HOW TO RESEARCH A WORD

When confronted with a new word or phrase, the first impulse of most interpreters is to run to a colleague and ask, "How do *you* say it?" This is fine for a "quick fix" in an emergency, or as the first step in researching a word, but to truly understand and to integrate a word into one's vocabulary, extra research is called for.

It is imperative that a good interpreter gather together a good research library, or have ready access to a Public Library. You must have at your disposal:

- Several same-language dictionaries, i.e. English/English, French/French, etc.
- Cross-language dictionaries, i.e. English/Spanish, Japanese/English, etc.
- Special use dictionaries, such as medical, legal and engineering in all your working languages
- Dictionaries of slang, sayings, idiomatic expressions
- Dictionaries of word origins
- Newspapers and magazines in your working languages

Now that you have all these wonderful books at your beck and call, what do you do? First you must determine the function of the word within its context. Is it used as a verb, a noun, an adjective or an adverb? Also, try to determine in which sense the word is used; is it a sports term or legalese or something else altogether?

Let's take a word and play with it. For example: **BENCH**.

- She sat alone on a bench in the park. (Plain old noun)
- The judge took the bench at 8:30 AM (Legalese noun)
- The coach had to bench Johnny for the rest of the season. (Sports term and verb)

See how tricky just a *simple* word can be? Now you are ready to start researching the word.

1. Look up the word in a same-language dictionary in the Source language.
   A. Check the uses and select the one you deem appropriate.
   B. While you're there, review word origins and appropriate pronunciations(s). You will find country of origin codes and international phonetic symbols towards the front of most dictionaries.

2. Check cross-language dictionary.
   A. Make sure you find the proper contextual usage.
   B. Check to see if there are regional differences in use and make a note of it.

3. Check a same-language dictionary in the Target language.
   A. Determine the contextual uses of your chosen translation.
   B. Check word origins and acceptable pronunciations).

4. Do a back-check.
   A. Trace new target word back to source.
   B. Verify that it retains linguistic integrity. Some words or phrases have a nasty habit of losing their original meaning, a great example is one faulty translation machine's rendition of the phrase "Out of sight, out of mind" as "Invisible, insane"!

When you encounter a new word or phrase, or a use with which you weren't acquainted, it is also helpful to:

- Endeavor to question the speaker as to his/her use of the word. (This is particularly beneficial at the interview stage, it helps everyone "define their terms: to aid communication.)
- Attempt to determine the original country of origin of the speaker and/or the word.
- Question several colleagues about their experiences with the uses of the word and the interpretations they may choose, and why. (This is especially helpful when trying to determine the nuances of a slang term.)
- Question experts in the field of the word's usage, i.e. attorneys about a legal term, doctors about a word used in a medical context, etc.
- Find the word in a word-origins (etymological) dictionary. This can be a fascinating meander down the path of the development of the present use of a term.
- It is also fun and often very informative to check the word out in a crossword puzzle dictionary.

Although it may seem like an awful lot to go through for one little word at first, the research is not only necessary for an interpreter worth his or her salt, it can also become a wonderfully addictive pastime and something to do when you have free time on your hands. It is also a great antidote for those "know-it-alls" who insist that *their* way is the *only* way to say something. All languages are in a state of continuous growth and redefining. One of the pleasant challenges with which an interpreter is faced is to stay at the dynamic forefront of linguistic changes, and constant research is the only way to do it.