

Standards, quality and rights FIT 2005, XVII^e Congrès Mondial / XVII World Congress *

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About 650 translators from 60 countries met in Tampere, Finland from August 4 to August 7, 2005, for the International Federation of Translators' congress, dubbed FIT2005 (www.fit2005.org). The congress drew a mixture of academics, institutional translators and freelancers who put the four days to good use learning about each others' cultures, about the various quality assurance standards now being developed, and about some recent advances in translation techniques and research.

The near-faultless organization kept the program on schedule, and local organizer Sheryl Hinkkanen and her team deserve special praise for running both the professional program and the social events efficiently. Particularly helpful were the red-T-shirted assistants, always at the ready to answer questions about the venue (the impressive Tampere Hall) and program, to help prepare the lecture rooms for the next session, and to ensure that lights were turned on and off, and doors were opened or closed, at the appropriate time. Their attention to these details left busy session chairs, moderators, and speakers free to concentrate on their duties without interruptions from the sometimes irksome glitches created by environmental distractions.

Most of the sessions in the program dealt with topics removed from scientific, technical or medical translation and terminology, so this breed of translator was a minority at FIT2005. The session on medical translation featured a talk by MedTrad member Elena Sánchez Trigo. A workshop on quality assurance in medical translation run by Mary Ellen Kerans gave participants a chance to compare their translation-revising skills on some challenging texts. Despite the slim offerings in scientific-technical-medical translation, issues related with project management and quality control provided a common ground for debate, since standards, quality, and rights concern all translators and interpreters, and all clients as well.

Standards

A major theme of the congress was standards, and some of the opening sessions were devoted to the different proposals under development. Certification for compliance with the procedures specified in ISO 9001 was felt to be feasible for translation companies and agencies, but was seen as an administrative and financial challenge for freelancers (who account for 70% of all translators). There were also concerns that the paperwork involved in compliance with the ISO standard might make freelancers' services unattractive to some clients. So alternative standards are needed for translation service providers (TSPs) who may be unable to bear the administra-

tive burden of ISO 9001 certification. Less onerous alternatives may be the standard under development by the Comité Européen de Normalisation (CEN, or European Committee for Standardization), and the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) International Standard WK2953, titled "Consumer-oriented Guide to Quality Assurance in Translation and Localization."

According to information on the Internet, the draft of the CEN standard EN-15038 ("European Quality Standard for Translation Services") encompasses the translation process and all other steps involved in providing the relevant service. The proposed standard offers both TSPs and their clients a transparent description and definition of the entire translation process. At the same time, it is designed to provide TSPs with a set of procedures and standard requirements to enable them to meet market requirements.

Both of the proposed standards emphasize the translation process over the translation product, and offer TSPs a way to document their own quality control and quality assurance measures in case the client is not satisfied with the translation. In other words, customer relationships and customer satisfaction are core issues in the new standards, which aim to defend the clients' right to obtain the best possible service. But both standards side-step the question of the quality of the actual translation.

One thing that seems to have been forgotten is that the client's needs (for speed and economy) may not overlap (or even be compatible with) the readers' or users' needs (for appropriate, nuanced language). If there is a middleman between the translator and the reader, there may be opportunities for factors that can enhance quality (competent revision) or threaten it (incompetent revision) to intervene. As noted at the congress, nobody knows how to measure the quality of translated texts. This makes it important for the TSP and client to agree in advance on a realistic evaluation of the job, its costs, and the purposes of the translated material.

The new standards may do nothing to guarantee that translations prepared in compliance with their process recommendations will be of better quality. They may, however, help TSPs satisfy their clients inasmuch as the quality of translation services is measured as the degree to which the client's wishes are met. If clients have their own metric for translation quality, this might solve part of the problem of judging objectively how well the translation satisfies the reader's needs. But this raises a potentially complex dilemma for translators: Who are we ultimately answerable to? The readers of the translated material, or the middleman (translation agency, publisher, institutional employer) who pays our fee or salary?

* Parts of this text are based on the report "Issues in institutional translation" to appear in the Proceedings of the FIT2005 conference.

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Quality and translation revisers

As a measure to improve the quality of the translation itself rather than the administrative processes surrounding the purchase and sale of translation services, the new standards propose that all translations be revised by a person other than the translator. Although the standards consider both translation agencies and freelancers as TSPs, the interests of these two players in the translation market are not always aligned. Translation agencies wish to provide their clients with high-quality services and products, and have justifiable reasons for complaining when the quality of the translations they receive from freelancers does not meet their standards. But the reasons why quality is inadequate may have as much to do with poor payment and impossible deadlines as with incompetence on the part of the translator. If there were time to revise translations before they are delivered, most professionals would be eager to do so.

Whether the reviser should be employed by the freelancer or by the agency that buys the freelancer's translation and resells it to their client at profit is not resolved by the new standards. In any case, the reviser (or editor) should not be expected to work for free. Agencies and other clients concerned about quality and added value do revise translations, and the most successful agencies and institutions seem to be those that develop effective systems for feedback and professional development with their translators. If translation agencies are unwilling to take responsibility for revising translations, they may need to find translators who are able to provide better quality, although this will usually be more expensive. We were told at the conference that most of the pressure to include the recommendation for revision in the standards had in fact come from translation agencies. Some agencies (and other clients) seem, however, to forget that there is a limit to the level of quality that can be bought at low rates, with insufficient time for quality control and quality assurance.

Revision by a person other than the translator looks like a good solution on paper, since even the most carefully-translated and conscientiously-revised text will benefit from a fresh look by a person skilled in editing. However, a number of practical obstacles make this solution less straightforward than it sounds.

1. Competent revision requires skills that are acquired by learning and training, and that not all translators may possess. Revision by someone unskilled in this task is unlikely to contribute much to quality. Errors may be overlooked, unnecessary changes may be made on the basis of personal preference alone, and overconfident revisers may make changes that introduce errors (as described in the workshop on institutional translation; see below).

The standards say nothing of the qualifications of translation revisers. The activity of revising is described, but not the level of skill needed to perform this activity effectively.

2. Revising a translation can take almost as much time as generating the translation; even a quick read-through to spot-check for errors requires time and concentration for long documents. It was suggested at the congress that revision may become the norm, and that freelancers may need to make ad hoc or long-term arrangements to share this additional task between colleagues.

It is hard to see how freelancers can ask busy colleagues to provide this service without suitable remuneration for their time. And paying colleagues for revising ultimately means raising the price for the client—or splitting the client's fee with the reviser. Have clients understood this, and will they be prepared to absorb the additional cost?

3. Translators who wish to comply with the standards but who lack the time, skills or motivation to perform a competent revision may be tempted to simply tick off items on a quality control checklist and sign the appropriate piece of paper without actually having looked at the text closely. The standards in themselves will do nothing to stop such corner-cutting practices.
4. If the market is unwilling to absorb the increase in cost that obligatory revision may lead to, the motivation to take revision seriously may never exist. This will leave TSPs and their clients in the same position they are in now: each practitioner is ultimately responsible for the quality of work he or she delivers. Clients are free to seek out TSPs who meet their requirements for quality and professionalism, and translators are free to negotiate appropriate compensation.

Will the requirement for revising every translation provide an opportunity for enhanced quality control? Or will it increase time pressures, force TSPs' earnings lower, and create opportunities for shady practices? The FIT officers encouraged the audience to let FIT know how we felt about the new standards.

Rights and institutional translation

At the workshop titled "Issues in institutional translation," Josep Bonet Heras described how enlargement of the European Union has affected the work of the Directorate General for Translation (DGT). Because of heavy demands on the staff's time and skills, and the lack of qualified translators into and out of all of the 20 official languages, the DGT is no longer afraid of two-way (out of the translator's first language) or three-way translation (when neither the source nor the target language is the translator's first language).

To manage the demand for translation, European Commission staff are now encouraged to prioritize which material is needed soonest, and to say what they wish to say in fewer words. One side-effect is that much of the more interesting ma-

terial (such as texts targeted to the general public) is now outsourced to non-staff translators, whereas most legislative and legal documents are reserved for the in-house staff. Authors of EC documents tend to develop a “neutral language” in their efforts to be concise, and this, together with sometimes less than complete fluency in the language they write in, can result in texts that lack precision and thus present special challenges to translators. Bonet noted that the DGT now seeks generalist translators rather than specialists, because generalists are better prepared to handle material in a variety of areas. In closing, he wondered whether it would be useful in the long term for skills in technical and engineering aspects of the translation process to take precedence over linguistic skills.

Participants from the audience contributed specific examples of success and failure at various institutions and agencies. One freelancer’s unsatisfactory experience with a government client showed what can go wrong when a good translation is “corrected” incompetently. Without the translator’s knowledge or consent, a translation for publication in a glossy public-outreach magazine distributed world wide was tampered with after it had been delivered, and the resulting text was published (in print and online) with many serious linguistic errors that had been introduced by a person whose language skills were clearly inadequate to the task of revising the translation. The damage to the translator’s reputation was potentially severe since the translator was clearly credited in the masthead. The client had violated the translator’s moral right to the integrity of the work, so the institution opted for an out-of-court settlement rather than risk the unfavorable publicity of a court case.

On a more positive note, a very successful system of quality control was described by a translation project manager

and reviser at an international financial institution. Freelance translators were made to feel part of the in-house staff’s team by being given clear information about the institution’s culture and working methods, and about the aims of each project. In-house revisers provided constructive feedback on the quality of all translations delivered. This approach to project management established long-term bonds of mutual respect between the client and the translators, and created a self-reinforcing system of continuous quality enhancement, as translators—appreciative of the feedback and client’s willingness to explain how translation fit into the bigger picture of the institution’s goals—became increasingly skilled in meeting the client’s quality criteria efficiently.

Most obvious among clients’ rights is the right to receive competent translations from their suppliers. Some institutional clients and agency representatives at the workshop noted that it was hard to find competent translators, and that it was still frequent for translations to need careful checking and correction—a process that can take up considerable amounts of the reviser’s or project manager’s time. For highly technical documents such as patents, it was suggested that one way to improve quality might be to use translators experienced in technical writing and documentation.

Not all practicing translators or researchers in translation studies identify with FIT’s institutional goals, and many translators could not afford to attend FIT2005. Nevertheless, those who gathered in Tampere were rewarded with plentiful opportunities to see what’s happening in the profession, and to learn about interesting developments that may affect practitioners in the near future. The next FIT conference will take place in Shanghai in 2008. Meanwhile, the proceedings of FIT2005 can be ordered from <www.fit2005.org>.

2002: el Quijote en espanglés

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In un placete de La Mancha of which nombre no quiero remembrearme, vivía, not so long ago, uno de esos gentlemen who always tienen una lanza in the rack, una buckler antigua, a skinny caballo y un grayhound para el chase. A cazuela with más beef than mutón, carne choppeada para la dinner, un omelet pa’ los Sábados, lentil pa’ los Viernes, y algún pigeon como delicacy especial pa’ los Domingos, consumían tres cuarers de su income. El resto lo employaba en una coat de broadcloth y en soketes de velvetín pa’ los holidays, with sus slippers pa’ combinar, while los otros días de la semana él cut a figura de los más finos cloths. Livin with él eran una housekeeper en sus forties, una sobrina not yet twenty y un ladino del field y la marketa que le saddleaba el caballo al gentleman y wieldeaba un hookete pa’ podear. El gentleman andaba por allí por los fifty. Era de complexión robusta pero un poco fresco en los bones y una cara leaneada y gaunteada. La gente sabía that él era un early riser y que gustaba mucho huntear. La gente say que su apellido was Quijada or Quesada —hay diferencia de opinión entre aquellos que han escrito sobre el sujeto— but acordando with las muchas conjeturas se entiende que era really Quejada. But all this no tiene mucha importancia pa’ nuestro cuento, providiendo que al contarlo no nos separemos pa’ nada de la verdá. [...]

Don Quixote de la Mancha traducido al *Spanglish* por Ilán Stavans. Reproducido a partir de: *Cuadernos Cervantes de la Lengua Española* (<www.cuadernos cervantes.com>), 2002; 8 (40): 10-11.