

Translation Standards - Who Needs Them?

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How European standards can help the world of translation

There once was a time when translation was largely undertaken by individuals, for individuals. Then globalisation arrived, with businesses seeking to market worldwide and national populations becoming increasingly heterogeneous: external and internal globalisation, as it were. With this, the demand for translation has increased way beyond what any individuals can provide; to avoid embarrassment and worse, translation clients have to be certain their message is being conveyed in other languages (even other forms of English) correctly. We have gone past the point where we can leave it to individual professionals to ensure things get done correctly. We are in the era of mass translation.

For individuals and organisations operating in this field, this means we have to get translation right, first time, every time. We have to be certain that the work we produce is what our clients want, and that clients know what they have to produce for any given sector or country.

A number of organisations have tried, and are trying, to define translation standards: if not what the product itself should be (because defining what a "good" translation is in the absence of context is virtually impossible, perhaps), then about the procedures we should use in producing it. Attempts are being made, both within individual languages, such as SAE J 1930 in the automotive industry, and between languages, such as DIN 2345 and, now, the CEN translation standard, which appears to have arisen initially out of the concerns and efforts of the European Union of Associations of Translation Companies (EUATC), although it has now been expanded to include representatives of the profession as a whole.

The CEN standard attempts to define what is required for translation to take place, how the various parties involved should deal with one another, and what they can and cannot expect of the results.

One of the fundamental things that translation standards establish is that translation actually exists: it does not just "happen," it is something that has to be done, and someone has to do it. That may sound bizarre, until you realise how many people think it is simply a matter of "typing it out in French." Like many service industries, the better the service, the less effort it appears to involve; but many potential and actual clients have little or no idea what translation involves, and don't want to know either.



The second major implication of translation standards for clients is that they have obligations too. Like choosing the right service provider to do the job, and making sure they have all the resources they need to do the job, such as the correct terminology and background information. There may have been a time when translators were some kind of “elevated experts,” who were presumed to know everything and simply did the job in isolation. Those times are gone.

What do translation standards mean for translation service providers?

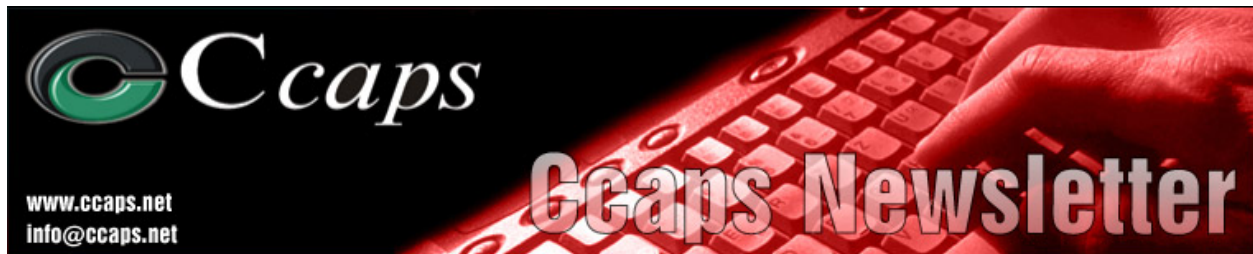
Within a translation organisation, one of the simplest but also the most fundamental requirements is that a translation should be checked (revised, edited or whatever term is used) by someone other than the person who did the original translation. The original translator may be a person within that organisation, or a (freelance) subcontractor, it makes no difference which.

There are two fundamental implications here: that the translation organisation (or “translation service provider” in the CEN speak) must actually check the translation before sending it out to the client. Merely taking it out of the translator’s envelope, or internal file folder, and putting it in an envelope or e-mailing it to the client is not enough. It is hardly necessary to say what this implies for less stringent translation companies; but, then again, these are the people the standard is designed to eliminate.

Secondly, it implies that translation service providers (TSPs) must actually have linguists (or at least people who can read) on their staff, who understand the issues involved in translation. This is not always the case at present, as I can testify personally.

What do translation standards mean for translators? Does having their work checked by another person relieve them of the liability for the quality of the work they produce? Not at all. For my own part, I can safely say that knowing that an organisation I am translating for will check my work does not make me less concerned to produce a quality job - quite the opposite. If I know the company I am doing a job for does nothing to check my work, and merely puts it in their envelope and adds a healthy mark-up, will that not make me less inclined to worry about the product, if anything? It also helps to know that the TSP I am working for will approach the client to obtain reference and background material if required. Care breeds care.

The CEN standard, and other standards (such as ASTM/ATA) are about working together; this can only have a good effect in combating the isolationism that has been endemic among translators. “This could mean the end of the ‘poor’ translator - in all senses of the word,” to quote Liz Robertson of the BSI CEN Mirror Group.



Other implications

As standards are adopted in the translation industry, they will inevitably have knock on (or “knock back”) effects elsewhere. Educational establishments training translators will have to start training them to work to standards, and establish their own standards accordingly. The quality of undergraduate and postgraduate translation courses on offer varies wildly, if the UK is anything to go by; but there is a major initiative under way at European level here, the Bologna Agreement to establish the European Higher Education Area by 2010. In the interests of “free movement of professionals and professional services” (as amongst doctors and lawyers), this requires all university courses to be validated and approved (validated mutually and by government authorities) by 2010. Any courses that do not meet standards will find themselves deprived of funding. “Live up or die” as it were. It does not take much imagination to realise that the effects of this could be devastating.

So who needs translation standards? All of us do — clients, translation service providers and translators. The idea of the “global village” may have been around since the 1960s, but it is now an established reality; even protests against globalism have themselves become a global phenomenon. We can no longer afford not to understand what we — all of us — are saying.

Andrew Fenner worked in Germany for some years in his youth, came back to England and helped run a printing company, then moved into translating, and has been freelance since 1984. He was on the ITI Council for a few years, and helped represent the Institute of Translation and Interpreting at European translation standards meetings. Fenner is also using language to help trace ancient (possibly prehistoric) trading and migration routes.

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