

Quality Assurance process in translation

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ABSTRACT

Quality does not start, when the translation is finished. To deliver a high quality product a well designed process is necessary. In the best case it starts already before the translation is assigned to a translator.

The session will start with defining quality and looking at the measures to achieve it. After having done that, we have a good starting point to talk about checking quality.

Quality of a translation cannot be achieved by using tools like CAT or QA-tools. These tools can only provide some help, but cannot replace the human. Nevertheless good quality can be improved, if the tools are used properly. But only then – improper use will cause a lot of misunderstandings and problems.

We shall thus talk about quality checking, focused on the target language. Tools like SDL Trados Studio, MemoQ or Xbench allow you to configure the QA-checking modules, but in quite different ways. Here not only the knowledge of the tool, but also some understanding of the target language is necessary. Best case QA-checking should be done by people understanding both source and target language. Unfortunately very often this process is done by project managers, who typically cannot have command of as many languages as the languages of the projects they manage.

During the session I would like to show why understanding target is also necessary when doing QA-checking.

1. Introduction

First things first: this paper will not talk about linguistic quality. Measuring the quality of a language is not my aim here, as it is highly complicated and remains quite subjective – our perception on language may differ, even though a definition of proper language is of course possible. So instead I will concentrate on parameters, which can be easier checked and controlled.

This session and this paper are addressed mainly to freelance translators and small LSPs.

2. Defining quality

More or less everybody is talking about quality nowadays. And of course nearly everybody talks about quality management, quality assurance, quality control and all related processes. But what IS quality?

There are several definitions for quality. If you look at Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quality_%28business%29 – to take an example), you'll find some interesting descriptions of how quality can be defined in business. And in the end what we do is business, so applying this definition to translation quality is surely not unreasonable.

From the definitions given there I would chose these:

- A combination of quantitative and qualitative perspectives for which each person has his or her own definition; examples of which include, "Meeting the requirements and expectations in service or product that were committed to" and "Pursuit of optimal solutions contributing to confirmed successes, fulfilling accountabilities".
- Degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements. The standard defines *requirement* as need or expectation (ISO 9000).
- Fitness for use. Fitness is defined by the customer.
- The result of care.
- Conformance to requirements.

Personally, I very much like the last three with the last one being my absolute favourite.

But what does this "conformance to the requirements" mean for us?

3. Quality in translation

Translation is not just done for the sake of the translation itself. The purpose of the translation is to make information given in the source language to the audience, speaking the target language.

So to provide a "high quality translation" we must meet the needs of this audience, as this audience is the "customer" here. However, our customer is the one who gives us the job. He is the one who knows the audience, so he defines the expectations – and this is why I particularly like the last definition. If the customer just needs the text to be understandable without any special requirement regarding the language, a machine translation with some post editing may be fully sufficient. In this situation the "high quality" is defined not in the common sense, as we would understand it if applied to a product we would like to buy. Here "high quality" means to meet the expectation of the customer with the lowest possible effort. A very good example of this approach are articles in the knowledge base of Microsoft, which are machine translated and still very understandable – at least from what I can tell for their German and Polish language versions.

Using some common sense definitions, the quality of a translation shall include, but is not limited to:

- correct transmission of the meaning from the source to the target language

- no spelling and grammatical errors
- linguistic perfection
- nicely written sentences (good readable)
- and many more...

Certainly there are much more criteria we could define.

But how to achieve these?

4. Steps to quality

Being bilingual or having a so called “very good” knowledge of a foreign language is commonly seen as a good base for being a translator. For most people outside of our industry translating is more or less the same as taking a dictionary and retyping the source in target language. I think most of us have already heard similar statements from other people. But is an in-depth knowledge of another language really enough to be a translator? Certainly not – I think we all agree on that. So what is really needed to provide a translation, which can be considered a good one?

Again there are so many aspects of this, so I can list here just few of them, but I think the following are quite important:

- perfect language skills
- knowledge in the field of translation
- research
- continuous learning
- ...

But even though people may study languages and be an expert in several languages, knowing the important aspects of grammar, vocabulary and so on, such people are not necessarily good translators. Same applies to bilinguals. There must be something more, what we need to be a good translator. Something similar to what an artist needs to be a good one or an interpreter need to carry the audience away. A translator must “fit” to the purpose and must have that “something”, what makes him more or less an artist. This is quite an important aspect, which cannot be taught – either you have it or you have it not. All this may sound a bit philosophical, but if you look at your own career I think you'll agree. You have been successful because you are not “just a translator” – you are a kind of a virtuoso.

5. How to achieve quality

Now, as we already defined what kind of quality we would like to achieve and which steps can be taken, it is time to define a process for achieving quality.

Of course language cannot be pressed in a form and moulded like aluminium. Language is like fluid. Do you remember the definition of fluids from your school time? Here is a definition from Wikipedia: “In physics, a fluid is a substance that continually deforms (flows) under an applied shear stress.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fluid>) This fits quite well I would say.

But even if the language is like fluid, we can catch it. A fluid will take the form of a vessel, so we just need a vessel:



<http://slodkotko.blogspot.de/2012/03/inspiracje.html>

Now let's try to define a process of getting our translation there:

- The customer sends a request
- We check, if we're able to fulfil the request
- The job is accepted and confirmed
- Materials provided by the customer are being translated
- A spell- and grammar-check will be performed
- The text shall be checked for omissions or number errors
- A proofreading is performed (better to call this step revision)
- Target text is being created
- The target text shall be formatted
- A final check is done
- The result is delivered to the customer

Of course this is a very simplified process and the steps above can be supplemented by many more, but this reflects the core of our work.

6. Quality Assurance (QA) vs. Quality Control (QC)

When we talk about quality and means to achieve it in our work, in most cases the whole process is being called "Quality Assurance". Unfortunately, usually in our business this is not correct.

If we talk about quality assurance, the process MUST start before the text even comes to us. A QA process must already begin from the creation of the source, which will then be translated. But in nearly all situations no one of us – both freelancers and agencies – can take influence on the creation of source materials. So our QA starts from the receiving of the materials from the customer. So it starts before we start to translate. However, this fact is commonly being forgotten – and people talk about Quality Assurance, but start to perform it when the translation is already done. In this situation no influence can be taken on the input – so if the input is bad, there is I think no doubt that the translation cannot be as good as it would be with a good input.

So if we want to perform a “real” Quality Assurance, we MUST start before the job even begins. This is quite important – and even if we cannot influence the creation of source materials, we can of course check them before we start to translate.

Many errors (not only translation errors) are caused by problematic source. The source may be badly understandable, and so the translation will remain – it is at least not trivial to translate a non understandable source to an understandable target. However in such cases many translations really read better than the original. But the source may have much more traps than the linguistic one. And all these “small” traps are usually overseen in the process of translation – by all involved parties, starting from the customer and ending with the translator. I will return to this problem in another section of this paper.

What is usually performed by translators and translation agencies, is not Quality Assurance (even though many of us really call this process QA – just look at the tools we use), but Quality Control. The difference is quite simple. While QA starts from the very beginning of the process and follows it in every step, the QC is a task performed after certain process steps have already been done. QC is the proofing done after the translation has been finished. It is part of the Quality Assurance, but cannot replace the QA. The translation can be checked for several purposes – spelling, grammar, no omissions, correct numbers, comprehensibility and many other. All this checks are parts of the Quality Control.

7. Checking of the quality in CAT tools

All CAT-tools I know have a build-in module for checking quality. Very often this module is called “QA Checker” (SDL Trados Studio) or “Run QA” (MemoQ), even though no real quality assurance is done here.

Obviously also integrated is at least a spell-checking module and sometimes a grammar checking module.

Beside the integrated checking modules also external programs can be used. There are several programs on the market, which can perform quality checks. Some of those are even for free, like Xbench in version 2.9. The current version of Xbench is 3.0 and it is a paid one. Other program for quality checking is ErrorSpy or QA Distiller and many other.

The checks performed include, but are not limited to:

- numbers
- translation consistency

- segment length
- forgotten or empty translations
- target and source identical
- punctuation
- capitalization
- specific lists of words
- regular expressions criteria
- and many more ...

8. How to achieve quality

A good question I think. And a question with no general answer unfortunately.

There was no, is no and will not be any universal method to achieve quality, valid for all of us and for all languages and kinds of texts. Quality must be defined and checked individually.

However, some general steps can be defined, which shall help to achieve the desired quality. But quality does not start with the translation and does not only apply to the translated text. No, it starts even before we have got the job... Quality starts with the author of the text. A badly written text may not deliver as good target text as a source text, which has been written with the intention to be published in several languages and thus having the need of translation in mind.

Of course we cannot affect the author of the text. But still we can do something with the text we shall translate – we can try to tidy it up.

When for example translating from German into English you may sometimes encounter something like this:

Mit der Maschine können:

- *Dosen,*
- *Flaschen*

produziert werden.

It means more or less, that the offered machine is designed for producing cans and bottles. But of course it is not possible to keep this word order in English, so the last part "*produziert werden*" must be integrated in the first part and the last segment will be empty or contain just a period:

<i>Mit der Maschine können:</i>	:	<i>The aim of the machine is to produce:</i>
- <i>Dosen,</i>	:	- <i>cans,</i>
- <i>Flaschen</i>	:	- <i>bottles.</i>
<i>produziert werden.</i>		.

If you now confirm all the segments, they can be used for a pretranslation of your next job. And in your next job your customer will send you this text:

Mit der Maschine können:

- Dosen,
- Flaschen

abgefüllt werden.

Now this machine is not for producing, but for filling of cans and bottles. But you have already this segment in your translation memory:

Mit der Maschine können: : *The aim of the machine is to produce:*

So you are now trapped – and this is why such text needs correction before you start translating or you need a different way of treating segments within your translation project to avoid such things happening. This ways may differ from tool to tool, but the aim is not to store such translations in the TM.

From my own experience it is very important to go through the source and not only to check for such examples like above, but also look for superfluous paragraph breaks, tabulators and other means of formatting, which are breaking the text flow into separate segments.

This is what you see in a PDF file or in printout:

Adapter Vierkant (1/4" Sechskant)
Nutzung mit Schnellwechselfutter und
Führungshülsenmodellen, soweit nicht
anders vermerkt.

But when you open the file in the corresponding editing program and switch on the view of non-printable characters, you will see this:



Adapter Vierkant (1/4" Sechskant)¶
Nutzung mit Schnellwechselfutter und ¶
Führungshülsenmodellen, soweit nicht ¶
anders vermerkt.#

The above text is splitted into four lines by paragraph breaks. Of course this will cause severe problems in your translation. So to make your job easier remove the paragraph breaks. If you perform these steps, you will move from quality checking to real quality assurance.

After having prepared your text for translation the core process may now start. During the process, beside the obvious things like correct grammar, perfect wording, usage of correct terminology, consistence and other factors some other much less important things do also

matter. These small things are commonly considered not to be very important. These are mainly elements of typography, but also spaces and dashes and so on. Quite often I see linguistically good translations where double spaces between words may be found – of course this is a minor error, but such text goes to print without correction you will see the disturbing bigger space between words. These things include quotation marks and also correct spacing between numbers and measurement units. As translators we must remember, that the person creating the final document in a DTP application for example may very well not know our language. So she or he will not know, if the correct typographic quotes are "" like in English or „" like in German or maybe « » for French or „" for Polish. She or he will not know that the German notation of percentage with a space like 5 % is not correct in Polish, where it should read 5%. The delivered translation needs to fit to the standards of the target language and make the job of the layouter easy. Checking for such errors is a part of the QC process.

9. Why even small things do matter

All the steps taken to achieve high quality translation may sometimes fail, because some small things have been overseen.

As you've already seen, translating badly prepared and thus badly segmented text may bear a danger of mistranslation in it because of the use of a translation memory system, which will pretranslate text, taking matches from the TM, which may not fit. But this kind of errors will usually be fixed with the proofreading of the text. However, some other kind of errors tend to be overseen quite often. One of the most common mistakes is the omission of spaces between the number and the measurement unit. For example instead of 40 kW, you see 40kW. Or in many American texts you can find 24VDC, even though it should state a voltage of 24 V direct current – 24 V DC. Many engineers do not pay attention to that, so many translators do simply use same way of writing. However, a mistake in the source does not really legitimate us to repeat it in target.

Please look at the following example. This small piece of text is a part of a description of a Polish airplane from the time of the Second World War.¹

Silniki. Wersja P. 37A: dwa silniki chłodzone powietrzem, dziewięciocylindrowe gwiazdowe Bristol Pegasus XIIIB o mocy nominalnej 820÷860 KM przy 2250 obr/min ha wysokości 1220 m, o mocy startowej 930÷970 KM, o masie 460 kg każdy, ze sprężarką i reduktorem. Rozrusznik ręczny bezwładnościowy Avia-Eclipse 11A. Osłony silników duralowe, z kolektorem spalin na krawędzi natarcia. Śmigła trójłopatowe, metalowe, dwupołożeniowe, przestawialne w locie, DH-Hamilton Standard. Zbiornik główny na 532l paliwa pod kabiną pilota. U nasady odejmowanych części płata dwa zbiorniki po 238 l. W gondolach silnikowych dwa zbiorniki opadowe po 119 l. Łączna pojemność zbiorników 1246 l. W kadłubowej komorze bombowej zakładane dwa zbiorniki dodatkowe po 369 l. Maksymalna pojemność zbiorników 1984 l. W gondolach silnikowych dwa zbiorniki po 115 l oleju (normalny zapas 90 l). Przelotowe zużycie paliwa przez samolot 322÷350 l/h, maksymalne zużycie 462 l/h.

¹See "Andrzej Glass, Samolot bombowy PZL. 37 ŁOŚ, TBIU 1/2012(5), Wydawnictwo ZP 2012"

It lists the capacities of fuel and oil tanks, given in litre. The unit symbol is "l". But in the font used, the lower case letter "l" (L for litre) and the number "1" are very similar. This is the case for example if you use Times New Roman:

Here is the letter "L" in lower case in TNR: l

And here the number "1" in TNR: 1

They are really very similar. Now please look at this sentence from the above example:

niowe, przestawialne w locie, DH-Hamilton Standard. Zbiornik
główny na 5321 paliwa pod kabiną pilota. U nasady odejmowa-

This sentence does give the capacity of the main fuel tank. But it is NOT 5321 litres! The plane has had a total own weight of approx. 6250 kg and a load capacity of 4250 kg. Over 5000 litres of fuel would mean more than the load capacity of the plane. The correct number would be 532 l – 532 litres, but due to the missing space you really may get the impression the capacity were over 5000 litres.

Another nice example is the loss of the Mars Climate Orbiter. Due to the usage of wrong unit systems this NASA space probe was totally lost. This example is not directly correlated with linguistic translation, but shows how important a proper QA and QC is.