

Translation Quality: Understanding the Factors and Standards

Introduction

Translation quality is a function of many factors that cover the nature of the source document, the translation process, and the needs of the intended audience as represented in the request specification. Your satisfaction with a translation is dependent on how well you work with your translators or translation company to reduce sources of disappointment.

Additionally, satisfaction with a translation activity is often dependent on the document creation process. Documents that are revised after the translation process starts are in jeopardy of inconsistency between the source and target versions. Problems of quality in the source document are usually magnified by the translation process.

Business Challenge

Translation of literature is usually for one of two purposes: to make your information and knowledge available to people who read languages other than the source documents (product literature, patents, user manuals, etc.), or to obtain knowledge and information that is presented in another language than you or your employees understand.

The translation process is usually more costly and takes longer than many people realize. Thus, it is very important to address the many issues that lead to superior translation quality.

Solution

In order to achieve an acceptable translation to meet your needs, there are requirements to keep in mind, including the details of your source document, the final document specifications and as well, your expectations related to quality, timeliness and cost.

Some details of your source document that are important include:

- Are you sure you know what language your source document is in? Russian, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian are often confused; is that Simplified Chinese or Traditional Chinese – or Japanese, etc.
- If you are asking to have an electronic document

translated, what codepage is it in? ISO codepages are common on web-sites; UNICODE is becoming more common; some Indian languages and South East Asian languages have specialized fonts with unique codepages.

- If the document is on paper or is an image of a page, is it readable?
- If the document is 'old', it may have special considerations: Korean documents before the mid-1990's may have quite a few Chinese characters; German before 1941 might be printed/written in the 'Old German Script' (Sütterlin Schrift);
- Do you have confidence that spellings are correct; that the grammar is correct?

It is important to provide additional information to your translator about your expectations:

- What is the subject matter? In particular, is there an expectation that the translator be knowledgeable in the discipline of the document? If your company has specialized vocabulary, acronyms or 'shop talk', you may need to provide a glossary of terms so that the translator knows what is really meant in terms of someone not from your organization.
- Typically you would expect dates, times, numbers (decimal symbols, delimiters), currencies to be appropriate to the target language. But do you expect the translation to have units of measurement converted into metric for non-English target – or to American units for translation into American English?
- Do you expect Imperial English units of measurement? If you want currency represented appropriate to the target country, you may have to provide the exchange rate you want used (current or at a particular time).
- Do you want translation of proper nouns? Product names, people names, company names, trademarks? Would you prefer such nouns be transliterated? (The words represented phonetically into the target character set?)



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- Sometimes, you may need a document 'translated' so that it is not only in the language of the target country but that it be compliant with regulations of that country. It will require translators with specialized education to produce such documents, or the need might be satisfied by reviews of the translation by specialists in the target country. If equivalent agencies and regulations are expected to be in the target document, you may have to provide references for the translator.

Issues such as legal rights to translate the document or whether the document can be made available to citizens of another country are typically the responsibility of the requestor of the translation.

- What is your timeline? Often, quality and timeliness can be in conflict. You may specify various levels of quality output as a trade-off with time and cost.
- For very quick and low-cost translations of certain language pairs and disciplines, machine translation may be adequate. For certain specialized fields, the machine translation vocabulary may be more complete than the memories of non-specialized translators. If the source document does not have spelling or grammar or syntax errors, it may produce adequate output for understanding the translation. However, the output translation may be somewhat difficult to read due to unusual sentence structures.
- If you want output that is very natural for large numbers of people to easily read (e.g. advertising literature), it will likely be necessary to find a translator with the target language as a mother-tongue, residing in the country of the majority of the target audience (e.g. to faithfully translate advertising literature from German to English for Australians, it might be important to have an Australian who knows German rather than an American who knows German).
- The translator must know the expected education level of the intended audience. In some cultures, it is also necessary to have the translation in the appropriate tone of respect for the audience – not to command, but request compliance, for example.

Final document specification is also important.

- If on paper, are there specifications? Weight or color of paper, point size of the 'type', size of paper (A4, letter, legal, ...), etc.?
- If electronic, a Microsoft document type? RTF? PDF? A special version? Another desktop publishing program?
- If there are graphics with words, do you expect the images to be rebuilt with the text translated and embedded? Do you expect the translator to find more appropriate graphics? (For example, if in American English there is an image of a football game, do you expect the picture to be replaced with a soccer scene?)

Style and personal preference may be important for consistency over a set of documents. You would want the translator to know if this is one document in a larger collection that you expect to be translated and read by the same audience. The need might be satisfied by having one person edit work done by a team, or might be achieved by use of translation memories that are initialized by one translator with the desired style.

You will have to specify if you have additional expectations, such as appropriate idiom translation (rather than translation of the original words), or if you expect a poem to result in similar meter and tone.

Accuracy

The most critical characteristic of a translation is that it faithfully represent the knowledge of the source document in the target language. The most common technique to measure the accuracy of a translation is to have a 3rd party (to the customer and translator) assess the translation accuracy. It is important to instruct the reviewer that the task is to determine faithfulness of the translation, not whether the translator has chosen the same words and style of the reviewer. It is expected that any two people performing a translation task will not provide the



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same work product, but they are able to determine whether another translation is faithful to the content of the source document. In some cases, faithful translation may require re-casting the original text with fairly different metaphors, especially if local cultures are being discussed.

International Standards

The ISO 15001 Quality Standards provide insight on how to obtain results consistent with specifications; but this is incomplete for translation processes. The European Committee for Standardization (CEN), has published the EN 15038 standard that Translation Service Providers (TSPs) shall have a documented quality management system that includes, at least, the following:

- a. a statement of the objectives of the quality management system;
- b. a process for monitoring the quality of the translation services; and
- c. a process for handling information received from the client.

There are several additional international standards that address the translation process. The ASTM standard, F 2575, addresses the translation process and provides a glossary of terms used in the translation field. This standard might satisfy the second requirement of the EN 15038.

The SAE J2450 standard discusses a metric for quantification of quality by counting errors in the output document by type of error and severity. Source of the error is also important – was it in the original document or introduced by the translation process; however, this metric does NOT address the source of the error.

Summary

There are a number of factors to consider and communicate with your translation organization if you want consistent and appropriate translation results. These factors can be focused on the details of the source documents, the translation process and specification, and the details of the expected output formats..

Comments, questions, and suggestions are welcome and appreciated. Reach us at info@gltac.com.