

Getting fit for survival

Ralph Wittgrebe, BDU FCIL

Dipl.-Pol. Dip Trans IoL

There is a risk of the translator's (and interpreter's) profession becoming obsolete due more prolific use of broken English as the accepted lingua franca of the future.

The paper outlines strategies which independent translators and small translation firms - rather than translation agencies - can resort to in order to address these challenges.

Approaches include:

- expanding knowledge base
- expanding co-operation
 - o with translators
 - o with professionals from other disciplines
 - o with the language services of government agencies and large corporations- increased sharing of databases with colleagues and other professionals
- (improved) marketing
- use of I T systems/machine translation
- (most importantly) offering of unique selling propositions.

Assuming that the worst-case scenario will in fact materialise, translators will have to develop an offering that goes beyond the reduced requirements for foreign language communications and that communicates to customers the importance of qualified translation. This, in turn, will both require and lead to the development of lasting co-operation with key customers. One precondition for this is the possibility to offer sustainable relations and this requires an ongoing inflow of young talent.

The paper presents ways of communicating to customers that the translator's work will always cost less than the cost of the customers' staff trying to translate or write in a foreign language. Furthermore, customers must be made to realise that whilst broken English may suffice in certain cases, quality is in fact a vital element of communications in many other areas.

At the same time, translators will have to develop ways of achieving economies of scale and of sharing the resulting benefits with customers whilst at the same time benefitting from cost savings.

In addition to the above, young talent is vital for the survival of our profession. The paper discusses requirements for young colleagues and ways to attract young talent as a precondition for the continuing prosperity of the translation industry.



Ralph Wittgrebe,

member of BDU

(Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer, Germany
[Federal Association of Interpreters and Translators],

member of VKD

(Verband der Konferenzdolmetscher im BDU

[Association of Conference Interpreters in the BDU],

FCIL (Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, UK)

Born 1952 in Bielefeld, Germany, Ralph Wittgrebe graduated in political science in Berlin. While studying business administration, he established his own translation firm in 1975. Now a senior partner in the translation firm of Goldin, Dalton & Wittgrebe, he is also a state-examined translator and sworn to the Berlin judiciary. He is chairman of the board of examiners for translators at the Berlin Chamber of Industry and Commerce and has presented papers on industry-related topics on several occasions since 1990.