

decided in 2000 to offer Honorary Membership to Seamus Heaney in recognition of his translation work, taking into account *Sweeney Astray*, as well as other translations. I was to introduce a second Honorary Member, Mícheál Ó Cearúil, at the same event. My introduction was in Irish, and when I resumed my seat who should be seated next to me but Séamus Heaney. I decided not to lionise him, with so many literary figures present. But with typical courtesy he remarked on my clear Irish, saying that was the first time he had understood the Irish being spoken in Dublin! And why wouldn't he understand my Irish? I was at QUB. *Et in arcadia ego*. I didn't mention the coffee.

Requiescat in pace.

Máire Nic Mhaoláin
Chairperson ITIA

Ergonomic Issues at the Professional Translation Workplace

Some time ago, a request was sent via the ITIA for freelance translators working in Ireland to respond to a survey on ergonomics in the translator's workplace. This article reports on some of the findings from that survey, coupled with those from a parallel project conducted in Switzerland. We recently presented our joint findings at the Brazilian Translator's Conference, ABRAPT, which was held in Florianópolis in September of this year.

The ZHAW received funding from the Swiss government for a research project to investigate the development of translation competence by comparing the practices of translation students with those of professional translators.

One of the findings that emerged from that project was that the ergonomics of the translation workplace should be examined more closely. The professionals taking part in that study were all staff translators, i.e. fully employed by a translation agency and working from their offices. We thought it might be useful to do a comparison

between staff translators and freelance translators, hence the decision to carry out the survey of freelancers in Ireland. Although the response rate from freelancers was relatively low, the responses were interesting, as were the contrasts, and we are very grateful to those who took the time to answer the survey.

Why ergonomics?

When we hear the term 'ergonomics', most people probably think immediately of suitable office chairs, sitting position, eye levels *vis-a-vis* computer monitors, repetitive strain syndrome, and so on. This is also what we first had in mind for our survey. However, according to the International Ergonomics Association, the concept of ergonomics also extends beyond the physical, to what we might term 'cognitive ergonomics', i.e. the mental processes (perception memory, reasoning, motor response) as they affect interactions among humans and other elements of a system, and also to 'organisational ergonomics' (the sociotechnical system, including organisational structures, policies, processes and so on). We were also interested in probing these aspects of ergonomics.

A reasonable question is: why should anyone be interested in this? As practising translators know, translation is a complex and demanding task and, in some domains, it has become even more complex and demanding with the use of computer-aided translation tools, quality assessment tools, machine translation, project management tools etc. Both of us have an interest in translation as a complex, human-computer interaction task, and in the cognitive aspects of those tasks, but we felt that it is necessary not to limit the field of enquiry to just the task itself, but to extend it to consider what is happening in the immediate environment in which translation takes place.

What did the translators tell us?

The survey had 14 responses from translators working in one of the largest translation agencies in Switzerland (11 women and 3 men), who were aged between 26 and 65,

and 9 responses from freelancers living in Ireland (8 women and 1 man), also aged between 26 and 65. The responses were collected in November 2012 (Switzerland) and in April 2013 (Ireland); all responses were anonymous.

The questions on the survey were divided into three categories: Workspace, Hardware/Software and Sociotechnical (focusing mainly on health issues). In analysing the data, we coded responses according to three categories: (1) good practice; (2) warning signals; and (3) possibly problematic.

The questions asked about Workspace focused on aspects such as glare, air quality, ventilation, desk size, leg room, chair height and so on. In comparing the responses, we found that (unsurprisingly), the freelancers had more control over aspects such as air quality, but seemed to pay less attention to ergonomic aspects of furniture (e.g. desk space). The translation agency had obviously invested in ergonomically-appropriate furniture, but the staff translators identified problems with air quality and ventilation.

Questions on the use of hardware and software focused on the use of dual monitors, screen height, internet connectivity, CAT tool usage etc. A notable finding here was that no staff translators and very few of the freelancers used a second monitor. We found this surprising because (a) translation frequently involves the use of multiple software applications (word processor, CAT editor, glossary tool, web browser, email client) and it is quite tedious to switch between these on one monitor and (2) it is fairly normal these days for people working in 'screen-intensive tasks' (e.g. programming) to be supplied with two (or more) large monitors. While all of the staff translators used CAT tools, only 33% of the freelancers did. Obviously, CAT tools are not suitable for all types of translation, but we found this surprising nonetheless since we assumed that freelancers specialising in specific domains would make use of CAT tools, if only for their own benefit.

For the sociotechnical (organisational ergonomics) category, we posed questions on topics concerning feedback from clients, resources supplied by clients, client workflow efficiency, interruptions, relaxation space, and hourly breaks, to name just a few. Here, significant differences are notable between the two translator types – freelancers enjoy the freedom to take breaks, have relaxation spaces and are not frequently interrupted, whereas interruptions are common for the staff translators, they have very limited relaxation space and none take hourly breaks! On the other hand, the staff translators enjoy good communication with, and feedback from clients, but freelancers find client communication somewhat problematic.

Some general questions about health and well-being were followed with a number of specific questions about health. On a positive note, both groups reported being in good or very good health, and the majority take exercise for at least 2 hours per week. Nonetheless, all staff translators and 75% of the freelance group reported that their health was affected by work. In the previous 12 months, both groups reported being affected by time pressure, mental overload and stress. What was perhaps most interesting was that a much higher proportion of staff translators reported health issues compared to the freelancers when asked about, for example, burning eyes, headaches, concentration difficulties, and burnout.

As mentioned earlier, the groups were too small to make any generalisations, but we think that the trends are interesting. Our motivation for this research is to increase awareness of the complexity of both the physical and cognitive task that is translation and to try to understand the task in a more holistic manner. If we better understood ergonomic issues at the professional translation workplace, we could suggest mechanisms for support. This is especially important in a profession that has experienced increased technologisation and, arguably, increased complexity, over the last 20 years.

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