

SERVING THE RAINBOW NATION: THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSLATORS' INSTITUTE (SATI)

Anne-Marie Beukes

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African Translators' Institute (SATI), a national non-profit organization, was established in 1956 and represents some 500 language practitioners around the country. SATI's aims are mainly threefold: (a) to advance the professional status of language practitioners, (b) to protect its members and promote their interests and (c) to protect members of the public who make use of the services of language practitioners. Since its establishment almost 50 years ago, SATI has been the only professional body for language practitioners in South Africa.

2. THE RAINBOW NATION: SOUTH AFRICA'S LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

South Africans are fond of referring to themselves as the Rainbow Nation. This metaphor is an apt description of our colourful society, which is characterised by rich cultural and linguistic diversity. Prior to the new democratic dispensation, South Africa was a *de jure* bilingual country with two official languages, English and Afrikaans. Historically, the translation profession, and with it the South African Translators' Institute (SATI), evolved in a context where these two languages were pivotal.

However, the translation landscape changed markedly in 1994, with the adoption of a new Constitution granting official status to 11 spoken languages, which "must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably" (section 6(4)). In addition to English, the Constitution recognises 10 indigenous official languages: Afrikaans, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. The four languages from the Nguni language group, i.e. Ndebele, Swati, Xhosa and Zulu, are mutually intelligible to a high degree, as are the three languages from the Sotho group, i.e. Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Tswana.

The majority of the South African population of 40,5 million people (about 75%) speak one of the nine African languages as their home language, some 14% use Afrikaans as a home language and almost 9% English (source: Statistics SA).

This brief description of the linguistic diversity that characterises South Africa points to the pivotal role the translation and interpreting profession could play in giving concrete effect to constitutional multilingualism in this country, and in ensuring that South Africans have the freedom to exercise their language rights. Effective and functional multilingualism depends to a large extent on the manner in which our profession is able to respond to the communication needs of a linguistically and

culturally diverse nation. Translation and interpreting are key to achieving the goal of equitable use of all the official languages.

3. THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSLATORS' INSTITUTE

Since its establishment, SATI has constantly demonstrated an awareness of the needs of the society it serves. This is clearly articulated in its mission statement, which was adopted during South Africa's transition to a new democracy in the early nineties:

"In the spirit of its motto, PER INTERPRETES PONS CONDITUR, the South African Translators' Institute is committed to playing its part in a changing world by helping to build bridges between people and groups and fostering in the community an awareness of the need for effective communication.

In pursuit of this goal the Institute endeavours to:

- *Promote excellence in translation and related fields, as well as clarity of thought and expression*
- *Ensure high standards of professionalism among its members through accreditation and the adoption of a code of ethics*
- *Provide support for its members both in their occupational lives and as members of a multi-cultural and dynamic society".*

Membership of SATI is open to anyone interested in translation and interpreting, and the related professions such as terminography and lexicography. There are currently no qualifying professional requirements for ordinary membership, but accredited membership requires a pass in an examination set by the Institute. At present SATI offers five categories of membership:

- **Honorary Member:** A person to whom, in view of his or her exceptional contribution to the profession and on the recommendation of the Executive, honorary membership has been awarded by SATI at an annual general meeting.
- **Founder Member:** A signatory to the original constitution.
- **Member:** A person who has complied with SATI's requirements for membership and has been accepted and registered as such by the SATI Executive.
- **Accredited Member:** A member who has sat and passed the examination set by an accreditation committee. Only accredited members have the vote.
- **Student Member:** A member who is a registered full-time or part-time student not in employment involving substantial remuneration.

The system of accreditation has been extended over the years and now includes examinations in all the official languages and also other languages such as French, Spanish and German (language combinations offered involve 24 African and other languages). Accreditation examinations are currently available for translation, conference interpreting, text editing, terminology and pioneer Bible translation, and for purposes of becoming a sworn translator. Accreditation is available only to members and lapses upon termination of membership.

In the light of the 11 official languages, SATI has been actively working towards the development of a culture of multilingualism and a tradition of translation and interpreting in the African languages. As far back as 1993, SATI decided to implement strategies to facilitate the use and development of the indigenous languages of South Africa. Giving practical expression to the idea of multilingualism, however, requires the use of competent and properly trained language practitioners.

Because SATI is particularly concerned about the inadequate numbers of trained language workers in South Africa, it was decided to set up a Development Committee. The brief of this committee is to collect funds and make assistance available to deserving translation and/or interpreting students at tertiary institutions. Some 26 bursaries totalling R60 000 have been awarded since 1993. In addition to bursaries, the Fund also subsidises the payment of needy members' dues.

Following the success of the development bursaries, SATI decided to expand its developmental work with a view to promoting the use of the indigenous languages in published translations. In 2000, it introduced a prestigious translation prize for work in the official languages of South Africa, the SATI Award for Outstanding Translation. This was a first for the country, since no translation award of this nature had ever before been made.

The objectives of the SATI Award for Outstanding Translation are to promote multilingualism, and in particular the use and development of the indigenous languages, by rewarding outstanding translation of fiction and non-fiction work into and/or from the official languages. Through this process we believe that SATI is promoting cross-cultural understanding and raising awareness of the role of translators in uniting the people of South Africa. The award is made on or around International Translation Day and consists of a substantial cash prize supported by the SATI Development Fund, a floating trophy and a certificate of merit.

SATI has a firm commitment towards upgrading members' skills and regularly organises seminars and courses dealing with a wide range of relevant issues for members. In an effort to make them more accessible to members across the board, courses have also been offered in venues adjacent to rural areas. An important development is SATI's recent decision to align the ongoing upgrading of members' skills with new South African legislation, through the adoption of measures aimed at continuing professional development (CPD). These measures are currently being refined and will be implemented in the near future.

It is expected that legislation will soon be tabled in Parliament to establish the South African Language Practitioners' Council. This Council will manage the accreditation and registration of language practitioners with a view to scrutinising and maintaining standards in the profession and protecting the professional interests of language practitioners. The Council will also develop, implement, revise or amend a Code of Ethics to govern the conduct of language practitioners.

SATI has played a major role as a member of a government committee that embarked on a process of consultation with stakeholders and role-players regarding the powers and objectives of the Council. Since the Council will probably take

responsibility for the accreditation function currently managed by SATI, it was decided that SATI would in future focus on training matters and would position itself as a prominent training coordinator/provider. To this end SATI will offer courses in all domains of language practice to comply with the requirements for continuing professional development.

It is SATI's aim to promote excellence by making available competent language practitioners for translation, interpreting and associated services, and at the same time to give increasing practical expression to the constitutional principle of multilingualism. In this way we believe the translators and interpreters of South Africa will demonstrate their commitment to implementing constitutional multilingualism and helping to build and consolidate a united Rainbow Nation.

Author:

Dr Anne-Marie Beukes
Member of the SATI Executive
PO Box 27711
Sunnyside, 0132
South Africa
am.beukes@dacst5.pwv.gov.za