

TRANSLATORS IN THE U.S. MARKET: SPEARHEADS OR SPEARCHUCKERS?

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Simple Spanish words are becoming familiar even to the aggressively monolingual. Political candidates in the U.S. sprinkle (or pour) Spanish in their campaign speeches. Advertising copy in Spanish — good, bad and ugly — is suddenly sprouting up everywhere. Characters on prime time speak Spanish for stretches with no subtitling or dubbing. Special news and entertainment programs now feature simultaneous interpreting into Spanish. (Activate the Secondary Audio Program feature included in most TVs built after 1997, and hear the dialog in *Desperate Housewives*, *CSI New York*, and other shows in Spanish.) Popular culture and the media are saturated with such indicators, and with the high profile of Hispanics in recent mass demonstrations nationwide, do we need further proof that Spanish is becoming normative? Clearly, the big players in government, business and the media (after much hemming and hawing) have begun a mad rush to woo the Hispanic markets in the U.S. for votes and purchasing power.

After decades in which opportunities for U.S.-based Spanish language professionals seemed a tantalizing mirage, translation has suddenly acquired prominence. However, as profits grow and employment opportunities continue to multiply, chances are good that companies will move to reduce compensation to these professionals, or replace them with amateurs because “everybody speaks Spanish.” How do we respond effectively? First, we need to understand that much of the work cannot be outsourced for a variety of reasons, so we have the clout and opportunity now, if we play our cards right, to help lay the ground rules to dignify translation expertise, which will allow experienced translators to share in the benefits of this market. Second, as translators we must begin to critically examine our own work as individuals and that of our peers, to help shape—as shape we must—a distinctly Stateside culture of professional language services.

Fittingly, then, the *VII Annual Conference on Translation and Interpreting*, co-sponsored by InTradES-Apuntos and the Instituto Cervantes, held at the latter’s landmark headquarters in Manhattan on February 27, 2006, focused on translating (to the exclusion of interpreting) for the Spanish-language demographic. Five Spanish-language experts addressed an audience of emerging and established translators, interpreters, educators and representatives from government and private sector entities. The Instituto Cervantes, which has forged a reputation for broad-minded and avant garde programming, provided an ideal setting for the event.

Leticia Molinero, president of InTradES-Apuntos and editor of the online magazine, opened the conference by suggesting that translators need to treat their work as journalists do, to move

beyond the standard dictionary inquiries and conduct “extra-linguistic reality checks” unbidden. She pointed to “the limited culture of translation here in the U.S.,” as setting us apart from Europe, because most translators and interpreters here come from other disciplines (“the empiricals”). Let’s consider this a strong point, in that most of us see the work of translation as a cultural or artistic pursuit. Now we simply need to make the adjustment to treat it as a lucrative business. Molinero also mentioned another powerful argument for using U.S.-based translators rather than outsourcing: to avoid the mistranslations that come from amateurs or those who don’t fully understand the original. This reminded me of a literary agent’s tale about U.S. publishers who turned to Latin America to get books translated into Spanish on the cheap: the translations came back loaded with Spanish regionalisms that just could not span the rainbow of Spanish speakers here, and often did not capture the original English.

María Cornelio, medical translator, literary consultant, and former Columbia University professor, turned the focus to the playing field. She has tracked states with the largest Hispanic populations to determine whether their health websites included

Spanish versions, and then rated them for accessibility, clarity and mistakes. Her PowerPoint presentation, highlighting in phosphorescent yellow all the grammar, spelling, usage and other errors, elicited knowing groans and eye rolls. New Jersey, it turns out, can thumb its nose at New York and the three Western states with the largest Hispanic populations: its state website had almost no errors and in Cornelio’s opinion, reflected the work of a professional translator. Unfortunately, she noted, “bilingual experts” — often people inside organizations who grew up speaking some Spanish but never worked as translators — still exert undue influence and can often take a “check n’ wreck” approach to the completed work of professionals. Which brings us to the next step in her strategy of helping shape the field: client outreach. An effective approach to companies that put out subpar translations, she suggested, would be to “call them and play the injured party, rather than the indignant translator professional who may be looking to establish a client relationship.” This is a good example of how we can assume a leadership role, applied to the growing field of web content translation in the U.S.

The most stimulating presentation came from María Godfrey of the General Services Administration, who works as bilingual web content manager for FirstGov en Español (www.firstgov.gov/Espanol/) the federal government’s official information and services website. She described herself and a colleague as the

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“Girl Fridays for a staff of 1,900 people,” praised her agency for its “sensitivity to language issues,” and mentioned recent events that have helped radically transform the federal government’s approach to translation. These include LEP Executive Order Number 13166, Improving Access to Services for Persons With Limited English Proficiency, signed by President Clinton and reaffirmed by President Bush; and a government-wide initiative to help thousands of Spanish-speaking communities who lost vital documents during Hurricane Katrina. Godfrey announced exciting future developments, including a Federal Multilingual Website Committee, which will evaluate and rate translators so that government agencies can find experts when they need them. The boldest initiative includes a program to centralize and standardize the government’s Spanish language usage through the creation of a Spanish Language Style Guideline, a living document derived from a variety of sources. (The standardization effort has worked well in Europe and Canada, but to succeed here, it will need to navigate the shoals of regionalism, chauvinism and jingoism that lurk in the many varieties of Spanish spoken on the American continent.)

Godfrey briefly touched on machine translation (“good for extremely restricted domains of technical language”) and warned about the current corporate use of “back translation” as a quality check—which, ironically, tempts novice translators to do word-for-word renderings because they back-translate perfectly. She reiterated the important points that ran through all presentations: that translators need to know their audience, translate in a culturally appropriate manner, and when possible, use plain language.

In the end, consumers can shape the marketplace by demanding quality product — and language specialists should remember that, for we are also consumers. We have the power in our hands and the obligation to set standards. If translators don’t insist on standards and hold the U.S. market, both private and public sectors, accountable, the value of all language professionals will be degraded and the “bilingual experts” will indeed end up running the show. Federally sponsored initiatives such as the Style Guideline and FirstGov en Español may be powerful allies to counteract misguided trends and help language professionals here make their points effectively.

María Cornelio talked about “giving people the ammunition to change the culture in their workplace.” She offered a snappy comeback to client complaints about rates. If a client suggests that Spanish translation should be cheap because Spanish is so widespread, the translator can answer: “Then why pay so much for advertising copy? Lots of people speak English.”

Despite the many misconceptions surrounding the cost and importance of translation for Hispanic consumers, translators need to stop following and start taking the lead in promoting professional services for professional prices. Then we will be spearheads in the niche market that we know belongs to us. *Adiós* to being paid as spearchuckers, the walk-ons who say two words and exit. ▲

[The author is a federally certified court interpreter, translator, and actor of stage and screen.]

Visiting Delegation from China

Way Moy

On March 15, 2006, on behalf of NAJIT, *Proteus* editor Nancy Festinger welcomed a delegation of interpreters and translators from China at the federal courthouse in the Southern District of New York.

The group of sixteen, led by Mr. Yuen Shun Liu on behalf of the Translators Association of China (TAC, www.tac-online.org.cn), had just completed an intensive three-week interpretation/translation course at the Monterey Institute of International studies in California. All were from Shantung, a coastal province in central China, right across from the Korean Peninsula. They worked in various provincial or municipal agencies and business entities, and their responsibilities required them to have the ability to interpret or translate from and into English. There were representatives from university departments, trade development, banking, environmental protection, and tourist offices. The course and the visit to the U.S. was meant to offer them further training, insights and practice in American English. Some were sponsored by their place of business; others were semi-sponsored and contributed to the cost of the trip, a unique travel experience. Of the sixteen, many had just graduated from university programs.

Their visit to downtown Manhattan began with a tour of the area surrounding Centre Street, where the state and federal court buildings stand. On the way to the nearby African burial ground on Duane Street, a recently discovered archeological site that has provided information about the slave population in New York in the 1700’s, they learned that the area used to be called Five Points and was a hotbed of criminal activity. Upon return to the courthouse, they visited Judge Kimba M. Wood’s courtroom, where they sat in the jury box as they heard the judge give an overview of her judiciary functions vis-à-vis interpreters. A lively question and answer period followed. Many questions concerned interpreter qualification and administration, or problems that may occur with interpretation during trial. Afterwards, there was a walk-through of the many support areas within the court building, including a panoramic view of the city from the 26th floor. Of interest was the fact that none of the visitors had ever been in a courthouse before, either in China or the United States.

At the end of the visit, there was a NAJIT-sponsored reception which other interpreters from the local area also attended. The *Proteus* editor welcomed the group on behalf of NAJIT’s Chair Dr. Alexander Rainof and briefed them on NAJIT and its activities. Mr. Yuen Shun Liu responded with the visitors’ appreciation for NAJIT’s hospitality, and provided information on TAC. Of particular interest to all was the fact that TAC will be hosting the Federation of Translators (FIT-IFT, www.fit-ift.org) XVIII World Congress in Shanghai, China in 2008.

The evening ended with a dinner in nearby Chinatown, and a farewell to our visitors who were on their way to Washington D.C. the following day. ▲

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