

Screams in the Quality Jungle

by Robin Bonthron, Fry & Bonthron Partnerschaft,
Language Consultancy and Services

Like taxes, the question of translation quality seems to return to haunt us with almost predictable regularity, causing not only chronic headaches, but also what are some of the fiercest and most divisive arguments in the language services industry. Even as this article is being written, an emotionally charged dispute on translation quality, translator quality and the future (if any) of the “profession” is raging in CompuServe’s FLEFO forum. This article looks at a number of the issues behind this debate - some of which have very little, if anything, to do with translation quality - and attempts to reconcile the different views to produce more balanced proposals for solving the “quality problem”.

Us v. us

To an observer, the conflict seems to have degenerated into a rather dirty form of internecine trench warfare. On the one hand, there are those who claim that the only key to a “quality” translation is some sort of certification or accreditation scheme for translators. This is often based on academic qualifications (or equivalent) and generally combined – almost inevitably – with membership of a “professional” organization (indeed, in many cases, the former are a prerequisite for the latter). Ranged against these views – and often uneasy about being cast in the role of opponents – are those who argue that consistent and acceptable translation output quality can be achieved most effectively through process-oriented quality design and standardization procedures, whilst not ignoring the urgent need for some sort of common standards for the individual service providers involved.

In many cases, however, the arguments in favour of personal certification and/or accreditation seem to be based not on any genuine desire to improve quality standards across the board, but rather on a belief that “access to the profession” – in other words the legal capacity to style oneself as a translator and offer translation services on the market – should be restricted to an elect group of “professionals” meeting criteria which they themselves have devised.

Us v. them

This would seem to be the background, for example, to developments in Austria, where there is a move to institute personal certification for translators as “experts” on the basis of EN45013, which covers the competence of personnel. The motive behind this attempt to establish a highly restrictive closed shop may well be a wish to make a concrete distinction between full-time translators and “housewives and caretakers”. One legitimate comment which can be made on this proposal is that if the “professionals” are running scared of the “amateurs”, then the latter are evidently getting something right and the former should be *learning* from them and trying to integrate them, instead of trying to shut them out.

However, the Austrians do not deserve to be singled out alone in their efforts to form an exclusive club. This retrograde mindset permeates the structures and policies of many translator associations and frequently crops up in arguments advanced by individual members of the industry. It also seems evident in discussion material produced by the “European Translation Platform”, a panel appointed by and operating under the aegis of the European Commission’s DGXIII (although the criteria for membership are not immediately apparent). Its activities are possibly suspended at the present following the temporary freeze on the Multilingual Information Society programme.

Although the Platform rightly sees the need for some sort of standards, one solution to which it has given prominence is the establishment of a centralized European Accreditation Authority coordinating the accreditation activities of national and/or international “professional” associations. This completely ignores the fact, for example, that a very large number of extremely competent translators are not members of such associations. The same applies to translation companies and other businesses involved in translation and localization. Many of them have voted with their feet, whilst others are not even *allowed* to become members, and they will certainly refuse to let such bodies, a number of which have a chequered past and an even more uncertain future, interfere in any way in the conduct of their business and the future of their careers. The message here is quite clear: where translation quality is concerned, the track record of many “professional” associations hampers their participation in any activities in this field until there is a significant change in their attitudes and policies.

“Let me through, I’m a translator ...”

One feature common to these approaches is that they are fundamentally flawed. Firstly, they are often predicated upon the fundamental belief that translators qualify for membership of the group of certified professionals: for instance lawyers, physicians, accountants, engineers and other professionals who can be called upon to provide written or oral expertise. With the exception of the relatively small number of translators who actually do hold qualifications in areas other than languages and/or translation, this stance is quite typical of the arrogance and self-delusion so widespread in the industry today. A certified professional is one who has gained a qualification (generally based on both examination and experience) which is recognized in the relevant profession as being based on sound, objective and repeatable (auditable) methodologies. Indeed, it is this qualification which is a prerequisite for exercising the profession in the first place, which is not the case with translators.

For translation, however, no such generally accepted methodologies exist at the present. Indeed, many advocates of the schemes outlined above claim that the metrics of translation quality assessment are not even possible, and that the quality of the translator (and the translation) can and should be measured only by what amounts to peer review. Unfortunately for them, the logical consequence of this lack of well-founded methodologies is that their arguments in favour of equating translators with other qualified professionals are inherently self-defeating.

As an extension of the first weakness, the second is the widely held opinion that linguistic skills are the primary competence of the translator, with subject-area knowledge and experience at best a rather poor second. This is exemplified by the emphasis on lan-

guages and linguistics in most university-level translation courses and by the restrictive admission criteria imposed by many “professional” associations (although it must be pointed out that the frequently poor *target* – normally native – language competence of this “qualified elite” is often a cause for surprise and dismay).

Reality has shown, however, that combined with fluency and good style in the translator’s target/native language, subject-area expertise is just as – and often more – important than near-native speaker competence in the source language. This is of particular importance to the localization industry, where the complexity and diversity of business applications, for example, demands a level of domain knowledge vastly superior to that of the average threatened “mix ‘n match”, non-specialized translator.

The Anglo-American approach

The situation is not entirely bleak, however. In the USA, the American Translators Association (ATA) runs an exam-based accreditation scheme, although this has come under fire from a number of quarters, including attacks on the grounds that it is essentially “rent-a-qualification”, as accreditation apparently lapses if annual ATA dues are not paid.

The British Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) also operates an exam and/or assessment-based membership scheme (for qualification as a full member). Although it, too, is not uncontroversial, its pragmatic approach probably makes it the most likely candidate for use as a framework for more universally accepted personal qualification testing.

One element, however, is missing from these assessment schemes: the allegedly “impossible” objective translation metrics referred to above. But these metrics *are* possible, and any examination of them should logically start in the area where they are already in place: process quality.

Processes are easier than people

The dominant view in the language services industry in (continental) Europe still seems to be that translation is an art-form, somehow underpinned by a frequently esoteric university discipline of “translation science”. This is the underlying attitude which continues to see thousands of “graduate translators” emerging onto the market each year, most of them quite unprepared for the harsh realities of increasingly savage competition, but confident in their in-built superiority and ability to provide “perfect” translations. The situation is only aggravated if their qualification entitles them to more or less automatic certification by the local courts.

Outside this ivory-tower mentality, however, there is a firm view in minority, but successful, sectors of the industry that translation is not an art, a science only in a very restricted sense, but above all a business process. This is the background to promising initiatives such as the LISA QA Model and the draft DIN Standard 2345 “Translation Projects”. The starting point for these projects was the realization that because of the rapidly shifting localization and translation environments, the ISO 900x series of process

quality standards is only of limited relevance to translation and localization processes, and in particular that these standards are insufficiently flexible for the workflows which typify these processes. In addition, the prohibitive cost and workload involved in ISO 900x certification for individual service providers and small TCs was a driving force behind DIN 2345. Another reason is the concept of quality which appears in the ISO standards.

The definition of quality as “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs” in ISO 8402 does not satisfactorily address the specific requirements of translation quality. In much the same way, the ISO 9000 definition of quality as “an integration of the features and characteristics which determine the extent to which output satisfies the customer’s needs” is also of limited use when assessing the quality of a translation. As far as translation services are concerned, these neat – but rather opaque – interpretations of quality fall into the same trap as those practitioners who ultimately abrogate the translator’s responsibility for ensuring quality by claiming that the customer is the best judge of the quality of a translation.

This is demonstrably untrue. In most cases, customers are not in a position to assess the quality of a translation, generally because they do not have the necessary target-language – or even subject-area – skills available to do so. In effect, they are relying from the outset on the language service provider to deliver a certain degree of quality – the elements of which are rarely defined beyond the level of “good English” or “something which will be appropriate to the target group in country X” – without the means to validate this “quality” at the time of delivery. For localized software and documentation, the first inkling a customer may have that the localization is inadequate is a scathing review in the target country press, user complaints or even litigation.

Another factor is the widespread principle in commerce and industry today that the supplier of a product or service is responsible for ensuring that quality standards are met, and that the buyer’s quality assurance procedures should generally be restricted to random sampling. This highlights the paradox facing the language service providers: the onus is now on them (rather than the customer) to guarantee quality, but there are very few tools available to validate compliance.

Two of the toolsets already mentioned are the LISA QA Model and DIN 2345. LISA members will be familiar with the former: it is the first successful attempt at an industry-wide level to develop sound methodologies for describing and specifying – amongst other things – translation-related processes, and it already extends quality assurance beyond the process level and into the domain of *output quality* (in particular in the QA Model, Appendix A), a feat regarded by many in the translation industry as impossible. The LISA QA Model’s contribution to the establishment of sound metrics for translation-related quality cannot be underscored enough, and we should all be grateful to the authors for their outstanding work in achieving a significant advance in this discipline.

DIN 2345, currently published in draft form, is less specific than the LISA QA Model, primarily because it was designed from the outset as a catch-all solution for all types of translation (1).

Towards a solution

Together, these two quality assurance models go a long way towards providing a basis for assessing not only the process quality, but also the output quality of translation work in general. The LISA QA Model, currently addressing localization, which can be seen as a subset of translation in general, could be expanded and suitably adapted to cover the meta-level before being broken down again into greater detail to address domain-specific requirements. The overall structure and much of the content of DIN 2345 could then be merged with this new superset to develop a set of quality assurance procedures in conjunction with other complementary activities, such as:

- *Terminology validation.* The widespread availability of validated terminology is one of the prerequisites for translation and localization process and output quality. In cooperation with ELRA – the European Language Resources Association – the European INTERVAL project, co-funded by the European Commission and coordinated by LISA Member CL Servicios Lingüísticos (and also involving other LISA members), is currently in the process of describing and designing harmonized procedures for terminology validation. These terminology QA specifications will then be available, amongst other things, for incorporation into the new translation quality model.
- *Tools.* It is vital that translation and localization tools be integrated into the quality assurance process. Consistent use of commonly available tools, such as MT systems, TMSs, translation memory systems, and spelling and grammar checkers, as well as more recent developments such as controlled language checkers and terminology extraction systems, can simplify and enhance quality assurance procedures.

At present, however, these tools are generally available, if at all, as island solutions. Tools manufacturers should be encouraged to develop common interchange and interoperability features, which should be extended to cover other tools increasingly used in the translation and localization process, such as voice recognition systems. In today's limited market segments, it may be the case that tools manufacturers are hesitant about such cooperation for fear of losing market share. However, this cooperation could also be exploited to grow overall market potential, with consequent economic benefits for them all.

The good, the bad and the acceptable

An argument frequently advanced against the application of output quality metrics is that there is no such thing as a “perfect” translation. In the same way, it is argued that ten good translators can produce ten good, but differing translations, so that it is impossible to assess which of these products is the “best” or “most suitable”.

Such arguments, which always attempt to measure a translation by comparing it with one or more theoretical or actual competitors, are irrelevant for objective quality assessment, which does not seek to rank potential output variants in some sort of competitive procedure. The basic outcome of combined process and output quality assessment of translation work is not whether a translation is “outstanding”, “good”, “poor” or “bad”, but simply whether it is *acceptable* or *defective*. By establishing a set of measurement

criteria – based, for example, on a further developed LISA QA Model/DIN 2345 and incorporating other elements as mentioned above – the quality of a translation (and by extension of the translator) could be evaluated by hybrid process/output quality assessment procedures, which can be adapted to domain-specific requirements.

By incorporating these methodologies into translator testing schemes based around the model used by the ITI (which is already considering modifications to make it even more pragmatic), it would be possible to achieve a more objective assessment of personal translator competence.

Development and implementation of these QA procedures will not necessarily be easy; it will certainly be controversial, but not impossible. Above all, it will require a radical change in attitudes in wide sectors of an industry which is already undergoing rapid and fundamental change. Instead of viewing such integrated and far-reaching QA proposals as a threat to their alleged – but totally illusory – status as “free-thinking artists”, language service providers should rather welcome and support them actively as a major contribution towards their long-term survival and growth in an increasingly harsher operating climate.

Above all, the concept of “sound methodologies for sound translations” is a good business proposition which should be embraced by translators, localizers and customers alike.

The final question, of course, is: who will undertake this work? Perhaps the groundwork could be laid by LISA members (with the support of the original author team of the LISA QA Model) and those who have been involved in the drafting of DIN 2345. Any proposals would then have to be made available for discussion in the industry at large. Two principles should be adhered to at all times. Firstly, the process should be industry-wide, inclusive and integrative, rather than exclusive, although this should not be allowed to hamper progress. Secondly, any attempts at control – whether by elected or non-elected interests – must be resisted strongly.

- (1) The German-language draft of DIN 2345 can be obtained from Beuth Verlag GmbH, D-10772 Berlin, Germany, Fax +49 30 2601 12 60, price DM 60.40. Objections and/or proposals for amendment must be submitted to DIN by 30 November 1996. A translation into English is currently being prepared so that DIN 2345 can be submitted as a draft European standard (Euronorm).