

## Targets in Translator Training

I. J. Citroen

Volume 11, Number 4, décembre 1966

La formation du traducteur

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002246ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/002246ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Citroen, I. J. (1966). Targets in Translator Training. *Meta*, 11(4), 139–144.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/002246ar>

# TARGETS IN ●●●●● TRANSLATOR TRAINING



## PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE

Many persons concerned with translation in one form or another will have noticed a growing interest among the younger generation for the translating profession, and a desire to be educated in this field. Vocational counsellors are frequently asked these days how one can become a translator, and the same question is put to officers of national societies of translators all over the world, or may be read in the question-columns of popular journals.

Whereas translators and interpreters were virtually unknown until a few years ago, the spotlights of publicity have been focused on them repeatedly in recent years, thanks to their outstanding work in organizations such as the United Nations and in international relations in general. It is becoming recognized that translating is an interesting and rewarding intellectual occupation, and that it may offer the possibility of a satisfactory career.

What can we answer the eager youngsters when they ask us about the possibilities of translating and interpreting as an occupation? In general the reply is rather disappointing. Although there exists a real need for well-trained competent translators and interpreters almost everywhere, the training facilities at a satisfactory level (that is, at university level) are very few and the qualified schools that do exist in a small number of countries have only a limited capacity. Besides, it takes real inborn aptitude to become a good translator, and many enrolled in translator schools cannot make the grade after a few years of study, thus still further limiting the useful output of the schools and blocking the way for others. This, in general, makes it difficult to get educated as a translator.

## EXPEDIENCE

### ●●● OF FORMAL TRAINING

Furthermore, there appears to be much uncertainty among practising translators as to the character that training for the profession should have, and

even whether a formal training for translators is really desirable. After all, the majority of the translators active at present have never had a direct schooling for the trade they ply, nor have they ever felt a need for it. Some have been educated as linguists, others are persons who have learned languages abroad, many are gifted people who managed to master the required skills in their own ways.

Possibly there is an unconscious fear at the back of the minds of some translators of an older vintage that they might eventually be overshadowed by the bright young people entering the profession from the university, and for this reason they may be opposed to formal training. However, if we give the matter some thought, there seems little difficulty in choosing between, on the one hand, a training at a qualified school where student translators and interpreters are enabled to acquire, in a few years' time, the exact basic information they need for the satisfactory pursuit of their chosen profession, and on the other hand, the many years of largely unguided study required by their elders to reach a satisfactory standard of competence with no way to check whether such a standard has actually been achieved!

There is, however, another consideration, and a very down-to-earth one at that, which may play an important part in our judgement of the advisability of sending young people to appropriate translation schools. What I am referring to is remuneration. The intellectual capacity required of a student to go through a school of the type mentioned, and to become a competent translator is no less than that needed for any other university study. Why should a gifted young person take the trouble to plod through a course of study of some four to five years, after leaving school, to become a translator, if with almost the same effort he could graduate as a lawyer, a doctor or an engineer at much higher pay? Many people who would, in fact, have preferred a career in translation have chosen this alternative in the past while the rates of pay for translators were low, and perhaps deservedly low in view of the often insufficient quality of the work delivered by incompetent persons claiming to be translators. A real vicious circle.

Now the scene in the world of translation is beginning to change. Better realization by translators of the requirements their work should satisfy, and more understanding by the people in need of translations, the « consumers », of what it takes to make a good translation, have much improved the climate. If we now examine the salary scales of permanently employed translators, such as those published in the June 1966 issue of META, we can detect a material advance in the working conditions of the profession. Even so, the income of translators does not always compare favourably with that of other intellectual occupations. On the other hand, however, the work of a translator or an interpreter can give such profound satisfaction to a devoted worker that financial considerations are not the major factor. This also explains why there have always been, and will always be, translators of books who do their chosen work for nothing or for a mere pittance.

All the factors summed up here — the greater familiarity with the work of translators and interpreters, the improved financial conditions and the attrac-

tiveness to talented persons of an occupation based on languages — have helped to increase the willingness of young people to be trained for this profession, and the preparedness of universities to cater for the demands of these groups. Let us now consider how these activities have developed in the past and how their expansion might be channeled in the future.

#### TRAINING METHODS IN THE PAST ●●●

Admirable pioneer work has been done by the first schools for translators and interpreters founded in Europe, the best known of which, no doubt, is that at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. Situated as it is near the seat of the old League of Nations and numerous present-day international organizations, it had and has access to many experts in the field of international exchanges. Other schools followed its example in France and Germany and later in other countries as well. Tuition was mainly given by professors and tutors of the university itself. The set-up of the school naturally followed the pattern of the university faculties more or less, and was mainly based on the practices of classical philology. In view of the close proximity of international bodies it was to be expected that the school programs would prominently feature subjects such as Law, Economy, Politics, etc. Many excellent translators and interpreters have joined the ranks of their older colleagues thanks to the successful training they received at these schools.

Some of the principles underlying the school programs were the axiom that only translation into the mother tongue is possible, the assumption that a translator usually works alone and should be able to solve his own problems, the requirement that his vocabulary should be so extensive that all translation exams can be taken without the aid of dictionaries, and finally, the philosophy that translation in unknown fields can successfully be accomplished mainly with the aid of vocabularies to supply the required terminology, and on the strength of a wide general knowledge imparted to the students.

#### ●● TRENDS ● IN TRANSLATION

In general it may be said that society is developing along the lines of ever greater diversification and specialization. Science and technology are increasingly branching out and becoming more important elements in daily life, and specialists for each new branch are emerging. It is only natural that these developments should have their repercussions on translation as well. Whereas translators in the past, usually working alone, were able to cope with most of the subjects that came their way, many are finding it increasingly difficult to do so now. The numerous international exchanges in science and technology are exerting on the translating profession pressures to which it must necessarily respond.

Its responses may have a profound influence on some of the methods that have already become traditional in this young profession. One thing that will not change is the rule requiring a translator to have a good knowledge of the

source and target languages and of the subject matter. What is changing, however, is the relative stresses placed on each of these « three pillars of translation ». No doubt owing to translation's philological and literary origins, the main accent has always been placed on the linguistic proficiency of a translator, often requiring him to translate into the mother tongue only. In scientific and technological translation the stress has shifted to knowledge of the subject matter. Linguistic perfection will, of course, always remain a goal, but accuracy of rendering of scientific concepts is at least as important if not more so. Now it has become an asset for the translator of this type of texts to « speak the same language as the author », meaning that the translator should have a complete understanding of the subject and be able to discuss it intelligently. The result is that a very high degree of specialization is becoming desirable for science and technology translators, but at present there are relatively few persons who can sufficiently comply with these requirements<sup>1</sup>.

As the ideal conditions (the « three pillars ») a translator theoretically has to satisfy: a perfect knowledge of the source and target languages as well as of the subject matter, combined in one person, are encountered too rarely at present in science and technology translation, other methods of working have emerged. If these talents are not found in a single person, the responsibility for the correctness of a translation is split up among a number of individuals working in a team<sup>2</sup>, each possibly having an outstanding knowledge of at least two of the « pillars », and not necessarily working into their mother tongue. Such a team may be composed of a person with a good knowledge of the source language making a rough translation, a subject revisor and a language revisor for the target language, other sub-divisions of the work also being possible. Although this arrangement is frequently adopted when great quantities of translation work have to be done quickly, there should be no misunderstanding concerning the fact that a translator accomplished in the « three pillars » of his work should always be preferred if available. In view of the enormous diversification of human knowledge it would obviously not be possible for one translator to be thoroughly conversant with all existing subjects. Hence, specialization is becoming an absolute requisite for the translator.

It is, however, believed that in a future stage of the art, translators specialized in science and technology will hardly ever work alone, but will prefer to practise in teams together with other competent colleagues<sup>3</sup>. Today it already is a fact that in almost all the large translation units, such as those of the United Nations, UNESCO and the European Coal and Steel Community, translations are always revised by language or subject specialists no matter how competent the translator may be, resulting in superior work. Indeed, some of the best translations have been produced by co-operation between several persons.

1. I. J. Citroen, « Specialization in Technical and Scientific Translation », *Babel*, vol. 8, n° 2, 1962.
2. Eli Arlock, « Editing and Quality Control of Technical Translations in a Mass-Translation Project », *Ten Years of Translation*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1966, pp. 125-128.
3. I. J. Citroen, « Teamwork in Translation », *Babel*, vol. 11, n° 1, 1965.

There exists a widespread belief among non-specialized translators that all the problems a text may present can be solved by studying the terminology of the subject. This, however, only holds good for relatively uncomplicated texts. Subjects of greater difficulty require a different approach if a high degree of quality is to be aimed at and if unwarranted loss of time is to be avoided.

In this connection Long's opinion<sup>4</sup> on the risks run in technical translation is revealing:

[We have] learned to look for sources of danger and for traps that constantly lurk in the path of all who dare to put translations down on paper.

It is not possible to generalize when defining the type and amount of knowledge a translator should have, as this greatly depends on the kind of work he does. There are masses of translation work in commerce, travel, civic life, etc., that require only the very wide general knowledge a good translator should have. Translations of texts related to special fields should preferably be entrusted to persons specially equipped to do them, both from the point of view of quality and from that of adequate remuneration of the time devoted to the work. And here we come to the subject to which the previous paragraphs have been an introduction. How should students be trained to meet the new trends in translation?



#### TRAINING METHODS FOR THE FUTURE

Schools for translators, generally, try to impart some knowledge of as many subjects as possible to their students, with a bias towards civics and the humanities. Such a wide general knowledge is an asset to any translator and is usually well fitted to meet the exigencies of the average translator's practice. At present most schools cannot train specialized translators, but even if they were able to they would not do so, as they are quite unable to make a choice of a subject to study because there is no way to know where their students will eventually be employed.

The growing demand for specialized translators by science, industry and certain international organizations, however, cannot be disregarded and, hence, at least a part of the annual crop of translation students showing aptitude should be enabled to receive a specialized training. In future, it ought to be possible for some translation schools at university level to differentiate their programs, each school giving the type of course in harmony with its character. For instance, there would be schools for technical translators attached to a number of technological universities where students could avail themselves of suitable courses in engineering subjects, etc.

The question then arises as to how far specialization should go. It is thought that no detailed study of any particular subject should be envisaged, but that the

4. Donald F. Long, « Suggestions for Users of Translations », *Quality in Translation*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1963, pp. 389-394.

aim should be to impart to future translators a sound basic knowledge of a few broad fields not necessarily limited to science and technology alone, such as:

- a. Pure sciences and natural sciences
- b. Applied sciences (Medicine, Pharmacy, etc.)
- c. Technology
- d. Social science, law, economy

With the aid of this basic knowledge, translators can specialize in the narrower field their work demands once they are employed in a translation post. Specialization on the job can take anything from six months to two years, depending on the difficulty of the subject matter.

The next thing to be considered is how a student or a school could know which special subject to select for study or, to put it differently, where the newly trained translator could be put to work once he had mastered a special subject. It is at this point that I should like to mention a few departures from methods more or less taken for granted at present. The school of the future would maintain close relations with the « consumers » of translations, to get to know their needs and to be able to draw on them for information. Thus it would be possible to collect statistical data on the number of translators that could be placed in various fields in the course of the years. On the other hand one of the new tasks of the school would be to advise students in the choice of the special studies they should undertake, in the light of the possibilities of future employment and of the student's own talents, with as necessary adjuncts, career planning and possibly job mediation.

In view of the fact that the specialized translator will often work as a member of a group, with possible « division of labour » so as to cover a large diversity of languages and subject combinations, he will not necessarily translate into his mother tongue only. Exercise in translating into the foreign language studied should therefore be included in the curriculum. The specialized translator very frequently working in frontier regions of scientific or technical development leans very heavily on technical dictionaries, handbooks and journals for his terminology and understanding of the subject matter. It is his aptitude to extract the information needed from these sources, on the basis of his general theoretical knowledge, that marks him as a skilful translator. For this reason translation examinations for specialized translators where the use of dictionaries and other reference books is prohibited differ too much from practical working conditions to serve as a reliable yardstick for translating ability. Hence, use of reference books should be allowed at examinations.

Looking into the future is always a hazardous undertaking, but in this instance perhaps not too rash. The demand for specialized translators is a fact. Some of the newer schools of translators are actually introducing engineering into their programs. There seems no reason why this trend should not continue.

I. J. CITROEN  
*Hilversum, Hollande*