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## Quality in Translation

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## QUALITY IN TRANSLATION

Donald F. LONG\*

I would like to make it quite clear in presenting this paper on quality in translation that I do not presume to suggest that all the translations made by my colleagues and myself are in any way perfect — we are just as fallible as everyone else, and undoubtedly worse than many.

Nevertheless, we have had many years of experience in handling technical translations, mainly dealing with mechanical and electrical engineering and the many uses of the internal combustion engine, and have over those years learned to look for the sources of danger and for the traps that constantly lurk in the path of all who dare to put translations down on paper.

There are, of course, many ways of ensuring that a translation is as good as human ingenuity can make it. For instance always make sure that it is done by the person most suitable for the job, refuse to do it if it's beyond your powers and if you don't know enough about the subject, and so on. But we all know these things, and they are really obvious.

Today, however, I'll deal with a matter we have often discussed in London, that is, the education of the client. In the circles where I work, the client is usually represented by an advertising clerk or by an export clerk who knows very little of language problems. He is often someone quite ignorant of the work involved in producing a technical translation, and frequently he is unsympathetic and doesn't want to cooperate. All he wants is the translation, and this p. d. q. (As a linguistic aside p. d. q. means "pretty damn quick").

One of our main problems as suppliers of translations arises from this very ignorance of the client who generally imagines that, just because a French domestic servant employed by the firm's Managing Director speaks French, she can translate the firm's trade catalogues into the impeccable technical jargon used by trained French engineers.

So often have we encountered this sort of viewpoint among our clients that we have produced a leaflet aimed directly at this ignorance and I believe you might well be interested in knowing the way in which we in London try to serve our clients to their greatest advantage, sometimes without their cooperation, but generally with it when they realise how important their translations really are. For the purpose of this afternoon's discussion, I therefore invite you to pretend that you are a prospective client to whom I am trying to explain how best I can help you with your language problems.

**You**, then, are my client, an English industrialist, and we will consider technical and scientific translations from English into other languages :

The first thing you want to know, when faced with the task of arranging for a technical translation to be made (probably for printing), is what is possible and what is not.

At the very outset I must make it quite clear that except in very rare and special cases a translator cannot possibly prepare a flawless version, in a new language, of a technical text relating to equipment or processes **with which he is not absolutely familiar**. There are, however, solutions to this problem and these are dealt with below.

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\* Documentation dans le cadre du Congrès de Bad Godesberg, Juillet 1959.

Let us assume by way of example that YOU are responsible to your Board or to your employers for arranging for a specialised engineering text to be translated from English into Spanish.

The text may be a specification, a catalogue, a paper to be read to a group of Spanish engineers, etc., etc. But no matter what its nature, on it will depend the reputation of your firm, the business under discussion or even the entire future business of your firm in the particular Spanish-speaking territory where the translation will be used.

**THE OBJECT OF THE EXERCISE IS A GOOD TRANSLATION.** It goes without saying that you want the best possible translation. I too want our work to be as accurate as it is humanly possible to make it.

You must nevertheless understand that until we have been working for you for a while, we cannot hope to know as much about your special equipment, practices, etc., as you know yourselves. You must understand that we are not slot machines out of which the appropriate, often abstruse, technical term in a foreign language can be extracted by merely inserting a coin; that just because one of our translators can write exquisite Spanish, he cannot necessarily, at a minute's notice, prepare a perfect Spanish translation on, for example, an electronic device which has only just been invented and which embodies a principle unknown outside your drawing office. Our example may sound absurd when presented in this way, but we are frequently asked to perform such miracles, often over the telephone!

The question of technical translation is not always one where you, the user, can pass the job over to the translator and comfortably forget about it until you receive the typed copy. A good technical translation is the result of collaboration between you and the translator, though your participation does indeed become less and less as the translator does more and more work of the same kind and familiarises himself with your equipment or the practices concerned.

Let us, then, take a look at the ideal technical translation into a foreign language.

The **ideal method** of preparing a technical translation is obviously that of following the same procedure as adopted for your firm's English text; this means that the translation should be prepared by one of your resident engineers who has seen the equipment involved and understands it in all its details, whose mother tongue is the foreign language concerned, who is highly literate in that mother tongue, and up-to-date with current technical writing trends and with the specialised terminology of the industry in question. In addition, this same member of your firm must be willing to prepare the translation and have the time to do so; unfortunately, however, thanks to his qualifications he can almost always be employed much more advantageously by his Directors on work other than the preparation of translations.

That, then, is the Utopian ideal; Utopian firstly because very few firms have skilled and literate engineers whose natural tongues cover even the more usual languages, and secondly, because where there are potentially suitable persons, they usually have more important work to do as engineers.

We therefore come to the **next best thing to this ideal**, which is to entrust the translation to a reliable translation office. In my office you can find persons with many of the qualifications enumerated above; we have staff (or free-lance consultants and employees) whose mother tongues are the principal languages used in modern international affairs and who are skilled writers and experienced, willing translators who have devoted their lives to our profession. Most of them have taken the language **examinations** of the Institute of Linguists and many are elected Fellows of that Institute. Usually they have extensive engineering knowledge, for most of our work deals with technical subjects. It is in this latter particular, however, that they differ from the engineer in the ideal case described above; they have not (at the beginning in any event) the necessary intimate knowledge of the technical aspects of the equipment made by firms who are not already clients of ours.

I have emphasised this difference because my experience proves that clients — usually because they have never had occasion to reflect on the matter — often imagine that merely because we are experienced and established translators

we can at a moment's notice prepare technical translations on entirely novel (to us) subjects; in fact, clients have more than once remarked, in response to our request for technical explanations, "Haven't you got any dictionaries?" We have hundreds, but the new terms we don't know are never in them.

I have also emphasised this difference as I wish to make it clear at the outset that when a new client asks us (or any other translator) to prepare a technical translation relating to equipment or engineering practice which represents a fairly new field to the translator, the latter will need the cooperation of the client until his experience in that field has made him familiar with the subject. If the translator had the knowledge of the experienced engineers on the clients' staff, he would be an engineer, not a translator.

It will now be obvious that translators must be "trained" by the client over a reasonable period of time if the best possible results are to be obtained.

And now another important matter, that of uniformity of style and terminology. Two points require mention here. The first is that if you are in possession of earlier translations regarding your special equipment or product, we ought to examine them to ensure that the same terms are used where possible or advisable. The second is that we have on many occasions been asked by clients to prepare a brochure, catalogue, etc., in a particular language, and during later discussion we have found that the client has simultaneously entrusted several similar translations to several different translation offices or translators, "in order to save time"; although time may well be saved, there is in that way no possibility of ensuring any degree of uniformity and this we consider to be a major tragedy. We would prefer not to handle any part of such a split order, as the overall results cannot possibly justify the effort expended by the translator.

If (as is frequently the case) a member of your staff has technical linguistic knowledge, we like to have his name and telephone number for consultation purposes.

We also like to hold a representative selection of your technical literature in any language. The first step in preparing a technical translation is to understand the original; this is often possible only by studying the subject before actually translating a single word. One drawing or illustration is often worth 1,000 words of explanation.

In the final extreme, we often find it of help if we are allowed to visit the factory and see equipment in operation.

Given your cooperation and understanding as described above, we can now prepare our hypothetical translation in good Castilian Spanish. It will be correct in interpretation, elegant in style and, to all intents and purposes, ready for printing. It may, however, contain turns of phrase, technical expressions and so on which, while perfectly correct, are not the exact colloquial terms used by the Spanish engineers in the industry in question. To bring the translation into line with this colloquial terminology is obviously the ultimate stage of our sought-after perfection.

There are two ways in which this aim can be achieved.

The first one costs relatively little, and consists of sending a carbon copy of our translation to your main Spanish-speaking agent overseas for him to read it through and suggest improvements.

We then examine his comments and incorporate those we like. This takes time, however, and our experience has shown that if two Spanish agents are consulted, each will recommend entirely different changes, in the same way that any two English technical writers would seldom agree on an English text if consulted independently. Personal preference for certain words enters into this matter, and as you will be well aware, anyone can amend the leading articles in to-day's "Times" if he so feels inclined, and his alterations would not necessarily be wrong; nor does that mean that the original would not be 100% correct.

The second method is somewhat more expensive, and involves submission of the text to a subject specialist in a Spanish-speaking country, so that he may read it through and suggest improvements. We at Long's use the services of many such subject specialists and find that this procedure gives by far the best results.

Time, however, is often at a premium, and the money available, alas, even more so. We frequently find with English industrialists that their budgets fail to

## RENSEIGNEMENTS

La BANQUE CANADIENNE NATIONALE publie un bulletin mensuel qui expose brièvement diverses questions d'ordre économique. Les commentaires qu'il contient intéresseront ceux qui désirent se tenir au courant de ces questions, mais qui n'ont pas le loisir de parcourir de nombreux périodiques financiers. Vous pouvez recevoir gratuitement ce bulletin en faisant la demande à l'un de nos 595 bureaux de la Banque au Canada ou au Bureau-chef, Place d'Armes, Montréal.

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provide for foreign-language literature, and that it has to be paid for out of the margin allowed for unforeseen expenditure. This very often means that quotations are asked for, and the lowest estimate is accepted. As the cost of a translation depends solely on the time devoted to it and on the calibre of the translator, our profession is an outstanding example of one in which the results you obtain are in direct proportion to what you pay.

### AND IN CONCLUSION, A WORD OR TWO OF ADVICE

1. call us in for discussion immediately you contemplate production of an important translation, particularly when it has to be printed. We do not claim to be infallible, but long years of experience have taught us many of the answers. In our opinion at least, our advice is of value to you, and advice costs you nothing.
2. if you entrust the production of your foreign-language catalogues, etc., to an advertising agency, always insist that the translators must have direct access to those members of your staff who can provide the necessary technical information and replies to queries. Elaboration of this point would seem to be unnecessary.
3. make sure that your printer has type founts with the proper (not make-shift) accents and symbols. We can help if necessary.
4. make sure that your English original contains no ambiguities.
5. always allow the translator as much time as possible.\*



\* Il serait bon que les traducteurs d'agences de publicité au Canada puissent montrer cet article à leurs clients difficiles de langue anglaise. Ils auraient ici l'avis d'un traducteur qui a su comprendre le fond du problème. Ceci pourrait être profitable à la fois aux clients et aux services français des agences dont on exige parfois beaucoup trop. R. S.