

Translation Quality Assurance: Standards and Practices in Australia¹

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ABSTRACT

Awareness of the importance of quality assurance in translation has increased within the translation industry and in society at large both domestically and internationally, with universities and training service providers offering courses in Translation Quality Assurance (TQA) in recent years. This paper looks at the TQA standards and practices in Australia and argues for a formalized approach to quality assurance as the next logical step in the translator accreditation and professionalization process.

PROLOGUE

It can be asserted with a great degree of certainty that translation in Australia, and perhaps in many parts of the world, is unfortunately not a profession yet. It is rather an occupation, a means of earning a living, or just about, mostly associated with disadvantaged migrants and marginalized communities. Its practices and standards are still not adequately developed, its body of knowledge not yet synthesized and recognition of its practitioners in society at large still wanting. It seems to attract the tired, the retired, the non-hired and the “tempest-tost” of other professions, and continues to be controlled by external authoritarian powers, plagued by shoddy practices, lack of vision and outdated modes of operation, and often dictated to by self-styled, imperious and culturally and linguistically misinformed academics² whose exposure to real-life translation situations is based on tentative experimentations that largely lack validity and reliability. In the seventies and eighties, especially in Europe, translators were in the driver’s seat of the translation effort. Today, particularly in Australia, they hardly have a seat or figure prominently in the translation process. It is little wonder that translation quality assurance today remains as controversial and wanting as the “profession” itself.

INTRODUCTION

As awareness of the importance of quality assurance in translation increases within the translation industry and in society at large, a formalized approach to quality assurance and to quality assurors becomes the next logical step in the translator accreditation and professionalization process. So far, the focus of accreditation bodies, such as the

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National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) in Australia, has been on the individual translator/interpreter, with little attention to other actors in the translation process, such as translation editors and translation quality checkers, and to the translation industry as a whole. The accreditation system in Australia has been in operation for more than twenty years. It has established a set of standards and expectations, however controversial, for the translator/interpreter, the translation services provider and the translation consumer. However, this accreditation system remains lopsided, heavily focused on the principal actor to the neglect of other essential requirements for translation quality assurance.

In this article, I shed the light on some problematic issues arising from the current system of accreditation and the *modus operandi* adopted by translation agencies and translation service providers across the country, and call for the introduction of a new accreditation category by NAATI and other accreditation bodies elsewhere for translation quality assurors and checkers.

BACKGROUND

In the late nineties, the translation industry in Australia suddenly woke to the magic concept of quality assurance. Prior to that, translation agencies and various organizations nation-wide used to commission individual translators to produce finished translation products, in many cases without a translation quality assurance (TQA) process in place. Everyone seemed to be contented at the time with a controversial accreditation system that presumably provided a safety net for translation commissioners and a pragmatic, headache-free way to select “qualified” translators. This sense of security and contentment was reinforced by an antiquated “Victorian”, high school notion of translation that expected the accreditation candidate to produce a publishable translation product within a specified examination time, thus negating the basic intrinsic iterative nature of the translation process and writing for that matter. However, for a myriad of reasons, many unqualified, incompetent and unscrupulous “translators” are alleged to have slipped through the accreditation system, especially in the early days of its operation. Stories of shoddy and erroneous translations and reports of *shonky* (underhanded) dealings by “ethically unaware” and “culturally inept” operators spread like a rumor. The emphasis on competence in one language, namely English, to the neglect of the so-called NESB³ language, made the problem much worse. Even today, accreditation-indexed translation and interpreting courses offered by various providers rarely address LOTE⁴ competence. Arguably, these courses are not foolproof, and many incompetent students have allegedly slipped through the net into a marketplace that nowadays seems to pay lip service to quality standards. In some instances, monolingual teachers, and individuals with a smattering of another language, have become specialists in translation, theorizing and developing models for translators and interpreters. This nefarious practice may have its roots in the model of communication as translation. Translation conceptualizations of reading and

comprehension have had a long history. Roman Jakobson's inclusion of paraphrase (rewording) in his classification of translation types is evidence of this model. In this regard, Bogan and Shaw (1990) comment, "it is not surprising that translation is such a resilient and pervasive notion. In some ways, it is the only notion we have ever had about reading" (Bogan and Shaw, 1990: 37-38). Therefore, those monolinguals who have been brought up to believe in this notion have no problem in proclaiming expertise in translation proper.

Push Me-Pull You System

To address the problem of competence and professionalism, translation agencies began to implement a dual "push me-pull you system" in the mid nineties, whereby an accredited translator would produce the translation and another accredited translator (in those days usually nominated by the first translator) would check it. No prior training or expertise in TQA was required or even contemplated by those agencies. The introduction of this dual "peer-review" system has raised a new set of problems vis-à-vis TQA validity and reliability and the competence and expertise of TQA performers. To begin with, those commissioned to do the original translation are generally inadequately trained in the translation process — no formal training in this area is offered by educational institutions or accreditation-oriented training providers, and the translation process is seldom addressed in pragmatic terms. Those asked to quality-check the translations are largely not qualified to do so systematically and methodically. Whether they have earned their accreditation through an accreditation examination or later through poorly designed and outrageously erratic and inward-looking makeshift accreditation-licensed university and TAFE courses, TQA performers do not possess adequate skills or training in TQA systems, and formal TQA training simply does not exist.

To make matters worse, a pro forma *Checkers Commentary/Report of a Translation* (a good sign in itself) has been later developed primarily by monolingual speakers or bilingual speakers who are not TQA accredited or trained, or even translators, and has been universally adopted at least in Victoria.⁵ The pro forma consists of three main columns. The first one is assigned for errors (omissions, mistranslations, other), the second for nominated correction or new translation, and the third column for reasons for change. See *Figure 1 - Checking and Cross-Cultural Assessment of a Translation*.

Examining comments made by various checkers using this form reveals a high degree of ignorance of targeted translation quality assurance and morbid subjectivity of assessment. English novelist H. G. Wells once observed, "No passion on earth, no love or hate is equal to the passion to change someone else's draft". Wait until you see these forms!

What is more ridiculous is that in many situations the TQA task is given to an "in-house" translator or worse still a bilingual "social welfare" worker, who is automatically vested with unquestionable linguistic and cultural ascendancy, to check the translation. More often, such a bilingual person is not accredited or

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qualified as a translator or even as a TQA performer. In a profession that is adversarial, intensely competitive and endemically plagued with nepotism, cronyism and cut-throat practices, this system has generated a great deal of rancor and ill-feeling among translators, and many unscrupulous or inept translation checkers have used this system to undermine fellow translators, despite the *Professional Solidarity* principle enshrined in the AUSIT code of ethics⁶. It generally takes only one or two bad reports by a misguided translation checker to drive a nail into the coffin of the reviewed translator. Given the fact that most individuals working in the translation industry in agencies and other departments are either monolingual or unqualified as translators or TQA auditors, a report of this nature is bound to influence their view of the reviewed translator, especially where a pet culture hijacks common sense and professional practices. Moreover, certain translation agencies tend to hire homegrown “native” nationals in order to attract customers and make them feel at home. The reason for this “window dressing” has its roots in the Australian society’s apprehension of NESB translators and overseas born Australians, despite the fact that 43% of the population are “born overseas or with at least one parent born overseas”⁷. Notwithstanding, these so-called “natives” are unable to judge the validity of translation reports, so they heavily rely on rapport and personal relations with their translators and translation reviewers, in a dollar-driven industry that places so much importance on ethics of the profession—perhaps only in theory! Furthermore, when these illiteracies and malpractices are challenged by the translator, the client will most likely ignore the translator’s expert advice and the agency will more often than not ask the translator to make the changes as requested by the client. Such a situation would never arise in the legal, medical or other respectable professions, and the expertise of the “accredited” professional is seldom questioned. When clients of these professionals are in doubt, they may seek a second and a third opinion from equally qualified or accredited professionals in the field of inquiry. In contrast, translation clients seek the advice of bilingual workers, who are frequently hired not so much for their linguistic or all-encompassing cultural knowledge as for their ethnic, racial and or gender affiliation and representativeness.

Checking & Cross-Cultural Assessment of a Translation

Title of document: _____ Language: _____

Name of person providing comments: _____ date: _____

C/- Agency of service: _____

Page No. Line No.	Mistake/Omission/Mistranslation/Others (Clearly identify the issue)	Nominated Correction or New Translation (Clearly write out the nominated version)	Reason for Change (Comments in English)

Figure 1 - Checking and Cross-Cultural Assessment of a Translation

Focus Groups

In some cases, focus groups are used by special cultural consultancy providers commissioned to test the translations produced by translation agencies or individual translators. These consultants seek to test the effectiveness and clarity of the messages, whether people understand the content of all the materials, and whether the information and design elements are appropriate, relevant and useful to non-English speaking audiences. Data is collected through surveys, which are completed by the focus groups. However, apart from the arbitrary, subjective and relative nature of these surveys, the results are not always authenticated. In a world dominated by cut-and-paste, reuse and recycling of information, many surveys fall foul of validation rules.

Field-testing the translated text is a method of quality assurance first employed in translation in the late eighties and has been used with limited success outside technical communication. The method is used to gather feedback from a sample of typical translation users to ensure that the translation meets the requirements and information needs of the intended audience. Feedback is analyzed and valid comments are incorporated into the final version of the translated text. Focus groups are intended to achieve the same results. Yet it is alleged that some of these surveys in certain community groups are routinely filled out by the bilingual liaison officers facilitating these focus groups.

Professional Accreditation

What makes matters worse in certain quarters of the industry is the Australian rank system of accreditation that has become so entrenched in the psyche of the community of translators and translation agencies. Increasingly, agencies, companies and government departments demand accreditation as the only or primary credential to the exclusion of other qualifications. Sadly, in a so-called paperless professional world the only proof of expertise that counts seems to be a piece of paper. Furthermore, most translation agencies shy away from commissioning advanced and senior translators, formerly known as levels four and five, and opt for the general Professional Translator (level three) accreditation, out of the belief that higher ranking translators expect higher remuneration—a notion symptomatic of a mediocre world and good-enough practices, where the predominant paradigm of remuneration is still based on word count and cheaper rates.

Gender and Racial Demarcation

Another ridiculous and backward TQA practice is to assign translation jobs and TQA tasks along gender lines. For example, a medical text about women's health issues would automatically be given to a female translator irrespective of specialization and expertise. In many instances, an unmarried female translator, who has not experienced pregnancy and labour, is assumed to know more about these issues than a male medical translator or an aware and informed translator who has gone through the pain and pangs of pregnancy and labour with his wife

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or female partner. The same applies in reverse. A female translator is not usually given traditionally male-dominated topics such as automobiles, mechanical engineering, hydraulic systems and so on. Many real examples of this backward view of translation and translators come to mind as we speak about this kind of practice in twenty-first century “fair-go” Australia. If the reasoning is subject-matter expertise, this practice flies in the face of all what translation education and training is proclaimed to be, and in this case we should close shop as I/T educators and go home. If the rationale is to have a translation sympathetic to the subject-matter and intended readership, this violates the very basic notion of neutrality and invisibility of the translator. While it is a prerequisite in gender-specific interpreting situations to observe cultural sensitivity and appropriateness when selecting the interpreter, such a requirement is not critical or essential in translation situations so long as the translator is an informed qualified professional.

For quite sometime now, the profession has reverberated the political events elsewhere in the world. During the civil war in Lebanon for example, it was not unusual for translation agencies to receive requests for interpreters with a Christian or Muslim Beirut Accent. Increasingly, with the influx of migrants from war-torn third world countries, the profession has taken a turn to the worse. Languages, such as Arabic, are being subdivided not only into regional dialects, but also more alarmingly along racial, religious, sectarian and tribal lines. It is not unusual for an agency to ask for a Sudanese Arabic translator, or an Iraqi Muslim Shiite interpreter, or a Christian Lebanese interpreter. It is also not unusual of certain agencies to remunerate whoever is chosen for this task based on whether they have “accreditation” in such language idiosyncrasies.

Today, we witness the same kind of *dark ages* practices not only on the business side of the profession, but also on the educational and academic side. Universities and TAFE institutions are now offering specialized “Sudanese Arabic”⁸ courses alongside “standard Arabic” courses, as an example. This policy reflects the level of ignorance⁹ of these educational institutions of the languages and cultures they are catering for.

For a variety of reasons, not discounting the business aspects, these requests are being daily entertained by agencies across the country. Ignorance and suspicion on the part of clients, lack of awareness on the part of those hired to work at the call centers of agencies, and complacency on the part of the interpreters and translators, are all contributing to third world practices.

TRANSLATION ASSURANCE ACCREDITATION

One way to enable the translation profession to address the problem of quality assurance is for the accreditation bodies to introduce a new accreditation category for translation quality assurors, translation editors, and translation checkers. By formalizing these tasks into accreditation, recognition of the specialist skills and knowledge required to perform them as an integral part of

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the quality assurance process is bound to align translation standards to expectations across the various stages of the translation process.

These proposed accreditation categories entail training in a formalized, clearly defined translation process that should be designed specifically to address the critical elements of quality assurance. They should include prerequisites that must be put into place to ensure quality assurance is informed by process and standards rather than by personal preferences and individual interpretive frameworks. These categories should at least include:

- Translation Quality Assuror accreditation
- Translation Editor accreditation

The competencies for these categories should include the following as a minimum.

- Advanced knowledge of quality assurance methodologies, processes, and procedures
- Good understanding of the attributes and variables of the translation process and translation product
- Understanding of the translation dynamics, problems and constraints
- Understanding of the translation process
- Advanced knowledge of the various translation techniques and strategies
- Advanced source and target language competence
- Translation editing skills
- Understanding of the documentation production process
- Understanding of the Translation Development Lifecycle (TDLC)
- Understanding of work methodologies and tools

Quality assurance is a mechanism that must be in place to ensure that the translation quality standards are met. Quality assurance consists of two major components:

- Quality control
- Final quality inspection

As noted in previous work (1995, 2003, 2004), without well-defined assessment and evaluation standards and processes, translation quality assurance will remain largely haphazard and subject to the personal preferences and whims of the individual assessor or the interpretive frameworks, bureaucratic perspectives and draconian measures of educators and evaluators alike.

It is important to remember that developing translation is a cumulative and iterative process that employs a rational step by step development strategy consisting of planning, designing, writing (translating), editing and proofreading. It is somewhat like building a house. The plans are drawn up first before

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construction begins. The foundation is then laid down, the structure is put in place, and the bricks and mortar are laid, and so on, until the house is completed. No attention is paid to the dirt that falls on the floor until the house is completed and the cleanup process (proofreading) begins. Effective translation development uses an architectural translation strategy to ensure that all the details are included according to the original plan, blueprint (or standards and specifications). With this in mind, whichever the approach, accreditation of translation quality assurors and editors should test the skills and competencies in these areas.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Finally, accreditation has hitherto focused on the individual translator/interpreter, and has overlooked the employers, agencies and other organizations employing translators and interpreters. Translation quality assurors or checkers, as they are often called, are a vital actor in translation quality control. While this aspect has been recently recognized within the translation industry, there is hardly any recognition of the complex nature of the skills and frameworks required for a quality-compliant fulfillment of this role. It is therefore highly recommended that a new accreditation category be introduced for translation quality assurance, along the lines proposed in this article, where focus is placed on testing the candidate's understanding of the translation process, the tasks, responsibilities, interfaces, deliverables, completion criteria, tools and techniques, verification and validation requirements, and general and specific standards.

It is also high time educational institutions snapped out of outdated and backward training programs and offered something more viable and realistic than just a hodge-podge of incoherent jumble of lopsided subjects that leave both teacher and student more confused, disenchanted and disgruntled and the system exposed to misuse and abuse by teachers and administrators with conflicting interests and agendas. 🐼

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NOTES

¹ A revised and re-titled version of a paper published in 2004 by the author on www.at-turjuman.com (Towards a Formal Accreditation of Translation Quality Assurors).

² Take for example, the notion of inclusive writing in English and the recent call by certain academics and accreditation bodies to impose similar rules upon grammatically gender-sensitive languages such as Arabic, Spanish and French.

³ Non-English-speaking background.

⁴ Language other than English.

⁵ As translation businesses expand interstate, they transfer their standards and practices to the areas they set up shop in.

⁶ Australian Institute of Interpreting and Translation

⁷ Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity, Commonwealth, 2003.

⁸ Here we are not talking about tribal languages such as *Dinka*, *Mandari*, *Narim* or *Nuer*, which certainly require separate qualified interpreters. There are shocking reports of interpreters who could not speak a word of any of these languages, yet passed themselves as interpreters in these languages. In most of these cases, both clients and interpreters were found speaking standard Arabic comprehensible to most other Arabic interpreters, which makes a farce of the “Sudanese Arabic” offering. It is only natural that different sections and denominations within the same country opt for a common ground form of language to communicate with one another. That common ground or baseline form is in this instance close to Modern Standard Arabic. The situation is most likely not any different in other languages with several variations.

⁹ Perhaps combined with a money-making drive; many educational institutions have been pressured in recent years to be profit-making businesses.

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