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THE SCENE IN TECHNICAL AND SCIENTIFIC TRANSLATION IN RUSSIA

An interview with Ivan I. Oubine

During a visit to Moscow in mid-October 1998, Cay Dollerup interviewed Professor Ivan I. Oubine, PhD, Dr, and director of Russian National Centre for Translation of Scientific and Technical Literature and Documentation.

Cay Dollerup: How long have you been working here?

Ivan I. Oubine: I was employed about twenty-five years ago after having completed my PhD thesis at the Moscow State Linguistic University. I began as a research assistant and have risen through the ranks.

CD: What does this Centre do and who are your clients?

IO: First I must stress that this is a State organisation, but in the same breath I should mention that our Centre has never been supported financially by the State. We are financially self-sustained organization. We have always relied on our own income and paid ourselves for everything including taxes, rent, wages of our in-house and free-lance translators and salaries of the supporting personnel, equipment, dictionaries etc. The Centre is the oldest specialised translation agency in Russia.

Previously all our clients were State-run institutions since they were the only organisations we had at that time which were interested in sci-tech translation. Now we translate sci-tech, legal, business, educational etc. texts, manuals, official and personal documents etc. for legal and physical persons irrespective of their nationality - Russian or foreign

CD: You have always done translations?

IO: Not exclusively. For a twenty-year period, that is until 7-8 years ago, when legislation was changed, we used to coordinate all translation work in the Soviet Union. We addressed internal needs by processing and distributing all translated articles, books etc. to public and to specialised libraries. You must understand that, whereas academics in small countries will often command two or more languages, the situation is different in large countries, such as the USA, the former Soviet Union and present-day Russia: many professionals and experts know not more than one foreign language or even only their own national language. We made sure that even engineers in, say, distant parts in Siberia, and who knew only Russian, would be able to keep up with developments in their specialist fields. This was done by making translated books and articles available in reading rooms where, in case this was needed, people could make photocopies for which they paid themselves. As hinted, the system was abolished when Parliament introduced legislation to the effect that ten copies of every book published in Russia are to be sent to copyright State libraries. Unfortunately, translation (translated articles, books, standards, etc.) is excluded from this procedure. However, it was a very useful service and to this very day we continue to get phone calls from people who would like to have the system reintroduced. They feel that they cannot keep abreast of developments, not even in Russia, and have to order books from abroad which they can ill afford.

CD: Any solution?

IO: To re-introduce the old system of coordination of translations but on a new technical level. Now there is no need to collect hard copies of translations. For example, we would be happy to be in contact with foreign firms in, for instance, Western Europe so that we could locate titles of Russian articles, standards, technical norms, legislation acts, etc.

translated by us, say, into English or German, by means of the 'Internet'. If ordered we could pass the translations to our clients by e-mail. In my view there is a need in Russia for coordinating the establishment of terminology banks and for networks in virtually all legal, engineering, and scientific fields.

CD: And what does the agency do now?

Ivan Oubine: We translate texts which has also been part of our work in the past. They have always been texts commissioned by clients, not selected by us. With 'perestroika', the nature of the texts has changed. Our customers previously used to commission mostly scientific and technical translations, the latter being manuals, instructions for installation, maintenance, repairs and so on. They made out c. 90% of our work, but is now - as of 1994 for which we have our latest figures - down to c. 55%. Personal documents (for instance birth, marriage certificates, etc.) as well as contracts and the like have increased from nil to more than thirty per cent, thus illustrating that there are more non-governmental commercial contacts with the outside world. In general, there are fewer English texts (down to c. 40%), more German ones (20%), and Spanish has increased significantly from 1% in 1984 to 12% in 1994. In addition, there are now documents in the languages of the former Soviet republics, such as Ukrainian, Georgian and so on.

However, the bulk of translation work has dropped drastically. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, people and institutions have little money and must be very selective when they commission work. There are more competitors on the market, and there are many translators and agencies that work, as we put it, *[in the shade]*.

CD: In other words, there were no other agencies than you before perestroika?

IO: Oh, yes, there were, and they were perfectly legal. There were several in-house translation departments at many large factories and research institutions which served their needs without State intervention. The independent Chamber of Trade and Commerce and the semi-autonomous *[Intourist]*-travel agency also had translators on their staff. But there were no privately owned and privately run agencies before 'perestroika'.

CD: And what's like now?

Ivan Oubine: There is no law prohibiting Russian citizens from working for foreign companies. These days, people do not have to report where they work, provided they pay taxes and their employers contribute to their pension funds. So there are many translators working for foreign firms, both on a free-lance and on an in-house basis. A look in the Moscow telephone directory will show that there are about sixty legal and independent translation agencies. In addition, there are numerous small groups and teams which are joint-ventures or operate privately, and which do not want to be listed because they work for stable customers. Numerous others work *[in the shade]*.

CD: What is the background of your translators?

Ivan Oubine: We can employ people with any kind of university education, that is with a training of five or six years at a seat of higher learning. They do not have to be linguists but may equally well be engineers, medical doctors, and so on. So, although we all know that we cannot 'translate' academic titles, our translators are, roughly speaking, MAs, MScs, MDs and so on and so forth. In order to be employed, potential employees are interviewed and then, whatever their background, they have to pass a test. This is a relatively short translation, only half a page, but it is enough to discourage many candidates. I should say that most of those that give up at that stage are school teachers.

CD: How large is your staff?

IO: Our in-house staff of translators comprises five or six people. They cover the major European languages, namely English, German, French, and Spanish. They translate in this building and take care of urgent work, often in the presence of the customers. Thus they can do a letter in 15-25 minutes. Most in-house translators tend to be fairly young. Most translations, some 80%, are done by our free-lance translators. We have a bank of 800 to 1,000 translators, all of whom have passed the test. Of course, we do not employ all of them at the same time, but I believe that in the course of one year we enlist the services of 200 to 300 different translators. This depends on their specialities, their language combinations and the like. So, when a customer hands in a translation, we select the translator who is to do the job and forward it. The most frequently used free-lance translators tend to be old hands with considerable experience, people in their forties or fifties.

CD: Do you work in both directions?

IO: Of course we do, since there are few native speakers of other languages in Russia who are also translators. It also follows from the fact that c. 80% of our translation work is from European languages. We openly acknowledge that our translations into foreign languages are not stylistically perfect, but we know that in terms of the semantic contents and of terminology they are superior to what most that native speakers could come up with. There is more to it, though: although there are always exceptions, we find that the best translators of scientific, technical, and business materials from foreign languages into Russian tend to have a specialist background rather than a linguistic or translation oriented training. Conversely, people with a linguistic training are better at translating out of Russian.

CD: How much work do you do?

IO: We count work by the number of orders for work. We get nearly 10,000 orders per year, from letters to large reports. The |work load| has changed. The work load of a translator has increased prodigiously. In former epochs, a free-lancer was expected to handle 24 regular pages, each defined as a total of 1,680 typographical units, in 20 calendar days. This was, of course, ridiculously low. Now we translate the same number of pages in four or five days, and, if it is urgent, in two calendar days. This is about the international norm.

CD: And you differentiate between text types?

IO: Yes, we do. Urgency and languages also have a bearing on prices.

CD: Do you do any research?

IO: Sadly enough, no. We used to do research and we published 20 to 25 books a year. As mentioned, I started here as a research assistant and I have published on machine-assisted translation, but now I direct the agency and even occasionally step in to do translation. Some of our translators | including myself | lecture at the Moscow State Linguistic University. It is important to pass on the experience we have gained from our professional lives to the next generation.

CD: You have alluded to agencies operating |in the shade|. Do you mean to say that they deliver poor goods.

IO: Not necessarily. In order to survive, they have to be reasonably good. In terms of competition, they charge the customer less and pay translators more than we can, since we and other completely legal agencies have to pay a total of 45-50% of the turnover in taxes. We are more expensive and pay translators less. We can only survive by doing a large bulk of translation.

CD: You used to be the President of the National Association of Technical Translators?

IO: Yes. It had 800 to 1,200 members with regional branches in places such as Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Minsk, Tashkent, Voronezh, and other places. But it quietly fell apart in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union because re-registration proved too difficult. I do know, however, that there are some associations of translators, and I sometimes come across interviews with members of these societies. However, I do not know how they operate, and I still have to feel their influence. I believe that the sobering truth is that translators here are not as organised as in the West. Not even members of the organisation I headed enjoyed any privileges. The main problem is that there are no regular certificates. Any person with a higher education can declare himself a translator and, unlike a doctor in medicine, one needs no license to practice translation in Russia.

