

Back and Parallel Translations: Managing Client Expectations

By Chris Lines

When I have the opportunity for direct contact with representatives of our client base, I am almost always struck by their limited understanding of the translation process. When my conversation is with a corporate vendor manager who routinely procures translation services, there is a triple focus on cost, turnaround, and accuracy. Cost and turnaround are precisely quantifiable: the client seeks a cost-effective solution and on-time delivery, and a negative profit margin on our part or late receipt of the job by the client can be clearly measured.

in the language business know that an 80% match in a back translation that was done by someone other than the original translator represents a high degree of correlation. And the more dissimilar the language pair, the lower the correlation figure is likely to be.

The Growth of Back Translation

The previous example was an informal effort on the part of a client who wanted some assurance of accuracy, but did not understand linguistic realities well enough to interpret the result. For some time, we have been seeing a growth in client demand for

tions are especially important.

It is common for non-linguists to think that translation involves word-for-word equivalence or something close to it. The idea that one word in English may have multiple, context-dependent translations in the target language, or no direct translation at all, may be illogical and frustrating to the client. This fact needs to be explained to the client patiently and clearly, and, most importantly, without any hint of condescension.

This is what I mean by managing customer expectations. It is well worth the time and effort it takes to explain major linguistic differences to the client (for example, verb finality in Japanese, or the fact that the Japanese verb generally comes at the end of a sentence). It might also be helpful to explain that very visible differences in the lengths of corresponding passages can be accounted for by varying language structure and richness of vocabulary. (For example, compare the English and Welsh texts on a television license in Wales and you will see that the Welsh version is nearly twice as long.) It is important for the client to gain some appreciation for the semantic and morphological factors that contribute to the degree of correlation between the first original and the back translation.

To illustrate these morphological and semantic variances, two examples of translation divergence are presented here. The first example shows the same Russian→English translation performed by two different translators. The second example is an actual back translation of a clinical trial document.

Presenting Parallel Translations

I use the term “parallel translation” to describe jobs where the client requires the source to be translated into two or more target languages.

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However, clients also require accuracy, which is harder to define within the spectrum between a literal, word-for-word rendition and a translation that has been freely paraphrased in the interest of maintaining the source text’s literary style. Of course, scientific, technical, legal, and patent translations of necessity need to adhere closely to the source meaning and read as fluently as possible in the target language. The balancing act that the translator and editor must achieve here has been widely discussed.

How does a non-linguist client assess the accuracy of the translator’s product? Sometimes they perform a back translation themselves, which leads to client comments such as: “One of our engineers in Germany re-translated your text and his version was only 80% in agreement with the original we supplied you.” Well, those of us

formal back translation, despite the additional expense, as a means of verifying translation accuracy. This trend is particularly prevalent for documents in fields where high translation integrity is critical, such as the pharmaceutical industry (especially drug datasheets and clinical trial participant documents), industrial process operations, information technology instruction sequences, and key legal contracts.

When one of our clients requires a back translation, we engage a second translator specializing in the relevant knowledge domain to execute the task. After the result is edited (which is done without the editor having access to the first original in order to avoid “contamination” of the back translation), it is delivered to the client, who can then compare the back translation with the first original. At this stage, client education and management of expecta-

These jobs are often formatted in a spreadsheet with a column for each language. The source-language text appears on the left and the translated text for each language appears in the columns on the right for easy comparison. The side-by-side juxtaposition of the same text in multiple languages makes differences in text length and word order easier for the non-linguist client to recognize. This type of comparison will inevitably lead the client to ask more questions that the translation company must be ready to answer in order to manage client expectations.

Translation Divergence: Azeri, Russian, and English

The following example is taken from the book *Principles of Azerbaijan Folk Music*, written by the outstanding Azerbaijan composer Uzeir Hajibeyov (1885-1948). The Azeri version of the text is available online at http://musbook.musigi-dunya.az/musbook/content_az.html. Here is the first part of the Azeri text describing the sound system of Azerbaijan folk music:

“Musiqişunasların fikrincə, ‘Şərq musiqisində’ (Azərbaycan musiqisini də buraya daxil edirlər) butöv və yarım tondan başqa 1/3 və 1/4 ton da vardır. Bu iddia ən kiçik intervalı yarım ton olan Azərbaycan xalq musiqisinə aid edilə bilməz. Avropa musiqisində olduğu kimi, Azərbaycan musiqisində də oktava 7 diatonik və 12 xromatik pərdədən ibarətdir. Fərq ancaq bundadır ki, Avropa musiqisindəki oktavada pərdələr müntəzəm, Azərbaycan musiqisində isə qeyri-müntəzəm temperasiya olunmuşdur. Ona görə də temperasiyalı musiqi alətlərində (xüsusilə fortepianoda). Azərbaycan havaları ifa olunduqda, xüsusilə tersiya və seksta tonlarının ucalığında bə’zi uyğunsu-

zluqlar hiss olunur; Azərbaycan musiqisində böyük tersiya temperasiya tersiyasına nisbətən qısa, kiçik tersiya isə temperasiya tersiyasına nisbətən genişdir. Yarımton temperasiyalıdan genişdir. Fərq təxminən bir komma qədərdir.”

The website provides a Russian version that serves as the original for this exercise:

“По мнению музыковедов, в ‘восточной музыке’ (к каковой относят и азербайджанскую музыку) кроме целого тона и полутона существует еще 1/3 и 1/4 тона. Это мнение не должно касаться азербайджанской народной музыки, в которой наименьшим интервалом является полутон. Октава в азербайджанской музыке так же, как и в европейской, содержит в себе 7 диатонических и 12 хроматических ступеней. Разница заключается в том, что ступени октавы в европейской музыке равномерно темперированы; ступени же октавы в азербайджанской музыке также считаются темперированными, но неравномерно. Поэтому при исполнении азербайджанских мелодий на темперированных инструментах (особенно на фортепиано) чувствуется некоторое несоответствие в высоте тонов, особенно терновых и секстовых; в азербайджанской музыке большая терция уже темперированной, малая терция - шире темперированной. Полутон шире темперированного. Разница - приблизительно одна komma.”

Before accessing the English translation provided by the website, I completed my own translation from Russian into English as follows:

“In the opinion of musicologists, in

‘oriental music’ (to which they also relate Azerbaijan music) there exist, apart from the full tone and the semitone, 1/3 and 1/4 of a tone as well. This opinion must not apply to Azerbaijan folk music, in which the smallest interval is a semitone. An octave in Azerbaijan music, just as in European, comprises 7 diatonic and 12 chromatic levels. The difference is that the levels of an octave in European music are uniformly tempered, and the levels of an octave in Azerbaijan music are also considered tempered, but non-uniformly. Therefore when playing Azerbaijan melodies on tempered instruments (especially on the piano), a certain disparity is felt in the level of the tones, especially of thirds and sixths; in Azerbaijan music the major third is tempered, and the minor third is more widely tempered. A semitone is wider than a tempered one. The difference is approximately one comma.” (154 words)

Now, for comparison, here is the English translation provided by the website:

“According to musicologists, ‘oriental music’ (to which Azerbaijan music is related) has 1/3 and 1/4 tones, in addition to complete tones and semitones. This tendency should not be applied to Azerbaijan folk music where semitone is the smallest interval. Octave in Azerbaijan music, as well as in European music contains 7 diatonic and 12 chromatic grades. The only difference is that the octave’s grades in European music are equally tempered, but in Azerbaijan music, however, the octave grades are tempered unequally. Therefore, while playing Azerbaijan melodies on tempered musical instruments (especially on the piano) one feels some discordance in the pitch of tones, particularly in the thirds and ➡

sixths. In Azerbaijan music the major third is narrower than tempered one. The minor third is wider than tempered one. Semitones are wider as well. The difference is about one comma.” (139 words)

To assess the two texts for the degree of correlation, we adopt a method of averaging the total number of words $(154+139)/2 = 146.5$, and expressing the number of divergent words as a percentage of this average word count $(53 \text{ words}/146.5 \times 100 = 36.2\%)$. We then can take the degree of correlation as the complement percentage $(100-36.2 = 63.8\%)$. There is, of course, some subjectivity in the process of determining the number of divergent words. We are also assuming that the English translation on the website derives from the Russian and not from the Azeri, since

two versions. This type of divergence is also what fuels client reaction and leads to comments like the one at the beginning of this article about the back translation not being a 100% match.

A Real Back Translation: Spanish Clinical Trial Instructions

Our second example involves a clinical trial translation, which is a typical document associated with patient participation in clinical trials of new medications. Trial sponsors display heightened concern regarding translation accuracy due to the need for clear, unambiguous, and accurate instructions to trial subjects, together with the legal exposure inherent in clinical trial activities.

I will give the source English text and the translation into Spanish. The Spanish translation will be followed by the back translation, which was completed by a

tion on these work sheets and update the sheets if necessary. The information on these work sheets should be filled in as required once your child receives the vaccine up to 42 days following the second vaccine. You must complete work sheets A and B of the participant folder within approximately 28 days after the first vaccination. Work sheets C and D must be completed before the visit after the second dose, which will take place approximately 28 days after the second dose. Work sheets E and F must be completed up to 42 days after the second dose. The trial personnel will try to schedule in advance the exact date and time for each follow-up meeting. The trial personnel will answer all your questions or concerns about the trial during these contacts. In these meetings, please notify the trial personnel of any unusual or alarming event you have observed. Please do not sign these work sheets until the trial personnel have reviewed the information with you.” (224 words)

Spanish Translation:

“Este cuaderno contiene varias hojas de trabajo diseñadas para recolectar información sobre la medicación que recibe su niño, así como sobre cualquier enfermedad y/o eventos médicos significantes que el niño pueda experimentar tras recibir una vacuna del estudio. Es extremadamente importante para el éxito de este estudio completar estas hojas de trabajo. Por favor, registre información precisa y completa en estas hojas de trabajo y actualice las hojas de ser necesario. La información de estas hojas de trabajo debe completarse según lo requerido una vez que su niño reciba la vacuna hasta 42 días después de la segunda vacuna. Usted debe completar las hojas de trabajo A y B del cuaderno del participante aproximadamente durante 28 días tras la primera vacu-

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the book was originally written in Russian in order to reach a wider readership (first edition, 1945; second edition, 1957). The book was not translated into Azeri until 1962, with a second translation completed in 1965.

This exercise provides a clear indication of the different renditions that two translators can produce from the same source. Upon careful examination, it is apparent that the two versions say the same thing, but a non-linguist will most likely focus more on the differences between the

different translator (me) without looking at the original English text.

English Source:

“This folder contains various work sheets designed to gather information on the medication your child is receiving, as well as on any illness and/or significant medical events the child may experience after receiving a trial vaccine. It is extremely important for the success of the trial that these work sheets be completed. Please record accurate and complete informa-

nación. Las hojas de trabajo C y D deben completarse antes de la visita tras la segunda dosis, que tendrá lugar aproximadamente 28 días tras la segunda dosis. Las hojas de trabajo E y F deben completarse hasta los 42 días tras la segunda dosis. El personal del estudio intentará programar con antelación la fecha y horarios exactos para cada reunión de seguimiento. El personal del estudio contestará a todas sus preguntas

28 days after the first vaccination. The worksheets C and D must be completed before the visit after the second dose, which will take place approximately 28 days after the second dose. The worksheets E and F must be completed until 42 days after the second dose. The study personnel will try to program beforehand the exact date and times for each follow-up meeting. The study personnel will answer all your questions or con-

This example of back translation again illustrates how two translators will find different word equivalents or forms of expression to convey the same meaning in what is a relatively straightforward text. The differences may seem, and indeed be, semantically insignificant, but the tendency of non-linguist clients to query them should not be underestimated. These queries should be met with a clear explanation of the translation process. With particular reference to the items queried, it is often necessary to arrange for someone fluent in the relevant language pair to answer the client's questions. That person also needs to be able to empathize with the client's concerns, as any hint of academic arrogance will be very counterproductive.

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o inquietudes sobre el estudio durante estos contactos. En estas reuniones, por favor, informe al personal del estudio cualquier evento inusual o alarmante que haya observado. Por favor, no firme estas hojas de trabajo hasta que el personal del estudio haya revisado la información con usted.” (238 words)

cerns about the study during these contacts. At these meetings, please inform the study personnel about any unusual or alarming event that you have observed. Please do not sign these worksheets until the study personnel have reviewed the information with you.” (216 words)

English Back Translation:

“This notebook contains various worksheets designed to collect information about the medication that your child receives, as well as about any illness and/or significant medical events that your child could experience after receiving a study vaccine. It is extremely important for the success of this study to complete these worksheets. Please record precise and complete information in these worksheets and update the sheets as necessary. The information in these worksheets must be completed as required once your child receives the vaccine until 42 days after the second vaccine. You must complete the worksheets A and B of the participant notebook approximately over

Assessment

By assessing the two texts for the degree of correlation using the same method as before, we find that the average number of words is $(224+216)/2 = 220$, and that the number of divergent words as a percentage of this average word count is $36/220 \times 100 = 16.4\%$. The degree of correlation is the complement percentage $100 - 16.4 = 83.6\%$. As opposed to the English and Russian from the first example, there is a higher degree of correlation between the English original that was translated into Spanish and the English back translation. This is to be expected since the linguistic disparity between Russian and English is much greater than between Spanish and English.

Better Understanding Leads to Greater Client Satisfaction

In terms of client satisfaction and better understanding (with fewer queries) in the future, time and effort expended in educating the non-linguist client is a worthwhile investment in the management of client expectations, the consolidation of the client relationship, and securing the prospects of obtaining further business in a very competitive marketplace.

The payoff for such an investment is perhaps best summarized by an e-mail I recently received from a client. I had spent almost an hour on the phone with her explaining the translation process and answering several specific questions about aspects of a Flemish medical translation we had just delivered. She wrote: “Thanks so much Chris! It was really interesting and instructive talking with you yesterday about the translation process. Thanks for taking the time.”

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