

The quest for translation quality in international organisations

Emma Wagner

M.A. (Cantab.), FITI

The views expressed are the author's and not necessarily those of her employer, the European Commission, or her professional association, the ITI.

Resumen

Las organizaciones internacionales que trabajan con varios idiomas oficiales dependen de la traducción para su propio funcionamiento, para comunicarse con los Estados miembros, para explicar sus actividades al público y, en ciertas ocasiones, para elaborar leyes. Por un lado, la calidad es esencial en la traducción, pero, por otro, estas organizaciones están sometidas a una política de ahorro que se traduce en reducciones de costes y/o personal. En este trabajo, me propongo explicar y comparar los diferentes métodos de los que se valen estas organizaciones para atender sus necesidades de traducción (contratación de traductores en plantilla o traductores a tiempo parcial; colaboración con traductores autónomos o con agencias de traducción, desarrollo de programas de ayuda a la traducción, traducciones externalizadas, pero revisadas por el personal interno; o revisión de traducciones juradas). No hay un método más adecuado que otro: cada cual presenta sus ventajas e inconvenientes. No obstante, todos ellos plantean una serie de imposiciones a los traductores y revisores que ponen limitaciones a su trabajo (rapidez, métodos de producción, aislamiento) y que afectan a sus oportunidades de formación y especialización.

Introduction

What do we mean by quality? When we buy any manufactured product, for example a bar of chocolate, we have certain quality expectations:

We expect it to taste as indicated on the label (plain, milk, peppermint, etc.)

We expect it to taste the same as other bars of the same make which we have bought before

We expect it to be fresh, without any mouldy bits

We expect it not to contain harmful substances (toxins or foreign bodies such as sawdust, grit, glass, etc.)

We could make quite a long list, but I shall stop there.

Translations are not bars of chocolate, but in some ways the requirements are similar. The manufactured product referred to as a translation must meet the following expectations:

- Equivalence: it must match the original text in some way
- Consistency: it must be of the same standard as earlier translations of the same type
- Accuracy: it must not contain mistakes
- 'Non-toxicity': must not be damaging.

All together, these help to define **product quality**. When people talk about translation quality they often mention the first three elements – the requirements of equivalence, consistency and accuracy. But the fourth – the requirement not to cause damage – is also important in the commercial world. For international organisations it is especially important to avoid 'toxic translations' and this influences the arrangements they make for translation.

However, translation is not just a product, but a service. The requirements specific to translation **service quality** are:

- guaranteed availability
- multilingual coverage
- speed of service
- cost factors (bearing in mind that cheap translations may be bad, and bad translations, like bad chocolate, can be toxic. So apparent economies can have hidden costs.)

Product quality and service quality make up a 'translation **quality package**'.

International organisations

Here I am using the term 'international organisations' to refer to intergovernmental and/or supranational governmental organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union. These organisations need translators and interpreters in order to

function. This is because they bring together representatives of different countries, speaking and understanding different national languages. The United Nations and its agencies, and the European Union institutions, are multilingual: they have several official languages (six at the United Nations, eleven in the EU – soon to be increased to twenty). Even if one or two languages are used as *linguae francae* by officials within the organisation, translation is still needed for the organisation's contacts with national delegates and the public - for information gathering, international meetings and cooperation, and in order to publicise and explain the organisation's activities. Many of these organisations produce legislation, as the EU does for example, and it must always be translated into all official languages in order to create legal certainty and to guarantee equal treatment of all Member States.

It is often wrongly assumed that in international organisations everything has to be translated out of all languages and into all languages. This is very rarely the case. There are two directions of document flow: incoming and outgoing. Incoming documents may arrive in any of the official languages, but often it is enough to translate them into a lingua franca (English or French) for internal information. Outgoing texts are written in-house in a lingua franca and then translated into the other languages required. So it is very rare, in the European Commission at least, that a text has to be translated from Finnish into Greek, for example. And in those rare cases, it can always be translated by using a lingua franca as a pivot language, translating Finnish into French and French into Greek, for example.

Finnish > pivot language (French or English) > Greek

Although the role of translators and interpreters is vital, it is of course secondary to the political and diplomatic work done by these organisations to promote international cooperation, to distribute aid or to settle disputes. But translators and interpreters are not the only back-room boys (and girls): many other professionals are employed by international organisations in a similar non-political supporting role, including accountants,

doctors, teachers and lawyers for example.

International organisations employ hundreds and in some cases even thousands of professional translators. For example, in January 2000 the translation services of the European Union institutions had nearly 3000 translators^[ii], as shown in Table 1 (EU institutions' and bodies' translation services). These figures are for translators only and do not include conference interpreters.

EU institution (in order of translator numbers)	In-house translators
European Commission	1300
Council of the EU	640
European Parliament	410
European Court of Justice	230
Committees (ESC + COR)	198
Translation Centre for Bodies of the EU	65
European Court of Auditors	62
European Central Bank	30
European Investment Bank	26
Total number of translators	2961

Table 1. EU institutions' and bodies' translation services

When new Member States join the EU in 2004 the numbers of translators will increase, but they will not double. It is often reported in the press that translation and interpreting absorb an astronomical proportion of the EU budget, but in fact the proportion is currently 1%, which is hardly astronomical. This proportion is expected to increase only marginally after enlargement^[iii]. There is great pressure to cut EU spending and to keep staff numbers down. Even before enlargement was imminent, efforts were made to contain translation costs in various ways, some more successful than others. These included:

- development of machine translation, beginning in 1976
- experiments with translation agencies which offered to take on certain defined areas of translation work

- *ad hoc* use of freelance translators (both individuals and companies).

Of these, the third was by far the most successful. The others failed for a number of reasons which I shall come back to later.

In-house versus Freelance

Most international organisations meet their translation needs by using a combination of:

- permanent in-house translators (also called staff translators) who are salaried employees of the organisation
- freelance translators working outside the organisation, paid according to the volume of work commissioned.

The translation profession is dominated by the split between in-house translators and freelance translators. According to the cliché, in-house translators are comfortable and overpaid, while freelancers starve and struggle with peaks and troughs in translation demand, exploited by cruel translation agencies. In fact neither cliché is true. The reality is that in-house translators have the luxury of constant work, the company of colleagues and an IT department providing computer training and support. Freelancers have the luxury of freedom to work how, when and where they want – in the garden if they prefer – and above all the freedom to say “No” to jobs they do not fancy: those with unreasonable deadlines, on boring or complex topics, or in languages they find difficult.

In-house translators have the advantage for the employer that they can be carefully selected and controlled. They can be trained further and build up the skills that are essential for translation quality: insider knowledge of the organisation, improved translation skills thanks to revision and assistance from more experienced colleagues, and interaction with colleagues of other nationalities. They can specialise in technical or political subject areas relevant to the organisation. They can and do learn new languages in addition to those they were recruited with. Above all they have the inestimable advantage, for their employer, that they

cannot say “No”.

On the other hand, the advantage of freelancers for the employer is that they are undoubtedly cheaper than in-house employees and that they can be used as and when required, to help cope with peaks in demand or to deal with long or humdrum texts so that in-house resources are freed up to deal with important political texts. Using freelancers can help to improve service quality – the speed, capacity and cost factors I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The problem is product quality and reliability. Freelance quality is not necessarily lower than in-house quality, but it is uneven. It may be unreliable. Where product quality and reliability are paramount (as with important political or legal texts) in-house translators will always be a better choice.

That is why almost all international organisations need in-house translators as well as freelance resources. For example, in 1999 the translation services of the European institutions used freelance translators for the various percentages of their translation work [\[iii\]](#), as shown in Table 2 (Freelance translation percentage in EU institutions and bodies).

EU institution (in order of translator numbers)	In-house translators	Freelance percentage in addition
European Commission	1300	20 %
Council of the EU	640	0.25 %
European Parliament	410	28 %
European Court of Justice	230	12 %
Committees (ESC + COR)	198	1 %
Translation Centre for Bodies of the EU	65	50 %
European Court of Auditors	62	4.5 %
European Central Bank	30	75 %
European Investment Bank	26	30 %
Total number of translators	2961	

Table 2. Freelance translation percentage in EU institutions and

bodies

Evidently there is no correlation between the freelance percentage and the size of the institution's translation service. The differences arise from the situation of the institution and the nature of its documents. In 1999 the European Central Bank was still building up its translation department – it is now much larger – and had to use freelance translators pending the recruitment of in-house staff. In the middle of the range, the European Parliament has a large number of general documents that are suitable for freelance translation, such as the verbatim record of the Parliament's debates. The institutions using relatively little freelance assistance include the Council of the EU, with only 0.25%, because so many of its texts are highly political and have to be translated for very short deadlines.

There are some other factors militating in favour of in-house translation:

Confidentiality: Obviously, confidential documents are better handled in-house.

Revision and feedback: In-house translators are trained in part by more experienced colleagues who revise their work. Of course freelance translations can be revised too, but there is rarely time to do so properly and the effort involved may be so great as to cancel out the cost advantages of freelance translation. Feedback to freelancers is difficult too, as they are not used to having their work revised and they tend to be offended by correction.

Legal revision: Where the text being translated is a piece of legislation, it will often have to be revised again, after translation and first revision, by legal revisers in the organisation's legal service. Their role is to check that the correct legal terminology is used and that the different language versions all match and thus have the same legal effect.

Ultra-short deadlines: Deadlines dominate all the work of

international organisations. It is not unusual for translators to have to work through the night or to translate 50 pages in a day. Great efforts are made to secure reasonable deadlines, so the translators can deliver reasonable quality. But ultimately, international organisations are political bodies subject to unpredictable pressures and events, and translation just has to keep up. It is easy to blame bad planning- but no one could have planned ahead for the Iraq War or the SARS epidemic.

Frequent amendments and new versions: Word processing has made it possible to keep on rewriting source texts until the last minute, and authors often do this. It is especially common with political and legal texts where various interests have to be reconciled in order to secure agreement. A source text may well go through six or seven successive versions (with accompanying translations) before reaching its final form. It would be logical (and more economical) to delay translation until the original text has been finalised. But in reality, every version is optimistically assumed to be the final one; and there is never enough time for translation after the text has been finalised. For example, in January 2000 the Commission adopted a White Paper (50 pages long) setting up a European Food Authority. It was written in English; the final amendments came in at 8.30 in the morning of the day when the Commission was meeting to adopt it. The French and German translations had to be completed for the press conference at 12.00 the same day.

In private industry, many in-house translation departments have closed in recent decades. Companies have been encouraged to outsource translations to freelance translators. But anecdotal evidence suggests that some regret this decision, given the problems of outsourcing: administrative overheads; time-consuming contract chains; uneven quality caused by lack of continuity; and the phenomenon of the freelance translator who refuses urgent and difficult work (an option that is not open to in-house translators). In view of the problems and hidden costs of outsourcing, it is likely that international organisations will prefer to keep their large in-house translation services in place, but that

they will use freelance translators too.

A related problem is the absence of international standards on the translation market. There are some national standards, mainly applicable to translation companies, and the DIN 2345 standard on translation contracts, which imposes certain requirements on translation buyers. Work is in hand to devise international standards in the US and in Europe. But these new standards still concentrate on the translation process – the service quality – rather than the quality of the end product, because that is extremely difficult to define and specify.

If it could be guaranteed that freelance translations would always meet a high standard (of product quality and service quality), then the management consultants who advise senior management in international organisations would certainly have convinced them to disband all in-house translation services and rely on the freelance sector of the industry.

But it may turn out that translation is the sort of product and service that does not lend itself to definition in terms of a quality standard, at least not in quite the same way as an electrical product or a recycling service. If it were that easy, I am sure translation standards would already exist.

Other options and variants

So those, briefly, are the advantages and drawbacks of in-house and freelance translation. For reasons of quality, most international organisations prefer to combine the two. They can be combined in various ways, and some of these variants present particular advantages. One such variant is the employment of what we might call 'in-house freelances' or temporary translators. This gives experienced freelance translators an opportunity to work in-house for a defined period, and allows the employer to boost the workforce in peak translation periods. This is not common practice in the EU institutions, but some UN agencies regularly employ known and trusted freelance translators in this way, to translate at special conferences for example. The big quality advantage of this solution is that it removes freelance

translators from their usual position of isolation, cut off from their clients and from other translators.

One of the service quality elements I mentioned at the beginning of this paper was 'multilingual coverage' – that is, ability to provide translation out of all the official languages and into all the official languages, via a pivot language if necessary. In-house translation services offer this as a matter of course, but individual freelancers cannot do so. Freelance translators usually translate into one language only – their mother tongue – out of two or three other languages. So if a text has to be translated into 10 languages, 10 individual freelancers have to be found, 10 contracts issued, and 10 invoices paid, with the inevitable administrative overheads. Alternatively, if the source text contains passages in several languages, because it includes contributions from various countries, it cannot be handled by a single freelancer. This is where freelance translation agencies can play a useful part, if they are capable of finding competent freelancers able to cover all the language pairs, to split the job between them and reassemble it correctly, and to coordinate the terminology queries and deadlines. If they can do this, they can relieve the in-house service of major administrative burdens. But the coordination element is difficult, and the cost to the agency can be much higher than expected, making this sort of project unattractive to them. One case where this approach has worked has been the translation of the European Parliament's debates, which are produced in a 'rainbow' edition combining all the official languages. The translation of the European Parliament's debates is handled by 11 translation agencies in different countries of Europe – one agency for each of the 11 target languages.

As far as translation quality is concerned, the main problem of working with translation agencies is that they create a barrier between the freelance translator and the client. They discourage direct contact between the two, and this in turn discourages the questions and feedback that help to improve translation quality.

Developing computer assistance to translation

As long ago as the 1970s, with the introduction of the Systran machine translation system, the European Commission began to explore alternatives to human translation. The aim was originally to replace some of those expensive human translators by computers that could translate more rapidly and (it was hoped) more reliably. For that reason the Commission chose to develop Systran in the two language pairs that were most commonly required: French into English and English into French. Other language pairs have been added since; the only ones frequently used by translators are French into Spanish and English into Spanish, as Spanish translators seem to enjoy working with Systran raw translations. This has not however had any impact on staffing levels in the Spanish translation units, so the hoped-for result of replacing human translators by machines has not been achieved.

Nowadays everyone has an opportunity to try out machine translation, even if they do not work for an international organisation, because it is freely available on the Internet. The general consensus is that it helps to give a rough idea of a document's content, but that the quality does not compare with human translation. In the EU institutions it has often been suggested that it was a mistake to develop Systran to translate between two widely-understood languages (English and French). If people had realised that machine translation would only ever be useful for information scanning, to get the gist of a document, it would have been better to program it to translate out of less well-known languages into English or French. Machine translation from Greek or Finnish into English would probably be more useful than a system translating between English and French. But with hindsight it is easy to criticise, and there were funding issues to be taken into account.

There are other forms of computer assistance to translation that are commonly used in international organisations and have been more enthusiastically received by translators, including:

- word processing and document management software
- the Internet as a research aid

- translation memory.

All of these, if used correctly, can help to enhance translation quality. If used incorrectly, they can lower translation quality too, and that is what I would like to talk about next. Situations where, despite all the careful selection and deployment of translators and revisers described above, things can go wrong and have gone wrong.

Quality hiccups

It would be wrong to suggest that there are no quality problems with texts produced in international organisations. Everyone has seen texts written in incomprehensible Eurospeak or internationalese, and assumed that translators are to blame. Translators are not blameless, but there are many other factors that contribute to imperfections in international outpourings, including:

- very short translation deadlines,
- the nature of the topics discussed
- the quality of the original texts.

I have already described the problem of translating within very short deadlines. The second factor is the nature of the topics discussed, which are often – how shall I put this? – not particularly thrilling or sexy. The EU may seem obsessed with dull topics such as anti-dumping duties, greenhouse gas emissions trading, arrangements governing imports of certain floricultural products originating in Cyprus, and so on. But many of these texts are essential for the smooth running of trade in the EU. And many of the documents produced by our own national parliaments and civil services are equally mind-numbing. A further factor is this: many UN and EU texts are self-referential, tied to past terminology used in Treaties or earlier texts that cannot now be altered. This is where translation memory can be a particularly useful aid to consistency. In legislative texts, consistency of form and terminology are essential for legal reasons. That is not to say that legislation cannot be improved. It can, and it will be if the public complains about it forcefully enough.

There are a number of reasons for poor original texts:

- drafting by non-native speakers
- growth of English and tolerance of defective English
- fear of brevity
- Eurojargon

The quality of original texts naturally affects translations. A translation cannot be more thrilling or sexy than the original. But it can be better written, and increasingly, it is. Translators always translate into their mother tongue, but most of the texts written in international organisations are produced in English or French by non-native speakers of those languages. In recent years, English has overtaken French as the main language of drafting in the EU institutions. In fact many non-native speakers do an excellent job of drafting in English. But when you are exposed to a flood of *franglais* and false friends, it is difficult to resist being swept along by the tide. It requires a conscious effort to remind oneself that

FR: *délai* is EN: deadline, NOT 'delay'
and

EN: delay is FR: *retard*, NOT '*délai*'

This is especially difficult if background documents refer to 'payment delays' (*délais de paiement*) when in fact they mean 'payment periods'. When translating texts written by non-native speakers, there may be additional problems of interpretation. The French translator has to decide if the word 'delay' is being used correctly by the author, and should therefore be translated by the French 'retard', or whether it is being used incorrectly and should be translated by '*délai*'. Much expensive translator time is spent dealing with problems of this kind. Poor originals certainly affect the quality of translation in the EU institutions.

Conclusion - Fitness for purpose

'Fitness for purpose' is a quality criterion often mentioned in quality assurance circles. But before we can decide if a translation is fit for purpose, we have to find a way of defining that purpose. Theoretical designations of translation purposes and corresponding

translation types, such as Christiane Nord's 'instrumental' and 'documentary'^[iv] are useful as a starting point, but the distinctions they suggest need to be expressed in more concrete terms that can be understood by translation clients. One way of doing this is to analyse the translation needs of the organisation concerned and to define 'translation types' which meet those needs.

Table 3 (Translation types in the European Commission) shows the breakdown of purpose-related 'translation types' that was introduced in the European Commission in 2001^[v].

Translation type	Definition
Basic understanding	Rough translation, usually for one person, to permit understanding of content. Will not be published.
For information	Accurate translation for internal information purposes. Will not be published.
For publication	High-quality translation to be published and/or distributed to specialists or the general public (requester should specify which).
For EU image	High-quality polished translation that is important for the Commission's image
Legislation	Translation in accordance with the Commission's rules for legislative documents

Table 3. Translation types in the European Commission

These labels could no doubt be improved. Critics have pointed out that the last three are all types of 'publication'.

Nevertheless, if we think in terms of the purpose of translations, we can see that there is a place for all the various translation processes I have mentioned: freelance, in-house, revised, unrevised, even machine translation. The breakdown shows how

each of them can be used to best effect. There is no single correct route in the quest for translation quality.

The suggestions made in Table 4 (Translation types and processes) have no official status, nor can they be applied rigidly. My aim is simply to show how quality requirements can be matched to translation processes, to ensure that all resources are deployed in the most cost-effective way.

Translation type	Process	Freelance or in-house?
Basic understanding	Machine translation if available	Freelance OK
For information	Unrevised human translation; rapidly post-edited MT; translation from L1 to L2	Freelance OK
For publication	Human translation, preferably revised	Freelance OK
For EU image	Human translation + revision or journalistic editing	Preferably in-house
Legislation	Human translation + revision + legal revision	Preferably in-house

Table 4. Translation types and processes

Interestingly, some translators are sceptical about the feasibility of providing different translation types. They argue that 'a translation is a translation' and that the level of quality should not vary. But clients' needs do vary, and a purpose-related breakdown of this type does at least provide a means of specifying the quality level required.

[i] Figures from Chapter 2 of Wagner, E., S. Bech and J. M. Martínez (2002) *Translating for the EU Institutions*, Manchester: St Jerome.

[ii] Commission Vice-President Neil Kinnock, interview with BBC

World, 17 February 2004.

[iii] Figures from Chapter 2 of Wagner, E., S. Bech and J. M. Martínez (2002) *Translating for the EU Institutions*, Manchester: St Jerome.

[iv] Nord, C (1997) *Translating as a purposeful activity*, Manchester: St Jerome.

[v] Also outlined in Wagner, E "Translating in the EU machinery" *Perspectives* 9:4, 265