

# International Certification Study: Norway

By Jiri Stejskal

In the last issue we reviewed the options of becoming a “traductor público” in Argentina. Norway, the country selected for this article, has a similar system for the certification of translators and interpreters. To become a “statsautorisert translator” (government authorized translator), the linguist must pass a stringent examination administered by the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration (Norges Handelshøyskole, or NHH), the leading Norwegian business school. Authorization is subsequently awarded by the Norwegian government. All those who pass the rigorous examination are then invited to join the Association of Government Authorized Translators (Statsautoriserte Translatørers Forening, or STF). This system is different from the Anglo-American system, which leaves certification to professional bodies. The Norwegian system of certification corresponds to the “continental” system of governmental certification that is practiced in other Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden (discussed in detail in the February 2002 issue of the *ATA Chronicle*), as well as in Denmark, which will be introduced in the next issue in order to close our discussion of Scandinavia.

The information presented here was partially gleaned from the SFT and NHH websites, and from an interview with Bjørnulf Hinderaker (bjornulf.hinderaker@nhh.no), an NHH faculty member who is responsible for the examination of translators, and Sveinung Løkke (sveinung.lokke@chello.no), a government authorized translator and member of STF, who generously offered to translate a substantial part of the interview which was published in issue No. 4 (2002) of the Norwegian periodical *Kapital*. I am

also indebted to Linda Sivesind (sivesin@online.no), vice-president of the International Federation of Translators (FIT), a government authorized translator, and a member of STF, for her thorough feedback and information on the Norwegian Association of Nonfiction Writers and Translators.

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The history of government authorization for translators in Norway dates back to the pre-1800 period. Around 1800, the job of appointing translators passed from being a royal prerogative to the king’s council. In those days, the principal work of authorized translators was reportedly related to the collection of customs revenues (i.e., authorized translators were producing official translations of bills of lading). More historical information will be presented in the upcoming article on Denmark, as Norway was part of Denmark up until 1814, which is the year in which the Kiel Treaty brought about the end of the 434-year-long alliance of Denmark and Norway.

Government authorized translators in Norway are organized within STF, the above-mentioned Association of Government Authorized Translators. (The English name was changed from

“Guild” to “Association” only recently.) The association was founded on November 14, 1913, and is one of the oldest translators’ associations in the world. It is organized and run as a nonprofit organization for the purpose of protecting the interests of its members in the widest sense by:

- Seeking greater recognition for government authorized translators as highly skilled professionals;
- Promoting good translation practices and supporting its members by providing guidance and information;
- Working for greater understanding of the importance of quality translations among the authorities and relevant user groups; and
- Strengthening the links among colleagues and promoting high professional standards and work ethics.

STF, a member of FIT, currently has around 200 members, almost half of them living in the Oslo area. They are authorized in 16 different languages—15 European languages and Chinese. Because of the difficulty of the examination, only a handful of members are authorized in more than one language pair. English dominates, but there are also a number of German translators. The majority of STF’s members are self-employed freelancers, but some work for translation companies as staff translators. Many STF members also have the outgoing nature and verbal skills that make them first-class interpreters, and a number of them are among Norway’s best conference and court interpreters.

All STF members have passed a very demanding translation examination, containing both a written ➡

and an oral component. Until 1999, examination candidates were required to translate into and from Norwegian and the foreign language concerned. Today it is possible to be authorized in a single direction. The “*Translatøreksamen*” represents the highest Norwegian qualification for written translation to and from Norwegian of specialized texts (economic, administrative, legal, commercial, and technical). As a result, successful candidates are authorized by the Norwegian government, currently represented by the Ministry of Education and Research, to place their stamp and signature on their work, along with the words “True Translation Certified.” The use of the official translator’s stamp is confined to government authorized translators. The certificate issued by the Ministry grants a license for the given language “pursuant to Regulation relating to the licensing of government authorized translators laid down by the Ministry of Education and Research on 15 August 2002, pursuant to Act No. 22, Section 57a, dated 12 May 1995, relating to universities and colleges,” and requires that “the office of translator be conducted conscientiously and to the best of one’s ability and in accordance with the oath or solemn pledge taken.” Like the licenses currently in use in Austria, the Norwegian licenses were, until quite recently, based on royal decrees dating back to the 19th century: “The license is given pursuant to the Royal Decree of 27 March 1887, *cf.* Royal Decrees of 9 September 1897, 11 July 1919, 15 September 1950, 11 March 1960 point IV, and 14 December 1962.” (Translated from Norwegian by Mr. Løkke from his own license.) Translations that are signed and stamped by a government authorized

translator are generally seen as having the status of original texts. A lot of people see this professional designation as the crowning achievement after many years of education.

It is of interest that the title “*stat-sautorisert translatør*” in Norway uses a similar wording and carries the same weight as that of “certified public accountant” (which is also the case in Argentina) and that, unlike in the U.S., authorized translators enjoy a certain social status. An anecdote shared by Ann Macfarlane, ATA’s immediate past president, comes to mind in this context. When interviewing Michael Hamm in an effort to evaluate the current ATA accreditation process and inquiring about how long it took to achieve the credibility of certification enjoyed by certified public accountants in the U.S., his reply was “About a hundred years.” The rationale for the appreciation of translators in Norway, as well as in other Scandinavian countries, stems from the fact that Norway has a small, very open economy, with exports amounting to 50% of the gross national product. Of course, this means that linguistic skills are essential for anyone wanting a career in almost any field. The school system continues to put tremendous effort into teaching modern foreign languages. Mr. Løkke reports that when he was entering college, the minimum entry requirement was seven years of English, three years of German, and three years of French.

The “*Translatøreksamen*” is administered by the Department of Languages of NHH. The Department of Languages was established in 1985 and offers courses in four languages: English, French, German, and Spanish. The principal activity of the department is the teaching of languages as elective subjects in NHH’s

four-year degree program. The department also offers two-year programs at the postgraduate level, as well as one-year business language studies in English, French, and German. In 1986, the Ministry of Education conferred the responsibility for the administration of the national translators’ examination on NHH. The objective of this examination is to authorize candidates who are able to carry out translation work for the public and private sectors, as well as for private individuals. One staff member is specially assigned to the supervision and organization of the exam. This position is currently held by Bjørnulf Hinderaker, supervisor of the examinations and lecturer in German at NHH.

NHH is the only institution in Norway certified to offer the national examination for translators. Each year, 40 to 50 candidates sit for this exam. Mr. Hinderaker notes that a very high percentage of applicants fail the exam—about 80% (still an improvement from the 90%+ failure rate when candidates had to translate in both directions to be authorized). This figure is by no means unique, as the rate is quite similar for ATA and a number of other professional T&I organizations, including those in Sweden and Denmark, and is roughly the same for all languages. The requirements for passing the exam are the same irrespective of the language combination. Recently, eligibility requirements for the qualification of candidates for taking the test became more stringent and academically oriented. A minimum of three years of relevant university education, properly documented, is currently required. This requirement was introduced in order to comply with European Union regulations. This fact is of particular interest to the author of this article, who was

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recently appointed chairman of the ATA ad-hoc committee for ATA accreditation eligibility requirements, a development which will be discussed in one of the future issues of this publication.

The National Translators' Examination makes great demands on the candidates. It is necessary to be in full command of both Norwegian and the foreign language. The candidate must understand the differences and similarities between the language, and be able to translate either way with great accuracy. It is necessary to have a thorough knowledge of economic, administrative, legal, and technical subject matter in both the source and target cultures. Economists, engineers, lawyers, technical translators, and people with similar types of education, combining languages and factual knowledge, will have an advantage when sitting for the examination. Work experience is also a definite plus.

In principle, candidates can sit for the examination in any foreign language in combination with Norwegian, provided it is practically possible to employ qualified examiners in Norway or the other Nordic countries. The requirements are not supposed to vary significantly from one language to another. There is no educational program in Norway that fully prepares candidates for the examination. NHH provides guidance for candidates who are planning to take the examination in the following languages: English, French, Spanish, or German. Potential candidates are entitled to submit their translations of a set of previous examination texts and receive feedback on their performance. Samples of English-to-Norwegian tests for the past few years are available at the NHH website ([www.nhh.no/stud/spr/trengelsk.html](http://www.nhh.no/stud/spr/trengelsk.html)).

The written test takes eight hours.

For those who pass, there is also an oral examination. Those who fail are allowed to try again up to three times. A pass means that the candidate has shown an excellent command of legal, financial, and technical subjects and that he or she is able to translate such texts. The written part of the examination consists of two independent tests:

1. Translation from Norwegian into the foreign language of:
  - A general text of about 350 words;
  - An economic/administrative text of about 250 words;
  - A legal text of about 250 words; and
  - A technical text of about 250 words.
2. Translation from the foreign language into Norwegian of the same subject matter and size as for Test 1.

Tests 1 and 2 take place on consecutive days. The candidates who pass the written part of the examination are invited to sit for the oral examination. The National Translators' Examination is considered completed when a candidate has passed both the written and the oral parts of the examination.

Around 40% of candidates take the English test. The Norwegian text to be translated is the same for all foreign languages. Thai is an example of a language that NHH rarely organizes an exam in, but even if only one candidate comes forward, NHH is still obligated to organize an exam for that candidate. Languages of limited diffusion that have been requested in the past include Urdu, Slovenian, Slovak, and Czech. There have also been candidates in Arabic sporadically. At the very least, according to Mr.

Hinderaker, NHH is able to find examiners in 20-25 languages.

It should be noted that we also received a reply to our initial query about certification abroad, mailed in November 2000, from Norsk Oversetterforening (NO), or the Norwegian Association of Literary Translators. While this 280-member association does not offer any certification, the eligibility requirements are quite stringent: two published books or two staged plays, scrutinized by NO's Literary Council. The association conducts seminars and organizes trips abroad for its members to allow translators to better acquaint themselves with the cultures and languages they are specializing in.

Norway also has another association of book translators, Norsk Faglitterær forfatter- og oversetterforening (NFF), or the Norwegian Association of Nonfiction Writers and Translators. This association has 4,800 members, 420 of whom are translators of nonfiction books and articles. The vast majority of the members are academic/nonfiction writers. NFF has no quality-related criterion for membership, but requires applicants to hold the copyright on the translation of one work of nonfiction (at least 100 pages). Both NO and NFF are the recipients of photocopying remuneration and money derived from public lending rights, allowing the associations to generously finance annual project and travel grants to qualified translators, and to be very active in international affairs.

For the sake of completeness, it should also be mentioned that this nation, about the size of Minnesota, has two more groups of translators: NAVIO, the Norwegian Association of

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## Setting Up a Translation Agency Continued

Develop a logical method for cataloging clients and jobs. A three- or four-letter mnemonic for each customer and three or four digits for sequentially ordering jobs should be sufficient. The more transparent it is, the better. In 10 years, we have done more than 500 jobs for some of our clients, so it's not out of the question that you will need those four digits. Another option might be to include the year in the naming scheme, allowing you to restart the sequential numbering each year. It's also important to have a policy for how long you will archive work done.

A daily staff meeting is a must. This can be 5 minutes or 45, as needed. In our case, we run through our entire schedule daily, discussing all active jobs, everything that has been delivered in the last few days, and everything that is being quoted.

The advantage of this is that everyone hears what is going on and can provide input or clear up misunderstandings. It also gives everyone a chance to brainstorm if a project manager needs help with a particular project.

Above all, don't underestimate the importance of good communication. Freelancers working for themselves only have to remember to ask the questions that they personally need answers to. Agency owners and project managers, on the other hand, must try to anticipate every question from their customers' and suppliers' points of view, and pass on as much information as clearly as they can. In more than 15 total years of operation in the business of translation, virtually every major problem I have ever encountered has been caused by poor communication. It seems odd that we, as translators and interpreters,

whose professions, by definition, consist of facilitating communication, could ever be less than perfect at it in our business relations, but we are human, after all.

Last, but far from least, as agency owners, we set the tone and personality for our businesses. Whether we like it or not, our staff, customers, and suppliers perceive us based on their interactions with us. If we allow ourselves to be seen as cynical, arrogant, and difficult, then we risk having those attitudes creep into how our company deals with the outside world. If we are open and communicative, fair and honest, this will be communicated through our staff to our customers and suppliers, and the result will be many rewarding relationships with suppliers, coworkers, and customers alike.

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Audio-Visual Translators, which has about 110 members who do subtitling for TV, films, and the opera, and Norsk Tolkeforening, the Norwegian Interpreters' Association, which organizes sign language translators and interpreters. Additional information about STF is available in English at [www.statsaut-translator.no/english.htm](http://www.statsaut-translator.no/english.htm). The website of NHH is quite complex, with a limited amount of information available in English. The address of the NHH homepage is [www.nhh.no](http://www.nhh.no). The address of the Norwegian Association of Literary Translators, also with limited information in English, is <http://skrift.no/no/index.asp>. The Norwegian Association of Nonfiction Writers and Translators website is at [www.nffo.no//index.asp](http://www.nffo.no//index.asp). It contains some information in English, and the

"Find a translator" service has English options available. STF, NO, and NFF are members of FIT, and NO and NFF are represented on the FIT Council.

In the next issue, we will examine the government authorization of translators and interpreters in Denmark, which, in 1966, introduced the allegedly first-ever law on the authorization of translators in the world. As the editor of this series, I encourage readers to submit any relevant information concerning non-U.S. certification or similar programs, as well as comments on the information published in this series, to my e-mail address at [jiri@cetra.com](mailto:jiri@cetra.com).

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## Translation in the News Continued from p.18

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Schmidt, Susan. "Terrorism Focus Set for FBI." May 29, 2002, *The Washington Post*.

Strauss, Valerie. "Mastering Arabic's Nuances No Easy Mission." May 28, 2002, *The Washington Post*.

Talbot, Margaret. "Other Woes." November 18, 2001, *The New York Times*.

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