

REPORT

Round Table: Translation policies at NGOs

Monday 22 June 2015, Aston University, Birmingham
Organised by Dr Wine Tesseur and Professor Christina Schaeffner

1. Aim of the round table

Many NGOs and charities provide translation and interpreting as part of their work, but their services are not always very structured. These organisations usually don't have much funding to devote to translation, which often results in translation being done by volunteers or staff who were not trained in translation. This round table aimed to provide an opportunity for NGOs, charities, academics and translators to meet and discuss challenges that NGOs and charities face when providing translation and interpreting, and to learn from each other. The round table also considered how universities can help NGOs and charities with their translation needs, and in what way we could collaborate in the future, both for research and training.

The round table was organised as a follow-up of Dr Wine Tesseur's doctoral research project "Transformation through Translation: Translation Policies at Amnesty International", one of the first major research projects focused on translation policies at NGOs. The project, conducted within the framework of TIME (see 5. *Round table discussion: Collaboration between universities and NGOs* for more information on TIME) revealed large differences in the translation policies of Amnesty International, depending on the language and the local Amnesty office, which resulted in large differences in the actual translations. The study argued that different people hold different beliefs of what translation is and should entail, and that raising awareness of these issues would help facilitating communication about translation needs and practices.

To raise awareness, more opportunities to discuss translation should be organised (e.g. by organising workshops, training events, and joint meetings), which would help in establishing a better translation service, with more effective use of translation resources. Many NGOs and charities work across national borders or are confronted with different languages as part of their work, and having effective translation policies in place will help these organisations to achieve their organisational mission and vision. The round table at Aston was a first event to raise translation awareness, and to explore future collaborative possibilities between NGOs and universities, both for research and for training. The organisers were keen to listen to the NGO practitioners' views on Dr Tesseur's research project and findings, and to their opinions and ideas as to what kind of collaborative efforts NGOs and charities would benefit from most.

2. Presentations by practitioners

- **Amnesty International – Philippa Dunn, Head of Operations, Language Resource Centre**

Amnesty International is a global NGO with members in over 150 countries, and offices and sections in about 70 countries. Amnesty operates on a democratic model: regular International Council Meetings (ICMs) are held, attended by delegates of national sections. The International Board (formerly International Executive Committee) serves as an executor between ICMs and is responsible for the implementation of decisions taken

at the ICM. Founded in 1961 with its International Secretariat in London, the NGO is now shifting to a different structure with regional offices being set up and taking over part of the work of the London-based Secretariat, including work on campaigning, researching and communications. The idea behind the change is to be able to respond quickly to events wherever they happen, and to have a more powerful presence in the global south and east.

These changes have also brought with it severe challenges and changes being implemented to Amnesty's translation service. Originally a strongly English-based organisation, Amnesty has translated for years into French, Spanish and Arabic, which are traditionally its official or strategic languages. Besides these, Amnesty also has translation teams for other major languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German, and Portuguese. Finally, there are many other local sections that work in their local language, and who deal with their translation needs on a local level, taking their own decisions and providing for their own needs.

Under the "One Amnesty" approach, in which the idea of Amnesty as one global organisation campaigning and standing up for human rights is central, Amnesty identified a need to start restructuring its language and translation services. Several internal reviews of the services took place, but it took until 2007 for Amnesty to produce a language policy and strategy which aimed to strengthen the impact of Amnesty in a multilingual world. To increase the amount of translation work from and into more languages, and to offer more support to language services throughout the organisation, Amnesty established a Language Resource Centre (LRC) in 2011. The LRC has started to incorporate many of the existing translation teams, but changes are ongoing. A big challenge for the future remains offering support to the many local sections who are catering for their own translation needs. There is a lack of information exchange between the offices and sections about translation practices. One of the key areas that the LRC is working on is to build a network of contacts throughout Amnesty of people who deal with translation and translation policy, and to collect information on local sections' practices.

- **Oxfam GB – Alberto Sanz Martins, Translations Manager**

Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 affiliates networked together in over 90 countries. The organisation's focus is on building a future free from the injustice of poverty. Oxfam has about 10,000 staff worldwide, of which about half work for Oxfam GB, and it has about 22,000 volunteers. Oxfam focuses on campaigning, advocacy, long-term development, and emergency situations.

Before the creation of the translation service of Oxfam GB, which was officially launched in 2011, there was no translation policy and no centralisation of translation. There were a lot of quality problems (e.g. caused by both a lack of proofreading and of translation professionalization) and inconsistencies in the use of terminology. Translation rates would depend on the team, and there was a lot of duplication of translation work.

The decision to create a translation service was partly due to the brand reputation risk of Oxfam. In 2009, Oxfam hired a researcher to investigate translation practices at Oxfam, but also to compare these with other NGOs such as Amnesty and Save the Children. The researcher proposed a translation policy for Oxfam GB, and a Translations Service Pilot was launched in 2010. The service included a centralised database, a translations policy, and hiring a translations manager and translations coordinator. In 2011, the service was launched to all Oxfam GB regions. This further developed in closer collaboration with other affiliates in the following year, and a translations officer being hired in 2013. At the moment, Oxfam is exploring whether the service can be shared with the whole confederation, instead of being just available to Oxfam GB teams.

The language structure/status of languages of Oxfam GB is as follows:

- **Level 1 – official language: English**

- *A language that is the dominant language of operation, both in terms of internal and external communication*
- **Level 2 – strategic language: French and Spanish**
 - *A language used for two or more of the following purposes:*
 - *Internal communication for majority of staff in one or more regions*
 - *External communication in more than one region*
 - *Working language of one or more Oxfam affiliates*
- **Level 3 – tactical language: Portuguese and Arabic**
 - *A language used for two or more of the following purposes:*
 - *Internal communication for small number of staff in more than one region*
 - *Targeted external communication in one or more regions*
 - *Use for external partnerships of significance in one region*

The overall objective of the translation service is to meet the translation needs of Oxfam in its agreed business languages, so that the organisation can communicate effectively with an international, multilingual audience, both internally and externally. Its specific objectives are:

- **Central Management:** to make the database accessible for all staff worldwide; to have translation policy and best practices applied by all translation teams.
- **Quality:** to ensure quality a) by having specialised translators as part of the team, with knowledge and expertise of the NGO and aid sector; b) by having all translations proofread by the team to ensure consistency and quality.
- **Cost savings:** Reducing translation rates; translating and proofreading within the team; reducing duplication and unnecessary translation.

Oxfam’s challenges for its translation services for the future include:

- **Team capacity:** There are 3 in-house translators (2 En>Fr; 1 En>Sp). Most translation work is conducted by freelancers. The proofreading and terminology work tends to be done in-house. The team translated about 1 million words in its first year. By now this has increased to about 2.5 million, as more translations are being requested through the team (instead of teams relying on their own networks). The figure is expected to increase even more in the future.
 - **Resources:** finding, obtaining licenses for, and managing the appropriate translation tools (Trados, Multiterm, no tool yet for subtitling).
 - **Changing structure:** Oxfam’s 2020 Restructuring Programme might require changes to the translation service as well.
 - **Differences in regional languages**
 - **Staff turnover:** Many staff don’t know how long a translation project can take (e.g. they will request 20,000 words to be translated by the next day). Large staff turnover makes it even more difficult to “educate” people about translation. The problem is being dealt with by introducing a session on translation and requesting translations in the induction programme for new staff.
- **Family for Every Child – Nicola Taylor, Head of Membership Support at Family for Every Child**

Family for Every Child is a global alliance of national civil society organisations around the world that work on children’s care issues. At the moment Family for Every Child has 18 members, and this will grow to about 40 members in the next few years. Its decision-making structure is similar to that of Amnesty: there is a General Assembly meeting once a year, where all members are represented and where the strategic direction of the alliance is set out. Next to this, there is a Board of elected members and co-opted trustees that oversees the delivery of the strategy. Family for Every Child’s global secretariat has about twenty staff members who are based around the world, and has an office in London with just a handful of staff.

The working languages of the alliance are English, Spanish, Arabic and Russian. When inviting new members to join the alliance, one of the criteria is that they should be able to work in one of these languages, although this is not always the case in practice. Working languages might change in the future, e.g. Portuguese might become one of the working languages, while Russian might no longer be used. This all depends on the growth of the membership over time.

Family does not have an in-house translation team. They mainly use a translation agency and freelancers. Documents that often need to be translated are for example research reports and policy documents, although it has been noted within the alliance over the last year that there is an increased need to translate and interpret day-to-day communication between members, such as e-mails and telephone conversations. Because freelance translators are not always available, cannot always meet turnaround times, and require a degree of admin and coordination from staff, Family has started to use a translation agency, based in Scotland. Although the turn-around of the agency is okay and much more fitted to the needs of the organisation, the content of the translations is not always up to standard, especially when it comes to terminology specific to the alliance and its field of work. This can include problems arising for the translation of seemingly very simple and straightforward words, such as “child”, “family”, or “care”. The translation agency does have a good pool of interpreters around the world that Family can rely on. The amount of words translated per year through the secretariat would be around 1 million maximum.

Family’s interest for the round table particularly stems from the changes Family is going through and the ongoing addition of new members. These changes naturally entail new challenges for translation and interpreting. A few examples of challenges for Family are:

- Deciding how much to spend on translation
- How much to translate, to how many languages, and which materials (e.g. reports, video subtitling etc.)
- The mixed quality and appropriateness of translations
- Linked to this: the problem of native speakers not being able to agree on an appropriate term
- Using professional or non-professional interpreters
- The pros and cons of simultaneous vs. consecutive interpreting
- When is using Google translate appropriate, etc.

• **Refugee and Migrant Centre – Heather Thomas, Head of New Projects**

The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) is a small charity based in Wolverhampton, with about 20 staff and 100 volunteers, who are regularly involved in the organisation. The Centre was founded in 1999 by volunteers who were themselves refugees. The Centre provides a dedicated service to asylum seekers, refugees and vulnerable migrants, who come from over 125 different countries.

On a typical day at the RMC, there are long queues in the waiting room, with up to about 125 people waiting. RMC provides advice and support on a wide variety of issues, including housing, health, welfare, immigration, employment, destitution, education and training. The RMC runs a Women’s Surgery, an MP Surgery, and regular Citizenship Workshops.

The RMC relies on or has a need for translation and interpreting throughout the day. Many of the Centre’s staff and volunteers are people who have gone through the experience of being a refugee or migrant themselves, and are thus not native speakers of English. While this may make formal letter writing an issue for caseworkers, the benefit of this situation is that they can often identify with and communicate with beneficiaries in their own language.

Because of its multicultural and multilingual staff and volunteers, RMC often receives requests for translation and interpreting from other charities and organisations in the region. RMC is somewhat considered as a place

where languages are available (30 available on site) and therefore translation and interpreting might be obtainable, although there are no professional or trained translators/interpreters working at the Centre.

Recurring issues and challenges with translation and interpreting, and language use more generally include:

- **Interpreters:** Interpreters working with the RMC are not accredited. RMC wonders how the interpreting quality can be checked if you don't have any knowledge or familiarity with the foreign language. At the moment, services are based on a relation of trust. Interpreters the RMC works with are either own staff members or volunteers. Sometimes RMC has to resort to using its own clients to help them out with interpreting needs, which could be deemed unethical. Another problem is e.g. different dialects in a language, such as Kurdish dialects, which makes it even harder to find appropriate interpreters.
- **Language quality:** Some kind of quality standard for texts/publications would be useful, both for foreign languages as for English.
- **Brand and reputation risk**
- **Languages:** When does it become viable to translate into a particular language on a regular basis? Especially keeping in mind that the Centre deals with people from over 125 countries.
- **Materials:** A lot of (translated) materials are duplicated across regions, due to a lack of exchange of information.
- **For asylum seekers/migrants:**
 - **Access to GPs:** Difficult to register with GPs, as the registration forms and services are rarely available in other languages.
 - **GP appointments:** When successfully registered with a GP, it remains problematic to gain access to an interpreter for the GP appointment. There is funding available to GPs to provide interpreting services, yet GPs are sometimes reluctant to make use of this, because working with an interpreter doubles the appointment time. Instead, GPs will often revert to other resources, which aren't always very ethical or constructive, e.g. Google translate, asking patients to bring their children to interpret, the Language Line.
 - **Access to other healthcare services:** there is no language support for e.g. visiting the dentist or optician.

3. Presentation by Dr Wine Tesseur on the findings of her doctoral research project “Transformation through translation: Translation policies at Amnesty International”

This presentation summarised the set-up and the key findings of Dr Wine Tesseur's doctoral research, as summarised on the poster on p.9. It was used as a lead-in to the discussion on “What is next?”. The benefits and contributions of the research for NGOs and academia were pointed out, while at the same time challenging the round table participants by asking them how useful they believed the research findings really are for NGOs. The research project was used as a way to start brainstorming on how academics can make their research more attractive for NGOs, and what kind of research NGOs really need or would be interested to get involved in.

4. Round table discussion: What's next?

The following provides a summary of issues indicated by the NGO participants. These include both areas that could be interesting for research, or in which NGOs could benefit from training or support provided by universities and academics.

- **Translation management:**
 - **Development of policy:** How do you develop a translation policy as an NGO/charity? There is a need for an increased exchange of information between NGOs/charities on language and translation policies and practices. Related to this is the question how NGOs/charities are

coping with language issues as part of the structural and organisational changes that many of them (Oxfam, Amnesty, Family) are implementing in today's global era.

- **Impact of policy:** How can you measure the impact of having a language or translation policy?

Questions that arise are:

- How much brand damage is caused by *not* having or providing translation into particular languages? Or e.g. by having staff do translation (because then they don't have time to do their other work)?
- What solutions would be good in terms of return on investment? E.g. hiring multilingual staff might be useful to have some translation done internally, but then how much time do these staff have left for their main tasks?

- **Translation/interpreting products:**

- **Translation:** How are translations received? How could we measure the impact of translation efforts? For example, could we investigate how people receive NGOs' texts, if the content is clearly understood, if it would convince them to undertake action/to donate/to get involved as a volunteer/etc. How do media receive NGOs texts? If translations are provided, are they picked up and reported on in the media? Etc.
- **Interpreting:** How could we check interpreting quality? How could we evaluate the pros and cons of e.g. telephone interpreting vs. having an interpreter on the ground?

- **Translation practices and beliefs:** In this area there are mostly training needs, such as:

- **Awareness-raising through training events/workshops/etc:**
 - **What:** how to work with an interpreter (ethical implications), how to write effective texts (also in English), how to work with translation agencies (what kind of information is important?), implications and precautions when working with volunteers, etc.
 - **For who:** Not only for NGOs, their staff and volunteers, but also for local authorities, smaller NGOs, job centres, etc. – any type of organisation that deals with assisting or providing services to a multicultural/multilingual audience.
 - **Problem:** The challenge in organising such an event is that these organisations tend to be very busy, and that they might not be aware of the importance of a translation policy ("People don't know what they don't know"...). The key to making such an event successful is to build a network of connections first.
- **Knowledge exchange and best practices:** there is a need to exchange information on translation policies and best practices. Could universities help in creating a platform where e.g. NGOs can exchange experiences, and also for example terminology knowledge that they have? If a platform is created, could it be linked to/affiliated with Babels, Proz.com or Translators Without Borders to give it more visibility and credibility?

5. Round table discussion: Collaboration between universities and NGOs

In this session Dr Wine Tesseur introduced two research projects that create a collaboration between universities and NGOs: TIME, as part of which Dr Tesseur's PhD was carried out, and the AHRC-project "The Listening Zones of NGOs", in which Dr Tesseur will work as a postdoctoral research assistant.

- **TIME: Translation Research Training: An Integrated and Intersectoral Model for Europe** (1 July 2011-30 June 2014)

This project was a Marie Curie FP7 Initial Training Network (ITN) that received EUR 1,228,978 funding from the European Commission. The project involved 4 academic partners (with 4 Early Career Research Fellows and one Experienced Researcher) and 7 associated partners, of which Amnesty International was one. Dr Wine Tesseur's doctoral research was carried out in her position as an Early

Career Research Fellow in TIME, and was made possible due to the requirement of the EU that all Early Career Researchers carry out work placements or “secondments” as part of their training. Such secondments as part of doctoral training are very unusual in Humanities. Collaborating with non-academic institutions was a new experience even to most of the senior academics involved. Some of the TIME work placements were very successful and useful for both parties (like the one with Amnesty International), others were not. The main lesson learned from the collaborations is that thorough preparation and discussion of the expectations of both parties is needed to make the collaboration a success.

- For more details on the collaborations as part of TIME, see: Pym, Anthony, González Núñez, Gabriel, Miquel-Iriarte, Marta, Ramos Pinto, Sara, Teixeira, Carlos S. C. & Tesseur, Wine. "[Work Placements in Doctoral Research Training in the Humanities: Eight Cases from Translation Studies](#)". *Across Languages and Cultures* 15(1), 2014. pp. 1–23. (A copy of the accepted manuscript can be found [here](#).)
- More details on the TIME project can be found on the [project website](#).

➤ **The Listening Zones of NGOs: Languages and cultural knowledge in development programmes** (1 July 2015-30 June 2018)

This project is organised by the Universities of Reading and Portsmouth, with the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), Oxford, who received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council for this interdisciplinary project. The aim of the project is to examine for the first time the role that languages and cultural knowledge play in the development programmes of UK-based NGOs, and to offer guidance and recommendations to NGOs and government on the basis of robustly researched case studies. Dr Wine Tesseur has been appointed as the postdoctoral researcher working on the project, alongside Professor Hilary Footitt (University of Reading), who is leading the project, and Dr. Angela Crack (University of Portsmouth).

- More details on the Listening Zones project can be found on the [project web page](#).

The above projects were described to the participants to raise awareness among NGOs about the possibilities of collaborating with universities for research, and that also contain elements of guidance and training for NGOs. The two projects are excellent examples of what collaboration between universities and NGOs can look like. Having an impact outside of the academic context is becoming increasingly important for academic research, and this opens the door for more future collaborations. Dr Tesseur also pointed out that as part of the new project, several interviews will be conducted with NGO international staff, and that the participation of the practitioners at the round table would be warmly welcomed.

Comments from the ensuing discussion:

- The NGO participants indicated that Dr Tesseur’s organisational study of the translation services at Amnesty was very interesting, especially the part focusing on Amnesty Flanders (AIVL), as it is often not known how local, smaller offices deal with translation, and what implications these different approaches have. This lack of information applies not only to Amnesty, but also to the other NGOs that were present.
- It was indicated that very similar studies are on occasion ordered from independent consultants, and that it is disappointing that the collaboration as part of TIME was not made more use of by Amnesty. As described in the set-up of the collaboration, the project and research interest grew quite organically, and neither Amnesty’s LRC nor the researchers involved in the project had much experience in these types of collaborative projects.
- It was established that there are definitely common interests for research, but that the problem remains funding: NGOs will often require a study quite urgently. In an academic context, setting up a project, applying for and gaining the necessary funding can take a long time.

- Participants found the presentations of the two projects very useful, pointing out they were not aware academic research was interested in these topics, nor of the various funding opportunities.
- Participants expressed their interest in the *Listening Zones* project and asked to be kept informed, and were also willing to help in establishing interview participants/being interviewed.
- Participants were keen to set up future projects and be part of any workshops organised in future.

6. Round table discussion: What can we learn from previous research on translation at other institutions?

Professor Christina Schaeffner gave more information on what kind of research has previously been conducted at Aston University, and her experiences with grant applications. She pointed out that having experience in applying for funding is important to make an application successful, yet it does not guarantee success. Careful planning and not giving up after an application has been turned down are essential – it might work next time! Again, this situation emphasises that NGOs should keep the possibility of a long timeframe in mind when setting up collaborations.

7. Closing remarks

The round table was a useful opportunity for NGOs and academics to exchange information, and to increase awareness of each other's research interests. The numerous discussions and presentations raised awareness among NGO practitioners of what academic research can offer; and it gave academics insight into what kind of research and training NGO practitioners need. The participants concluded that making these initial connections was highly valuable, and a good starting point to develop new initiatives. The organisers take away that:

- The NGOs that were present were interested in the upcoming project *Listening Zones of NGOs*. They would like to be kept informed, and they are happy to be interviewed for the project or to help setting up relevant connections for interview participants.
- There is a clear interest in the area of translation/interpreting policy at NGOs, and giving these past and possible future initiatives more online visibility would be very helpful for NGOs, translators, and academics (especially to increase personal networks). Setting up a webpage with relevant information would be a good first step to increase collaboration, knowledge exchange and networking.

