



BECOMING A LANGUAGE PRACTITIONER

This pamphlet gives some general information on the language practice scene in South Africa (this includes translation, interpreting and editing and in some instances terminological work) and should be supplemented with the Institute's general pamphlets on the individual professions, on the Institute itself and on the Institute's accreditation system.

Who can become a language practitioner?

Language practice is at present unregulated in South Africa, except for sworn translation. What this means is that free market principles apply and anyone who wishes to may work as a language practitioner (translator, editor, interpreter) if they can find a client wishing to use and willing to pay for their services. There are no formal requirements to be registered or have any particular qualifications.

The government in 2013 began a process of regulation, however, and in 2014 passed the South African Language Practitioners' Council Act (Act 8 of 2014). This Act will establish the South African Language Practitioners' Council (SALPC), which will oversee the profession. All language practitioners will in due course have to be registered with and accredited by the Council in order to work as translators, interpreters, language editors or terminologists. Regulations have been published under the Act, giving some further details of the requirements; others will be set by the SALPC when it is established. No date of implementation has yet been announced for the establishment of the SALPC. Belonging to an organisation like SATI means that one is kept up to date on developments and requirements and as a practitioner you can be sure that your professional association is working to protect your interests in relation to the legislation as far as possible.

Sworn translators are a special case. These are people who have been accepted by the authorities as qualified to produce translations for official purposes, e.g. for emigration or immigration, documents that are used in court, educational certificates for purposes of study or work permits. The procedure for becoming a sworn translator involves being tested (either by a sworn translator of seven years' standing in the relevant language combination or by SATI as part of its accreditation system), having a certificate in a specified form issued by your tester if they are satisfied of your ability, drawing up a set of specified documents for use in court, applying to the registrar at your local division of the High Court for a date and then appearing before a judge and being sworn in. One will then be issued with a certificate by the Court, indicating that one has been accepted as a sworn translator; this allows one to practise as such and to have a stamp made that one can stamp on sworn translations.

Not all translations need to be sworn. This is in fact a fairly narrow field of practice and will involve translation of mainly legal and official documentation. There are a number of conventions related to the way a sworn translation should be done; the Institute has published a manual giving guidelines in this regard.

What qualifications does one need?

It is important to realise that having a knowledge of two languages does not necessarily mean one will be a good translator. Theoretical knowledge on its own is also not enough. One has to have a natural ability for transferring the underlying meaning and nuances, which many people are not able to do successfully. Practice improves one's abilities, but without the innate competence one is unlikely to be successful.

There are a number of institutions that offer training in different types of language practice and although not essential to becoming a good translator, etc., it is a good idea to take a course or two. This gives one some theoretical grounding and today the courses generally include a fair amount of practical work as well, which is invaluable.

What demand is there?

It is not easy to paint a picture of the demand for language services. There is a demand, but without regulation it is not possible to ascertain exactly what it is. The public in South Africa is not particularly well informed when it comes to language matters and this influences the extent of the demand. The government in 2012 passed the Use of Official Languages Act (Act 12 of 2013), which came into operation in May 2013. This legislation requires various government structures to set up language units, which in turn influences the demand for language services, especially in the indigenous languages. With South Africa's increased global interaction since 1994, there is also an increased demand for other languages. Globalisation and technological advances in addition mean that one can work for clients anywhere in the world. By the same token, though, there are many people already in this profession and the closing of many language offices over the past few decades makes it very difficult for newcomers to the profession to obtain the practical experience that is required to be successful. One should

therefore not expect to enter the freelance market and be flooded with work; it takes years to build up a successful practice and many people start on a part-time basis in conjunction with a job in a different field and make the transition when their client base is large enough to sustain them.

How does one start out?

As in any profession, starting out is not easy. Word of mouth remains the most successful means of obtaining clients, so it is a good idea to join any professional bodies in your field and mix with others in the profession. Joining SATI means one is entered onto their database and stands the chance of being referred to a prospective client. However, with the Institute having over 800 members, this is unlikely to be a reliable source of work, especially in the more common language combinations. In addition, the Institute prefers to refer accredited members, as this is the only guarantee it has of a member's ability. Since this is also the client's only guarantee, gaining accreditation is also a good way of promoting one's services. Beyond this, building up a client base is a matter of considering who might need one's services and approaching them. Advertise as widely as possible in relevant media (the Institute also maintains a register of freelancers on its Website). Do volunteer work for clubs, interest groups, friends and so on in order to build up experience and references, and use any contacts you have. You can also approach translation agencies and ask about being put onto their database of freelancers.

What does one charge?

Another question invariably of interest to persons considering entering this profession is what one can charge and what one can earn. Don't think that you are going to get rich as a translator or interpreter! Again, since the profession is unregulated, there are no minimum or recommended fees. Market forces dictate rates and so they can vary tremendously, depending on region, language, subject, level of experience and client. The Institute undertakes informal surveys on a regular basis, the results of which offer an idea of what is currently being charged, but there are no "official" rates. Guidelines are published on our website. Earning potential depends on where you live, who your clients are and how many hours a day you put into your work.