bytelevel *research*

"Back Translation" and Beyond: Q&A with American Translation Partners

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First of all, what is "back translation"?

Back translation is considered a method of quality control. It is the process of translating a document that has been translated into a target language back into the source language. For example: you have a document in English that you want to translate into Spanish. In order to perform the back translation, you first translate the document from English into Spanish then you reverse the process and translate back into English.

What types of text seem suitable for back translation?

Technical documents or scientific formulas seem to be suitable for back translation because the source text is usually written by engineers or scientists and is less likely to include humor, colloquial expressions, or complex literary statements. If the content seems like it is written by a computer, then it is easier to obtain an verbatim translation in the target language, and a back translation would be helpful to verify the content.

Why do clients use back translation?

Traditionally, back translation has been considered as a way to validate, approve, or guarantee that the translation is accurate, follows the original source text, and reflects their ideas accurately. For certain organizations, there is no better way to validate a translation because they don't understand the language and have no resources to determine the accuracy of the work. Certain organizations dealing with pharmaceutical case studies, mental health evaluations, or instructions for medical equipment use back translation because they have no reason to believe it does not work.

Our opinion is that back translation provides absolutely nothing syntactically or semantically about the translation and therefore is unreliable as an effective quality control procedure in translation.

What are the inherent problems with back translation?

Keep in mind, "Translation is an art, not a science." Unlike science,

where a certain scenario with the same elements and same factors will produce consistent results, translation involves a human factor that adds a unique variable into the scenario. Another typical problem with back translation is that it sometimes involves the use of a bilingual employee of the client rather than a professional linguist, which may negatively impact quality control.

If back translation is not a good way to ensure high-quality translation, what should the client do?

A good way to ensure high-quality translation is to check out the reputation of the language service provider and fully understand their translation process and quality control.

So you can better understand a quality control process accepted by the federal courts, here is American Translation Partners' translation process for comparison:

> **Step 1: Linguist #1** — "Draft File". Create draft translation with queries inserted for any ambiguous terms or phrases for Linguist #2, Project Manager or the client to clarify.

> **Step 2: Linguist #2** — "Track File". Conduct linguistic review (editing and proofreading) and electronic spelling and grammar check of draft translation using the Microsoft Word "track changes" feature.

> **Step 3: Linguist #1** — "Review File". Review and evaluate changes and comments made by Linguist #2. Insert comments for any changes that you disagree with strongly and provide a sufficient enough of an explanation in the form of constructive criticism.

> **Step 4: Linguist #2** — "Final Review File". Review all of Linguist #1's comments followed by accepting and/or rejecting track changes for a final, clean file. Make sure that content is consistent with the source text and nothing has been omitted or added.

> **Step 5: Project Manager** — "Quality Control File". The Project Manager will check the document for the last time by reviewing the cosmetic appearance, making sure that all of track changes and comments have been removed. The Project Manager will also prepare any certifications and notarizations for court acceptance.

The project manager sets deliverable times after consulting with the client. In order to ensure this quality control translation process, it is important to understand the capabilities of one translation team: their average daily volume, the complexity of the source text, and formatting requirements for deliverables.

What does a certified translation mean?

Certified translations are used to formally confirm a translation as true, accurate, or genuine. They can also be us to guarantee as meeting a certain standard.

What is a "notarized translation"?

Notarized translations require a person legally empowered to witness and certify the validity of documents and to take affidavits and depositions.

Why would someone need a certified and/or notarized translation?

State, federal and district courts as well as many other legal entities sometimes require a document translation to be certified and notarized to establish its credibility when being submitted as evidence. Certification and notarization is also used by the medical, insurance, and technical industries.

How do you know if your translation has been put through the necessary quality control procedures?

Trust, reliability and industry reputation are very important factors in determining the quality control procedures of any translation company. Some organizations can obtain ISO 9001 certification to help establish their credibility; the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) maintains a common set of standards for manufacturing, trade, and communications. The representative for the ISO in the United States is the American National Standards Institute (ANSI): **www.ansi.org**.