memory, followed quickly by commercial systems, were re-

ported. And when the International Association for Machine Translation, with its three regional associations (North America, Europe, Asia), was created, *Lan-*

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guage International was there, and has continued to cover its activities.

Then there has been the university teaching of translation. Before *Language International* came on the scene, courses were few and far between, and many of those that did exist had a strong literary bias. Universities were, however, readers of *Language International* and began to take note of the changing requirements that were being heralded in its pages. The interest was so strong that *Language International* itself organised a series of highly successful conferences on university translation teaching. The first three were held at Elsinore in Denmark, the fourth in China, and the fifth in South Africa. Who will now take up this baton?

Another change that has taken place over the years, and which has been closely reflected in the pages of *Language International*, is the fragmentation of the language industries. Back in the 1980s there were organisations for language teaching, academic bodies for linguistics,

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and translator associations, and nothing much else. During what we might well call the *Language International* era, everything changed. What we used to perceive as a cohesive world is now splitting into many

discrete activities. And these activities are all developing a momentum of their own, with their own conferences and associations.

Think of the associations and conferences which have been created during the *Language International* era, for activities such as machine translation, translation studies, localisation, terminology, controlled language, speech processing, subtitling and dubbing, automotive documentation. Some of these associations, such as the Localisation Industry Standards Association (LISA) or the European Association for Terminology have become colossi of our language world, with more influence than traditional translator associations. At the same time technical writing associations such as TEKOM in Germany and the international Society for Technical Communication are more and more involved with multilingual documentation.

Finally we need to realise, particularly the older ones among us, that we are the last text-oriented generation. The future lies

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with multimedia. And that opens up a whole Pandora's box of possibilities.

And this is the problem for *Language International*. It is no longer possible to cover in one magazine such a fast expanding range of different activities. The fact of the matter is that the whole world of transfer of messages between languages and between cultures is exploding all over the sky. Given the combination of the information revolution on the one hand and the emergence of the global economy on the other, this explosion was bound to happen in some way or another. But, I think we can boast, it fell to *Language International* to light the fuse.

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