

# Quality Assessment in Translation

By Jiri Stejskal, PhD, CETRA

**T**he American Society for Quality defines quality as a “subjective term for which each person has his or her own definition.” This is not very helpful, but when we look elsewhere, it indeed seems to be the case. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, quality is defined as a “cleavage term between hip and square.” Other definitions include “pride of workmanship,” “fitness for use,” and “conformance to specifications.” So how do we assess quality in translation?

The end user reads a translation and not the original because he or she does not understand the language in which the original document is written. Obviously, such a person is unable to independently assess the quality of the translation because even if the translated text reads beautifully, it could say something completely different than the original. He or she must rely on assurances that the translation was done by a qualified translator and that proper procedures were followed. Such assurances can be



offered within a regulatory framework. Typically, regulation is achieved through a combination of standards and certification processes.

**Three Ps of Quality Assessment**

Three distinct areas need to be addressed: provider, process and product. The provider is a physical or legal person, that is, a translator or a translation company. The process is a sequence of steps used to produce a target text (the translation) that corresponds to the source text (the original document). The provider follows the process to create the product - the translation itself. When determining the quality of a translation, all three Ps must be considered; however, the quality assessment method will be very different for each of these areas.

We can make quality judgments based on the qualifications of the translation service provider and on the provider's adherence to standards. The competence of providers can be assessed through certification, while processes and products can be subject to both certifications and standards. Let us look at these three different aspects of quality assessment in greater detail.

**Provider**

The most common scenario in the U.S. translation market is that the user of the translation service hires a translation company,

which, in turn, hires individual translators and editors. Arguably, both translation companies and individual translators can be considered to be providers of translation services. The competencies required, however, are very different. For translation companies, it is the project management, process management, and competence in vendor selection that are needed in order to succeed. For translators, it is linguistic competence.

Quality assessment methods exist for both translation companies and individual translators, and in both cases the assessment is achieved through certification. For companies, certification is based on a quality standard and the company's compliance with such a standard. These standards invariably define the processes that should be employed in order to provide good quality translation. Currently, there is no U.S. standard to which a company can be certified; such a standard, however, exists in the European Union (EN 15038) and a new ISO standard is being developed that will serve as a basis of certification of translation companies on a global level. For individual translators, certification is based on their ability to translate. The most widely recognized certification is offered by the American Translators Association, which offers certification in 27 language combinations, but there are other certification bodies in the U.S. and abroad.



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### Process

The best-known standard defining the process is the widely accepted International Organization for Standardization's ISO 9000 series of standards, which specify requirements for a quality management system. Today, many translation companies around the world are ISO 9001-certified. ISO 9001 provides a number of requirements that an organization needs to fulfill if it is to achieve customer satisfaction through consistent products and services that meet customer expectations. The trouble with this standard and certification is that it applies to any industry, including manufacturers. Of course, when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail, and application of the ISO standard forces companies to apply processes that might not be appropriate in areas requiring creativity, such as translation. Translation companies often acquire this certification either because they are forced to do so by their clients or in an effort to boost their image in the marketplace.

In the past 10 years, industry-specific standards defining the translation process have started to fill the existing void. These standards are either national or regional. This poses a problem in the

translation and interpretation industry, which is, by definition, international. An international industry-specific standard is therefore desirable, and it can be expected that the ISO will draft such a standard in the foreseeable future. In the U.S., there are currently two process standards available, both published by ASTM International: F 2089 – 01 Standard Guide for Language Interpretation Services (published in 2001), and F 2575 – 06, Standard Guide for Quality Assurance in Translation (published in 2006).

The process standards do not use metrics, but rather specify and define the processes needed to achieve quality translation. It is known that process standards such as the ISO 9000 series will assure that certain processes will be followed, but that the processes can be flawed. To assess the quality of the translation itself, product standards or metrics are used.

### Product

Several product standards are available today. What they have in common is that they provide statistical assessment of a number of errors per specified amount of text. Unlike in the previous scenarios for provider certifications and process

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standards, in the case of product standards it is the end user who dictates what a "quality translation" is. A U.S. manufacturer who needs a translation merely to satisfy requirements for use in the European Union without actually planning to use any of the translated materials will have very different demands for the quality of the translation than a U.S. marketing research firm that needs to translate a survey to poll international panels.

The idea of developing such metrics for assessment of the quality of translation has an economic basis. In some industries, product and service documentation is so extensive that a traditional quality check would be prohibitively expensive and exceedingly time-consuming. Translation quality metrics make it possible to assess overall quality and identify recurring problems. The end user states his or her tolerance for errors in the translation, and a statistical sample of the translated text is then evaluated. U.S. consumers and translation service providers in the automotive industry are familiar with the SAE J2450 Translation Quality Metric. This standard is applicable to translations of automotive service information into any target language. The metric may be

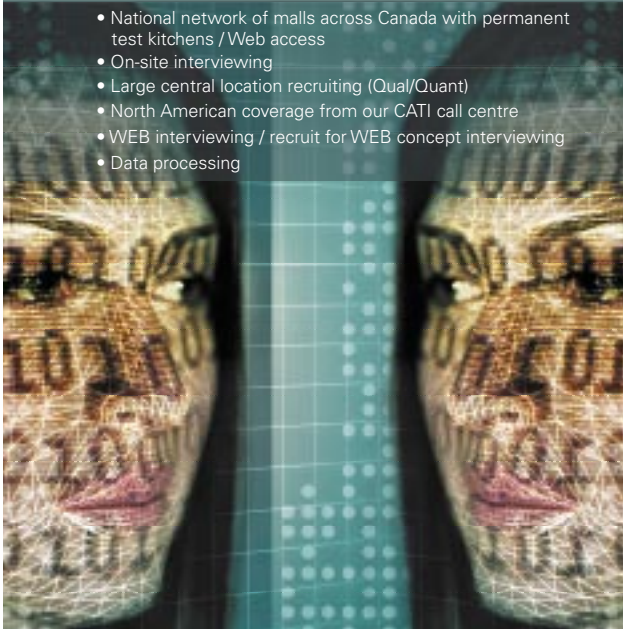
## “Translation quality metrics make it possible to assess overall quality and identify recurring problems.”

applied regardless of the source language or the method of translation - that is, human translation, computer-assisted translation, or machine translation.

A similar metric is the LISA QA Model, distributed by the Localization Industry Standards Association (LISA). Used in localization projects, this model is a customizable set of templates, forms, and reports built into an Access database. It contains a list of language codes and language names, a predefined list of severity levels and weights, a list of error categories, a list of tasks performed by reviewers, and predefined metrics to define a Pass/Fail grade. Other metrics

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are available as well. The American Translators Association developed its own metric, which is used for the grading of certification exams and which has been adopted by several academic programs in the U.S. The ASTM standard can also be applied to the product—the translation. It lists translation-specific parameters that, when given project-specific values, provide a set of specifications against which the quality of a translation can be evaluated. By adding weighted points and a threshold, an ASTM specification becomes a metric. *Pulling It All Together*

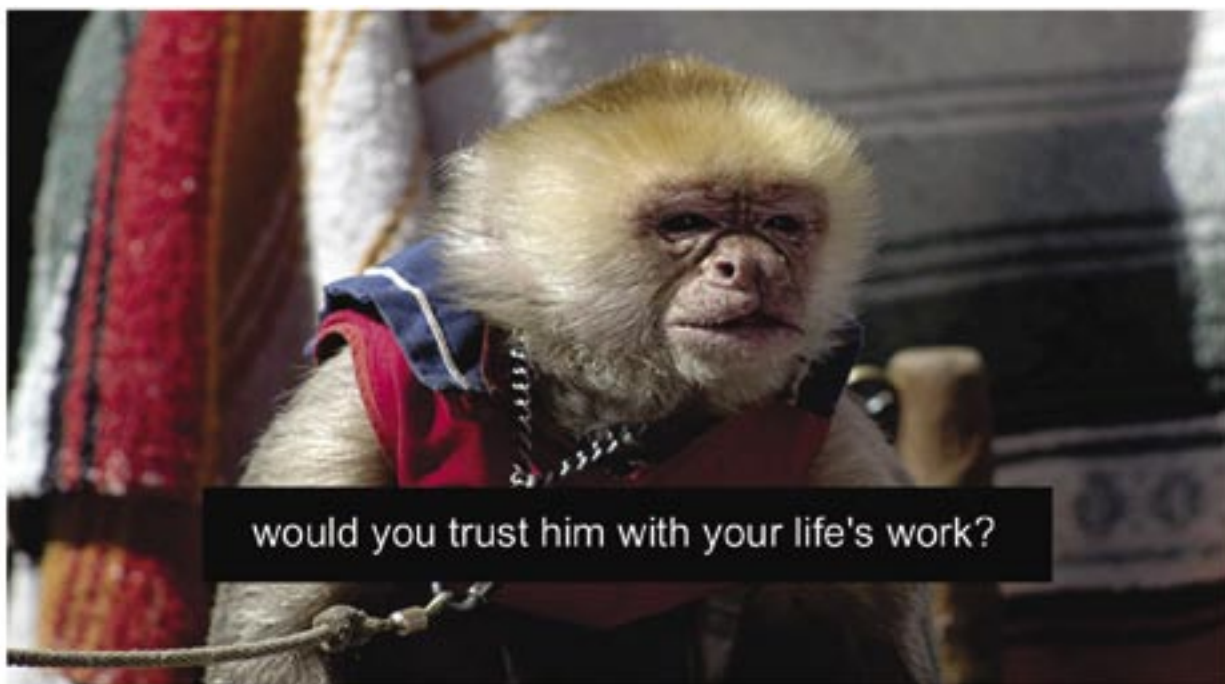
The regulatory landscape is becoming increasingly complex, and new standards and certification programs are being developed. Certification of individual providers—the translators—is gaining ground around the world, and with this leveling of the playing field, the creation of international credentials or reciprocal recognition of credentials is coming closer to becoming a reality.

Standardization of the translation process is undergoing a particularly exciting period, with the new ASTM standard now in place and a

new ISO translation-specific quality standard on the horizon. While there is no certification for translation companies currently available in the U.S., it can be expected that such certification will be possible once the work on a global ISO translation quality standard is completed. Translation quality metrics are also undergoing rapid development, with the SAE task force looking into possible collaboration with the ISO and extending the use of the existing standard, and with LISA constantly upgrading its own quality assurance model.

Standards and certification play a crucial role in translation quality assessment, and it is important to view these as a complementary system rather than as stand-alone solutions. However you define it, covering all three Ps - *provider*, *process*, and *product* - will ensure that the best possible quality is achieved. □

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