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Found in translation

By David Adams
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NEED to know what "Jeg vil gjerne ha en kopp kaffe" means? David Connor can tell you. Able to translate 11 languages into English - from Icelandic and Norwegian through to Latvian, Spanish and Bulgarian - he has worked as a translator for more than 30 years.

After completing a bachelor of arts with majors in French and German and minors in Dutch and Swedish, Mr Connor went to work as a translator after trying teaching and finding he didn't like it.

After a brief stint at the Department of Immigration, in 1971 he went to the the translation section of the Postmaster-General's Department (which divided into Telecom/Telstra and Australia Post in 1975), staying until the section was closed in 1996. Since then, he has worked as a freelance translator.

Much of his work is immigration related, involving people applying for Australian visas.

"I just like reading other languages and working out what they say," the 58-year-old says. "It's like doing a jigsaw."

The profession of translating is typically grouped with interpreting, but they are "very separate skills", according to Bradley Dawson, an administrator with non-profit industry organisation Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators.

Translating relates to the written word and interpreting to the spoken word. "With interpreting, they have to be able to think on the spot," says Mr Dawson, a Russian-to-English translator. "It's quite a different skill from a translator, who's got more time but often has to be more exact."

According to the 2001 census, more than 3000 Australians are employed as interpreters or translators, with more than 800 in Victoria.

Interpreters and translators come from a range of backgrounds; some have grown up in bilingual households; others have studied languages at university. They tend to specialise in interpreting or translating (although some do both), and most work for themselves.

People who want to make a living as an interpreter or translator are advised to seek accreditation from the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), which is a requirement for government work and with many other employers.

Several universities provide interpreting and translating courses in languages depending on demand, some of which can also lead to NAATI accreditation.

Unlike interpreters, accreditation for translators can be one- or two-way - for example, from Russian to English or English to Russian.

"It's easier to translate into your native language," Mr Dawson says. "The people who have accreditation in both ways of translating need to be very good, fluent and aware of idioms and humour and history and culture and all those things."

A professional-level translator typically earns between \$25 and \$45 per 100 words, with a normal work flow of 150-200 words per hour.

Jobs can range from big tasks such as translating a technical manual, to something small such as a driver licence, and the internet has opened new possibilities with work now available via international translating agencies.

Mr Connor says it can be solitary occupation - he mainly works from home - but he regularly communicates with other translators around the world via online groups. He says this is particularly helpful if he becomes stuck on a word or phrase. "You've got a worldwide community of people to email," he says. "Email has just made the job so much easier."

By the way, "Jeg vil gjerne ha en kopp kaffe" is Norwegian for "I'd like a cup of coffee".

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