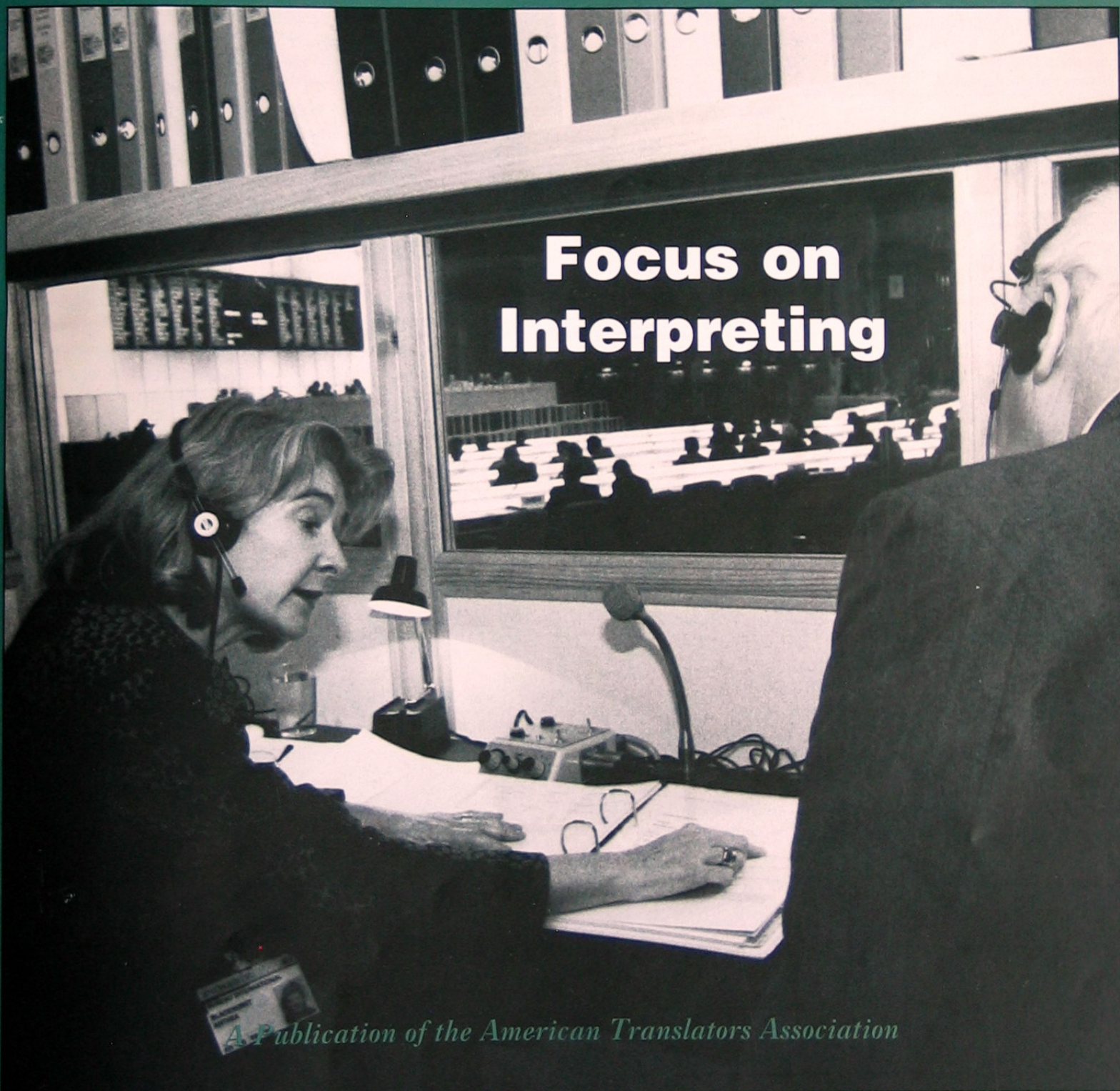


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Ukrainian—An Emerging Market?

By Igor Vesler

The telephone rings. "Hello, is this Igor? My name is John Anybody from the XYZ Corporation. Are you a Russian translator? Excellent. We have an agreement that needs to be translated into Ukrainian. Are you available?"

This is a conversation that I have had many times. Sounds good, right? Except that nobody would be likely to ask a Swahili translator to work with a text in Urdu. But until very recently the Ukrainian language has been widely considered—at least among the general public—to be just another dialect of Russian. This was not purely a matter of linguistic literacy. Historically and geographically, Ukraine was a part of the former Soviet Union for a long time, and the language of all business and trade with Ukraine has been predominantly Russian, which, to a great extent, contributed to the creation of such a peculiar stereotype.

Today, American businesses are increasingly exploring new opportunities in Ukraine. The number of American law firms and trade and industrial companies establishing offices in Ukrainian cities has tripled over the last three years. The recent approval of the IMF loan to Ukraine, U.S. assistance in dismantling Ukrainian nuclear weaponry, and numerous joint projects are adding to a steady growth in this trend. As a translator, I can measure this growth by the number of requests for Ukrainian translations: from eight in 1990 to 72 in 1994. (Besides, it definitely is not pure coincidence that an article on government involvement in the translation business was written in the October 1994 *Chronicle* by Edward J. Salazar, the U.S. Department of State's desk officer for Ukraine!)

However, things are changing much more slowly in language than in the economy. All such changes are not always positive: presently, the Ukrainian language, even though it's gradually getting back to its roots, suffers from the same contagious disease Russian does by borrowing mostly English terminology and phraseology. (Reading Ukrainian newspapers is still a tough business for me. Sometimes I think that it would be much better if certain articles were written in English.) Although this probably makes life easier for Ukrainian-into-English translators, the opposite is not true. Ukrainian business, trade, and financial terminology and phraseology, which started developing in the 19th century, have been all but forgotten. The situation is aggravated by the fact that for more than 60 years the Ukrainian language has experienced strong pressure from the language of "Big Brother," i.e. from Russian (which itself has

been grossly distorted and spoiled by ideological clichés and communist phraseology). Borrowing Russian words and expressions became so common that a special, and very contemptuous, Ukrainian word—"surzhik"—was coined for that weird Russian-Ukrainian slang.

Unfortunately, the apparent proximity of the Russian and Ukrainian languages creates a false impression that any Russian translator who has spent some time or even lived in Ukraine can handle English-Ukrainian work. Quite often here in the U.S. translators accredited by ATA in the English-Russian language combination can't resist the temptation and, armed with only a school English-Ukrainian dictionary and a vague idea of what the real Ukrainian language is supposed to sound like (save for grammar, style, and special terminology), accept assignments into Ukrainian. The results can be shameful. I once witnessed some Ukrainian officials diligently try several times to read one such 'translation' and finally asked their American counterpart to give them the English original to have it translated by a local translator. In other cases I received requests from translation agencies to review Ukrainian translations, and in most cases these were so poor that no editing was possible. Such cases damage the reputation of real professionals, in particular, and that of our profession, in general.

At the recent ATA convention in Austin I was a moderator of the Ukrainian business and legal terminology workshop. After having had the pleasure to meet colleagues and work with them, I've come to the conclusion that there are so many highly experienced and professional Ukrainian translators actively working with the Ukrainian language that the time has come to establish an accreditation exam in the English-Ukrainian and Ukrainian-English language pairs. This is not just a matter of showing respect for a language that more than 50 million people currently speak. With its geographical location, well-developed industry, and a large number of trained specialists, Ukraine is becoming increasingly attractive to foreign (and, in particular, American) investors. This creates a new market for translation and interpretation services requiring professionals whose credentials are validated by ATA accreditation.

Recently the *SlavFile*, the newsletter of the Russian Division, spread a message for those who would support this idea. Since then, I have received a dozen phone calls from Ukrainian translators, but we need more! Please call me at (718) 853-5030 or fax your comments and suggestions at (718) 435-8930 (24 hours a day).

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