The Way We Were

By Bernie Bierman

Some months ago, a patron of one of the numerous translator watering holes in cyberspace posed a very intriguing question: "What would translation and the translation industry, in terms of technology, look like 50 years from now?"

It was a question that I felt qualified to answer with a single word: different. For certain, I did not want to offer anything more, since crystal ball gazing and saying the sooth are both endeavors for which I am eminently unqualified. However, I did offer the questioning patron of that cyberspace watering hole a bit of a rear-mirror view of what translation and translators, and translation technology in the U.S., looked like some 50 years ago. Indeed, as I sit here in front of a computer screen and absolutely marvel at this truly amazing piece of technology, I cannot help but think of what translators had to work and live with 50 years ago and how far we have come, technologically-speaking, since those far more simple days. Clearly, the technological contrast between 2008 and 50 years ago is so striking that the reader of this narrative might come to the belief that I am describing not the 1950s, but the 1850s!

The All-powerful Typewriter

Imagine today translating a lengthy document in which you have used the word "widget" some 25 times over 15 pages, only to discover by the time you reached page 15 that the word is not "widget" but "gidget." With a little flick of a mouse and a couple of clicks, you change 25 "widgets" to "gidgets."

As the 1950s came to a close, the situation described above was nothing short of a very bad dream, for the central production tool of the translator was a typewriter, a most unforgiving tool, for if you made an error—even a minor typographical error—there were few alternatives to fixing it.

In fact, in 1958, the manual typewriter was still king of the office, although it was now starting to be replaced by the electric typewriter, which provided just a bit more efficiency and less wear and tear on the left arm, the limb assigned to operate the manual typewriter's carriage return at the end of every line. And for the translator with an eye toward "cutting-edge" technology (the term was still three decades away), there was the IBM Model D electric typewriter with its unique proportional spacing feature. This was a feature that provided newspaper-like formatting, but if you had to go back and make a correction, such as inserting two extra words, you were entering the gates of technological hell. To correct an error, the IBM Model D really provided the translator with just one option: retype the entire page!

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1 + 3

Yes, 50 years ago it still equaled 4, but it had another meaning for

the translator. It meant an original plus three copies…three copies made on thin paper called onionskin paper, with carbon paper providing the medium for making the typewritten impressions on the onionskin paper. That meant that in order to do "1 + 3," you inserted seven sheets of paper into the typewriter. One sheet of bond paper, three sheets of onionskin paper, and three sheets of carbon paper. And it was a not too seldom occasion when the translator was asked to provide an original plus six copies! If you made a mistake, you corrected the original with chalk and the six copies with a soft rubber eraser.

But suppose you were asked to provide 25 copies of your translation? Certainly, there was no typewriter that could handle some 50 sheets of paper. The technological response of 50 years ago was the stencil, a piece of dark blue wax-coated paper with all sorts of lines to help guide the typist. But before one could type a single word onto the stencil, it was necessary to remove the ribbon from the typewriter, so that the typing impression would result in white letters on the blue background of the stencil. Errors made on the stencil paper were corrected by applying a special liquid made especially for stencil work. A little dab here and a little dab there, and a wait of about five minutes, and you were ready to resume work. Upon completion of the stencil, you ran (or walked) with it to the nearest printing shop, and hoped (and perhaps even prayed) that your 25 copies would be run off before the client's stated deadline. Of course, if your translation assignment ran 30 pages, you were faced with hand-collating 25 copies of 30 pages, unless you were willing to have the print shop do the honors for an extra fee. (At that time, Kinko was a term to describe someone who had unusual sexual proclivities, and Federal Express was the name of an overnight train on the Pennsylvania Railroad that went between Boston and Washington).

In the film "The Bridge on the River Kwai," the commander of the British prisoners of war, Colonel Nicholson, firmly tells his Japanese captors that "British officers will not do manual labour." In the "Paleozoic" age of translation of some 50 years ago, there were many translators who steadfastly refused "to do manual labour," namely typing. Indeed, there was a fairly well-known translator team working in New England who fervently, if not dogmatically, believed that typing was not just below the dignity of a translator, but was outright unprofessional. For those translators who refused, in the spirit of Colonel Nicholson, "to do manual labour," there was a piece of equipment called the Dictaphone, a weighty piece of electrical machinery into which one spoke one's translation, with the words being recorded onto a cylinder. The completed cylinder was then dispatched to someone who did condescend "to do manual labour"—namely a typist. Those translators who opted for dictating their work (called in the parlance of the day, "dictators"), claimed that their method was not only more dignified and professional, but much faster and efficient than those who chose the "manual labour" of the typewriter.

But whether one chose the route of "manual labour" or some other more "dignified" method of production, there was no doubt about it that the world of the translator of 50 years ago was a world of paper, reams and reams of it: bond paper, tissue or onionskin paper, carbon paper, stencil paper, envelopes for sending the paper, filing cabinets for storing the paper, all punctuated by an inventory of essential office aids like typewriter ribbons, chalk and rubber erasers, paper clips, staple guns, etc., etc.

And if the methods by which translation was produced look like horse-and-buggy compared to what we have 50 years hence, the methods of communication appear in comparison to be something out of the age of the quill pen. In the late 1950s, the principal media of communication were the telephone (the rotary version, of course) and the U.S. mail. For those living and working in major urban areas, there was local messenger service. Overnight courier service was still unknown (although the U.S. Postal Service did offer a thing called "Special Delivery," which guaranteed, or supposedly guaranteed, next-day delivery), and facsimile transmission was still a full decade away. Voice-mail? Only a privileged few had the luxury of an answering service. I said answering service (as portrayed in the 1950s musical show, "Bells are Ringing"), not answering machine. A call from a client or potential client that went unanswered was often a call truly lost.

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The Google of 50 Years Ago

A couple of movements and clicks

The countryside of translation in the 1950s was not unlike the rural America of the 1850s, where the inhabitants could go for weeks, if not months at a time without seeing or talking to another soul.

with today's computer mouse brings the modern translator to one of the most phenomenal research tools of our age: the Google search engine. "Instant gratification" would be a most appropriate and descriptive term.

The search engine of the translator of the 1950s was the translator himself or herself, and his or her library of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference books. Absent such personal library, the translator had no choice but to leave the typewriter (or dictation machine) and repair to the local public library to undertake a time-consuming search through encyclopedias, reference books, journals, magazines, etc., to check on words or terminology or phraseology. But there was one particular element of the mid-20th century that was not too different from the early 21st century, namely the delivery deadline. Yes, even 50 years ago, clients needed their translations "yesterday"!

And if the technology of 50 years ago appears quaint, if not primitive, so does the structure of the U.S. translation industry. When Dwight D. Eisenhower was still the occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, the terms "translation agency" or "translation (service) company" were not even part of the daily vocabulary. Rather, there were "translation bureaus." And they were called "bureaus" because they were precisely that: small entities, indeed very small entities, that provided a translation service. Oftentimes the translation bureau was one person—a translator—sitting in a small office, translating from (and sometimes into) several languages, and for the languages that he or she did not know, the work was "farmed out" to "collaborators."[1] There were other, slightly larger translation bureaus, owned by one person (again, a translator) with a staff of perhaps two or three "in-house" translators and a "stable" of outside "collaborators." And when you walked into any of these translation bureaus, whether they were one-person or five-person entities, you saw dictionaries and reference books everywhere (aside from typewriters, stationery, and filing cabinets), for not only were these businesses owned and operated by translators, they were also places where translation was produced. In the terminology of the late 1950s, a project manager was someone who supervised a construction site, and an agency was a place to which one went to make travel arrangements.

Splendid Isolation

The countryside of translation in the 1950s was not unlike the rural America of the 1850s, where the inhabitants could go for weeks, if not months at a time without seeing or talking to another soul. If today's translator uses the term "splendid isolation," it is used in a more or less poetic fashion, for the technology of the 21st century has made the translator's isolation a thing of the past. But in the 1950s, the term was an apt description of the translator's milieu.

In the very early spring of 1959, an incident occurred that was totally unknown to me. The incident was a dinner held at a Chinese restaurant in New York City, where a small group of translation bureau owners and freelance translators gathered to discuss the idea of forming an association of professional translators. Exactly five weeks later, this small group met once more, but this time on the campus of New York University. Again, I was not aware of the meeting, probably because I was more focused on and interested in closing a rental deal for a beach house on Fire Island, New York, and a summer of sand, surf, and partying. Those who came to that meeting at New York University on that first day of May in 1959 had slightly more serious business on their minds. By the end of the day, they had successfully completed that business. It was the formation of America's first national association of translators. The era of splendid isolation was drawing to a close.

Note

1. The term "collaborator" used in the U.S. translation business for a freelance translator ceased being used during the days of the Second World War, because the word became synonymous with someone who was cooperating with the enemy, the enemy of course being Nazi Germany and Japan. The term "collaborator" was first used in American mass communications to describe a Norwegian politician named Vidkun Quisling, who cooperated with the Germans when they invaded Norway in 1940. Indeed, the man's name became a commonplace noun in English, e.g., "he was suspected of being a quisling" (i.e., a spy, a collaborator). In the U.S. translation business, "freelancer" replaced "collaborator."

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