

Translator Training: A Global Overview

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Western Europe has undoubtedly dominated institutionalised translator training in the twentieth century. Yet forms of translator training were carried out in many other parts of the world in previous centuries, and the number of non-European institutions has been steadily rising in response to globalisation processes since the mid 1980s. In many cases, non-European training has been in quite different political and cultural contexts, giving rise to a surprising diversity of models and ideas. Indeed, since future initiatives in this field might be expected to be highly context-specific, translator trainers would do well to consider this diversity of models, looking beyond those that have been developed specifically for western European conditions.

A key problem here is the relative lack of reliable information, especially in view of the rapid development of training programmes in the 1990s. The data for the following overview has been drawn from international surveys by Caminade and Pym (1995) and Harris and Kingscott (1997), supplemented with regional surveys such as Park (1993) for the United States, the SIIT (1993) for Latin America, and articles in publications such as *Language International*. On this basis, one might estimate the number of translator-training institutions as approaching 300, depending on the selection criteria employed (Pym and Caminade list 268 institutions; Harris and Kingscott give 243). Readers are nevertheless advised to use internet resources to keep abreast of the most recent developments.

A Historical Background

Translator training of some kind has almost certainly existed at key moments in expansive empires, mostly in the form of group work on actual translations. One might seek the origins of training programmes in the elaborate Chinese state institutions for the translation of Buddhist texts from the fourth to the ninth centuries, in the ‘House of Wisdom’ in ninth-century Baghdad, in cathedral chapters as in twelfth-century Toledo, or with court scholarship from the thirteenth century. The great European colonisations were also associated with rudimentary translator training based on the capture and training of natives. Translator training was thus carried out on the fringe of empires or at the points where civilizations met, as seen in the training of French interpreters in Constantinople from 1669

or the Oriental Academy founded by the empress Maria Theresa in 1754. At the same time, European expansion led to defensive reactions in other parts of the world: the large Egyptian translation school now known as Al-Asun was established in 1835. In China, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a group of government officials dealing with Foreign Affairs created institutions for the training of translators in areas like shipbuilding and weapons manufacture. From 1896 Yan Fu, at that time principal of the Northern Chinese Naval Academy, supervised several translation schools operating under central and local government authority. While state-controlled instruction in translation was carried out in Europe for the training of diplomats, in Spain and Spanish America it was more commonly associated with sworn translation: a translation programme was offered at the Law Faculty at the University of Uruguay from 1885. Such examples serve to illustrate the extent to which translation training has long depended on local contexts and traditions.

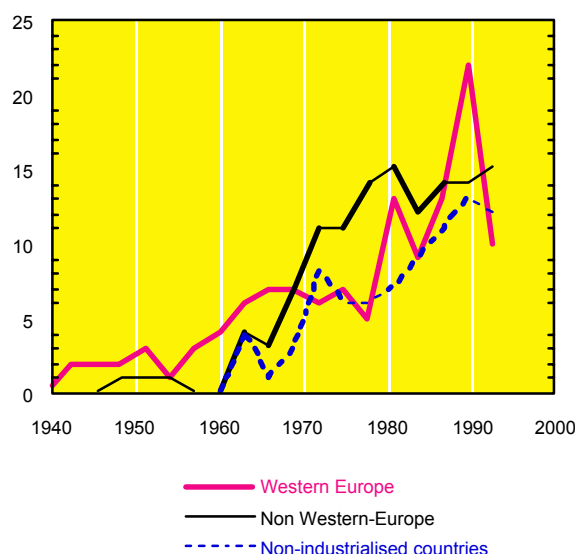
By the mid twentieth century western Europe had developed a string of institutions that were mainly focused on interpreter training and enjoyed a large degree of independence with respect to non-vocational university structures. Elsewhere, as at the Moscow Linguistic University (where the translation programme dates from 1930), translator training and was more explicitly integrated into independent foreign-language institutes, a model that still pertains in Russia, China and some eastern-European countries. Following the second world war independent university-level institutions were quickly established in the border regions of the Third Reich, with the main French institutions being founded in the 1950s.

European leadership is nevertheless challenged by figures that show the creation of non-European programmes—particularly those in the United States—rising quickly in the 1960s and actually outweighing that of west-European programmes in the 1970s (see figure 1, based on information in Caminade and Pym 1995). Indeed, while western Europe may have developed translator training in a series of responses to European unification, the non-European scene gives a somewhat smoother response to economic globalisation. Underlying both streams, though, are general reforms that have changed the nature of university education, progressively allowing more emphasis on vocational objectives and thus steadily integrating translator training into tertiary structures. This process has been particularly pronounced in Europe: one such reform took Spain from just four translator-training institutions in 1992 to some 23 in 1997. The process has been less drastic in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States, which would further account for the smoother rise of the non-European curves. It would thus be rash to assume that training programmes have developed in direct response to the social demand for translators and interpreters. In many cases youth unemployment has also played a role, creating student demand for vocationally oriented instruction programmes even in the absence of rising market demands for well-paid full-time translators and interpreters.

Students are predominantly women in almost all countries, although Caminade and Pym (1995) estimate that only 35% of programme directors are women. The same authors rate the languages most taught as follows: English (18.3%), French (14.1%), Spanish and German (11.7% each).

Growth in the twenty-first century should be in university-level programmes in the rising economies of the Pacific rim and China, in new and reformed programmes in eastern European countries looking toward the European Union, and in community interpreting (here covering interpreting for the courts, health services, immigration departments, etc.), so far mostly developed in ‘immigrant’ countries like Canada, the United States, Australia and Sweden, where there has been rising if conflictual awareness of internal multiculturalism.

Fig.1. Frequency of Creation of Institutions for the Training of Translators and Interpreters (data from Caminade and Pym, 1995)



Context-Specific Developments

Much of the real diversity of translator training is suppressed in European theoretical discourses and through organisations like the CIUTI, a club formed by some 23 prestigious translator-training institutions all in western Europe and North America. However, even within Europe there are considerable differences, most notably between the full university programmes offered in Germany and the one- or two-year ‘Masters’ programmes preferred in countries like France. In many cases the number of years involved in a programme depends on the foreign-language competence of secondary-school leavers: in many countries the first years of any university programme must be spent acquiring such competence, thus leaving actual translator training for later years.

Beyond western Europe, the model adopted often depends on which European (occasionally American) expert or institution was consulted. We thus witness a certain post-

colonial exporting of models, as in the case of the ESIT in Paris, which has had a heavy influence on programmes in Ottawa and Cameroon. This in turn leads to international exchange networks, further reinforcing shared belief in the superiority of one model or another.

Beyond Europe, the need to adapt to existing local structures, coupled with required language learning at university level, has led to a clear predominance of one- or two-year specialised instruction programmes at levels beyond the first three or four years of university. Such programmes may be in general translation or interpreting, although many focus on technical translating, court interpreting, community interpreting, sign interpreting and so on. There are only a few programmes in translation studies as such, mostly attached to literature departments, and remarkably few non-European programmes specialising in vocational literary translation or audiovisual work.

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of non-European developments is the way translator-training programmes have been set up between various university departments. In most cases this involves one language-specific department (say, English or Chinese) running the programme with participation from teaching staff from other language-specific departments. Sometimes the parent body is a department of Linguistics; in a few cases the actual running of the programme is carried out by an interdepartmental committee. Although the ideal may be to have a full-fledged specialised translation department, many other practical structures can be found.

More recent developments involve ‘paraprofessional’ training in non-university situations, usually in contexts where untrained bilinguals are already working as translators and interpreters and can benefit from short formalised instruction. This tends to be found in ‘immigrant’ countries, particularly Australia, and correlates with close attention to the various aspects of community interpreting. In Europe, where training has been centred on the universities, very little has been done to adopt ‘real needs’ approaches of this kind.

A consequence of translator training beyond the traditional university systems is the development of national control authorities, which may be responsible for exams (e.g. the Institute of Linguists in Britain), for giving official rankings to the various translator-training institutions (e.g. the NAATI in Australia), or for acting in an advisory capacity (e.g. the advisory Tolk- och översättarunstitutet in Sweden).

There is also an important political dimension involved, especially in situations where translation policies are associated with the defence and development of minority languages. For example, official programmes with double ‘A languages’ can be found not only in Ireland, Catalonia and Galicia, but also increasingly in South Africa since the end of apartheid.

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