Translation and indexing

The Author, 1987, as reported in our last issue, published a letter from the Society of Indexers' Registrar, Elizabeth Wallis, asking 'Are indexes an essential part of book production or of authorship?'1 In reply she received a letter from Paul S. Falla, of Bromley, Kent, printed here with his permission:

As a member of the Translators Association I read with interest and sympathy your letter in the winter number of The Author.

I should be interested to know if you have any views on the special problems of indexing translated works. Although I myself have always contracted out of this responsibility, I believe publishers in general regard it as a task for the translator, or anyway to be done at his expense. It seems to me that he can be expected to translate the index-entries of the original (if that has an index), but I doubt if he should have the duty of arranging these in English alphabetical order; and I myself would never accept the drudgery of converting hundreds or thousands of page-references. Of course this does not require full indexing skills either—it might be done by a student with a moderate knowledge of the foreign language; but to some extent the positions of author and translator are analogous, and I should be much interested in any comments that occur to you.

Mrs Wallis commented in her reply:

I know how tedious it is to adapt an English index to a shortened version, or to a work published in a new format. I usually advise people against doing such work. Indexing is a very individual activity and it is really difficult to get into the mind of another indexer.

She also referred to an earlier article in The Indexer by J. B. Sykes, in which he asked, 'Should one translate the index (if there is one), or index the translation?'. This was in fact in reply to an article on the Society of Indexers that appeared in the Incorporated Linguist, drawing a thorough comparison between the two arts of indexing and translation.3 Let us quote from this article, by SI's current President, K. G. B. Bakewell:

Thematically, language is the basic tool of both translating and indexing. Linguists and indexers make in-depth analyses of the texts on which they are working in order to assess the significance, exhaustively inventorize and maintain the unity of the author's concepts before moving on to their different tasks of selecting terms in the target language or for the appropriate subject heading. The indexer uses semantics in choosing indexing terms which are appropriate to the intended reader of the book (general or specialist) and then selecting suitable cross-references.

We sent the correspondence, and the question, to some SI members who offer foreign language indexing as a subject specialism, and received these further comments:

It is hard to get into the mind of another indexer; I can only think that the difficulty would be of a much greater order with an additional cultural barrier imposed. The translator has done a skilled job in making the book properly intelligible, nuances and all, in English: best deal with the translation in its own right.—Barbara Hird, Cheltenham, Glos.

I should infinitely prefer to do an original index for the translated work for the following reasons:

1. Translating an existing index would, I think, be a quite horrendous job involving as it does the additional chores of re-alphabetization and repagination, the latter aggravated by the difficulty of reading the mind of another indexer. How to tell where the original indexer decided one topic ended and another began? (I am assuming that it would not be a mere matter of a names only index, which would be much simpler.)

2. Moreover, if the original index were not very good, one would not only be attracting unnecessary criticism to oneself but, worse still, would be creating a further group of dissatisfied readers.

3. One would have to read the book very thoroughly before starting to translate the index, to ensure that one selected the same terms as were used in the translated text. For example, the word 'tristesse' could be translated by any one of sadness, gloom, melancholy, dejection, mournfulness, etc., but if it were a recurrent theme the translator would have selected and stuck to one of them, and the indexer would need to know which. Thus one might as well start from scratch, anyway.

For all these reasons, therefore, it seems to me that an original index for the translation is preferable. Ideally one should have a working knowledge of the language concerned plus access to the original index for handy reference, and possibly for helpful ideas.—Dorothy Groves, Wanstead, London

I believe that it would be much more satisfactory to index a translated work directly, with the English (or whatever the new language might be) reader in mind, for there are cultural as well as linguistic differences to take into consideration.

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It might be possible to translate the index entries themselves if they were little more than names only. But it would certainly be impossible to convert the page-references accurately without referring to the translated text all the time; and of course the whole thing would have to be re-alphabetized.

Incidentally, who is to take the blame—or the credit—for a translated index? The original indexer, the translator of the index, or the hack who deals with the drudgery of re-alphabetizing and converting page references? (In any case, I do not believe this latter job could be done without a thorough acquaintanceship with the text of the book itself.)—Joyce Line, Harrogate.

The publisher of cover-to-cover translations of five Russian scientific journals commented as follows:

Where there is a question of changing the alpha sequence in the change from Cyrillic to Roman this is done mechanically: nowadays, literally mechanically using the computer typesetter. To do otherwise would be to contravene the terms of our contract with the Soviet Union.

The problem in translation indexing is one of cultural practice as well as language and alphabet. The compromise necessary is so complex that acceptance of an agreed formula would be virtually impossible, so the mechanical process is probably the best. I can already hear the arguments against this, which makes my point. Indexing is a subjective process, not one of absolute standards.—Edwin Shelock, Turpin Transactions Ltd, Letchworth, Herts.

We should be interested to receive and publish comments from other readers, on indexing the translation or translating the index.

References
1. The Indexer 16(1) April 1988, 54.

Professional accreditation

Carolyn D. Smith, writer and editorial consultant, under the title 'Credit where credit is due', demands just this for all 'trained editorial personnel ranging from manuscript editors and project managers to proofreaders and indexers', in Publishers Weekly, 10 June 1988. She deplores that they 'are rarely given formal acknowledgment', and considers it would be appropriate 'to list individuals who have contributed to the creation of the published work on the copyright page'. A sample check of ten college textbooks showed half giving no such credit, three to in-house personnel only, while 'Only two listed such editorial professionals as developmental editors, permissions editors and indexers'; eight out of ten in business and professional books gave no credit, the others some (but not to indexers). She points out that such information included on the copyright page would take little space, cost nothing, and generate goodwill as 'formal acknowledgement enhances the careers of editorial professionals and provides information to those who might need similar services on another project', and concludes, 'Just as translators and photographers automatically receive credit for their work, so should editorial personnel'.

What sterling views! Expressed in an article whose editing is properly credited to Daisy Maryles.

A new Italian contemporary

We have received the first two issues of a new Italian review entitled L'Indicizzazione, a title which appears to embrace most of the meanings of indexing noted in the editorials to our own last issues. The review comes from the Centro di Informazione e Documentazione Automatizzata, in Trieste, and appears twice yearly. Begun by a group of University teachers, librarians and archivists, its aim is to improve standards of cataloguing and research for the benefit of providers and users of information in libraries, museums, archive repositories, databanks and documentation centres. Its editor-in-chief is Benedetto Aschero, Director of the Public Library in Trieste.

The review is divided into three sections. The first section contains an overview of some indexing and retrieval systems, followed by a lengthy bibliography—in the first number this is KWIC, KWOC and KWAC, with 173 citations; in the second PRECIS, with 268 citations. The second section presents current work of particular organizations or researchers—included in the first issue are papers from a conference on automation in research libraries; in the second, articles on the use of classification in retrieval. The third section is for readers' queries and contributions. Each issue contains just over one hundred pages.

The yearly subscription is 60 lire outside Italy. L'Indicizzazione (issn 0394–0810) may be obtained from C.I.D.A.T., c/o Biblioteca Statale del Popolo, via del Teatro Romano 17, 34121 Trieste, Italy.

M. P.