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THE AMERICAN TRANSLATORS ASSOCIATION
ACCREDITATION EXAM

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The American Translators Association (ATA) is the largest professional society of translators and language specialists in the United States. One of the many aims of the association is promoting the recognition of translating as a profession. Therefore, in 1963 ATA established the Accreditation Committee with the purpose of developing accreditation exams for translators. It was not until 1972, however, that ATA began to offer such tests. The purpose of the testing program is to accredit translators with the basic skills required to enter the free-lance market and to function as professionals in this field. Accreditation offers translators and clients one measurement of the translator's competence and commitment [Ref. 1].

ATA is based in Ossining, New York, with local chapters throughout the United States. The accreditation exam is offered once a year during the annual conference held in the Fall. However, Chapters and individual members, who are in good standing and are accredited translators may organize local sittings as often as needed. ATA requires that there be a minimum of 5 candidates in order to approve an accreditation exam at any time other than the annual conference. In order to take the exam, candidates must be members of ATA and pay a fee of \$50.00 per exam, or \$30.00 if the exam is a re-take for the first time. The accreditation exam is offered as a non-profit service to ATA members [Ref. 1]. Persons who are not members of ATA may join at the time they sign up to take the accreditation exam. Membership dues are \$50.00 for regular members and \$25.00 for students. All candidates must pre-register to take the exam and pay all fees at that time.

Members of ATA may take accreditation exams in several language combinations: French, German, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Polish, Italian, and Japanese into English, or English into French, German, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Polish, and Italian. At this time it is not possible to take an exam from, let's say, Spanish into Italian, or Russian into Polish. The source language or the target language must be English.

The accreditation exam consists of 5 passages. Each candidate has three hours in which to translate 3 of the 5 passages. Candidates should expect at least one passage in each of the following categories: literary, legal or business, scientific or medical, general, and semi-technical [Ref. 1]. Most passages are approximately 200-250 words long. The accreditation exam is an open book test, therefore candidates may bring dictionaries, glossaries, and other resource materials that are normally used when translating. A good rule of thumb is to bring a monolingual dictionary for the source and the target language, a good

bilingual dictionary, and technical glossaries or dictionaries in the fields listed above.

At the beginning of the exam, each candidate receives a packet which has been mailed from headquarters in New York. The packet consists of the 5 passages, instructions to the candidate, lined paper, and an envelope. Each envelope has been coded with a number and the language combination. On the upper left corner there is a statement that each candidate must read and sign. From then on, the candidate is identified only by the code number on the envelope. The exam lasts exactly 3 hours. That is enough time to translate the three passages, review and revise them, and make sure that all the requirements have been met. It is not advisable to do a rough draft with the expectation that there will be time to recopy it. Once the three hours are up the exam is over. There are no extensions.

Accreditation exams have been offered at BYU every year for the last 8 years. As an accredited member of ATA in good standing, I have organized a sitting whenever several members of the community have requested one. In dealing with each particular case, I have encountered candidates who fall under one or several of the following categories: Persons who have had foreign language courses and/or foreign residency and feel that they can translate; persons who are working as translators; persons who have gone through a translator training program; and persons who have done some "translating", but that when questioned further it is clear that they don't know the difference between interpretation and translation, and therefore believe that there's no difference.

In 1976, when I took the exam, I was told that the yearly success rate was about 25%. Last year, I attended a presentation of the Accreditation Committee during the Annual Conference, and it was mentioned that the success rate is about 40% now. Perhaps the success rate has improved because translation has become a little more competitive in the United States, and in the last 10 to 15 years there has been a marked increase in Translator Training Programs at the University level. Nevertheless, the success rate is very low, if we take into consideration that a large percentage of those taking the exam consider themselves translators. Why such failure, then?

When I organize an accreditation exam at BYU, I meet a lot of people who come by my office asking for information. The first thing I ask them is what kind of training they have had in translation. The answers vary: they have translated in the mission field - which as it turns out, it wasn't translation but rather interpretation; they are working at the Missionary Training Center and do some translating -that could also be interpreting instead of translating, but it could also be both; they are studying a foreign language and they like to translate; they have heard that accredited translators get paid "better" and they want to cash in on their language skills. If we add to this that in most of these cases the translating has been into their foreign language, then we have high-risk candidates. ATA defines high-risk candidates as people attempting to translate from their mother tongue into a foreign language or lacking practical translation experience [Ref.1].

In view of the above, it is not surprising that the question I hear most often when proctoring accreditation exams is: "How close of a translation do they want?", which means: "Do I do a literal translation? A word for word translation?" I believe that if a person needs to ask that question, then he or she has no business taking the accreditation exam. Instead, it would be better to take the practice test that ATA offers for \$7.50.

In the words of Mildred Larson, author of Meaning Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-language Equivalence, translation is the process of studying the lexicon, the grammatical structure, and the communication situation of the source language text, analyzing it in order to determine the meaning, and then reconstructing this same meaning using the natural forms of the receptor language [Ref. 2]. One of the key concepts in this statement is "using the natural forms of the receptor language." If the translation sounds unnatural, foreign, then it is a poor attempt to translating. On the other hand, if the translator uses the source-text as a guide, and then goes on to write the same ideas in the target-language, he or she may be taking liberties that will also invalidate a translation. Translators deal with form and meaning. If the form is the appropriate one for the target-language, and if the meaning of the source-text has been understood correctly -and in order to do that, it is necessary to have some expertise in the subject matter of the text so as to render it into the target-language with the appropriate lexicon-, then the translator most probably will meet with success.

In view of the above, there are some strategies that may come in handy when taking the accreditation exam.

1. If this is the first time you are taking the ATA Accreditation Exam, take it into your native language. Unless you are a very gifted language specialist, most non-native speakers have problems with collocation, and that in turns, creates unnatural forms in the target language. My favorite example comes from what Americans call "the read, white, and blue" when referring to the flag. If I were to call it "the white, red, and blue" the words would be the same, they would still name the colors present in the American flag, but the collocation of the words would immediately identify me as a non-native speaker. The form that I have used is not natural.

2. Prior to taking the exam, I feel it is wise to "warm-up" in preparation for a very demanding three hours of translating. We all know that there are days when one can translate for hours and the text flows easily. There are times, however, when nothing seems to come to mind. Warming-up prior to taking the exam may very well help you get in the right frame of mind to tackle the task.

3. Read all five passages before you make your selection. It is amazing how often I see people look at the title of each passage, choose one of the passages, and without having read it all the way through, begin translating the first word, and then the next one, and so on. Then comes the complaint that the passage was more difficult than it was expected, and by then it is too late to choose a different one because

of the time constraint. To avoid such problems, read carefully, and choose those passages that best match your field or fields of expertise. Once you have decided on the three that you would like to translate, begin with the easiest one. Don't forget to double space your translation. Aside from the fact that it is standard practice among translators, one of the rules of the accreditation exam is to double space. In proctoring exams I find that although I stress that rule at the beginning of each accreditation exam, too often I find candidates that start off double spacing and then switch to every line. If you hope to re-copy your rough draft, you may find that there is no time left to do so.

4. Give yourself enough time for each passage. You will be working under pressure, racing against the clock, or so it will seem. Each passage is about 200-250 words long. There is ample time to complete all three if you tackle each one at a regular pace and don't get hanged up on words. Look for the ideas, for the natural transfer of meaning rather than single words.

5. Spell carefully. Pay attention to rules of punctuation in the target-language. Just because the source-text uses a coma or a semi-colon it doesn't mean that you should copy them into the receptor language if that is not where they would normally appear. For languages with diacritical marks, make sure that you know the rules and apply them consistently.

6. Watch out for cognates. Any time you are tempted to use a cognate, document the meaning before you use such word. As we all know, there are good cognates and there are false cognates. However, too many times, specially for those living in a foreign environment, false cognates begin to creep into their own native language and they no longer notice the difference. If you choose to use a cognate, make sure that you have checked it out in the dictionary, even if you think that you know the meaning and therefore you won't make a mistake.

7. Remember that the source text is only a map. As you read it you will find the message that needs to be translated into another language. But, in order to do that, you will have to use the proper form of the target-language, regardless of the form used in the source-text. That means that you do not copy the structure of the source text, that you do not follow the grammatical pattern of the source-language, if the structure of the target-language is, as in most cases, not compatible.

8. Make sure that you leave enough time to review your translations and make revisions. Follow the appropriate patter: First read the translation. Pay attention to the style. Does it flow? Does it sound natural? Does it read well? Second, read the original text. You have already read it a couple of times while making your selection and translating, but read it now to make sure that you understood correctly. Third, compare both text. This step is very important. Don't read the source-text and then your translation. That was what you did when you were translating. To review your work, compare the texts in the opposite direction: first the translation and then the original. Does the translation mean the same as the original? Is all the information

there, or does it become complete only when one also reads the original? If that is the case, your translation needs more work.

Once the three hours are up, candidates must return all materials to the coded envelope and seal it. There are no exceptions regardless of the reason. The proctor collects all envelopes and then mails them to Headquarters in New York.

Ruth Harwood Cline, who has chaired the ATA Accreditation Committee, states that the examinations are graded by two or three graders who know the candidate only by number [Ref. 3]. The ATA brochure on accreditation further explains that the graders tend to be established staff and free-lance translators, some with university affiliations, who were selected because of their outstanding performance on the accreditation examination [Ref. 1]. Exams are graded on the basis of the consensus of two graders, if they both agree, or the opinion of a third one in case of disagreement. Judging from what's happened in previous years, it is safe to say that it takes anywhere from 2 months to 10 weeks for candidates to find out whether they have passed or not.

Ms Cline explains that some of the causes of failure are: Omissions, overly-free translations, overly-literal translations, and simply translating only two of the three passages [Ref. 3].

Candidates taking the accreditation exam need to be aware that, as stated in the accreditation brochure, the accreditation examination is not a teaching tool and becomes the exclusive property of the committee. The examination will not be returned, and the results will not be discussed [Ref. 1].

In the meeting that I attended last October, it was stated that during 1987 the committee had read more than 500 exams, and that the most popular language combinations were English into Spanish and Spanish into English. In this area alone, there were three sittings during the 1987-1988 academic year: two at BYU, and one in Salt Lake for the Translation Department of the Church.

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