

TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY IN TRANSLATION

**The Profile of Beginning
Language Professionals
in the Digital Age**

1st Edition

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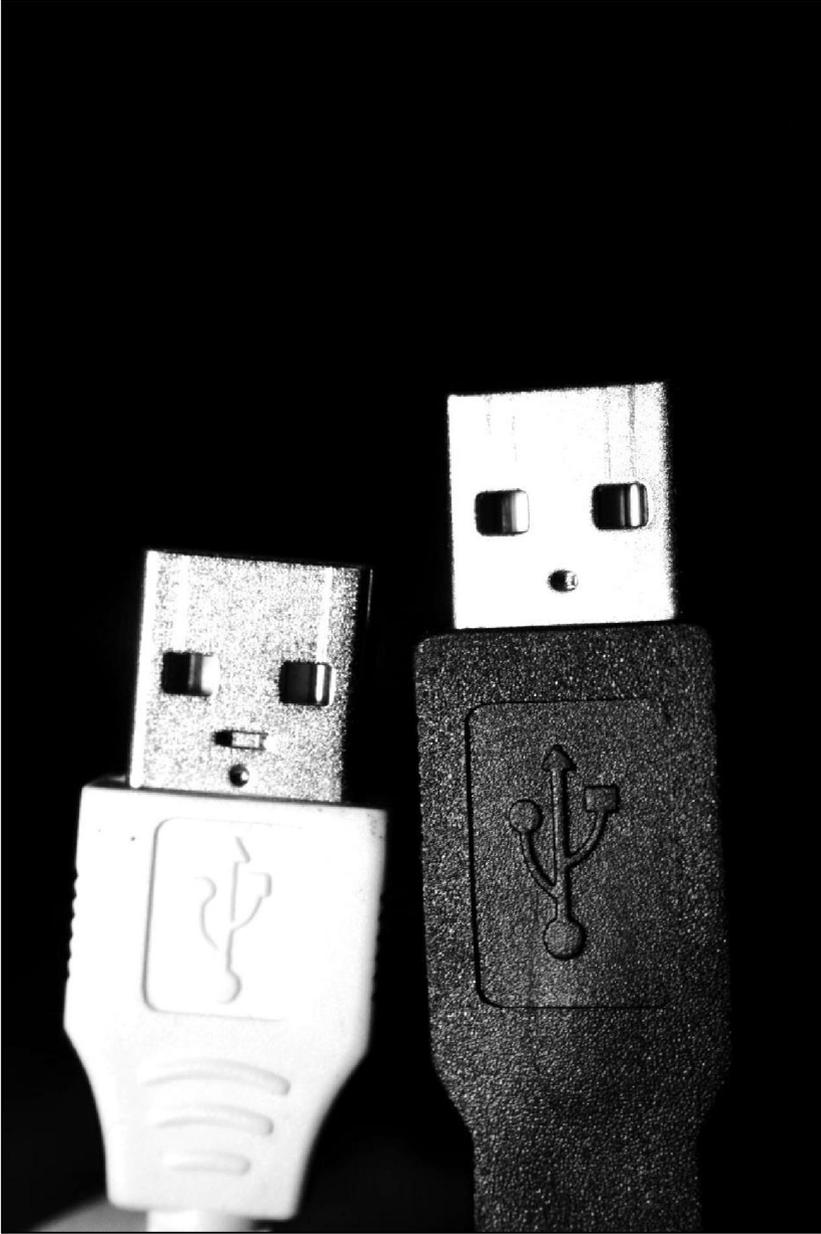
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF TECHNOLOGY IN TRANSLATION

Sumerian literature is reportedly the first subject of translations known to mankind¹. From the Middle Bronze Age through the Iron Age (27th to 6th centuries B.C.), literary works flourished in southern Mesopotamia, a region that today is the south of Iran, after Sumerians invented the first writing system. During the Akkadian Empire, and later the Babylonian Empire, these respective languages were imposed on the surrounding conquered states, but Sumerian continued to be used in literature and, consequently, translation into these two official languages was soon required. Much of what we know today as Babylonian literature is based on translations from earlier Sumerian works.

However, perhaps the most well-known translation dating back to ancient times was the Decree of King Ptolemy V, issued in 196 B.C. It was originally written in three languages: ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (top), Demotic script (middle), and ancient Greek (bottom) and recovered on a stone slab known as the Rosetta Stone².

Other known examples of old translations include Buddhist scriptures called Lotus Sutra³—translated from Sanskrit to ancient Chinese by Dharmarakṣa, aka Zhu Fahu, in 286 AD—and the Old and New Testaments of the Bible—from Hebrew and ancient Greek into Latin, known as Vulgate, by St. Jerome

¹ TORRE, Esteban. *Teoría de la Traducción Literaria*, Síntesis, 1994.

² SOLÉ, Robert & VALBELLE, Dominique. *The Rosetta Stone: The Story of the Decoding of Hieroglyphics*, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001 — Translation from the French by Steven Rendall.

³ ZÜRCHER, E. *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, Brill, 2005.

(Eusebius Hieronimus Sophronius)⁴ at the end of the 4th century. It should be noted that St. Jerome was translating from two of the languages he learned only later in life into Latin, which was not his mother tongue—he spoke Illyrian and learned Latin after moving to Rome as a young man. Nevertheless, he became the Patron Saint of Translators and, in his honor, the International Translation Day was instituted by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) in 1953 and is celebrated September 30 on the feast of St. Jerome.

Until the advent of the press in (1040s in China and 1370s in Korea⁵), translators had to write by hand and copies were reproduced manually. Mechanical systems evolved around the 15th century with the Gutenberg Press⁶, becoming increasingly smaller in size until typewriters, as we now know them, were invented in the mid-1800s⁷, allowing translators to be more mobile. Throughout most of the 20th century, when typewriters became more affordable and some electric models hit the market, translating became a more widespread activity.

On the other hand, translators in the past could only rely on the knowledge they had acquired during their lives and on the information they could look up in books and dictionaries. In order to solve a vocabulary issue, they would need to communicate with an expert in another town, state or country, first by regular mail, and later by telephone.

Then there was a major breakthrough in technology that changed the rules of the game. Commercial computers reached

⁴ WILLIAMS, Megan Hale. *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship*, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

⁵ _____. *Printing Press*, Wikipedia: <http://bit.ly/T3-WikiPress>

⁶ The Renaissance Secrets Team. *What Did Gutenberg Invent? — The Printing Process*, Open Learn, September 1st, 2005: <http://bit.ly/T3-GutenbergPress>

⁷ ACOCELLA, Joan. *The Typing Life: How Writers Used to Write*, The New Yorker, April 9th, 2007: <http://bit.ly/T3-TheTypingLife>

the office in the 1950s⁸ and translators, just like any other professional, had to learn an entire new set of skills to work more efficiently.

In the beginning, computers helped us to become more efficient because, besides the obvious improvement we had been enjoying from typing—which is a lot faster than writing by hand—we could also delete characters on the screen, as opposed to erasing them after they had already been printed on paper. Additionally, we could copy and paste contents within the same document and, later, among different files.

Soon systems were developed to help translators use databases that would aid them with terminology research. More interactive systems allowed translators to save their work in databases that would recall any previously-entered sentences in case repeated material arrived at their desks in the near future. And that was the beginning of Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tools.⁹

Yet another major breakthrough in technology changed the rules of the game one more time. The internet allowed people to connect themselves to an “information highway,” access the World Wide Web, and soon interact with other people. Besides typing faster and being able to look up terminology and back up their work, translators are now able to get in touch, in real time, with people a world apart that can help them solve their translation issues.

Likewise, the internet brought translators and clients together. We are no longer confined to a 9-to-5 job at a translation agency or the language bureau of a large corporation, or, as an alternative, working as a freelancer for local clients.

⁸ _____ . *How the Computer Changed the Office Forever*, BBC, July 31st, 2013:

<http://bit.ly/T3-OfficeComputers>

⁹ COCCI, Lucia. *CAT Tools for Beginners*, Translation Directory: <http://bit.ly/T3-CATBeginner>

Translators can now set up their own business, market their services, and work from home or anywhere with internet access.

Translators no longer receive hundreds of printed pages a year sent by regular mail or fax. It's all done by email, FTP servers or services that store files "in the cloud." Neither do we have to send resumes left and right looking for an opportunity of stable employment. We can apply for different projects individually and truly decide when we work, what we work on, and whom we work with. Or, better yet, we can now set up a virtual office and potential clients will be able find us online doing a simple web search.

For translators living abroad, in a country where their mother tongue isn't mainstream, the internet becomes an invaluable resource in keeping up to date with how their own language evolves. We can read books and news articles, listen to the radio, and even watch TV online to access the same information and be in contact with the same everyday expressions used in our country of origin.

The same is true for translators who do not live in a country where their source language is spoken and now, more than ever, we can have access to the same discourse that native speakers of our B language have at their disposal. This allows translators to keep up with how their second language evolves, what new expressions are being incorporated into everyday talk—mostly thanks to pop culture—and how technical terms are used by people working in the respective fields.

In a nutshell, being a translator in the age of technology means working anywhere, anytime, and with whomever we choose. It's not only about being language experts, but knowing our computers well enough to work with them in harmony. Being a translator is being a researcher, too, and knowing where to find more information about context and language use. It's being an entrepreneur and, literally, minding your own business.

Let's review how technology has helped translators become more efficient:

- ✓ **We have become faster because we can type our translations and edit them on the fly.**
- ✓ **We can back up our work, in case we're assigned similar jobs in the future, thus minimizing the need for repeated work.**
- ✓ **We can research terminology not only within preset databases, but with human-to-human interactions, and keep up with the evolution of our working languages.**
- ✓ **We can network in real time with clients and colleagues alike, regardless of where they are.**
- ✓ **We can set up a virtual office to advertise our services and be reachable by potential clients.**