

International Certification Study: South America Revisited

By Jiri Stejskal

In the previous issue, we completed our review of North American certification programs outside of the U.S. by looking at the rather complex situation in Mexico. The Canadian programs were covered last year in the January and March issues. In an attempt to complete the coverage of South America as well, I sent out queries to translators and interpreters in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela to complement the information presented in the July 2001 and June 2002 columns on Brazil and Argentina. I received a wealth of information from some countries, and very little or no response from others. Therefore, the information below is not necessarily well balanced, but it offers a sufficient glimpse into the T&I profession in South America.

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Just as in North America, the certification of translators and interpreters is handled differently in each country. Some countries have a sophisticated certification process and a wide selection of university courses in T&I, while others do not. We will now look at the situation in Colombia, Uruguay, and Venezuela, three South American countries with state-run systems of certification.

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Colombia

Translators and interpreters have been certified by Colombian government regulation as “judiciary experts,” along with accountants, jewelers, mechanics, and 15 other professions since 1951. Reportedly, some 5,500 translators have been certified to-date, 99% of them living in Bogotá. Like in Mexico, there are many indigenous languages in Colombia¹, most of them made “official” in the 1991 Constitution. However, most of these languages lack written form, and the Colombian justice system does not provide for judiciary experts in languages other than Spanish.

The certification of translators and interpreters was first handled by a special institute that was simultaneously responsible for preparing candidates for qualification (IEI). After a series of irregularities were reported, certification was passed, in 1998, to the State Universidad Nacional Modern Languages Department in an

attempt to fight corruption and to add a measure of academic judgment.

The administration of the roll of translators was in the hands of the Ministry of Justice until 1999, when it passed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Meanwhile, the system of fees for judiciary experts, first established by the Act of 1951 and last amended by the Act of 1969, is now in the hands of the Judiciary’s Disciplinary Council. In August 2002, the Council announced that the legislation concerning the fees still needs further revision, as the remuneration of translators specified in the Act is not being observed. As an interesting side note, similar legislation in Peru, the Supreme Decree 33/92, rules that while “official” translators work in a free market, they will provide translation to the Foreign Ministry free of charge.

Currently, candidates for certification are examined by the aforementioned university department. As an eligibility requirement, which is not stipulated in the Act but rather imposed by the university, a university degree is required, but no experience is needed. The examination requires candidates to pass a four-module test consisting of about 200 words of text to be translated in each direction in 3 hours, and about 20 minutes of interpretation in each direction. In order to pass the test at the Universidad Nacional, candidates need to score 90%, up from 60%, with all four modules carrying equal weight. Consequently, the pass rate has dropped and fewer candidates earn the credential (currently 10% to 20%).

Other eligibility requirements include:

- Moral integrity, certified before a notary by three independent witnesses. ➡

- Proof of the right to earn income in Colombia. (It is not necessary to be a Colombian national.)
- Submission of an application for specific language pair(s).

The examination schedule only allows one examination to be taken at a time, and examinations are offered only in Bogotá in June and December each year. If the candidate fails, the examination can be taken again any number of times. There are no continuing education requirements, and no re-examinations.

There are several T&I organizations in Colombia. The Colegio Colombiano de Traductores (CCT) was founded a little more than a decade ago with the support of the Colombian Foreign Ministry, the British Council, the Alliance Française, the Goethe Institut, and five major universities in Bogotá. The Colegio has about 70 members and its purpose is to serve as a meeting place and contact point for translators, offering a regular schedule of academic and social events. The Asociación Colombiana de Traductores e Intérpretes (ACTI) was established in 1997 and reportedly has less than 10 active members. It has an admission examination for document translation into Spanish only.

Individual members of the CCT and the ACTI have been involved in the state certification process, complementing the team of linguists at the Universidad Nacional. The Colegio does not certify, since Colombian law (Decree 382/51, Decree 2275/51, Decree 2265/69, and the Civil Code) would necessarily implicate it in any civil or criminal liability case, or require it to act as arbitrator, and there is no administrative, academic, or financial structure to support such a position.

There are many academic programs for translators and interpreters in Colombia, in addition to a dozen or so undergraduate programs that include translation as a language-learning tool. Of the 12 academic institutions offering graduate diploma courses for translation listed below, 8 are in Bogotá and 4 are in the provinces. The offerings range from 100 to 300 hours of class sessions. Reportedly, none of the courses have computer facilities, and the student mix is such that the programs cannot assume that each student has access to a computer. At present, none of these courses are designed as training tools for professional translators.

Among the universities offering graduate courses in translation are:

- **Colegio Universidad de Nuestra Señora el Rosario:** three semesters of technical modules in economics, law, literature, and translation theory (all into Spanish since 1994);
- **Universidad Nacional, Bogotá:** three semesters of workshops (linguistics and theory are the strong areas) for translating into English (since 1999);
- **Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín:** three semesters of terminology and linguistics;
- **Universidad del Valle:** has network for terminology with the Universidad de Antioquia and the Universidad del Cauca;
- **Universidad de Pamplona, Pamplona:** two semesters, mainly for English teachers (now held up by lack of government funding);
- **Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Bogotá and Cartagena:** two semesters (a program for English teachers);
- **Universidad del Quindío:** has a relationship with the University of Puerto Rico;

- **Universidad del Cauca:** working on a terminology network with the Universidad de Antioquia and the Universidad del Valle;
- **Universidad IDEAS;**
- **Escuela de Administración de Negocios (EAN):** 100-hour diploma program based on business needs for English document writing;
- **Instituto Caro y Cuervo:** free courses in classical Latin and Greek for translation; and
- **Universidad de La Sabana:** weekly three-hour internal courses in classical Latin translation for teaching staff (mainly used by the law faculty).

Apparently, there are no graduate courses available for interpreters in Colombia at any level. The Universidad Nacional has offered some theory on the subject, but has no equipment to make a practical application of the theory.²

Uruguay

In Uruguay, translators become sworn translators (“traductores públicos”) upon completion of a four-year course at the Law School of the State University in Montevideo. The credential is currently available for English, French, Portuguese, Italian, and German. For other languages, the appropriate embassy certifies the competence of experts in the foreign language concerned, with translations being signed jointly by an expert and a sworn translator who have graduated from the university. Another option for candidates who are interested in acting as experts in foreign languages (except for the five languages mentioned above) is to apply to the Colegio de Traductores Públicos del Uruguay, attaching documentation in support of their application. After review of such documents

and an interview with the candidate, the Colegio decides whether or not to approve the candidate's inclusion in the list of language experts ("idóneos"). These experts are called to help translators, whenever needed, with the translation of languages for which there is no sworn translator available. Translations are then signed jointly. There is no official certification for interpreters in Uruguay. Uruguayan professional translators receive training mainly in legal translation, since areas such as literary or technical translation are not fully covered at the university. Translators specialize in their areas of choice after completing their university studies.

In order to be eligible for the studies, candidates must have finished high school and have passed an entrance examination in English, French, Italian, Portuguese, or German (in addition to Spanish), both written and oral. A level of proficiency similar to that of a native speaker is required. It is of interest that this examination is an exception in the educational system of Uruguay, because student applicants normally enroll for university studies after completing high school without having to pass any entrance examination.

This credential was duly recognized in Uruguay at the end of the 19th century. The law school regulations of 1885 stated that the degree was to be granted by said school. Later on, sundry regulations and administrative provisions organized courses and examinations, but in 1915 students were transferred to the Escuela Superior de Comercio. Thus, the degree was no longer a university degree, but merely a professional degree. The next stage began in 1932, when courses were taken again at the university, not at the law school, but at the School of Economy and

Administration. The degree, however, was still merely a professional certificate. In real life, the courses proved unsuccessful on account of their synthetic and impractical character. Finally, the authorities organized regular courses at the law school. A new three-year plan was put in practice in 1976 at the school, where Professor Puig still teaches language and legal translation. A few years later, another year of study was added. The degree is once again on a par with that of lawyers, notaries, architects, etc.

As was noted above, law school graduates become "sworn" or "public" translators, rather than literary or scientific translators. The school's objective is to train translators for official purposes and work, and therefore their studies are focused on the letters and the law. Interpretation is currently not offered as an independent program, but it is covered to some degree in the school's curriculum (court consecutive interpretation, for instance).

The level of the T&I profession has been duly noticed at the United Nations and in Europe; reportedly, it is among the highest in Latin America. The Uruguayan Association of Public Translators (Colegio de Traductores Públicos del Uruguay) is well known abroad thanks to its journal, the *Revista del Colegio de Traductores Públicos del Uruguay*, founded and edited for 11 years by Professor Puig. However, the publication was recently discontinued. The Colegio was the first Latin-American member of the International Federation of Translators (FIT), and the third in the Americas, after the U.S. and Canada. It was founded in 1950 on the basis of a previous association founded in 1932, and currently has about 300 members. The web address of the Colegio is

www.colegiotraductores.org.uy. There is also an interpreters association, Colegio de Intérpretes de Conferencia del Uruguay (CICU), founded in 1986, that has 16 members. Since there is no training in Uruguay for interpreters, CICU requires professional practice (100 days of actual interpretation work) or a proven skill in the field (to be evaluated by two members) for admittance.

Venezuela

Certification in Venezuela is handled by the National Government at the Ministry of Justice. Certified translators are called "intérprete público." Similar to Spain, a translator is certified as an "intérprete," even ➡

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though the certification examination focuses on translation rather than interpretation skills. Reportedly, anyone can take the exam, which consists of a written test and an oral interview. A degree in translation is not required and there is no continuing education requirement or recertification process.

There are currently two universities in Venezuela with a translation program. The Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) in Caracas has a translator and interpreter training program, offering a Licenciatura (bachelor degree equivalent) in translation, interpreting, or a combination thereof. This program is reportedly very thorough. All students must take two foreign languages. The second university is the Universidad de Los Andes (ULA) in Mérida, which offers a degree in modern languages with a major in translation. In the translation program, five courses are taught: Documentation and Terminology; Translation I (General Texts); Translation II (Sci-Tech-Med); Translation III (Legal and Commercial); and Translation IV (Literary). Students also take two foreign languages (currently English, French, Italian, and German are offered). As a final requirement, students must do an internship at a company, government agency, or translation bureau. Finding a place for the students to do their internship

is challenging, says Professor Moros, who teaches at this university. Some students are sent to the U.S. and Europe, but most of them stay in Venezuela. The university is planning to develop a master's degree program in translation. There is a third university, the Universidad Metropolitana, which offers a minor in translation in the modern languages program.

Venezuelan translators and interpreters are organized in CONALTI (Colegio Nacional de Traductores e Intérpretes), also a member of FIT, which was founded on July 29, 1980. All members of the association are either graduates of the School of Modern Languages of the Central University of Venezuela or translators and interpreters with many years of experience in the field. Several members are certified public interpreters, qualified by the Ministry of Justice to translate documents to be filed at government offices or to act in court. Further information on the Colegio is available at www.conalti.org.

Chile and Peru

In Chile, translators and interpreters can join the Asociación Gremial de Traductores de Santiago, a member of FIT. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile offers a four-year program for translators focusing on English, French, and German. In Peru, the Asociación de Traductores

Profesionales del Perú, also a FIT member, serves the needs of local translators and interpreters. Programs for translators and interpreters are available at the Universidad Femenina del Sagrado Corazón (UNIFE). The languages offered are English and French, and the students can achieve the degree of "Bachiller en Traducción e Interpretación" or "Licenciada en Traducción e Interpretación."

In the next issue, we will examine the credentialing processes in the Netherlands and Belgium. 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.

Notes:

1. About a half million Colombians use 1 of the approximately 80 indigenous languages as their native tongue. For more information, see www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Colombia.
2. The information on Colombia was supplied by Anthony Letts, Roberto Pizarro, and Mavis García. Mr. Letts compiled the results of their discussion.

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