Making Sure it's OK

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Abstract

Most quality assurance procedures for translation tend to be process-based – relying on the assumption that if the process is rigorous, the translation will be good. The experienced translator knows that such an assumption is unwise: some hazily-defined notion such as "fitness for purpose" is usually involved (what purpose?); nobody is perfect, no procedure is entirely foolproof, and no-one knows exactly what is meant by "good".
One quality assurance procedure based on the product rather than the process has always been available: it is called "revision". But revision is costly in terms of both time (when the deadline is short) and money (when the client wants value). Few attempts have been made to devise any alternative which addresses the product. This paper describes one successful approach to assessing the quality of the finished job which falls short of full revision. It has been developed jointly by the European institutions, and is used for assessing the acceptability of outsourced work. Between them, and in addition to their substantial in-house production, the EU institutions currently outsource around half a million pages of translation each year.

Key words: translation quality, quality assurance, revision.

A quarter of a century ago, when I was a very junior member of the English translation service at the European Commission, we began experimenting with an idea that 1981 was so novel that it had no name at all, but is nowadays called "post-edited machine translation". The first large-scale test we did was a report in French on the future of the translation market, the work of a think-tank in Brussels, commissioned by the people then known as DG13, nowadays DG Information Society. Two of us shared the work, which was around 130 pages of French to English, using a revolutionary new machine called a word processor. The senior reviser who was in charge accepted the job (DG13, as developers of Systran, had a political interest in the project's success) on the strict understanding that this less-than-human-quality translation was for information purposes only.

You can imagine our surprise when a year or so later our translation appeared in print, in exactly the same form, at a far from immodest price.

That's the problem with treating translation quality as anything other than an absolute. "For-information-only" jobs have a disconcerting habit of metamorphosing into glossy print and reappearing, warts and all, on a million doormats nationwide. And the senior reviser who was in charge of that particular document happened later in his career to become first head of English, then Director of the Commission's translation service, and finally its Director-

General. That experience of 25 years ago goes some way towards explaining why the EU's translators have a slightly old-fashioned attitude towards quality assurance.

The world has moved on, though, and few people have the leisure to revise every word. Other factors come into play, and one of the boss's jobs is to use his knowledge of his translators, combine it with his knowledge of his requesters and their documents, and reach an informed decision on what level of quality is actually justified.

But what do we do when we are not the supplier but the buyer of translations? How can we be sure that the work we buy in meets the minimum standard we require? Sure, the contract says that the translation will already have been revised, but when we don't know even who the translator is, far less whether he's competent, how can we feel sure that it meets our standards without actually revising it a second time?

This is not an idle question: between them, the three largest institutions [1] – the Commission, the European Parliament and the Translation Centre, all three based in Luxembourg – buy over half a million pages every year. For those of you who count translation in words, that's 150 million words. With average prices in the range € 25-€ 35 per page, it is easy to see why this multi-million euro market needs standards. There are still some operators out there who believe that translation is just another means of getting a piece of the EU action without any real quid pro quo.

Parliament and the Commission began working together in 1994 to harmonise their approach to external translation quality. The word "harmonisation" is one of the quickest ways to raise the blood-pressure of a eurosceptic, but in this case it was a useful and necessary measure. First, few members of the public – indeed not all members of the translation profession – are aware that "Europe" is not a single bureaucratic entity – the one usually referred to in the press as "Brussels". Not one entity but many, with their powers as carefully separated as are the legislature, the judiciary and the executive here in Portugal.

It made sense, therefore, to present to our freelance colleagues the unity they imagine us to have. It also made sense for the institutions concerned to get their acts together in order to apply common standards – no question of one allowing liberties which another would penalise. It thus consequently made sense to codify what we were doing, not least for the general benefit of the profession, and as a means of benchmarking our own internal standards. And finally, it therefore made particular sense that we should examine jointly the borderline cases and those which were quite manifestly sub-standard, to ensure that we were in practice pulling in the same direction.

This uniform system has been introduced gradually. The CIEQ, the committee which reviews borderline and clearly unsatisfactory cases, has been in existence and meeting regularly since 1994. In 2005 it examined some 250 documents, but this year, with new lists of contractors in force, it had already passed that total in June. The Committee has in fact been the driving force behind pushing the harmonisation any further at all. The common standards were devised by a working group drawn from the CIEQ, and the whole lot given authority by the interinstitutional translation and interpreting committee, which comprises the Directors-General of the various institutions meeting at political level – that is, representing our political masters – and counting between them a total staff of nearly 4000 translators and a total freelance demand which fluctuates between half and two-thirds of a million pages per year.

The latest stage of this gradual process is the standard evaluation procedure. We believe it incorporates the best of what we each previously did separately.

I am now being careful to use the word "evaluation" and no other. The word I am particularly avoiding is the one I began with: "revision". The contract requires work to be fit to use *as it stands.* No revision should in fact be necessary. Some agencies apparently do not

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[1] I use the term loosely. The Translation Centre is strictly speaking a "body" not an "institution", and the third largest institution is in fact the Council of Ministers. But the Council has no freelance budget, whilst the Centre commissions around 200 000 pages of freelance translation every year.

yet understand this but, equally tellingly, some colleagues don't either. We try to draw a very careful distinction between the "evaluation" of an incoming text – which we regard as a wise precaution – and its revision, which ought to be unnecessary.

Note that for a preliminary stage we have separated out six technical aspects of quality which can be assessed by clerical staff. First, was the translation delivered on time? An outstanding translation is of no use if the meeting has already broken up. Is it – apparently at least – all there, annexes, footnotes, and so on? We all know the tricks certain views of Word can play. Is it in the right format? – meaning, in our case, compatible with our exchange format. There are still people out there using Locoscript. Within that format, has the formatting of the original been cloned, or at least reproduced? Have specific instructions been followed? And finally – don't laugh, it has happened – is it in the right target language? These are objective questions which can be answered "yes" or "no". In most cases, if time allows, we can send a job back for any oversights to be corrected, and they will not be counted against the freelance. In practice, of course, time seldom allows: translation is *par excellence* a just-in-time business.

The document now proceeds to evaluation by one of the translators in the language department which has commissioned the job. A set of guidelines, available in all languages, tells the evaluator exactly what is expected of him.

I said "available in all languages". I mean "localised". The original French guidelines, for example, listed as a potentially serious error the linguistic crime of *animisme.* It's difficult to get excited about that in English, but that is exactly the kind of source-language interference we anglophones don't like: gallicisms, germanicisms and so on.

The principal guideline in all language versions is that the evaluator should not waste his time. This is, after all, work which the supplier believes is ready to go "as is" to its end user. Our rule of thumb is simple: check five pages or the entire text if it is less. We reckon that if there are no signs of poor work in five pages chosen at random, the odds are that there won't be any anywhere else. I would add as a parenthesis that we are looking at piloting a probability-based approach which will weight the amount of checking in the light of the freelance's recent form – but that is not for straight away.

In addition to his guidelines the evaluator has the standard form now before you, and he will be looking for errors of eight types. These are, in no particular order:

SP	spelling
PT	*punctuation*
GR	grammar
SENS	failure to understand the source text, mistranslation
OM	omission (or occasionally addition of elements not in the original)
CL	clarity, inadequate formulation, wrong register, SL interference
RD	failure to use style manual, reference documents; retranslation of quotations
	or other existing material, etc.
TERM	wrong lexis or terminology, including (but not just) Community terminology and jargon

Most of these need no introduction. Spelling, punctuation and grammar come first in my list not because they are the most frequent, but because they are what the economists would call leading indicators. Their tells you very quickly and very certainly that you have a problem. We all know this instinctively: a translator who cares little for the grammar of his language, who cannot spell or cannot punctuate is likely to have other, graver, shortcomings too. The evaluator's first action may indeed be to run the document past the spell-checker, because failure to take even this elementary precaution is a sure sign of a lack of professional instincts. A document which has not been spell-checked is likely on close study to reveal other signs of neglect, and in the case of an agency this implies a strong

presumption that the middleman has not in fact made any effort to earn his cut. In the case of a company I'd rather not think about what it implies.

Two degrees of severity exist for each of these eight types of error: minor and severe – venial sins, so to speak, and mortal. Minor errors are those which would make the reader raise an eyebrow, and no doubt make a reviser reach for his red pen, but which do not in practice prevent the message from getting into the reader's mind. This is where my fellow-translator must show restraint in his temporary role as evaluator. That restraint, and a marginal annotation, is all we ask of him.

A severe error, on the other hand, is one which in the view of the evaluator seriously, possibly even fatally, compromises the usability of the text. As an illustration, an error which misleads the reader momentarily until he picks up the thread again from the context is unlikely to count as severe, one which wrong-foots him permanently, leaves him on the wrong track, will.

You will have noticed that "Style" is not in the list. If the offending words can't be categorised as something else, we're not interested in the personal likes and dislikes of the evaluator. It is most unlikely that any court would contemplate something as subjective as style as grounds for cancelling a contract. Neither, therefore, may we.

The evaluator makes the necessary manuscript corrections, and uses the error codes as marginal notes. But only for the five pages. If he finds a translation wanting, it is up to his head of division to decide whether, notwithstanding the terms of the contract, the job needs revision. He may take a gamble that it is already fit for the requester's stated purpose – but that is a judgement he will be making with almost every document coming through the service. He may decide that translator time will have to be spent on bringing it up to scratch.

A parenthesis. What in these circumstances is "scratch"? The boss may well be willing to compromise the service's standards, and allow – or even perform himself – a revision of which he is not particularly proud. Oddly enough, few translators, in-house or outside, seem willing to put much effort into improving a job for which they get no credit even for the improvement. What that means is that the institutions implicitly have two standards of revision: their own house standard, and an acceptable minimum. In French (the language in which these ideas were originally conceived) this comes down to the difference between "une belle traduction" and "une bonne traduction". I'm still not sure what that makes in English, though I feel that "workmanlike" should be a useful adjective somewhere in the definition. I shall welcome your views.

That acceptable minimum is the standard an outside translation should attain before it is returned to the requester. It should be a timely, complete and workmanlike translation of the original, with the quoted matter correctly quoted, the Community and technical jargon right, and its usage not too crass.

That long parenthesis closed, if the boss decides that some kind of improvement is needed, it will become a factor in deciding whether or not the contractor should be let off with a warning, rapped over the knuckles, or downgraded.

Here, briefly, is what happens next. A document found wanting at the first evaluation is then reviewed by another evaluator of the same language but from a different institution. He will be a very senior translator between the two languages concerned – the Commission's panel average over 20 years of experience each, including the Finnish and Swedish members, who arrived only in 1995. He will also be remote from the urgency of getting the document out to its requester – remote enough, anyway, to review it dispassionately. One of the traps we have learned to beware of is over-zealousness: the evaluator who becomes irritated with a document and turns unduly severe.

Only after these two reviews is the document examined by the committee, who ensure that their decision is in keeping with its own precedents, with natural justice and with fair play.

I should perhaps close by repeating that these principles apply only to external translation. For work done in-house the Commission's culture is, as I hope I have made

clear, a good deal less forgiving. For thirty years we have been building our reputation as the best translation service in the world, and we are proud of it.

But we know that it is not reasonable to apply the same standards to work done outside, and that is why I welcome, and thank you for this opportunity to show the profession exactly what standards the EU institutions do apply.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Andrew Evans read Modern Languages at Westfield College, London, and the Sorbonne and took a Diploma in Management at the City of Birmingham Polytechnic in 1978. He joined the European Commission's English translation service in Luxembourg in 1980, working from the romance languages. In 2002 he became the Luxembourg end of the newly-created English editing service. He represented the Commission on the interinstitutional committee for the evaluation of external translation from 1996 until his retirement in 2004, initially as a staff-side representative and finally as its vice-chairman.

He is now serving as a Council member of FIT, the International Federation of Translators.