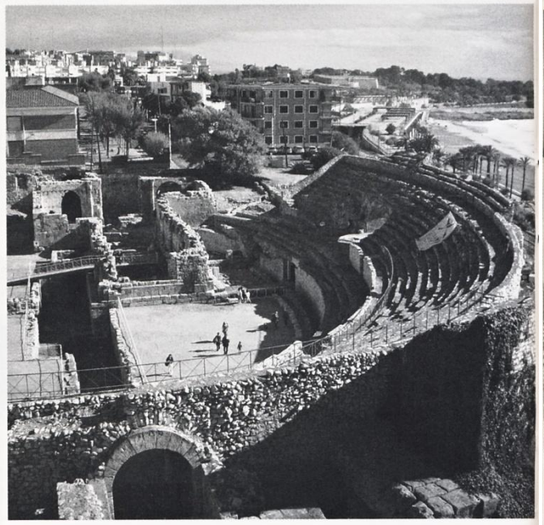
Sharing ideas in Tarragona

Marga Burke reports from the Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting 2010, held in picturesque Catalonia, Spain



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Recently I joined Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET), and I travelled to Spain for their METM10 conference at the end of October last year. MET is a non-profit association of language service providers working mainly into or with English. As the name suggests, many members also either work with Mediterranean languages or are based in the region. The organisation's main aims are for members to help one another improve as professionals by exchanging ideas and practices, and to increase job satisfaction. I was not sure what to expect, but with a packed programme of valuable talks and workshops, a friendly atmosphere and a picturesque setting, the conference was not to disappoint.

METM10 took place this year in Tarragona, a beautiful city and World Heritage Site in the south of Catalonia. Tarragona, we were told, is home to the oldest Roman ruins outside Italy, including an amphitheatre, circus and aqueduct, with a charming old city inside the Roman walls. As well as language-related events, the conference organisers arranged a walking tour of the city, a stroll along the beach and a guided visit to the Roman citadel. It was clear how much effort had gone into welcoming delegates and making sure we enjoyed our stay. Everyone was very friendly and there were ample opportunities for networking.

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Workshops

Before the conference opened, a number of parallel workshops were offered on topics ranging from revising translations to understanding statistics. I was disappointed to miss Felicity Neilson's 'Ready, Steady, Edit' workshop on editing medical texts, as my flight to Spain was delayed by the French air traffic controllers' strike. However, Philip Bazire's workshop on skin anatomy the following morning was excellent and has left me feeling far more confident about translating texts in this subject area. I was particularly interested to learn that the ink from that tattoo I got as a fresher will stay in one of my lymph nodes for the rest of my life, possibly causing confusion should I ever be diagnosed with melanoma!

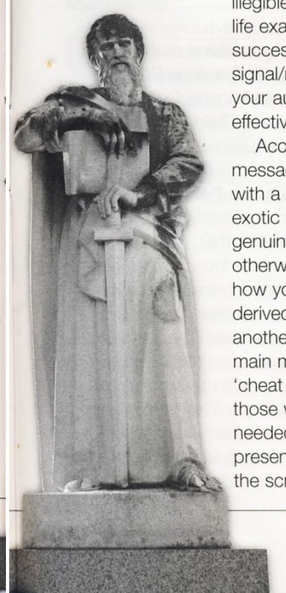
EU Clear Writing campaign

The main conference was made up of a series of presentations, knowledge updates and panel discussions by MET members, some plenary and some running in parallel. On the first day, Emma Wagner from the European Commission gave a talk on the Clear Writing campaign, which is aimed at anyone who writes or translates for the EC, whether in-house or as a freelancer. When we were asked to jot down a word we associated with the Commission, around half of the audience opted for 'bureaucracy'. Emma explained that the campaign aims to change this image by getting people to write shorter, simpler documents with less jargon that will attract more readers. The Commission's booklet *How to Write Clearly* sets out ten top tips for doing so, from the apparently obvious 'think before you write' to 'cut out excess nouns' and 'be concrete, not abstract'.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of Emma's talk was how the booklet, originally written in English, was translated into the 22 other official EU languages. In many cases, the examples given could not be translated directly and had to be reinvented by the translators; in some languages, certain tips did not apply at all. For example, addressing the reader directly, as advocated by the booklet, could come across as officious and patronising in Finnish. Avoiding the passive (I'm sure the Word paperclip will be delighted to hear this tip) is irrelevant in some languages, which do not have a passive voice, and translators argued that in Latvian passive verbs can be an appropriate choice. False friends, another item to be avoided, are rare in languages such as Bulgarian, so translators focused on the use of unnecessary or misleading foreign words instead. Finally, a light-hearted touch was created through humorous cartoons, as EC workers might not be reading the booklet in their mother tongue and could feel alienated if they did not understand language-based jokes.

PHOTOS: MARGA BURKE

Tarragona was a charming setting for the conference, with plenty to see including (above left) the oldest Roman ruins outside Italy



Effective PowerPoint slides

One of the conference's highlights for me was Jean-luc Doumont's talk 'Effective Slides: Design, Construction, and Use', which capped off several sessions on PowerPoint and poster presentations, aimed at translators and at editors who work in these areas and at those who coach clients in how to deliver presentations. The sessions were also very useful for anyone who might want to present at MET or another conference in the future! Jean-luc had the audience in stitches with a succession of poorly designed, illegible and information-heavy slides, all taken from real-life examples. He gave three rules for producing successful slides: adapt to your audience, maximise the signal/noise ratio (where noise is anything that distracts your audience from your message), and use redundancy effectively to compensate for information that may be lost.

According to Jean-luc, each slide should contain one message only, and convey it as concisely as possible, with a maximum of five bullet points. Animations and exotic backgrounds should be avoided unless they genuinely add something to the slide's meaning; otherwise, your audience's attention will be focused on how you got that equation to bounce, not how you derived it. Slides and voice should complement one another, so that either of these two channels gets the main message across. However, slides should not form a 'cheat sheet' for the speaker, nor a written report for those who could not attend the session; if these are needed, it is best to design them separately. In terms of presentation, Jean-luc recommended standing next to the screen if possible, so you do not risk becoming a 'voice off', and making each point verbally then developing it visually through your next slide. Jean-luc's final tip was if you do not have time to make good slides, leave them out: it is far better to focus on developing a well-planned and well-delivered presentation.

The translator's office: tips and tricks

Another very useful session was the panel discussion on getting the most out of your working environment. Freelance translators Anne Murray, Ann King and Kim Eddy shared their tips and tricks for a more efficient workplace, or as they put it, since time is money, 'money in the bank'. Among the software discussed was Find and Run Robot, a free tool for rapidly accessing programs and documents on your computer without using the mouse; Microsoft OneNote, which comes with Office 2007 onwards and is a way to collect and organise project materials; SyncBack backup and synchronisation software, which is available in free and professional versions; and Mr Site, an easy way to set up a website for those without any technical knowledge. There was also discussion with lots of audience input on the best way to use a laptop as a PC with a docking station or a stand and hub, and on the advantages of using two or more screens. Finally, some ideas were shared for how to get the best out of software that just about every translator already has. Did you know that typing F6 in Firefox or Alt+D in Internet Explorer will place the cursor in the address book? Or that Shift+F3 in Word changes the case of letters? iGoogle, searching across multiple PDFs in Foxit, Word's object browser and more Word shortcuts were all discussed, in a session that left me with lots of new ideas for how to spend less time wrestling with my computer and more time actually translating.

In addition to its annual conference, MET runs a number of workshops in Barcelona throughout the year and offers tutorials, a members' directory and job postings through its website. For more information, visit www.metmeetings.org.