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Lesson two: Translation Quality

When needing documents to be translated you have several options:

- Try to translate it yourself.
- Have someone you know translate it.
- Have the translation done by a computer, usually online (machine translation).
- Have a full service translation company handle all aspects of your translation.

The question of translation quality is: How do translators/evaluators measure and improve the quality of translations?

Texts translated in a communication setting can be analyzed as consisting of content and form. The translator as an intermediate between an author (Sender) and a reader (Receiver) seeks to achieve the former’s goals and respects the latter’s norms. He, generally, is assesses the quality of his work according to the level of fidelity, linguistic acceptability, clarity, or terminological accuracy. That is, importance is given to textual factors and non-textual factors in order to understand source text meanings then render them into an acceptable target text.

Researchers have rightly insisted that the notion of acceptability in translation is relative. For example, some claim that there is no such thing, in any absolute or general sense, as a « good translation » : That concept may have some validity in the pedagogic/academic context ; it has none whatever in the commercial and little in the literary. « Good » applied to a product means « appropriate »; and that means «appropriate to a situation», which thus has to be defined or specified. Others insist on the notion of appropriateness: There are no absolute standards of translation quality but only more or less appropriate translations for the purpose for which they are intended. The dilemma facing every evaluator is thus highlighted. Should he assess the quality of the translation in vitro, without reference to the customer's specific requirements concerning timeliness, language quality and accuracy, or should he weight his judgment in light of those needs and constraints?

Overall, it can be said that translation is a socio-economic act of communication. The actors’ configuration in Translation is often represented as follows (see for instance Dollerup 2007: 3)

Sender → Translator → Receiver

This model depicts adequately some situations, but it is not a very good representation of the more general case, if only because two important aspects of the communication configuration in the professional context are missing: firstly, the fact that generally, the **Translator** acts at the request of a **Client** who, more often than not, is neither the Sender nor the Receiver, and secondly the fact that the Sender's intended receivers are generally not the Translator's receivers. A more relevant general model to present to students is the following:

Sender → Source Language Receiver(s) Client Translator → Target Language Receiver(s)

The principals in professional Translation are a Sender (author, speaker/signer), the Target Language Receiver(s) and the Client (or 'Commissioner' of the Translation). Note that Senders and Receivers are generally 'natural persons' (people), whereas the Client is most often an organization (a business, an international organization, a research body, a department within a company etc.), though contacts between the Client and the Translator will be managed by persons. A speaker or author may wish to send messages to a foreign language audience or readership (Receivers) and Receivers may wish to understand what an author or speaker is saying, but in professional Translation, nothing happens until someone asks the Translator to do the job. Sometimes, the Client and the Sender are the same, but generally they are not, if only because Translation is relatively expensive and more likely to be paid for by organizations than by individuals. This general pattern collapses into different configurations in specific cases. For instance, if the Sender is only speaking to Receivers who do not understand his/her language, as is the case of a foreign speaker who has come to talk to a local audience and needs an interpreter to get his/her message across, the configuration turns into

Client Sender → Translator → Receiver(s)

And if the Client happens to be the Sender, into:

Sender → Translator → Receiver(s)

The question of professional loyalty is therefore a very real one: to whom is it due? To the Client? To the Sender?

One fundamental determinant of a professional activity involving an employer and an employee are the employee's duties towards the employer. In the case of an independent service provider, his/her duties are determined by the **service contract** signed with the client. This also applies to professional Translators – see Gouadec 1989, 2002, Robinson 1997. Incidentally, the Translator's livelihood depends on the Client, not on the Sender or Receiver. This is one of the reasons why conference interpreters, who are often recruited by colleagues (who therefore become ‘Clients’ in a way even though they are not the ones who pay them), may attach more weight to their reputation in the profession than to feedback from conference delegates. **As a professional, the Translator owes his/her loyalty to the Client first and foremost**. There are of course limits to what any employee or service provider will accept, and if the Client’s brief is strongly objectionable on legal or moral grounds, Translators can refuse it, but such cases seem to be rare. Moreover, in the field, the Client’s brief and interests are generally compatible with the Sender’s and the Receiver’s aims. This does not mean that they are necessarily convergent. Problems do occur, but they involve mostly prioritization of resources and optimization rather than opposing interests. If the Client is a translation company, translations, which satisfy Senders and receivers, are also satisfactory for him/her because they are liable to help generate good business. On the other hand, as mentioned above, in order to gain a larger market share, translation companies may wish to offer faster and cheaper translation services than their competitors. This is no longer necessarily in line with the aims or interests of Senders or Receivers, because optimizing the commissioned translation requires time, and having to work at cheap rates will not necessarily encourage translators to give their very best to the job. The Client’s brief can be considered an environmental constraint: the Translator needs to meet the requirements of the Senders and/or Receivers subject to certain constraints of time, remuneration and perhaps access (translation companies, in particular, may worry about losing their own clients, that is, the Senders or Receivers, to the Translator if s/he is given direct access to them). Once this environmental constraint is taken on board, whose aims and interest should the Translator serve? The Sender’s or the Receiver’s? The prevailing position is probably that in most circumstances, the Translator functions as an alter ego of the author or speaker. In written translation, this position is morally ‘natural’ because setting aside literary texts, readers tend to perceive the text they are reading as the author’s, not the translator’s. The translator thus represents the author and intuitively, it would seem wrong to betray him/her by serving another party’s interest without indicating so explicitly. In simultaneous conference interpreting, the same position is standard and is reflected in a norm: interpreters use the first person generally, and they tell listeners explicitly when speaking on their own behalf (“the interpreter cannot hear because the microphone is off ”, “the interpreter missed the name”, etc.). The fact that they sometimes depart from this position (see a case study in Diriker 2004) does not change this Sender loyalty principle. The situation can be different in court interpreting, where the principals’ interests can be strongly divergent and even confrontational and interpreters may need to observe specific rules which impose strong adherence to the form of statements they interpret. The Translator's position as representing the Sender, and therefore his/her aims and interests, does not mean that the Receivers' interests are not heeded, at least as long as they are compatible with the Client's and with the Sender's. This is most often the case in informational Texts aimed at informing or explaining, insofar as it is in the Receivers' interests to be informed and to understand.

For more information, please read:

The Assessment of Professional Translation Quality: Creating Credibility out of Chaos Malcolm Williams L'erreur en traduction Volume 2, numéro 2, 2e semestre 1989

Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training