**Crisis in the Translation Industry**

by Josephine Bacon[[1]](#footnote-1)

All over the world, the need for language translators and interpreters is increasing by leaps and bounds. There are many reasons for this, including the huge growth in international trade and in human mobility, with large numbers of refugees attempting to reach Europe from the Third World, as well as an increase in institutions like the European Union that require their entire output to be published in all the member states’ languages. Then there are the multinationals whose hardware, software and manuals are rolled out globally. Although translator and interpreter training at university level is now much more widely available, good translators and interpreters are still hard to find, even in the "common" language combinations, let alone in “rare” languages. Yet this is where the law of supply and demand breaks down. In many developed countries where translation and interpreting are desperately needed, these professions have experienced a serious drop in pay when compared to other skilled jobs. This is especially in the United Kingdom where the Ministry of Justice has introduced a privatised interpreting monopoly in the criminal courts that is threatening to undermine the whole legal system. The Ministry saw fit to award a single interpreting contract for the entire country to a small agency on the Yorkshire Moors run by someone who had no concept of translation or interpreting. The person in question was soon bought out by a much larger enterprise who had no experience in the translation business.

The rates of pay for interpreters, which worked out at less than minimum wage when travelling and waiting time (unpaid) were taken into account, were totally uneconomic and most professional interpreters – who had paid large sums of money to train as court interpreters and had to take rigorous examinations – have refused to work in the criminal courts. The Ministry of Justice is as “economical with the truth” as it is possible to be when defending their decision. A first they claimed it would save £12 million a year (a figure clearly plucked from out of the air) they have revised the figure downwards slightly but the fact remains that when the true statistics are finally revealed, the result will be a massive increase in costs to the British justice system. The reason for this is that it is harder and harder to find court interpreters, defendants who would otherwise have been released on bail are remanded in custody, others are discharged without ever having been tried and are free to re-offend, etc.

Now even what translators are owed is not being paid to them, due to the prevailing climate of fraud and dishonesty that seems to be sweeping the world.

One of my colleagues decided to stop translating because it was so badly paid in his own country, and start a list of translation agencies who were "bad payers". I downloaded his list and added a few names of which I had personal knowledge; my personal list now runs to more than 150 names, worldwide. These are companies who set themselves up as translation agencies and either pay only after considerable pressure has been applied to them, or not at all, EVER. Although there are companies like this all over the world, I am sorry to say that a veteran, non-British, colleague of mine noted recently that "the major proportion of names on the list comes from the UK".

This is very bad news and is the result of several loopholes in the laws of England and Wales (and probably Scotland too).

a) The UK is the only country in the western world that has no form of registration whatsoever for business names. The former Registration of Business Names Act, which merely required registration at Companies House, was abolished by the Thatcher government almost as soon as it came to power in 1979. Every other country has some sort of procedure for registering a trading name; the United States, for instance, requires publication in a local newspaper and registration with the State Board of Equalization to ensure that state tax is paid on sales. Other countries have similar practices, but over here, you can call yourself anything you like (as long as it doesn't have "royal" in it) and set up your stall tomorrow. What is so crazy is that this would be a good way for the government to earn revenue which it sorely needs.

b) It is all too easy to go into liquidation, just to avoid paying debts. A three-times-bankrupt boasted about it recently in *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper. In fact, in the UK, it is easier to go into liquidation than to tough it out and pay off debts. I am still owed more than £2000 by a translation agency owner who deliberately put his company into liquidation (even the liquidators expressed their suspicions to me) because, as he told a colleague of mine, he had been made "an offer he couldn't refuse" by a would-be partner who had set up a new translation company on millions of borrowed venture capital money. That venture soon went belly up, this agency owner has a string of failed ventures behind him and probably by now owes millions to translators.

3) It is similarly easy to escape creditors, writ-servers, etc., by trading from a secret address. In most countries, your headquarters are where you trade from. This is not necessarily so in the UK, which uses the "registered office" as the official trading address. It is perfectly legitimate, in England and Wales, to have a registered office in a place other than the principal place of business; accountants, and occasionally solicitors, act as the registered office for many of their clients. This is done for administrative convenience in some cases, especially for companies who are afraid important mail will go astray if they move offices frequently. However, it is also a very convenient way of escaping confrontations as more than one "rogue trader" has discovered to his immense satisfaction.

The net result is that British companies are acquiring a bad reputation worldwide, at least in the translation business, and probably elsewhere as well. Not only British companies though. It is almost impossible to sue for debt in the Repubic of Ireland and a couple of crooks who commissioned translations from all over the world then conveniently disappeared. Complaints to Irish diplomatic missions across the world did no good, apparently the Irish do not care if they get a reputation for dishonesty.

Non-translators should be aware that the trading conditions for dishonest translation and interpreting companies are optimum, in other words, the translation business itself can be a crook's charter. The main reason for this is that an agency and its translation or interpreting sub-contractor never meet.

Translation is big business and there are several multi-million dollar players all over the world, thanks to the internet. Yet there never was a business like the translation business for pulling the wool over a customer's eyes. A slick, smooth-talking salesman in an expensive suit visits a client and promises superb service etc. backed up with colourful literature all of which, when analysed, is meaningless. Having won the contract (which often amounts to many thousands of pounds in value) the work is turned over to the PMs (project managers) whose job it is to farm it out to the cheapest translator they can find. Sometimes the work is checked, sometimes it isn't. The net profit that the owner of a medium-sized agency (10-20 in-house employees) requires his/her staff to make on a job is at least 100%, often much more. If a Translation Memory program is used, the translators are paid little or nothing for words and phrases in the translation that occur more than once, known as "matches" and for “fuzzy matches” words that are similar (verbal forms of nouns, for instance). Needless to say, this saving is rarely, if ever, passed on to the customer.

1. Josephine Bacon has been a French and Hebrew translator and simultaneous and court interpreter for fifty years. She has worked on three continents and translated more than 100 books into English. She is also an author and journalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)