

# Interview with Freek Lankhof, the Bookseller

**T**hese days, if we need an Italian dictionary of seismography, we go online, just as we do for any kind of glossary or reference work. It's all on the Internet. But it wasn't always that way. Before the Internet, when we needed that kind of information, it came in a book. The question was, where to find that book? Some will remember writing to obscure publishers in foreign cities and the excitement of receiving a brown paper parcel in the mail. But the international book world was unknown territory for most American translators. Yes, one could theoretically go to European book fairs, but not all the time.

Before the Internet in the U.S., there was a particular bookseller who was passionately interested in supplying those reference works. Freek Lankhof has been in the book business his entire life, and has been a good friend to translators and interpreters in the U.S. for a quarter century. A translator himself, Freek based his business model on his support for the translation/interpreting community, and has long been associated with ATA.

## Let's start at the beginning.

### Where were you born?

I was living in Haarlem, The Netherlands.

### Where did you go to school and what did you study? What were your interests as a young man?

I went to high school in Haarlem, then studied Scandinavian language and literature at the University of Amsterdam. My interests were politics, music, soccer, and enjoying the 1960s.

### What languages do you speak, read, and/or write? Where/how did you learn them?

We were taught English, French, and German in high school. At the age of 27, I went back to school and studied Swedish at the university.

### When you started working, were you still in Haarlem? What were your first jobs?

My first job was supposed to have been temporary, something to do until I was called up for military service. But I had



Freek Lankhof with then-president Dorothee Racette at ATA's 54th Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas. Freek received special recognition for 25 years of exhibiting at the conference and for his support of translators and interpreters.

applied to be a conscientious objector, which was a procedure that took some time. I was still living at home when I found a job with an importer of American magazines in Amsterdam. My father worked at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, so I could commute to work with him. As it turned out, there were more young baby boomers than the army needed, so I got lucky and was dismissed. I stayed with the media company and moved up through the various departments.

### Were you already interested in books and reading at that stage?

No, that happened while vacationing with my grandparents, who subscribed to a book series from a liberal publishing company (lots of titles with secular humanistic undertones). That's how I was introduced to literature. At home there was much talk about politics but little reading. I became a reader after starting the job with the media company, which had four divisions: imported magazines, imported paperbacks, imported hardcovers, and a publishing

house. I worked in the magazine division, then in the paperback division, and then moved to the publishing house, where I became a proofreader/copyeditor. Many bookstores would, mostly by accident, return books to the magazine department instead of the publishing house. Those books often went unclaimed, and they became my first library. I would take them home, read them very carefully so that nobody could see that they had been read, and then put them back. With one exception: *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth. That book had such an incredible impact on me that I kept it. I believe it's the only book I've ever stolen. From then on reading became my preferred hobby.

### When did you become a translator, and what languages did you translate? What sort of books? Were you a published translator?

I started working as a freelance copyeditor and proofreader for several publishers in the early 1970s. My former employer published a series of Scandinavian translations and I became

the copyeditor for most of them, I guess because my first wife was Swedish, though I didn't speak the language.

Of course, a copyeditor's job is not limited to correcting grammar and making sure all the commas and periods are in the right place. In the case of a translated book, a copyeditor should also be knowledgeable about the source language. But this was not the case at this particular company, where the books were translated by university students under the watchful eye of a professor. So, I got some grammar books and a dictionary and began to find discrepancies in the translations, which I brought to the attention of the editor-in-chief. To no avail, however, since, for him, the professor's word was good enough.

I don't really know what prompted me to do so, but I went back to the University of Amsterdam to study Swedish, and by coincidence ended up in a class taught by that same professor. I must admit that we didn't have the best relationship. But a few years later, I translated my first book from Swedish into Dutch. I now have four published translations to my name.

**When did you come to America, and what prompted you to make that move?**

I came in 1983 when I was 35. It was my now ex-wife who made me jump the puddle.

**Did you have family here or know people in the U.S. language industry when you arrived?**

No, except for my second wife's parents, I had no family here. I had one friend who lived in Manhattan. Otherwise, all I had were a few letters of introduction from the Dutch publishers who had been my employers for many years.

**Tell us about those early days here in America. Were you translating at that time, working, or both?**

I soon discovered that American publishers were not standing around waiting for a "book freak who was fluent in four languages" (as I was referred to back in the Netherlands). I ended up working for Doubleday Bookstore at their flagship store on Fifth Avenue. I had a few other book-related jobs before joining E.J. Brill, a Dutch scholarly publishing company. I had replied to their ad in

Publisher's Weekly, and they hired me to manage their American operation.

**Please tell us how you started your own book-selling company. Did you see a niche in the specialized area of language dictionaries and reference works for translators and interpreters?**

Brill had purchased a mail-order bookstore and wanted to use it as their base for entering the U.S. market. I was in charge of promoting the publishing company and running the bookstore. For the first three years the bookstore was on the 10th floor of an office building on Broadway. In 1988, we moved to Kinderhook, New York, where I ran the company out of a barn and later, after the separation from Brill, out of my basement. When the company was split up in the early 1990s, I took over the bookstore and stayed in Kinderhook while the publishing branch moved to Boston. At that time the bookstore carried a lot of language material, including instructional books on how to speak Zulu, a Zulu dictionary, and books about less mainstream languages like Lithuanian, Maori, and Urdu. I started looking for material and built the stock up to about 70 languages.

***What I can do is provide a place where publishers, authors, translators, and interpreters can showcase their products to the end user.***

**How did you first connect with ATA?**

One day, I got a tip about exhibiting at ATA's Annual Conference. I shipped six boxes of books to Seattle in 1988, sold almost all of them, and realized I had found my niche and my calling. By comparison, the last year I attended the conference as InTrans Book Service, I brought 44 boxes of books.

**Please tell us about your 25 years of hosting a booth at ATA's Annual Conferences.**

After the success at my first conference, I realized that there was a group of professionals that needed professional material and decided to focus on that

group. I began compiling a list of highly specialized dictionaries and started marketing my services to ATA's local chapters and other organizations. In the early years there were several booksellers at ATA conferences—companies like Adler's Foreign Books, Imported Books, and the Continental Book Company. The difference between them and i.b.d., Ltd (which later became InTrans Book Service) was that I focused solely on the translation/interpreting community, whereas my competition offered a much broader range of foreign-language products, many of which were of little interest to translators or interpreters.

In my 25-plus years in the business, I was able to build up an incredible rapport with this community. As a result, InTrans became the place to buy books and meet your friends at ATA conferences. The conferences were also an awesome opportunity for me to listen to translators and interpreters, to learn their needs, and then function as their personal worldwide shopper. Before the Internet, my resources were the various publishers' catalogues and the three largest European trade shows: the international Buchmesse in Frankfurt, the Liber in Spain, and the London Book Fair. It was always thrilling to find new titles and introduce them to my customers. While selling books throughout the year, it seemed I was always working toward the next ATA conference. For me, that was the most exciting event of the year.

**How would you compare the translation/interpreting "world" you found in the U.S. when you arrived to what it is today? Can you see trends that might provide some insight into where we're going?**

The U.S. had no foreign dictionary publishing industry worth mentioning. Almost every available title was published in a country where English was not the native language. Other than traveling and bringing back a suitcase full of dictionaries, or buying them here from a few, generally overpriced brick-and-mortar stores, it was difficult for translators to build up a library. Today, thanks to the Internet, access has become so much easier. In the early days I used it like a virtual library, searching online for new publications. Then publishing

went digital, making it easier to format dictionaries so they could be accessed via the web. Experts in certain fields began to publish their own digital glossaries, and it wasn't long before printed dictionaries were moved from shelves to the basement. I think my first website was up in 2004, and it was phenomenal to be able to find titles on other sites, allowing us to offer our customers a wide variety of products.

But once specialized wordlists, and then dictionaries, appeared online, printed dictionaries were no longer in demand among beginning translators. Pre-World Wide Web translators held on to theirs, but cautiously began to use the ever-expanding supply of reference material now available with just a keystroke. The number of new dictionaries in print today has dwindled. Strangely enough, dictionaries on CD were never a great success, and most of them were supplied with the purchase of the printed book. Once typesetting went digital, it was only one short step to put all that content on the web. And with that, the era of translation memory began, making translating much more efficient. More and more machine translation software is available, and Google and Microsoft are now players in the translation market.

These are trends I can see, but I have no insight as to where this is going. I don't know if the book, or in this case the dictionary, will still play a role as time goes by. I doubt it. Translation must be done quickly and, above all, cheaply, so translators no longer have the time to flip through a dictionary as we used to do.

#### **What fields or subjects were your customers mainly interested in when you first started your business? Did that change much over the years?**

They wanted specialized dictionaries—technical, medical, and legal, mostly in German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. Some wanted Dutch and Scandinavian dictionaries. Those languages were easy to procure. There were some highly specialized multilingual dictionaries published in Moscow that were very popular. (The publisher Elsevier had a whole series of them produced for the Western hemisphere.) Later, things changed

and there was a demand for highly specialized dictionaries/glossaries, often put together by translators. InTrans Book Service was, of course, an excellent channel through which to market these titles. When the dictionary business started to collapse, I focused on related material, like translation studies and specialized textbooks. Dictionary sales, with the exception of those for which I had a sort of exclusive representation, also went downhill because of competition from online booksellers like Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

#### **You've lived and worked during what will be remembered as the watershed period between the past and the future of the book industry. You grew up in a business that has been dramatically altered by the modern phenomenon of the Internet. What are your thoughts on that transition?**

The Internet has given us tremendous access to more stuff than we can handle. If I was a translator nowadays, I know I would use it. The problem, I believe, as regards educational material, is that you can find a lot if you know what you're looking for, but if you don't know what is available, there is no way you can buy it. That was one of the benefits of being at the ATA conferences, where I could introduce my customers to new products, which Amazon can't do. Yes, you can buy anything online, but, again, you have to know what you're looking for.

#### **What is the next step in that process?**

This year, at the conferences of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, California Federation of Interpreters, and ATA, I took a new approach. It's no longer possible for me to stock books that I can't sell because I can't compete with online stores. What I can do is provide a place where publishers, authors, translators, and interpreters can showcase their products to the end user. Maybe by doing this I can keep some of the tradition alive and make sure that customers leave a conference better informed.

#### **At what point did you realize that giant online booksellers would displace operations like yours?**

When customers started saying: "Oh, Freek, you charge \$125 for this book, but I can get it at Amazon for \$95. Can you match that price?"

#### **What are you reading these days? Do you own a Kindle or similar device?**

I have an iPad on which I do not read books, and I have no other electronic reading device. Right now I'm reading *Everybody's Fool* by Richard Russo, and I just finished *My Father's Paradise* by Ariel Sabar, the author's search for his family's past that takes him from Iraq to Israel to the United States. My problem is that I buy more books than I can read. I just got *The Noise of Time* by Julian Barnes and *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. Oh, and don't let me forget the beautiful books by Haruki Murakami, translated by Jay Rubin, a guest speaker at the 2016 ATA conference.

#### **Will our grandchildren still be reading books as we do today? How about their grandchildren?**

I believe so, but it will depend on the parents and grandparents. Will they encourage a tradition of reading to their kids or will they leave them to their own devices, literally and figuratively?

#### **Now that you've retired, what do you miss most about the book business?**

I miss the research, trying to stay on top of the game and surprise my customers by having material I know they will need to become better translators and interpreters. I miss the excitement of the opening of the exhibits. I miss the personal contact and my friends. Maybe that will change now with my new approach. What an amazing world. 



**Tony Beckwith** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He moved to Texas in 1980 and currently lives in Austin, Texas, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: tony@tonybeckwith.com.