

## The ATA Conference: Impressions of a First-time Attendee

by Gianni Davico

### Abstract

Some thoughts on the 2004 ATA Conference held in Toronto, with considerations on the future of the translation market and a careful look at the benefits which participation can bring to translators.

### Biography

Gianni Davico is the founding member of Tesi & testi (<http://www.tesietesti.it>), a translation agency based in Turin, Italy. For many years now he has observed the translation world, and his articles have been published in "Tradurre", the newsletter of the ATA Italian Language Division, as well as in other publications. He has just published a book about the Italian translation market, *L'industria della traduzione* (see <http://www.seb27.it/scheda.html?id=66>).

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An awful thing happened to me whilst in Toronto (the only awful thing, to be honest; everything else was simply perfect, as I will explain below): I left a bag in the back of a taxicab. When the taxi driver returned the bag to me emptied of its contents, I went straight to the police station to report the theft. When I told the police officer that I was the owner of a translation agency, he looked at me as if I were an alien from outer space. Then he shook his head, declining to comment, but it was as clear as day that he thought I was simply crazy.

The situation immediately made me think of Leah Ruggiero's exhortation during her talk to first-time attendees to the Conference: "We owe it to ourselves and the world to help people better understand what our work is all about. The language industry benefits society in so many different ways and we need to make people aware of it." This reflects what Chris Durban has for some time now eloquently advocated in *Onionskin*, the column she publishes in this magazine and in the ITI Bulletin. It is also the message conveyed by Kevin Hendzel, Co-Chair of the ATA Public Relations Committee, in the fine speech he gave at the Conference itself, not to mention the ATA's on-going commitment to media information, a commitment which is producing successful results, as confirmed by the coverage given by the media to the ATA itself and to translation in general.

The most recent ATA Conference (Toronto, 13-16 October 2004), which was my first, was excellent from all points of view. It proved to be a marvelous opportunity, for those of us belonging to this fascinating and frightening world, to learn and to make the acquaintance of other translators, agency owners, and others involved in the sector. It was also an opportunity to see our competitors as potential allies rather than arch enemies. Above all, the Conference proved to be a unique opportunity for everybody to grow.

The organization of the event was positively amazing - starting from the welcome itself, everything was well structured and clear. In particular, I found it really useful that everyone was wearing a badge with his or her name, country of origin and languages spoken. This certainly made approaching people easier, and hence promoted the exchange of opinions. It was also funny to walk around peering at people's badges rather than at their faces! ☺

At any rate, there were lots of chances to chat informally and at leisure with both the other participants and the representatives of the ATA - especially during *Breakfast with the Board*. Again, a warm round of applause goes to the organizers.

I also noticed that certain fringe events were greatly appreciated, in particular the Job Marketplace, giving everyone the opportunity to display their business cards and résumés, and the Exhibit Hall, featuring the chance to meet agencies looking for translators and other companies involved in the sector (software houses, specialist publishers, and so on).

There were almost 180 sessions, focusing on twelve languages and 14 different specializations, offering something for everyone. Obviously, it is quite impossible to discuss them all extensively, however, the site (<http://www.atanet.org/conf2004/>) gives a good detailed description of all the talks and seminars. I will limit myself to what may be called my field of specialization (agencies), and will comment further on an issue which geographically relates to me - namely, the Italian situation with respect to what is happening in the US.

In terms of the first point, there were four events which I especially appreciated of the ten specifically focused on agencies. I list them here in order of the importance I believe they hold for agencies:

1. *Quality-First Management in the Translation and Localization Industry*, held by Randall Morgan, on the importance of quality and its careful management in all production phases, and the importance of the project manager being in control of the situation, without succumbing to pressures applied by customers to have their translations delivered on an urgent basis.
2. *Targeting and Profiling Translation Clients*, an introduction by Renato Beninatto to sales management techniques for translation agencies, with suggestions on how to best profile and win customers. It was a popular, 'standing room only' event, reflecting perhaps how important sales and sales strategy is in the industry. A solid, down to earth and concrete view of the market.
3. *Raising the Bar: Optimizing the Agency-Subcontractor Relationship for Ultimate Client Satisfaction*, by Scott Bass and Keiran Dunne, addressed several topical issues including the growing dependence of translations on computers, quality understood in terms of customer satisfaction, and the pro-active relationship between the agency and the translator in an effort to provide service excellence to the final customer.

4. *Guerilla Marketing for Translation Agencies*, by Greg Churilov, successfully highlighted the importance of marketing our services, which, in the end, is really a question of pure and simple common sense, though the talk itself did not touch on particularly revolutionary concepts.

On the other hand, although the *Translation Company Division Annual Meeting* was an important gathering, I found that it seemed to lack real inspiration and a strong guiding thread. Nevertheless, some significant points were raised, which could well be worth developing on, for example, the need to join forces in order to remain competitive in an ever-changing market. It was also an important opportunity for agencies to meet. However, I believe its structure should be reconsidered and strengthened in order to get the most out of the occasion.

I also noticed a certain tension brewing between agencies and translators. An old bone of contention, one might say, and this is certainly true. However, agencies are ATA members to all effects, and unless the ATA takes up an official line (excluding them from the association, for example), this tension will not be subdued. It should be noted that in Italy, and in Europe in general (and this brings me to my second point), the situation as regards this issue is quite different; there are separate bodies for each group. In Italy, for example, the main translators' association is the AITI, whilst agencies form part of the Feder.Cen.Tr.I. - two distinct bodies pursuing different sets of goals. Perhaps this could be a possible solution for the US situation.

Coming from Italy also allowed me to appreciate - from a different perspective than America (speaking in simplistic terms) - how the various problems faced and the opportunities on offer are exactly the same regardless of which side of the Atlantic one comes from. Now that the European Union has begun to take on concrete shape, and America finds itself dealing no longer with individual countries but with the EU, relationships are becoming more balanced. As a result, America has a lot to learn from Europe (whilst the opposite was, and remains, beyond dispute), and in fact I met many far-sighted people keen to exchange their impressions and experiences with their overseas colleagues.

In conclusion, it was an experience that I would recommend to any translator (including those on the staff of agencies), and those coming from abroad - and in fact over a quarter of the participants came from countries other than the United States, signifying the enormous importance this event holds for the translation world. For all translators, coming out of one's shell is an enriching and thought-provoking experience which does a world of good, and allows one to view his/her occupation and the market with greater peace of mind.

See you in Seattle!