

TRANSLATIONS IN AUSTRALIA

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The only significant scientific translation work I could mention in response to Pam Olsen's survey was the translation service that operated in CSIRO. I would be happier discussing this service if it was ten years ago, for now it is a sorry tale of something useful that has been closed down. When the last translator employed by CSIRO retired in 1992 the service effectively closed down.

At first I need to explain something of the nature of the organization. The initials stand for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization. It began in 1926 and is the largest research organization in Australia with more than 7,000 staff, including nearly 3,000 scientists working in laboratories and field stations around Australia. Their work covers a broad range of areas of economic and social value to the nation, including agriculture, minerals and energy, manufacturing, communication, construction, health, environment, fisheries and oceanography.

The Translations Service evolved from a wartime service which provided Australian scientists with translations mainly of German, Italian and Russian journals. It was formally established in 1946 with three staff and initially it also undertook work for other government instrumentalities as well as CSIRO. By 1973-75 there were seven translators, three stationed in Melbourne, two in Sydney, one in Brisbane and one in Adelaide, their placement determined by demand in those cities. At this time translations were produced from 18 languages but Japanese and Chinese, along with several of the less common languages such as Finnish, were translated by a panel of selected external translators. Most of this external work was in Japanese, approximately 60%, and the demand for Japanese translation was increasing. This imposed a considerable financial burden on the service for the rates paid to translators of Japanese were higher than those of European languages. Similar comments were still being made about Japanese translation in the last years of the operation of the service. There had been repeated requests throughout the 1980s for the employment of a Japanese translator.

The amount of translation work done was increased by the introduction of a system of "translation clinics" in 1973 which involved a translator being present at an advertised time and place to conduct vis-à-vis translations with the scientist requesting the translation. Longer translations and translations from sites which were not visited were recorded on cassette tapes, with any subsequent typing or editing the responsibility of the scientist. A table published in the 1976-77 Annual report shows a 30% increase in the number of translations between 1973-75 and 1976-77 and it seems that this period was the peak for the operation of the service. Through this period and into 1979 the majority of translations were from German, Russian and French: 84-86%.

Translations into English 1973-1975 and 1976-1977

The figures given in table relate only to translations of items of at least the length of an average journal article and do not include the large number of shorter items such as correspondence, synopses or table headings regularly translated in all centres.

Language	Number of articles translated					Total	
	1973-1975		1976-1977		Recorded	'73-'75	'76-'77
	Written	Vis-à-vis	Written	Vis-à-vis			
Afrikaans					1		1
Bulgarian	1		4			1	4
Czech	3		9			3	9
Danish	2		4		1	2	5
Dutch	14		18	8	8	14	34
French	107	67	122	63	44	174	229
German	317	167	246	224	96	484	566
Hungarian	8		3			8	3
Italian	15	4	18	9	4	19	31
Latin			4				4
Norwegian	3		8		2	3	10
Polish	8		10	2		8	12
Portuguese	11		14	6		11	20
Romanian	2		6	1		2	7
Russian	196	75	204	160	31	271	395
Serbo-Croat			2				2
Slovak	1		2			1	2
Spanish	53	4	39	7	3	57	49
Swedish	9	3	8	4	7	12	19
Ukrainian	2		1			2	1
Total	752	320	722	484	197	1072	1403

External translations decreased during 1976-77 due at first to a limit being imposed on the amount spent on external translations, then to a decision to pass on the cost of external translations to divisions. This could now be regarded as a harbinger for a similar, more drastic decision, taken ten years later.

The number of translators had been reduced to four and the number of translations had reduced to 646 in 1979 and by 1983-84 there were three translators who provided 574 translations.

The decline and eventual demise of the service began in 1988 when, after a management review of the unit which administered the translation service, the service was reduced to one translator and a "user pays policy" was introduced for translations. Initially, in 1989/90, there was a disbursement of funds to divisions on the basis of previous usage but from 1990/91 funds had to be found at the divisional level. After years of obtaining free translations for most language

requirements, scientists resisted paying for all translations. Not surprisingly this resulted in a reduced level of translations.

In June 1991 a questionnaire was issued to scientific program leaders and librarians seeking to elicit comments on the need for a translation service, the value of the existing service and preferences for various funding options. The preamble to the questionnaire claimed that: "In the past ten years the CSIRO Translations Service has been poorly managed. It has been allowed to run down and to meet the needs of scientists in an inefficient and ineffective way." However, a preliminary report on the questionnaire said that in general, librarians and research staff were satisfied with the current service. The survey confirmed that use of the service was low and the report said it was not clear whether this drop was due to the traumas of the last few years, the fact that the service was not providing Asian language translations, a general reduction in the need for translations, or a combination of these factors.

By the time of the survey the funding of the Translations service was in the hands of the Institute Resource Managers. CSIRO's basic organizational unit is the division with divisions working in similar areas of research grouped into institutes. Despite the continuing support for the service revealed by the survey and a plan for the future management of the service the Resource Managers decided not to continue a Translations service. In the final event it was a victim of economic rationalism. This was a period when centralised services were not considered desirable, it was cost-effective to contract out this kind of work, and the user-pays principle was to be applied wherever possible. The continued decline in the use of translations may vindicate those who considered the service unnecessary, it may be the increasing commercial emphasis of CSIRO's work, or a greater proportion of science being published in English but it could simply be the high cost of contract translation work. Scientists may ponder just how serious the effect on their work is of ignoring the science not published in English.

Finally, bibliographic control of all the work done by the Translation Service is in the form of a central, author card index at CSIRO Information Services in Melbourne. The Marine Laboratories Library has a similar card index for its own subset of translations. In the last years of the Service a database was created which had 1,162 records when the Service closed. It is still accessible on Ozline at the National Library of Australia but for marine science translations it would be preferable to contact the Marine Laboratories Library.