



## From the President **Jiri Stejskal**

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### On Statistics and Competition

**Last month we** looked at who we are (or not) as an association. Let us now take a closer look at who we are as individual members.

As of December 2007, there were nearly 10,500 of us, predominantly freelancers: individual members account for 92% (this number also includes in-house translators, project managers, and other individuals who do not work as full-time freelancers). The remaining 8% is divided between corporate members (7%) and institutional members (1%). In terms of individual membership, women account for about 70%, which means that there are more than twice as many women as men in our association.

We are a highly educated crowd. Of the roughly 6,500 members who indicated their level of education in their profiles, 99% have training beyond high school, 72% have graduate degrees, and 32% have a degree in translation and/or interpreting. About 19% of individual members are certified in one or more language combinations. We speak 92 different languages as our mother tongue, from Afrikaans to Yoruba. The top five native languages are English (35%), Spanish (32%), French (6%), German (6%), and Russian (4%).

Our profession is international by definition, because we as translators and interpreters facilitate cross-border communication. Accordingly, we are spread over 90 countries, with 16% of the membership residing outside of the U.S. Aside from the U.S., the top five countries are Canada, with 3% of the overall membership, followed by Italy, Mexico, Germany, and Argentina, with 1% each.

The international orientation of our association is not without controversy. The decision to support the international character of ATA was made eight years ago in the wake of a temporary

ban on certification sittings abroad. The ban was imposed in July 1999 in response to concerns expressed by some members about unfair competition from other countries. Based on the feedback from ATA members and on intense deliberation, the Board decided to allow certification sittings abroad and to support the international character of ATA.

Indeed, there is nothing in ATA's bylaws about protecting U.S. members from competition abroad. On the contrary, one of the objectives of ATA is to "promote professional and social relations among its members." As

tive differentiation across a given market. But, as we know, human translation is not a commodity.

So how do we effectively compete in a globalized world? We make sure translation is not traded or perceived as a commodity. To do that, we need to *specialize* in order to differentiate our translation or interpreting work qualitatively. This is not a new concept. Our immediate past president, Marian S. Greenfield, who is herself an example of a successful translator specializing in finance, has emphasized the need for specialization on

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long as ATA membership is not restricted to U.S. residents (there is nothing about that in the bylaws either), we cannot promote professional and social relations among the members while trying to protect U.S. members from competition abroad.

In 1776, Adam Smith explained in *Wealth of Nations* that free international trade is essential to each nation's well-being, and stressed that protectionism does not increase the total output of the country, but merely diverts its energies from more productive to less productive industries. What this means for us is that inexpensive translation from developing countries can be viewed as a threat to U.S.-based translators only insofar as translation is perceived as a commodity that can be produced regardless of location and supplied without qualita-

numerous occasions. There are areas in which only translators based in the U.S. can excel, just as there are areas in which only translators living in other countries can outperform the competition. By becoming an expert in a carefully selected field, you can help to dispel the myth of translation being a commodity and enjoy the satisfaction of truly professional work with the compensation that goes with it.

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