

# CORPORATE TRANSLATION

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**ABSTRACT:** Corporate translators face specific problems due to the constant rush, need to translate into a foreign language, translate texts for and by non-natives and translate several versions of the same document. **KEY-WORDS:** Translating into a foreign language; Efficiency in translating; Translating for non-native readers; Translating texts written by non-natives

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The first problem

The first problem faced in writing this paper was terminological: Is there a short, convenient, precise term to describe the activity of self-employed persons producing non-sworn translations for corporations not engaged in the book trade, including newspapers, but excluding literary supplements? I do not think there is and will call those professionals *corporate translators* and use analogous terms to refer to their activities, clients and trade. It is not a good term, but it has the advantage of convenience.

The problems faced by corporate translators are different from those faced by both technical and literary translators working for publishing houses. They are also different from the problems faced by

sworn translators and by those rare ones who have a fixed job, but this paper will be mostly concerned with the publishing house — corporate opposition because I have worked on both sides of this particular fence.

### 1.2 A real-life job

A French group wanted to change the corporate structure of its two Brazilian subsidiaries and requested suggestions from three consulting firms. The suggestions were to be discussed in Paris on Wednesday, June 23, 1993. On June 18, my client, one of the participating consultants, asked me to remain available to him on June 22 on a full-time basis. He did not say how many pages, lines or words were to be translated. He just stated his deadline.

On June 22, at 10 in the morning, bits and pieces of the report started coming over the fax, as the several members of my client's staff concluded their respective assignments. There were typed

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pages, copies of laws and regulations, and a few handwritten paragraphs. Some of the messages were copies of portions of older reports, adapted to the current circumstances by notes penned in between the lines. The mess was translated into English, revised and faxed back to the client, together with several requests for clarification and suggestions for changes.

At 6 p.m. we had a rough idea of what the final report would look like. At 7:30 the client and I began giving the report the final touch, which entailed providing a patchwork job with some semblance of stylistic unity. It was past 10 when the job was completed. He was to copy the fax on his letterhead, sign it and fax it over to France<sup>1</sup>. Faxes of faxes do not look very pretty, but that was the best we could do within the time schedule.

At 10:30 the client called me in desperation: he was alone in the office and could not refax my fax to France. I wrote a memo to the French company explaining the predicament, signed and faxed it to France together with the unsigned report, printed on ordinary blank paper, to which I added the client logo from a graphic file. Then I called it a day.

Next morning in Paris copies of my fax were handed to the right persons. In São Paulo, a messenger delivered a printed copy of the translation to my client. The printout was copied on the client's letterhead, signed and sent to France by courier, for the record.

Mission accomplished? Not at all.

The English text had to be translated back into Portuguese, for the benefit of the Brazilian staff who spoke French and Portuguese, but hardly any English. My client could not possibly send them a clean copy of all the bits and pieces that had been

faxed to me. After all the mending and patching, he could hardly say that what his staff had written was the original and my work a translation thereof in the accepted meanings of those terms. In other words, the translation had become the original and I had become a co-author<sup>2</sup>.

So, I translated myself back into Portuguese, noticing that several points of the original (translation?) could be improved, but it was too late. The whole thing had already been discussed and was on file in Paris. No chances of an erratum or of a second edition, revised and corrected by the translator (co-author?). The case had been closed. Finis.

No time to stare at the errors and cry either: Work kept flowing in, and it was urgent.

## 2. Tight deadlines: The rush syndrome

Perhaps the first difference to catch our attention is the time element and its effects on quality.

Publishers have schedules, corporate clients have deadlines. It is a question of life or death: sometimes, it is the deadline for public bid, sometimes it is a legal deadline. Everybody is in a hurry, everything is behind schedule, every job is a rush job. To make things worse, much of our work is made up of short texts. A three-hundred page book gives you some time to breathe and think. A ten-page report is translated and faxed to Timbuktu before sundown.

How can one make instant translations with a minimum of quality? The obvious answer is that we have to be more efficient. But how can we become more efficient? There are many ways, two of which will be discussed here: the use of the computer and specialization. I know, by personal communication, that professor Francis H. Aubert is interested in other facets of the same question and hope he will soon publish his conclusions.

1 Sometimes, telecopiers refuse to accept fax paper as input. In those cases, you either make a copy of the fax or place it into a special see-through folder. My client could neither find the folders nor the key to the copier room.

2 The form was basically mine, the contents were what the client wanted them to be. So this is a specific form of ghost-writing which includes translation.

## 2.1 The computer

For many years, the obvious answer seemed to be the computer, which was too expensive and most of us could not afford. Little by little, prices fell and all of us bought our computers. In the beginning, we gained in two different ways: First, computers process text more efficiently, using, for instance, search and replace tools which make revision an easier and faster task. In addition, we were able to supply our clients with clean printouts, free from the usual handwritten corrections. Our clients then began copying our printouts on their letterhead, and this earned us a little more time.

However, soon deadlines tightened again in a cruel inversion of Parkinson's law<sup>3</sup>.

However, the computer made an important contribution to quality, because the client that receives a well-printed text — and many of us now have laser printers — and is in a hurry feels very little inclined to change it. Thus, the computer meant an end to the infamous client-made "improvements" about which we used to complain so much.

I now fax a draft translation to my client, for suggestions and approval. We discuss everything by phone, I make the changes as agreed and send the client the final form.

## 2.2 Specialization

What saved me in the job referred to above was my experience with the specific type of text. Very little research was needed, and I have an excellent library on the subject at hand. Had the subject been different, it would be a question of more time or less quality — probably both.

Regrettably, there are too many specialties and too few jobs. Consequently, most of us are general practitioners. Because there are more jobs

involving English than any other language, people who translate into or from English stand a better chance of becoming specialists.

## 3. The Role of the non-native

In the book trade, you translate into your own language a text written by a native of the source language, for the benefit of native speakers of the target language who do not know the source language.

Not all readers will be natives. For instance, a Brazilian will often read a Spanish translation of a German work, but the Spanish translator is not concerned with this. The Spanish translator translates German into Spanish for the benefit of native speakers of Spanish.

In the corporate trade, things can be quite different, and entail problems falling into three different categories:

- a. Translating into a foreign language
- b. Translating for non-native readers
- c. Translating translations, texts written by non-natives, cryptotranslations and quasi-translations

### 3.1 Translating into a foreign language

The reader will have noticed that the example mentioned above referred to a translation into English, and that my mother tongue is Portuguese. It is generally held that the target language should always be the translator's mother tongue, but the opinion is not unanimous. (Gerver: 1976). The problem faced by the corporate translator, however, is not theoretical. There is a lot more work from Portuguese into foreign languages than native speakers capable of doing it. Consequently, we (that is, clients and translators) have no choice. Personally, I think the level of difficulty is the same. What changes is the side on which the difficulty is. When I translate into English, the difficulty is on the encoding side, when I translate into Portuguese, it is on the decoding side. From this standpoint,

<sup>3</sup> *Work expands to fill the time available to do it. In this case, it is available time that shrinks to fit the work.*

translating into a foreign language is easier than translating into one's native language, because I have a degree of control over what I write, but none over what others write. So, when I translate into English, I have more control over the side where the difficulties are.

It is also a question of specialization: I can translate a contract and imitate the style of an American lawyer, but can not translate a paper on medicine imitating the style of the American doctor. Otherwise, I try to keep style simple, which is possible and commendable in the case of corporate translation, where form is generally less important than content. In addition, the style of corporate texts is not always worth maintaining.

### 3.2 Translating for non-native readers

The reader will also have noted that I translated into English a text that was to be sent to France. He had two reasons for his choice: In the first place, he wanted to be able to read the translation and make suggestions and generally to ensure that what I wrote for him to sign corresponded to what he wanted<sup>4</sup>. In the second place, he wanted a specialist, and specialization in Brazil is usually only possible for those who work with English<sup>5</sup>.

The reader will also have noticed that the French read my text, not French a translation thereof. This imposed on me an additional obliga-

4 Years before, another partner in the same firm had had a text translated into German, of which he knew but a few words. It was his luck that he gave the translation a perfunctory look before signing it, because he recognized *Einkommensteuer*, which means income tax and was one of the few German words he knew. Since the original text did not contain a single reference to income tax, he destroyed the translation and thereafter the firm only used English translators — for English the partners can read.

5 An engineering firm had to send a catalog to a client in Italy. They did find competent translators, but none had experience in the area. Worse: none had access to the necessary research resources. The catalog was translated into English.

tion: to be clear to Frenchmen who perhaps did not know much English. A few lines above I said I try to keep my English style simple, meaning simple for me. Now it is a question of keeping it simple for me and for the Frenchmen.

This is not difficult in itself, because the French and I tend to have the same difficulties in English, although some of my French readers will probably know less English than I do. But I often have to write for Germans or Dutchmen, who have different problems. In addition, the latinized terms and constructions which the French find so simple and natural will drive any English readability index through the sky.

To mention an extreme example, once I had to translate into English for the use of officers of the People's Republic of China. I do not know any Chinese, I did not know how much English they knew and I did not know whether they could use the services of a good translator. So, how could I keep things simple? In this case, I decided the best strategy was to use short sentences and avoid verbs with prepositions and particles.

### 3.3 Translating translations, texts written by non-natives, cryptotranslations and quasi-translations

If the French company had decided to have my text translated into French, my French colleague would be translating a translation. If they could find someone to translate from Portuguese, it would be best to request the Brazilian firm for a Portuguese text to avoid the indirect translation. Because all translations involve a certain degree of distortion, indirect translation involves distortion squared. Indirect translation, however, is often unavoidable. Such is the case of court records which contain translations.

A similar case is that of the text written by a non-native. No matter how proficient we are in a foreign language, no matter how much we claim to

“think” in the foreign language, deep, deep, in our brains, the mother tongue reigns supreme.

Success in translating from a translation or from a text written by a foreigner depends on the knowledge the translator has of the subject and of the language of the original and/or mother tongue of the author. For example, I often have to translate texts on accounting and finance written by Germans or translated from German. Since I have been translating this sort of thing for 25 years and know some German, I have very little difficulty. For example, I can easily see that paragraphs that my wife, who does not know any German, finds terribly contorted are mere reflexes of German word order. On the other hand, I was forced to return untranslated an English translation of Japanese law on cooperatives made in Japan. Someone who knew Japanese would probably do with ease.

A special case is what I call cryptotranslation. It is best explained by example, which I owe to my friend Donna H. Sandin, from Reston, VA, USA. She was asked to translate the following: *A sociedade foi incorporada*. This should translate as *The company merged*, but it was a mistranslation from articles of incorporation originally written in English. The correct Portuguese was *A empresa foi constituída* and she translated it as *The Company was incorporated*.

Those cases creep up in the most strange and unforeseeable places and therein lies their danger. Their extreme point is what I call quasi-translations, which are also better explained by example. *Eventually* is a dangerous word. In English, it means *in due time*. In Romance languages, it means *possibly, sometimes*. I found *eventually* in a text written by a native American who, as far as I know, did not know any romance language. My sixth sense, aided by my knowledge of the subject, warned me that something was amiss and I decided to investigate the matter. It was a good idea. I discovered that the text had been based in a report written in English by a Chilean. The American, who did not know Spanish, could not detect the error.

#### 4. Ethics: requests, suggestions and changes

Several places in this paper refer my interventions on client work and on client interventions on my work, something that may surprise many of my colleagues, specially literary translators, who are bound by the rule of fidelity, and will at most add a few translator's notes to the original.

This difference also reflects a difference in purpose: book translators are true to what the author wrote, corporate translators generally must be true to what the author wanted to write or should have written. In addition, corporate translators do not add notes nor do they sign their translations, therefore, the client is legally liable for the translation. Thus, a common agreement over what is to be written protects both parties.

On the other hand even clients whose English is not very good can offer good suggestions. Clients who know a little more English sometimes change their minds when they see their text in translation. Strangely, they seem to read English with more attention than Portuguese. Last, there is the client who does not feel comfortable with a word is not familiar with. This is the case, for instance, of the client who asked me to change the *delinquent* in a text because *delinqüente*, in Portuguese, always means people who break the law and never means people who are late with a payment.

There is a limit, however, and I have often refused to implement the changes demanded by the client. It is his responsibility, but it is my professional reputation. I have lost more than a client on that account.

#### 5. The original disappears

The real-life example also mentions that the English translation finally became the original and was translated back into Portuguese. This fact is also common in corporate work. The extreme case appears in some types of contract work. For example, the Brazilian subsidiary of a U.S. company is

to enter into an agreement with a Brazilian company.

The parent company sends a draft agreement, which is translated into Portuguese. Local lawyers ask the translator to make some changes to adapt the contract to Brazilian law, and submit it to the other party. These, in turn, suggest other changes, which must be translated into Portuguese.

This goes on until an agreement is reached, when the translator fills in the blanks of his latest files with the proper names and dates and the agreements are signed. Both agreements are now translations of originals which exist no more.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 My first book

I still remember the first book I translated, in 1970. It was a fine book on finance, written in English by an American. Several drafts had been tested and analyzed by the students and colleagues of the author and the manuscript had been carefully revised by the publisher's staff. I translated the book into Portuguese at a pace which now seems leisurely, and revised the entire translation helped by my wife. The publisher had the translation revised and I saw it again in galley proof.

Three years later, I had stopped working for the publisher and was only working as a corporate translator, because of the higher fees. At that time I

thought, as many people do, that the only difference was in the earnings. I hope this paper has shown that it is not.

### 6.2 The last problem

The last problem faced in preparing this paper was translating it. The paper had already been kindly accepted by TradTerm and the last changes had been made, when it was suggested that I should submit it in both Portuguese and English. Because I am constitutionally unable to read one of my texts without changing it, I ended up by doing it all over again.

## 7. Acknowledgment

Most of the ideas discussed here had already been discussed with Professor Dr. Francis Henrik Aubert, in spasmodic telephone conversations and many of its points owe much to his advice.

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