

Quality and Efficiency: Incompatible Elements in Translation Practice?

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Article abstract

The aim of this article is to describe the quality assessment procedures in a large, national translation company. The company is more than ten years old, but the past five years' growth rates have been rapidly increasing. The growth in turnover can be attributed both to a high degree of customer loyalty based on a high level of efficiency and trust, and on high, well-defined and transparent quality standards. The company is based on the idea that translators should function in a working environment based on full-term employment. Consequently the increase in turnover has involved recruiting a large number of translators and support services in the IT-department. This is why quality assessment procedures are no longer an individual responsibility, but have become a corporate issue. Quality procedures must therefore be part of the daily routines and involve all aspects of the business. To understand the conditions of the translation market today, the author provides an overview of the market based on the ASSIM-study and information on the new economy. After that she presents the case of Translation House of Scandinavia and finally she discusses some of the possible quality assurance systems that are available today and are used by the translation industry.

Quality and Efficiency: Incompatible Elements in Translation Practice?

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article cherche à décrire les démarches de l'évaluation de la qualité dans un grand bureau de traduction d'envergure nationale. Fondé il y a plus de dix ans, ce bureau a connu un taux de croissance en rapide augmentation au cours des cinq dernières années. Il est possible d'imputer l'accroissement du chiffre d'affaires autant à une très solide fidélité de la clientèle, due à une efficacité et une relation de confiance hors pair, qu'à des normes de qualité élevées, bien définies et transparentes. L'esprit de l'entreprise veut que les traducteurs puissent travailler dans un environnement où l'on offre des contrats à durée déterminée. Par conséquent, le chiffre d'affaires accru a permis le recrutement d'un grand nombre de traducteurs et de services de soutien pour le service informatique. C'est pourquoi les procédures en évaluation de la qualité ne sont plus la responsabilité d'une seule personne mais bien de toute l'entreprise. Ces procédures doivent donc faire partie des routines quotidiennes et intégrer tous les aspects de l'entreprise. Afin de bien comprendre la situation du marché actuel de la traduction, l'auteur brosse un panorama du marché en s'appuyant sur l'étude et sur l'information ASSIM portant sur la nouvelle économie. L'auteur présente ensuite le cas de Translation House of Scandinavia avant de terminer par l'examen des systèmes potentiels de contrôle de la qualité qui sont actuellement disponibles et utilisés par l'industrie de la traduction.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to describe the quality assessment procedures in a large, national translation company. The company is more than ten years old, but the past five years' growth rates have been rapidly increasing. The growth in turnover can be attributed both to a high degree of customer loyalty based on a high level of efficiency and trust, and on high, well-defined and transparent quality standards. The company is based on the idea that translators should function in a working environment based on full-term employment. Consequently the increase in turnover has involved recruiting a large number of translators and support services in the IT-department. This is why quality assessment procedures are no longer an individual responsibility, but have become a corporate issue. Quality procedures must therefore be part of the daily routines and involve all aspects of the business. To understand the conditions of the translation market today, the author provides an overview of the market based on the ASSIM-study and information on the new economy. After that she presents the case of Translation House of Scandinavia and finally she discusses some of the possible quality assurance systems that are available today and are used by the translation industry.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

translation quality, translation assessment, translation market, translation industry, QA-systems

I. Introduction

It is an illusion that we can stall changes by refusing to implement them. When this happens — in business, in research, in sports—competitors pass us in the fast lane and we are left behind. And change has come to the translation sector as well. The total volume of translation is growing, new software tools for the sector are introduced all the time and new players in the market put pressure on the traditional providers. So change has come to the translation sector as well.

1. Language technology
2. Market changes
3. The Web

These are today's key drivers for change in a sector consisting mainly of one-man-companies until a few years ago.

We live, we work and we trade in a world where time and place as prerequisites for action have lost their importance. No matter where we are we can access the Web and be online.

It is possible to chat via the Web or on the phone with China; we can participate in study programs and get all sorts of information—even new ideas for dinner at a click.

Companies and enterprises are connected via the Web and it is becoming increasingly important to have access to supplier-systems in order to control the supply chain. It is nice and easy to be online and have access to each other's systems, but it all contributes to making daily life and working procedures increasingly complex. In order to deal with this complexity and ensure that all parties involved follow the same procedures, best practice and quality assurance are becoming crucial elements.

In the traditional one-man translation company or for the freelancer it is easy to handle procedures and quality, provided that you can set them up, but in a company where tasks are shared and labour is distributed between any number of people it is vital to have rules dealing with the different aspects of the business. By necessity bureaucracy becomes a natural priority, but also slows down the process in a market where customers are constantly pushing for tighter deadlines. Mainly because translation remains an afterthought in too many organisations, even big ones! This leaves the dilemma of efficiency versus quality and how to deal with it.

Free-lancers often deliver very good quality, because they can use any amount of time required to reach the optimum (providing the number of hours in a day will last). In a translation company with a large number of full-time employees for both translation, administration and IT other rules apply and systems must be set up in order to achieve a satisfactory result and still maintain an acceptable turnover of business.

II. The Translation Market

This article only deals with the market for industrial and commercial translations, but there is no doubt that the market for literary translation seems to be undergoing massive changes due to mergers and acquisitions in the publishing business, where large sums are at stake. This sector is also under pressure from web-products: print-on-demand, e-books etc.

As mentioned above there are three key drivers and they eventually influence the type of products that the translation sector has to provide to the business community. In the past ten years there has been an increase in that particular part of the market which is catering to the IT-industry, i.e. the localisation business, but concurrently with this increase the type of text to be dealt with in traditional translation companies has changed radically.

Globalisation in the L10N sector means preparing a product for being prepared to be launched in many different countries at the same time. However, let us not forget the original sense that trade is international, and that the volume of international trade is increasing constantly as economic growth and welfare reaches out to all the countries of the globe.

Growing volumes of trade and extensive international communication result in growing volumes of translation whether the products are electronic or more basic industrial products. Offers, contracts, marketing material, manuals, service contracts and contacts accompany trade. At the end of the day it is all a question of communication and interaction. The medium can be paper or electronic but it still requires translation. The complexity of the products and ultimately the contents of the accompanying documentation, manuals, marketing materials etc. require systems to ensure consistency in terminology and style for the translation to be the value-added product it deserves to be.

However, an increasing use of software in all types of industrial products as well as in business management systems (finance, ERP¹, CRM, CBT²-systems), Internet supported training material, multimedia, web-interfaces, etc. accounts for an increasing part of the total turnover in the translation sector. In order to meet customer demands and handle the large jobs the supporting tools such as translation memories, terminology management and other knowledge management tools have been introduced in the sector and have become daily working tools. The task of the translator becomes more diversified and entails a requirement for regulation and procedures in daily work that were not known ten years ago.

The tools permit an increase in speed, but at the cost of quality if they are not used with care and adapted to the particular needs of the company in question. Customers have realised that there are no short cuts and miracles to be found in the use of translation technology, still the demand for speed is unrelenting as competition becomes even fiercer. So the translator is caught between the claim for speed and the personal ambition of delivering the ultimate quality. Shall the two ever meet? This is the fundamental question.

In 1995 the EU-Commission launched the M-LIS³ program. The program contained several objectives: political goals as well as industrial support schemes. The political element was supported by the Cannes and Corfu declarations from the Council of Ministers stating the need for overcoming language barriers at the doorstep of the information society by a joint effort of EU-institutions, national governments and industry. The internal market would never really become an internal market unless it was supported by subsidies for overcoming the language problem. The EU has 13 official languages and 300 million people speak up to 24 different languages with deep cultural and national roots. From a linguistic point of view the challenge is immense and a short look at the single American market shows that one language is an important factor, though it should still leave room for regional charac-

teristics. It is not possible to have one language in Europe so the answer is to create facilities to deal with the problem in translation, teaching and communication in general.

One of the characteristics of the European industrial structure is the large number of SMEs. Their expansion and consequently contribution to economic growth is often hampered by language barriers in export markets, altogether keeping the industrial development at a pace where it is difficult to match American growth rates. The large number of languages on the continent has been (and still is) a major challenge for the co-operation of the EU institutions and even more so for industry. Creating a more business-oriented sector (i.e., larger entities) supported by high-end technology seemed to be part of the solution and was included in the M-LIS priorities and action lines.

The M-LIS program supported development of tools and best-practice criteria in a partnership-based environment in order to enhance efficiency in the sector. To bridge the gap between the business-oriented part of the sector and the suppliers (i.e., academic training institutions) the European Translation Platform was created. The ETP represented all the different aspects of the industry. Members were FIT, AICC, CIUTI, EUATC, and representatives from the big users of translation within EU-institutions and the UN. The platform met at irregular intervals during a four-year period. During that period the ETP discussed various subjects of relevance to the industry and came up with a number of position papers on Quality, Professional Status, and so forth. Furthermore, the platform took an active part in the planning of the launching conference for the DIN 2345 and in setting up standards for a study of the translation market.

Another initiative was a translation market survey carried out over a period of 12 months in 1997/98 and the result was published in April 1999 to be followed up by a comparative study in 2000. The results of the second study are not available yet, so the quotes below are based entirely on the first report. The second and comparative studies might very well affirm the trends registered at the end of the nineties.

The study does not include in-house employees and consequently it is difficult to estimate the total market. However total turnover compared to earlier estimates seems to confirm that the total is 3.75 billion Euro in 1997. This corresponds to a total turnover and 0.52% of GNP in the whole of the EU.

The total number of people in the sector amounts to 82.000 or 380 translators for 1 million people, which is not a lot if you keep in mind the number of languages between which translation is carried out. Between 1994 and 1997 economic activity increased by 55%, while employment only increased by 18%. The introduction of CAT and many different kinds of tools have bridged the gap, which makes it possible to handle the growing volume of translation within very tight deadlines.

The conclusions of the report are as follows:

- The development of multilingualism in Europe, for the most part, is being realized through the direct activities of those companies using multilingual services whose needs go beyond the strict limits of the current traditional sector of the supply side.
- The new ways of communication are breaking down the geographical barriers and competition will become more and more fierce within the European Economic Area, and even at the international level. If the traditional sector does not initiate the necessary change of direction the other neighbouring sectors will take the initiative and thus

venture to appropriate for themselves a part of the translation activity, this is already happening and we see the IT and the publishing industry going into translation of their own products.

At this stage it is too early to say whether the trend will continue. Outsourcing is very popular for other non-core activities and this could very well end up to be the case for translation as well. Chances are that it will happen and the end-result will be that the translation units taking on outsourced jobs for big companies must be able to handle large volumes of work with highly professional staff for translation, IT, terminology, project management and just plain management of businesses as well as human resources.

Do we feel the impact of these statistical trends today? Translation House of Scandinavia has experienced an interesting development over the past three years. The total volume of business has grown, but part of the growth is accounted for by localisation, which is that particular part of the translation industry, where electronic products are translated and transformed into another product targeted on a local market. English is simply not enough, especially for business-to-consumer product, since only one in four of the world's population speaks English to some level of competence. In addition, differences in working practices, legislation and in some cases even in human anatomy need to be taken into account. All these factors add to the complexity of the task and subject-matter experts have to be involved in the translation process to a larger extent than before.

The localisation industry is rooted in both the traditional translation sector and the IT-industry. According to LISA⁴ the localisation industry is currently generating sales of between US\$ 3 billion and US\$ 15 billion a year. There is no doubt that this is a large and growing market, but also that the investments are of a size where they call for a high ROI, and this can only be achieved through a high degree of efficiency and extensive use of modern language tools. Although they have improved considerably over the past years and leverage the industry in delivering highly sophisticated service, they can still only be used as the tools they are to serve translators to make them more efficient

There are no national statistics of the market as such, but the Danish market is characterised by a two-tier division of labour—a large number of one-man companies catering for one language and the second tier 5-10 companies with different organisational set-ups, but basically offering services in more than one language. It should also be taken into account that there is a long tradition for a very high level of foreign language (English) competence and in-house employment of translators for day-to-day tasks, if not big specialised jobs. Up till now, Berlitz has been the only big international company with any noticeable presence in the market, but other international players are establishing themselves in the market. A growing number of other companies rooted in the IT-sector are offering localisation services as an example of a neighbouring sector taking on the challenge of translation. This trend is growing and young translators with only academic and theoretical training see the growing number of in-house jobs as an advantage. But it could close down traditional translation companies if we do not adapt to or meet customer demands about cost, pricing, efficiency and quality.

III. QA-systems

Quality is an important issue in modern industry. Consequently, industrial customers come up with quality requirements for translations of their documentation and localised products. At the same time we have to recognise that a growing number of customers are, to a certain extent, fully capable of assessing the quality of the translated product. They are not capable of producing the text themselves—but they do know how to pinpoint quality.

Add to this a growing volume of business in each translation company, many big (multilingual) jobs, diversified tasks and complicated IT-support for tools as well as ordinary software and the case is clear. A translation company with more than one owner-employee will soon be forced to set up well-defined rules and standards dealing with all aspects of the business.

Different systems have been developed and space only permits to touch briefly on the characteristics of some of the systems. Total Quality Management (TQM) is the mother of all the subsystems. Whether you follow the rules of ISO, BS or the DIN the basic philosophy of TQM must be observed and afterwards maybe even implemented. It was first implemented by the Japanese, and is behind the success of Japanese industrial products after 1945. TQM defines quality as “Fully satisfying agreed customer requirements.”

The ISO standard defines quality as “The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.”

ISO has been known for years to standardise production of a number of products, but it is only within the last 15 years that the principles have been developed and applied in the service sector. And the introduction is often opposed as it is felt that this type of service should be viewed from a very individualised angle. However, it is possible to set up a framework of rules and guidelines that leave plenty of space for the personalised approach while safeguarding automatic and routine procedures.

What are the basics of ISO 9000?

The quality policy of the company must be stated clearly.

- The organisation of the company, i.e., what is the responsibility and the competencies of the staff whose work influences the quality.
What are the objectives of a policy and what are the milestones to be considered at regular intervals to achieve the objectives. One way is to measure customer satisfaction every six months and have a goal saying that you need at least 75% Very satisfied.
- Management is under an obligation to meet once or twice a year with the person in charge of quality to discuss the results of the system and whether improvements are required.
- There must be detailed rules and regulations for the acceptance of new orders, if the required capacity is present and how orders are accepted, how quotes are made and how detailed invoicing should be.
- How are new products developed—and this could apply to a traditional translation company taking on localisation for instance.
- Document control and workflow control, not to mention how the quality system as such is managed.
- How to ensure that suppliers—translators and software suppliers—are able to ensure the maintenance of the quality required.

- How is the material delivered by the customer controlled—security and confidentiality.
- What are the tests and QA that the product is submitted to during processing? And how is it recorded that these tests have actually been carried out? And how to make sure that the machines and software used for this part of the process are constantly tuned to the task.
- What are the precautions if it is known that the product has an unsatisfactory level? For instance, if a customer complains.
- How to ensure that the whole staff follows the rules.
- Internal training and development.

These are the main rules but additional detailed instructions can be set up for accounting, knowledge management, IT-security, etc.

A joint committee of experts on standards and translators set up the German DIN 2345. The standard is mainly concerned with business practices, (contract, delivery, hardware), software and the customer's own responsibility in ensuring the choice of the correct translators. It is not accompanied by any measures of control or sanctions against providers who don't comply with the rules.

As ISO it is not concerned with the contents of the translation, but as mentioned before the setting up of rules and guidelines could leave more time for the checking of the contents and nobody is barred from setting up rules that take this aspect into account!

IV. The case of Translation House of Scandinavia

Translation House of Scandinavia was founded 10 years ago as a limited company. It is owned by translators, run by translators and only employs professional translators. This point is particularly important for the founders, as they had a vision of a company providing a challenging working environment for a permanent staff of translators with academic training from the Danish business schools, where the faculties of Modern Languages have a year-long tradition for training translators on a high level.

Translation House of Scandinavia is not only a translation company, but sees itself as a service company. This means that it is highly attentive to customer requirements and constantly seeks to increase its value added and increase the number of products offered to customers. However, this has to be done on a basis which is always guided by the fundamental idea that quality is a key driver for all products delivered by the company.

Translation House of Scandinavia has developed its own QA-system "OASIS" including all aspects of the workflow. The items mentioned below all take into consideration the aspect of quality.

- Business concept
- Contractual arrangements
- Human Resources
- Hardware
- Software
- Workflow—document management
- Terminology
- Grammar
- Style

Basically Translation House of Scandinavia does not merely see itself as a translation company, but as a communications company in the service-cum IT-sector. This philosophy is implemented as a high level of customer service, continuous product development and high professional standards. The company constantly seeks to increase its value added and is very attentive in specifying products and services. When delivering the product it is ensured that it conforms to the specifications and above all that it is delivered quickly and on time. Trust and reliability are fundamental principles guiding all operations. The business concept and the basic idea that all customer relationships should be long-term relationships are reflected in the products and the way the workflow is managed.

Translation is a knowledge business and consequently human resources remain the most important factor. All translators are professional, academic graduates with a degree in translation and they are all chosen from among the best. Their continuous development and a constantly increasing learning curve is ensured by participation in internal or external courses. Knowledge sharing is encouraged and staff benefits contribute to a dynamic and very fruitful environment.

At an early stage Translation House of Scandinavia recognised the advantages of using CAT. Trados was introduced in its first version and new editions and tools are introduced as the suppliers market them. It is a basic principle to be at the cutting edge of IT-development in the sector. This makes it possible to offer advanced solutions for advanced companies teaming up with their progress and development. For more traditional companies the advanced solutions often solve their problems at a pace they had not expected and this creates a trust that provides the basis for future jobs.

The company has large databases that have to be managed according to internal rules. Maintenance, reorganisation and updating are crucial tasks that have to be performed constantly; otherwise the full benefit of the databases cannot be achieved. A special IT-department was set up 12 months ago in order to provide internal, professional advice for translators working with the tools. The department also has an important task in both preparing the jobs and in pre-delivery checks and controls.

From the outset it is important that customer and translation company agree one-hundred per cent on the requirements, and that implicit expectations and needs are made explicit. But in order to be able to proceed and do follow-up in all stages of the workflow, Translation House of Scandinavia has identified seven main stages in every normal job. For bigger projects other stages have been devised and different procedures and quality assessment checks set up. These both apply to the linguistic and functional testing of the product, but are not covered in this article.

The quality of translation is reflected at a number of levels. A translation must, of course, be idiomatically, grammatically and terminologically correct. Linguistic precision in relation to both the source text and the target language is crucial, but other elements are important as well.

1. *Project kick-off*

The basics are laid down, deadline, format, the translator is chosen according to language and specialist field and experience. English, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Swedish, and Norwegian and Danish are covered by in-house staff. The project is registered in OASIS, by the project-manager.

2. *Preparation*

Before translation can start an analysis is carried out. Support-material is identified, terminology is listed. Genre, register, target group and other important factors are taken into account.

3. *Translation*

One or two translators, according to the size and nature of the job as such, carry out the translation. They both use databases and translation memory to ensure consistency within the text and with previous texts translated for the same customer. This stage is always carried in close collaboration with the customer and sometimes in consultation with external subject-matter specialists.

Functionality is the key quality parameter. Given the target group, for which the individual translation is intended, it takes both technical and linguistic expertise to adapt the right styles and to communicate the message of the text with the utmost attention to detail.

At this stage validation of terminology by the customer comes in, if required.

4. *Proofreading and linguistic review*

A second translator always carries out this part of the job. And in the case of external translators an in-house translator will review the text and make sure that corrections are included. The resulting functional translation is a text, which does not read like a translation.

5. *Desk-topping*

After proofreading and linguistic review the text must go through the first pre-delivery check. Here it can be formatted in a simple data-processing programme or prepared for printing in a Mac-programme.

In the last few years texts are converted to HTML for use in net-browsers and web-sites. Many other types of delivery are available and a growing number of customers feel that this service is invaluable and saves them a lot of time, in the sense that they only need one service provider for both linguistic and desk-topping solutions.

6. *Approval*

One last rigorous check is carried out and the job is more often than not sent to the customer for approval to make sure that the latest changes are included. Before the texts are finally sent to the customers they have been subjected to strict quality control procedures which involve stringent technical and linguistic proofreading.

7. *Delivery*

The product/text is then ready for delivery according to the specifications of the customer. It is finalised and checked out of the workflow-system.

The procedure has been established over the years and in spite of the many and quite detailed instructions and items to be registered it does contribute to a smooth working flow. Customer feedback contributes to a constant tuning of the system and the overall response is positive.

The principles are based upon and inspired by the ISO and DIN-standards and it is quite conceivable that this development will be carried even further as the company is growing with different departments spread over several addresses.

V. Conclusion

To set up quality assurance systems a large degree of discipline is required. Translation House of Scandinavia is large by Danish standards, but still not a big company and rigorous procedures are sometimes seen as slowing down the process. However, for a translation company with a large in-house staff there are no short cuts.

Systems have to be set up and maintained to make sure that customers always get the same quality and consistent terminology no matter whether the translator is away on vacation, maternity leave or absent for any other reason. And new translators are easily introduced to new areas and new subjects as the databases and knowledge bases are available. For peak periods external translators are used and in this case it is even more important that stringent procedures be followed.

Customer feedback on quality assurance is very positive. In the case of complaints, the source of the translation can always be found and a discussion with the customer can be carried out on an objective basis helped by a clearly defined policy. In a case of major discrepancies, external experts are called upon to assess the translation.

Quality and efficiency are not incompatible—and the time spent on setting up and following procedures is regarded as an investment, which comes back manifold as long-term customer relationships, based on trust.

NOTES

1. Enterprise Resource Planning, Customer Relationship Management.
2. Computer Based Training System. Study programmes distributed via the Internet or on CD-ROMs, but supported by classroom sessions.
3. Multilingual Information Society.
4. Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA).