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Denise Heap's Translations Verbatim deciphers more than 20 languages for 60 clients.

## Curiosity translates into career

By MICHELE MEYER  
Houston Chronicle

Business got the better of Denise Heap — and she's better for it.

She studied German after her immigrant great-grandfather Martin Sah's died, leaving behind a diary and letters in his native tongue. No one in the family could read them.

"I was nosy; I wanted to know what they said," Heap recalls.

The then seventh-grader was hooked on German since reading one of Sah's letters to his sister. The great-aunt burst into tears with gratitude after learning she had not been snubbed by a starving family she had helped during World War II.

"That's the power of languages: to be able to understand people better."

Heap, 37, now makes her living by translating documents so that local businesses can communicate with their home offices in other countries. She and her contracted translators work out of their homes deciphering legal, financial and technical documents for 60 clients in more than 20 languages.

What sets Translations Verbatim apart from many of the nearly 60 translating businesses in Houston is its range of languages. Her crew translates Arabic, Croatian, Turkish, Slovenian, Vietnamese, Czech, Danish, French, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, Chinese, Japanese,

Korean and Spanish.

German is Translations Verbatim's mainstay, making up more than 60 percent of the business. More than 100 local companies have links to Germany, including Siemens AG, a high-tech telecommunications firm, and Mannesmann Pipe and Steel.

Heap decided to branch out on her own after having worked her way up over nine years from a three-day temporary to the secretary controller for a German-linked oil company here. "I decided I could do something safe — or something fun," she says.

Heap went for the fun but says she learned the hard way the importance of marketing, the challenges of being everything from the CEO to the janitor, and the expense of launching a business.

She admits that she wouldn't have started her own company if she had

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known how difficult it would be. "Fortunately, no one told me."

Nor did anyone mention how there's no rhyme or reason to translating, she says. "I'll get 10 jobs all in one day and then nothing for a week."

Documents can take up to a week to translate. She also writes a newsletter, takes care of the finances and drums up business through letters and phone calls.

Heap, who is fluent in German and English, hires translators she finds through computer bulletin boards and friends.

Her technical German translator is Austrian, a French translator is Lebanese, and both a Spanish and Russian translator are Americans. The Spanish translator was raised by her missionary parents in Bolivia, and the Russian one is married to a Russian she met while on an academic scholarship in his homeland.

Languages are only one of the translators' varied skills. One studies philosophy, while the others work full time in the fine arts, medicine, business and other fields.

Their varied backgrounds are essential. One day's challenge may be translating a legal document, the next, finding a new translator for a new language. If Heap could find someone who spoke Haitian Creole, she would be able to fill the order of an insurance company that hopes to market to Haitians in Miami.

Some assignments she rejects without hesitation, like one businessman's request that she claim that a translation said something in his best interest rather than the truth.

The most fascinating translations often are old letters people bring in from their ancestors. Heap has learned more about Hitler-occupied Germany from such letters than from history books. It was eerie, however, to realize how in the dark some writers were in the 1930s. "You think, 'That's not really what was going on,' but you can't tell them — they're dead," she says.

Sometimes the way a phrase is worded is as revealing as its message, says Susan Haroun, who translates Arabic and French for Heap. The native of Lebanon used to take her Arabic for granted, but now finds it amusing how the language uses a lot more words to say something than English.

People sometimes learn the hard way not to plow into an unknown foreign language, says Spanish translator Laura Wolf. "Words that sound similar but have completely different meanings can get confusing and embarrassing. For instance, instead of saying, 'We're going to ordain the minister,' they say, 'We're going to milk the minister.'"

The difference: The tilde ( ~ ) atop the "n" in the word *ordenar* changes ordain to milk.

Sometimes a little translation and a lot of patience go a long way. Once when Heap tried to reach the German-speaking lawyer who worked for a company in Slovenia, the Italian-speaking secretary was the only one in.

"I got out my Italian dictionary and we tried to communicate with my tiny, tiny bit of Italian and her tiny, tiny bit of English. You can communicate when you have to."

She may be improvising yet again with Slovenia: Her translator, a native of Croatia and a philosophy student, is moving to Norway.

Heap's secret weapon, besides tenacity and her arsenal of translators, is her facsimile machine. It gurgles, hums and blinks all day long with orders and communication between translator and client. The machine sits in the back room of her tree-shaded home in Spring Valley.

One would never know from the outside of the white brick house that an international business is carried on within. The only clue inside are the international flags and mugs and the preponderance of German dictionaries. The home office behind her living room contains a wood-burning stove, pottery and a stuffed toy as well as a computer, a printer and business documents.

Heap admits a longing to abandon everything and move to Germany. She used to visit yearly.

"I fell in love with the simplicity of lifestyle," she said. "It's still the way people used to be like here 30 or 40 years ago. Not everybody has a TV or dishwasher, and it's not important. Things are not what defines the people."

Over →

I keep hoping that one day you  
will expand your coverage overseas  
(or even into US Spanish, Vietnamese  
& Korean markets) + that you will  
give us a shot at the interpreting  
thereof.

Or, that you will start to  
publish multi-lingual versions of  
some of the more important  
proceedings as transcripts available  
for future political science study.

Best

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