

Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting (METM) 2009: Broadening the Scope and Setting Limits

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The 2009 meeting of Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) saw a return to the association's birthplace at the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) in Barcelona. Since its inaugural meeting in 2005, MET has grown around a core group of members in Spain to include 151 language professionals in the Mediterranean region and beyond. Twenty nationalities are now represented by members who live in 21 countries. All have two things in common—an interest in the provision of English-language support and a desire to learn and share knowledge with like-minded professionals.

A Knowledge-Sharing and Peer-Teaching Network

Since 2006, MET has offered professional development in the form of workshops, both as a separate series in the spring and immediately before the autumn conference (METM). The year 2009 was no exception: eight workshops were held during the afternoon and morning before the conference, half of which have been running successfully since they were piloted in 2006. All workshops were developed and led by MET members.

The first, "Corpus-Guided Editing and Translation", has grown over the years to cover two half-day workshop sessions, and it continues to sell out long before the conference begins. Using corpora (groups of sample texts) is a way to resolve doubts about terminology and phraseology when one is working in specialist fields. The approach allows decision making to be based on clear evidence rather than per-

sonal preference, and it makes choices easier to justify to both ourselves and our clients (thus, it also serves as an educational tool). In the first session, participants were provided with a theoretical toolkit with which to start building and using corpora, learning such terms as *concordance* (a list of words or phrases found in any text or body, or corpus, of texts) and *KWIC* (*key word in context*—the manner of displaying a concordance with key words aligned vertically). The types of questions that can be answered with a well-designed corpus were then explored through hands-on experience with a freely available concordancing tool (AntConc). The second session addressed the building of specialized corpora and ensuring that you get the best results from them. It also introduced useful tools, such as Archivarius, a desktop search application that can be used for mining "quick" corpora, including stocks of relevant PDF files. Thus, participants who attended the two workshops left METM fully equipped to begin using both general and specialist corpora in their work.

In addition to the corpus workshops, participants were offered opportunities to increase their understanding of anatomy and clinical research, to learn to identify and deal with citation problems, and to explore ways to improve text flow by resolving punctuation issues or attending to salient features of clear, flowing text. I attended a new workshop on the use of interactive activities to aid skill development. The session, facilitated by Dick Edelstein, an experienced trainer and language teacher based in Barcelona, was run for the first time at METM09 and helped experienced and inexperienced trainers alike to explore ways to ensure that experiential or interactive learning opportunities achieve their stated goals. The workshop gave both food for thought and practical

advice—I even came away with a prop to use in the Righting Citing workshop the following morning! One of the defining features of MET is its emphasis on knowledge sharing and peer teaching. Judging by the array of experience available among MET members, it is likely that Edelstein's workshop will be useful to current and future members who are interested in proposing a new workshop topic to the association.

Broadening the Scope

The contexts in which many MET members work can make it difficult for us to define our roles beyond the provision of linguistic support. Editors may often find themselves educating their clients about publication practices, for instance, and translators working with manuscripts before submission may find that additional editing will increase the likelihood of acceptance by the authors' chosen journals. What we all have in common, of course, is a desire to act in the best interests of our clients, but to do so we must be clear about what we can and cannot offer, what practical or ethical issues may be raised by our way of working, and when to seek input from colleagues who have different skills.

In the first session of the meeting, I was privileged to share a panel with four experienced colleagues to consider how we each define ourselves in the spectrum of roles that constitute professional writing support. Taking a reflective approach, we explored four categories of writing support—teaching of academic writing (Sally Burgess, University of La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain), translation (Susan DiGiacomo, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Catalonia), author's editing (Joy Burrough-Boenisch, Unclogged English, the Netherlands), and writing *with* authors (myself)—before look-

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ing specifically at the provision of hybrid services that involve a combination of editing, writing, and consultancy (Valerie Matarese, UpTo infotechnologies, Vidor [TV], Italy). By presenting ostensibly different services as a fluid continuum, we were able to reflect on where the limits of different services lie and where we might usefully learn from colleagues who work in different contexts. Thus, in keeping with the theme of the conference—“Translation, Editing, Writing: Broadening the Scope and Setting Limits”—the panel provided an opportunity to consider where each of us might appropriately expand our professional horizons and where we should draw the line.

Further opportunities to broaden the scope were provided by the array of topics covered in the 2009 METM. Although a large number of MET members work with science and medicine, many have an interest in other fields, such as history and literature. This year’s plenary speakers reflected those wider interests, presenting stimulating talks on the challenges of retranslating classics in Spanish literature (Peter Bush, Barcelona, Spain) and how classical knowledge from ancient Greece and India reached western Europe through the translators of medieval Spain (Thomas F Glick, Boston University). In addition, original research was presented on computer-assisted translation of Arabic into western languages, and there were a number of presentations on the translation of historical texts, the issues involved in working with non-native speakers of English, how ideology may influence translation, and highly practical concerns, such as how to ensure pain-free computing (both physically—through attention to ergonomics—and technically—with presentations on portable computing, sharing computer-assisted translation resources, and use of Microsoft Reader and Microsoft Word). The use of corpora was again discussed in an excellent presentation by Anne Murray, a freelance translator and editor based near Tarragona in Spain. Using the lovely example of terminology for describing the properties of mohair socks, she showed us how a tool

called BootCaT can be used to generate useful corpora extremely quickly. As I sit writing in a rather cold, damp London, I only wish that she had provided more information on where to buy the socks!

Promising Practices

In the second session of METM09, a panel of experienced language editors who work in a variety of settings addressed the complexities of pricing editing jobs. Felicity Neilson (Matrix Consultants, Paris, France) set the stage by considering the multiple levels of editing that may be involved in producing a publishable article and how these services are priced. Her presentation drew attention to the frequent lack of clear definitions of the services provided or what clients can expect for their money.

When it comes to pricing, two schools of thought prevail: by the hour and by the word. Mary Shaffer, a freelance language-service provider based in Paris, France, presented the case for charging by the hour. She discussed the perceived fairness of this approach for both service provider and client by taking into account hidden costs and complexities while not penalizing clients who present you with less-problematic texts. She pointed out, though, that this approach relies heavily on a climate of trust in which a client knows or has been told how you work and trusts that time will be billed fairly for actual time spent on the job. Alan Lounds, head of the Language Advisory Unit at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, showed how by-the-word pricing works in a university language service. He explored how context influences client expectations and may restrict the pricing options available. That led to some interesting discussion about ensuring clarity in agreeing on what service can be provided for a fixed price. Taking a different approach to the problem of pricing, Tom O’Boyle, a freelance translator and editor based in Madrid, Spain, challenged us to answer the question “What are you worth?” Quoting John Ruskin, he reminded us that “there is hardly anything in the world that someone

can’t make a little worse and sell a little cheaper—and people who consider price alone are this man’s lawful prey.” Food for thought indeed.

The question of pricing and business strategy was picked up in a later presentation by Greg Morley, a freelance writer, editor, and translator based in El Escorial, near Madrid in Spain. Having recently completed his first marathon, he explored the similarities between the rigors of long-distance running and strategies that are likely to bring long-term success as a freelance language-service provider. He argued strongly in favor of a *top-feeder* approach, involving smaller volumes of higher-quality work, usually with direct clients rather than through agencies. However, he cautioned patience and reminded us of the importance of maintaining a strong reputation for quality if we are to continue attracting clients who are willing to offer satisfying and sustainable working conditions.

Plagiarism is one of the most hotly debated issues in publication ethics, and it is one that most manuscript editors and translators will deal with at some point in their careers. In many contexts, however, it may be considered as much a writing and language issue as it is an ethical one. Authors attempting to publish in a second language, for instance, may be tempted to lift text from external sources rather than expose their limitations as writers in that language.

Two presentations at METM09 addressed the question of plagiarism. In the first, Dado Čakalo and Nevenka Kopjar—copy-editor and editor-in-chief, respectively, of *Archives of Industrial Hygiene and Toxicology*, based in Zagreb, Croatia—described “why gatekeepers need language specialists to mend holes in the net”. Their presentation highlighted the subtleties of identifying sentences that have been cut-and-pasted from electronic sources. The cues that they discussed included chunks of text that appear out of context or too smoothly written compared with surrounding text, long sections of information-heavy text with only a single reference at the end, and inappropriate switches in tense. By

comparing the effectiveness of electronic screening with their own ability to identify plagiarized text, they made a strong case for the involvement of language specialists in the manuscript-screening process.

The inclusion of language specialists in the manuscript-review process ensures that “patch writing” is dealt with in context. When editors are sensitive to but not tolerant of the problem, they may help authors to deal with it appropriately. Marije de Jager, a freelance copyeditor and translator based in Rovereto, Italy, discussed what to do when you have identified textual plagiarism. She described an approach, first reported at the 2009 meeting of the European Association of Science Editors with Mary Ellen Kerans, the current MET chair, that involves clear steps that can be taken by manuscript editors in a variety of contexts: determine and begin to document the extent and seriousness of the problem, give examples of how to deal with it (either ethically, for journal editors, or textually, for authors), write “frankly but helpfully” to the authors (and don’t be afraid to use “the P word”) and request revision, and then wait for the revised manuscript before continuing to edit. De Jager’s and Kerans’s approach is striking in that it allows all interested parties to resolve the problem of plagiarism without being either tolerant or punitive.

Setting the Limits

Are you concerned about ensuring that your choice of language does not cause offense? Or perhaps you see too much political correctness around us and would like a little common sense to prevail. Whatever your stance, if you work with texts that refer to people, you cannot avoid considering the potential effects of your words. As editors, therefore, we must be aware of current thinking on this subject so that we can advise our clients properly. In a highly stimulating and interactive session, Sarah Griffin-Mason, a freelance translator and editor based in Portsmouth, UK, asked us to consider the question “Sensitive language: How correct is correct enough?” Griffin-Mason compared the advice on inclusive language provided in the instructions for authors of four leading medical journals. Two discussed such issues as race and ethnicity and directed authors to sources of further information, but the others failed to provide any guidance whatsoever. As she pointed out, that is where many editors and translators can earn a living! A preliminary analysis of how those journals performed in avoiding problematic terms, however, suggested that all did well. During discussion of problems and some lively debate, consensus was reached on the importance of inclusive language as a guiding principle and a source of clarity rather than as just another set of rules to be followed.

MET Going Forward

As in previous meetings, the Mediterranean provided a warm and pleasant backdrop for the discussions and presentations. Barcelona and the IEMed were wonderful hosts, and the excellent food and wine during lunches and social events kept spirits high throughout. The Mediterranean region is blessed with many wonderful cities to explore, and discussions during the annual general meeting raised the possibility of taking MET workshops to other venues. That idea received widespread support, and it is hoped that it and other initiatives will help to expand and consolidate the peer network of professional support and training that is MET. The next METM will be held in Tarragona, Spain, on 28–30 October 2010. For further information, please visit www.metmeetings.org.

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