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### What about German? Russian? A letter to the Editor

Anna Stearns

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## LE COIN DU LECTEUR

¶ *Un confrère nous écrit de Washington :*

Monsieur Robert Assa, membre de la STM et collaborateur actif du *J. des T.*, siégeant à la fois au *Comité de direction* et au *Comité de rédaction*, nous a quitté récemment pour des cieux plus cléments. Il nous écrit de Washington pour nous donner sa nouvelle adresse (917 West Greenwich Street, Falls Church, Va. USA) et nous annoncer qu'il a servi à deux reprises d'interprète lors de conférences internationales. Notre confrère nous promet des textes pour le Journal et notre Comité de rédaction l'a nommé à l'unanimité membre correspondant pour la capitale fédérale américaine.

Nous souhaitons bonne chance à M. Assa dans ses nouvelles fonctions et attendons impatiemment les textes promis.



¶ *What about German ? Russian ? A letter to the Editor :*

A very constructive letter was sent us some months ago about what should be done in order to promote the *Journal* and secure a wider interest in it among translators and linguists. The following are extracts from Dr. Stearns' letter, which was accompanied with a handsome *abonnement de soutien*, a practice which always makes the cockles of an Editor's heart pleasantly warm.

Dr. Stearns first points out

(a) that instead of occasional *digressions* into the realm of other languages, one might draw German & Russian into being regular features of the Journal;

(b) that we should include essays of more didactic character than up to now, a proposal which received a good deal of attention from the Committee. It would be interesting indeed to publish extracts from assignments given in translation courses or seminars, together with their rendering in a target language and comments thereon;

(c) specialists in different fields sufficiently conversant with one or two other languages besides their own, could inform the would-be translator of the shortcomings of published translations in their fields and suggest ways to improve them :

We quote below the last part of Dr. Stearn's letter dealing with the controversial subject of machine translation :

"Succumbing once again to my innate desire to *share* casual findings, with regard to one or the other of my pet subjects, I am sending you the Literary Supplement of the *London Times* (April 20, 1962) where I found "The Future of Machine Translation" by Yehoshua Bar-Hillel highly gratifying. It is the fifth essay in the series "Freeing the Mind" . . .

Two passages in the paper of Mr. Bar-Hillel struck me as being a subject for further discussion, viz (a) 'Translation is an activity that requires, in general, a good amount of intelligence, in addition, of course, to a good knowledge of both languages involved, the source and the target language' . . . (b) Expert human translators use their *background knowledge, mostly subconsciously* in order to resolve syntactical and semantical ambiguities" . . . [Italics are mine].

The author of "The Future of Machine Translation" makes two "Gedankenfehler" in this passage which is introductory to his presentation and opinions on the subject title : a) the highest I. Q. and a reasonably good linguistic knowledge will quite often prove insufficient to produce a both reliable and readable translation on a theme for which the translator has no *educational* background; b) he overlooks the circumstance that electronic computers solving intricate mathematical or algebraic problems pro-

duce satisfactory results *only* if the so-called *programs* fed to them are prepared by highly trained mathematicians. Besides, electronic brains are being used to reduce the amount of "operations" for the scientists working on projects which involve countless time — robbing detail work, and not — to *replace* the scientist! I see no objection to good translators using an electronic machine for lexicographic purposes and to reduce tiresome cross-checking...

As to the translator using "background knowledge... mostly subconsciously", I'm sorry to disagree rather vehemently with an author who otherwise gratified me: the background knowledge a translator needs almost every minute of his working day, far from being subconscious must be wide and thorough, extending into different spheres of interest and the *easier recalled at will* the better for translator and translation! I find that a translator like a witness in court must be able to recall clearly and pertinently in order to be useful. No diffuse memories for either of them.

*Dr. Anna STEARNS,  
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