

## **Translation quality - how can we tell it's good enough?**

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My work at Aldus Europe involves the production of software documentation for the European market in up to ten different European languages. In this function, I am a translation consumer – I buy translation.

There is a wide variety of agencies in the market and representatives from many of them are present here today. The question for me is, then, what to choose. Which translation do I buy and how can I tell whether it will serve its purpose? So let me introduce you first of all to a little scenario which may look familiar to you.

Imagine, if you will, that you are running a translation agency which has just completed a 400-page technical manual for an obscure piece of software (not Aldus, of course!). You had secured the contract by impressing the client with the qualifications and the experience of your translation team. They had worked in this area several times before and you are confident that they did a good job.

Two weeks later, Friday afternoon, and you are contemplating how to spend the weekend. Suddenly, the phone rings and it's your client, foaming at the mouth and claiming that the translation you supplied is not worth the paper it was laserprinted on. He has just had the translation reviewed by his local distributors who told him in no uncertain terms that it was unacceptable for their market. No cheque for you, a disgruntled customer and a lot of rework over the weekend.

So what happened? You put experienced and qualified translators on the job who had delivered good translation before – so why didn't they manage this time? Did they slip up? Is the customer being unreasonable?

There is a third possibility that should not be discounted. You may not have understood what the customer wants, or worse still, the customer may not actually have known what he wanted himself. Both of you assumed that good translators provide good translations, but neither of you looked closely at what that means.

### **WHAT IS A GOOD TRANSLATION?**

So what are the hallmarks of a ‘good translation’, then? As an opening statement, I would like to say that there *are* no good translations, only adequate ones.

What I mean to say by that commercial translations cannot intrinsically be judged as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Translations are a service, so they are always target-specific. They must first and foremost satisfy the customer’s requirements, i.e. they must be adequate. Therefore translation quality, too, can only be judged by these standards.

So today, I propose to look at translation quality in the light of customer requirements. The analogy is, maybe, with having a meal at a good restaurant. For most people who like steak, for instance, their requirements are that it be a good tender piece of meat *and* that it be cooked in the way they prefer: rare, medium, or well done.

Even the finest steak will be unpalatable to the customer if it arrives on the plate ‘cremated’ when the order was for it to be rare. If we do not think of this as unusual, then why should we have a unified perception of translation quality? Translation agencies, like restaurants, provide a service to the customer. To my mind, there is nothing unusual, therefore, in saying that the quality of the service depends not only on the supplier and the materials, but also on the adherence to the customer’s wishes.

### **WHAT IS A SUITABLE TRANSLATION?**

What, then, are the areas, in which customer requirements will typically differ? Mainly, they will be related to the purpose of the publication and to the individual preferences of the customer.

Looking at the purpose of the piece, we have to look at what kind of document it is. Manual, tutorial, and marketing pieces all have different aims and therefore use different language. We also need to consider who it is aimed at. Documentation is always aimed at the target market for the product, so a graphics program for the professional designer will use a substantially different pitch from a general purpose word processor.

In the area of customer (i.e. translation client) preferences, it is important, first of all, to understand who is involved in the review process for the documentation piece. If, as in our introductory scenario, other

external groups are involved (such as local language distributors) you need to find out whether they can (or should) be brought into the translation process. You need to know what kind of corporate standards are encouraged and enforced in the company.

At Aldus, for example, it is corporate policy to maintain a very high typographical standard in all documentation, simply because we supply tools for the publishing industry. Other companies have a different focus, but often their particular slant will affect the way the company looks at translated documentation.

### **HOW CAN WE TELL IT'S GOOD ENOUGH?**

But how can we, as the clients, tell whether a translation is up to scratch? First of all, we have contacts. In many cases, distributors or other contacts in the markets are judge and jury in the assessment of translations, because the clients themselves do not have the necessary language skills in-house.

Often, the external contacts are not translation or documentation professionals, but merely combine technical skills with their native language competence. Bear this in mind when submitting materials to your client.

Secondly, we have experience. Most companies have gone through a learning curve in handling translation and consequently have a basic concept of what they view to be a suitable translation.

Thirdly, we have corporate standards, both implicit and explicit. Established corporate standards, and especially their violation, can often play an important part in how translations are perceived by clients, especially when they are not language professionals.

### **HOW CAN YOU ENSURE IT'S GOOD ENOUGH?**

With the above in mind, how can a company make sure it meets the goal of quality translation?

Most importantly, it should ask about the requirements that are specific to the job and the company. It should also be prepared to raise the issue in the first place, since clients themselves may not be fully aware of their specific requirements.

Furthermore, agencies should be sure that their translators understand the subject matter thoroughly and that they have the opportunity to maintain and extend that knowledge.

Finally, they should make certain that they are aware of the market conditions for the product in the respective country. They should have a good grasp of who is buying the product, what competing products are, what kind of jargon and buzzwords are used, etc.

**HOW CAN WE MEASURE QUALITY?**

There are a number of criteria that translation quality can be measured by and we can normally assume that many of these will be shared by translator and client. These are criteria such as accuracy, grammaticality, and fluency. Very few clients are going to insist that you provide them with a translation that obscures the meaning of the original (unless they are in politics).

However, there may well be variations as to the degree of fluency and accuracy that is required. For example, a rough translation for information purposes only will require considerably less attention to detail than a polished marketing piece. As a whole, we can measure this type of criterion quite accurately, so I have listed them below as 'objective criteria'.

But crucially, there are a few criteria that you cannot take for granted and where your intuition and the client's expectation may be widely different. Often these are areas like style, target audience, and market suitability. Again, not only is it important to find this out for yourself, but also to make the client aware of these potential trap doors. These criteria are also far more difficult to measure as they rely much more on personal preferences than on widely accepted conventions.

And finally, there are a number of criteria which are extraneous to the translation itself but equally crucial to its success. These are the added value services that translation agencies provide, such as electronic data transfer, editing and updating services, and project management.

So this was the situation where we found ourselves in the summer of last year: we wanted to build a framework for testing the services of the translation agencies in the market because we wanted to make contract decisions on the basis of comparable assessments, rather than simply on the basis of sales pitch.

At the same time, we were keen to explore the market further and spread our net of contacts. We could obviously not afford to do this through 'live' projects because of the commercial risk involved, so we decided on handing out a test translation piece to a range of agencies. We then developed a standard evaluation sheet on the basis of the criteria we had isolated, which would allow us to arrive at comparable results in the evaluation phase.

This evaluation sheet (Appendix 1) was designed to measure the translation by the different criteria that can be applied to translation quality. Each of the criteria was put in the form of five statements that ranged from the best possible state of affairs to the worst. For example in the category 'Grammaticality', the statements were: 'The text is consistently grammatical / largely grammatical / mostly grammatical / often ungrammatical / largely ungrammatical'.

We then asked our evaluators to select the statement out of the five that matched most closely their impression of the translation. This way we obtained a ranking out of five for each criterion.

### **OBJECTIVE CRITERIA**

The following were the objective criteria we looked at in the study:

Grammaticality – here we were concerned with whether the text was grammatically correct in the translated language.

Spelling – here the evaluators were asked to rate the number of spelling mistakes.

Accuracy – does the translation accurately reflect the content of the original?

Presentation – how was the translation presented and were the guidelines given to the agencies adhered to? This question falls between objective and added value criteria. (Responses for presentation were elicited through a comments column at the end of the evaluation sheet)

### **SUBJECTIVE CRITERIA**

The area that really interested us, though, was the subjective criteria. It was here that we felt we could benefit in particular from pooling the ratings by different independent evaluators.

Style – asks whether the translated text is pitched at the right level for that kind of document (e.g. a user manual, a tutorial, or a brochure).

Fluency – another slippery concept, but one that every reviewer grasps intuitively. What we asked for here, was whether the text ‘reads well’ or whether it is ‘clumsy’.

Functional identity – covers the question whether the translation manages to keep to the appropriate form for the kind of document. In the evaluation form, we broke this down into two elements: terminology and consistency. The questions to the evaluators were, whether the text uses the appropriate terminology and whether it is internally consistent in that use.

Cultural identity – the further down the list we get, the hazier the concepts become, although not necessarily more difficult to answer. The question here is whether the text appears to be a translation into the target language or whether it has the trappings of a text originally written in the target language.

**ADDED VALUE**

The whole area of added value was not rated since it goes beyond what appears on the printed page. A summary of the services supplied by the agency was compiled by the project administrator at the end of the exercise. The following aspects were considered, among others:

Effective communication – i.e. the speed and quality of response by the agency. This includes dealing with follow-up questions by the translators or progress reports to the client.

Hardware/software compatibility – i.e. whether the company was able to supply the translation in the specified format on the specified disks.

Effective data transfer – was the quickest and best method of data transfer used (mail, courier, modem, AppleLink)?

**VARIABLES**

What then are the variables that we need to keep constant in order to achieve our goal of comparable results across the range of translations? One of the most crucial variables concerns the choice of evaluators. Typically, we have used three evaluators: one member of our in-house language team, one contact at a distributor or subsidiary, and one other independent reviewer from an associated company in the respective country.

By using evaluators from these areas, we felt that we got a good balance between product expertise (in-house staff), market expertise (distributors/subsidiaries) and independent assessment (other reviewers).

Secondly, it is important to find the right balance between having a representative sample of evaluators and getting bogged down in too much data. My feeling is that three reviewers is a reasonable compromise, especially in view of the fact that they bring a wide range of different backgrounds with them (as outlined in the previous point).

Finally, because of the large number of agencies involved (35-40), the project extended considerably longer than we anticipated. It therefore became important to keep using the same evaluators in each language in order to achieve comparable results.

**RESULTS**

So what was the net result of this exercise for Aldus? On the whole, it proved to be a very useful tool for our group, since it provided us with the following:

We established a wide range of new contacts in the translation industry and got a better overview of what is available in the market place.

We ended up with a ranking of the translation results, based on a transparent and consistent set of criteria. This meant that we were able to choose between the available agencies on an informed basis.

We obtained an overview of the price/performance ratio in the market, which gave us a better idea of what kind of services different agencies could offer – and at what price.

And finally, but very significantly, we got a first-hand impression of the way that the agencies in the evaluation project conduct their business.

After completing the evaluation, we supplied a summary of the results to each participating agency. This way, the agencies received direct and structured customer feedback and it also gave them the opportunity to comment on the results of the study.

Since then, we have kept in touch with many of the agencies in the study, based many contract decisions on its results, or have at least used the study to identify a range of potential suppliers for our translation work.

## **SUMMARY**

As a summary, I would like to re-emphasise the three central points of our findings:

- The only good translations are suitable translations.
- Suppliers need to find out what is suitable for their customers.
- Customers need to be clear about their requirements.

**APPENDIX 1 - EVALUATION FORM**

Dear Evaluator,

Thank you for agreeing to assess a number of translations for Aldus Europe. Our aim has been to develop a set of standards by which we can measure the quality of individual translations.

In the following, you will be therefore be asked to rate each translation by nine different criteria. Each criterion is presented on a scale of 1-5 and is illustrated in a sentence. You should circle the number of the statement that you think comes closest to your opinion on the translation.

After you have finished, please return the evaluation form and the text to the co-ordinator. Thank you once again for your assistance.

*A. Grammaticality*

Please rate the syntax and grammaticality of the translation. The text is

- 1 - consistently grammatical
- 2 - largely grammatical
- 3 - mostly grammatical
- 4 - often ungrammatical
- 5 - largely ungrammatical

*B. Spelling*

Please rate the number of spelling mistakes you have found in the translation. The text contained

- 1 - no spelling mistakes
- 2 - hardly any spelling mistakes
- 3 - a few spelling mistakes
- 4 - a number of spelling mistakes
- 5 - a lot of spelling mistakes

*C. Accuracy*

Please rate, as far as is possible for you, the accuracy of the translation. The text is

- 1 - an entirely accurate version of the original
- 2 - largely an accurate version of the original
- 3 - a generally accurate version of the original
- 4 - a not very accurate version of the original
- 5 - an often inaccurate version of the original



*D. Terminology*

Please rate whether you think the terminology is appropriate or not. The terminology used in the text is

- 1 - entirely appropriate
- 2 - largely appropriate
- 3 - generally appropriate
- 4 - not very appropriate
- 5 - often inappropriate

*E. Consistency*

Please rate, whether terminology and style are used consistently in the translation. The text is

- 1 - entirely internally consistent
- 2 - largely internally consistent
- 3 - generally internally consistent
- 4 - internally not very consistent
- 5 - often internally inconsistent

*F. Fluency*

Please rate, whether the translation is written fluently (i.e. whether it reads well). The text is written

- 1 - very fluently
- 2 - mostly fluently
- 3 - reasonably fluently
- 4 - rather awkwardly
- 5 - clumsily

*G. Style*

Please rate, whether the style of the translation is appropriate for the type of document (software user manual). The style of the text is

- 1 - entirely appropriate
- 2 - largely appropriate
- 3 - mostly appropriate
- 4 - often inappropriate
- 5 - entirely inappropriate

*H. Cultural Identity*

Please rate the extent to which you feel the translation could pass as a text that was originally written in the translated language. The text looks

- 1 - like an original text in the translated language
- 2 - almost like an original text in the translated language
- 3 - like a good translation of the original
- 4 - noticeably like a translation of the original
- 5 - unacceptable as a text in the translated language

*I. Overall Impression*

Please rate the overall impression the translation made on you. The overall impression was

- 1 - Excellent
- 2 - Good
- 3 - Average
- 4 - Poor
- 5 - Unacceptable

*J. Comments*

Please list any other comments you may have here. Feel free to draw our attention to peculiarities and positive or negative aspects of the text. You may also want to highlight passages in the text to illustrate a particular point.

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