

A German Perspective



Starting out

I was a young girl growing up in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, when I first encountered the English language. It was during that first year of English studies that my teacher asked us to write a composition on the topic, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

I did not hesitate one second. I took my pen and firmly wrote, “I want to be an interpreter.”

My love of foreign languages has never diminished; indeed, it has grown into a rewarding profession that I still love and nurture many decades later.

Getting there

Language and wordplay sparked my imagination in Grade Five and, several years later, while studying French, I jumped at the opportunity to participate in an exchange program with students in Lyon, France. From that point on, my career path was clear, and I pursued my studies with determination and a specific destination in mind.

I enrolled in business school training, which involved classes in business English and French. Then, following my graduation, I took part in a two-year “apprenticeship in commerce” program with an international engineering firm based in Frankfurt am Main. As part of my apprenticeship, I was sent to the firm’s offices in Paris to learn the business and, later, I started my first real job with the company in Brussels.

My ultimate goal was to become a “sworn translator and interpreter” with the law courts and then

to start a business of my own. To become a “state-certified translator” in the German State of Hessen, I was required to pass a State examination administered by the Federal Ministry of Education. The examination tested my skills as a translator and interpreter for a pair of languages (one of which was German) in a specific field of expertise (e.g. business/economics, law). The requirements vary from state to state, but the level of expertise for a translator and/or interpreter wishing to qualify for that distinction and be sworn in by the courts is fairly similar throughout Germany.

To help me prepare, I enrolled in a two-year program of part-time translation studies in a private institution. The school specialized in teaching translation from French into German, and vice-versa, within the specific field of economics and was open to students with advanced language skills and foreign country experience.

Finally, in 1980, with the state certification tucked safely in my pocket, I was sworn in before the courts and shortly thereafter opened my own business.

I was an interpreter.

Keeping up in my field of expertise...

I built my business gradually, practising as a freelance interpreter. After gaining additional training with lawyers in England, I turned my attention to my studies again, this time to acquire my state certification in English in the field of law.

Over the years, my practical training grew with each new project I undertook, especially as I focused



A personal story on how to become a good multilingual translator.

by Inge Noeninger



more on translating legal documents for the courts, the prosecutor's office and for lawyers in Frankfurt.

... and in my native language while living abroad

In 1996, I emigrated to Canada and set up practice in Vancouver before moving to Montreal and finally to New Brunswick. No one is more keenly aware of how quickly language changes than translators and interpreters, and maintaining currency in one's native language while living abroad poses a challenge. The method that works best for me is to read both fiction and non-fiction books in my native language. I also access German and Swiss newspapers online on a daily basis. Working alongside my German husband (and business partner) also helps, as does staying in close contact with, and visiting friends and relatives back home.

Maintaining high quality

Quality control includes the customary steps of self-revision by the translator and always involves the "second set of eyes" in the form of a reviser; ideally, a native speaker of the target language. Shortly after I came to Canada, I began establishing working relationships with highly qualified freelancers—native speakers of English and French—to help me with idiomatic translations from German into those languages.

And, when it comes to my specialty—translating legal opinions drawn up by German or Swiss lawyers—I ensure the documents receive an additional review by a native German speaker. The job of this team member is to catch anything the freelancer who was assigned the translation into English or French may not have noticed, or simply not know, such as an obscure historic reference or an allusion to a certain legal issue in Germany or Switzerland.

My final step is to listen to the source and/or target text read aloud by a "text-to-speech" software program, while reading along from a print copy. The number of times that this neutral voice can still lay bare an

error, after all of us who had carefully vetted the project believed we had caught them all, convinces me that it is a valuable quality-control step.

Handling multilingual projects

Multilingual projects are a rare treat and typically involve the translation of standard terms and conditions (the "small print") from German into English and French. This requires the extra steps of having the various versions "cross-read"—including an additional comparison between the English and French translations (without referencing the German source) to find any inconsistencies—so that they all reflect the same rules in clear and unambiguous language.

Continuous learning

The passion that filled me as a young child still fuels my love affair with languages, and the law has motivated me to learn even more. The latest intensive studies I have been eagerly pursuing relate to comparative law. Torts and contracts should keep me busy for a while.

Looking back, it is safe to say that ever since that day, some 30 years ago, when I stood proudly in the German courthouse to be sworn in as a translator/interpreter, I have been soaking in every legal translation workshop, seminar, conference, or lecture I could possibly attend, both at home and abroad. I have read every legal magazine, article, treatise, and reference book I could lay my hands on and built my personal library accordingly. And, lately, I have begun attending bar association conferences so I can learn about the issues that concern lawyers, while networking and meeting potential clients in person. As a totally new marketing approach, I will be an exhibitor at this year's Canadian Bar Association (CBA) Legal Conference and Expo being held August 14-16 in Halifax, where I will proudly represent the translation profession, OTTIAQ, and, last but not least, the services that our small firm provides for the legal community. ☺

