

The history of International Translation Day

St Jerome's Day, as International Translation Day is commonly known, was celebrated on 30 September. In this article we look at how this day came about and what types of themes it has considered over the years.

[This is an edited version of a paper given by Liese Katschinka, former Secretary-General of FIT, at a conference in Italy in November 1997]

St Jerome, the bible translator, has always been considered to be the patron saint of translators and interpreters throughout the world. For a long time, the days and weeks (and sometimes months) around 30 September have therefore been used by translators and interpreters (and their associations) to celebrate the occasion. Ever since FIT (International Federation of Translators) was established in 1953, St Jerome's Day celebrations have been encouraged and promoted by the FIT Council and Executive Committee in an ad hoc fashion. It was not until 1991 that the Public Relations Committee of FIT launched the idea of an International Translation Day.

The FIT Council took up the idea and decided to suggest to FIT member associations that they join forces and show their solidarity on St Jerome's Day in an effort to promote the translation profession in their own countries (not necessarily only in Christian countries). This would be an opportunity to display pride in a profession that is becoming increasingly essential as borders are tumbling worldwide.

A press release was issued and distributed to FIT member associations, suggesting several activities to celebrate the occasion, such as awarding diplomas to young translators, bringing new translators into professional associations, presenting awards and announcing activities for the following year. It was also suggested that the media should be involved in the celebrations of International Translation Day, so that public awareness of the many facets of our often misunderstood profession could be increased.

Since 1991, the FIT Secretariat has collected reports by FIT member associations on the different ways they have celebrated International Translation Day. My paper is therefore a short summary of these reports, as well as a brief account of the evolution of International Translation Day celebrations throughout the world.

No official motto was announced for International Translation Day 1991. The motto of the Brighton FIT Congress was then also chosen for the celebrations in 1992 – “Translation – the vital link” (La traduction – au cœur de la traduction).

The slogan for 1993 was “Translation, a pervasive presence” (La traduction, réalité omniprésente). That year, the press release contained some valuable information for consumers, including the following:

- ◆ Imagine how difficult it would be to assemble furniture or bicycles, or to use video recorders, that you bought in a kit if the instructions were not translated (and everybody knows what problems badly translated assembly instructions can cause).
- ◆ People with allergies to specific products would be at a risk if the ingredients on product labels were not translated.
- ◆ Well-translated labels, instructions and marketing material can enhance a company's image, while faulty translations will certainly do a company's reputation no good!

The press release that FIT issued on the occasion of International Translation Day 1993 also gave some interesting statistical figures, which must have been difficult to compile. Let me give you a few examples:

- ◆ Did you know that the Bible has been translated into 310 languages, and some text passages of

the Bible into as many as 1 597 languages? I am sure that the International Bible Society – a FIT associate member – could give us some interesting details on the different languages (and the text passages).

- ◆ Did you know that the works of Lenin have been translated more often than Shakespeare's dramas (321 compared to 93), and that Jules Verne was published in more languages than Karl Marx (238 against 103)?
- ◆ And did you know that Asterix and Tintin have both been translated into 41 languages or dialects?

At least, those were the figures back in 1993.

The motto for International Translation Day 1994 was "The many facets of translation" (Les multiples visages de la traduction), with Jean F Joly, the FIT President, defining scientific and technical translators, media translators, terminologists, conference interpreters, community interpreters, court interpreters, sign-language interpreters and "translatologists" in his press release on the occasion.

"Translation, a key to development" (La traduction, facteur de développement) was the theme for 1995, and "Translators and Copyright" (Traduction et droits d'auteur) for 1996. The latter theme was adopted because that year UNESCO launched the idea of an International Copyright Day, and the FIT Executive Committee felt that translators (in particular sci-tech and media translators) were not paying enough attention to their rights. In addition, the information highway was creating new copyright issues of which translators should be aware.

The theme for 1997, finally, was "Translating in the Right Direction" (Traduire dans le bon sens). The idea came from the Finnish FIT member association. There, colleagues thought that with all their many translation assignments into languages other than Finnish (in relation to Finland's entry into the EU), colleagues were losing sight of the fact that the best translation/interpretation is done into one's mother tongue. I hope that with this statement I have given you plenty of material for discussion. Should one or should one not translate only into one's mother tongue? What are the advantages, what are the drawbacks? Etc., etc.!

The theme selected for 1998 is "Good Translation Practices" (Le professionnalisme en traduction). The subject matter is highly appropriate, since quality assurance is on everybody's mind and needs to be considered by translators as well. FIT is contributing to a possible solution on the EU's European Translation Platform.

In 1995, the FIT Executive Committee realized that it would help member associations to prepare their International Translation Day celebrations if a theme was announced (and announced early). For this reason the themes are generally announced about a year in advance, giving member associations plenty of time to translate and publish the press release sent out by the FIT Secretariat and organize their own celebrations and publicity.

What types of activities are organized by FIT member associations for International Translation Day? Basically, we see three types of activities:

- ◆ *Public relations focusing on the general public:* Press conferences, interviews with the press, radio and television. Occasionally, several associations in one country even pool their resources to run advertisements in the daily press on September 30.
- ◆ *Public relations focusing on the translators:* Diplomas or prizes to honour distinguished representatives of the profession are the most common type of activity. In the Czech Republic, the FIT member association JTP came up with the idea of a Best Dictionary Prize, which has been very useful in promoting the exchange of glossaries, terminology lists, etc. that was so very important in the wake of the Velvet Revolution. In the meantime, the idea has been "copied" by Norway. After all, there is a greater need to encourage the publication of dictionaries in the "languages of limited diffusion".
- ◆ *Public relations focusing on the translators' associations:* Further training events by translators' associations for their members (and as means to recruit new members), as well as joint (academic and social) activities by the different translators' associations in one country can be mentioned here by way of example.

It is encouraging to see that International Translation Day has developed into a genuine event in our profession. All over the world, translators take the opportunity to think with pride of their work and their achievements. From year to year, more associations in a growing number of countries report on their activities. Let us hope that the snowball effect will continue!

This article was written in 1997. The themes for International Translation Day since then have been as follows:

1999: Translation – Transition

2000: Technology serving the needs of translation

2001: Translation and ethics

2002: Translators as agents of social change

2003: Translators' rights

2004: Translation, underpinning multilingualism and cultural diversity

2005: Translation and Human Rights

2006: Many Languages – One Profession

2007: Don't shoot the messenger!

2008: Terminology – Words matter