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*Focus on*

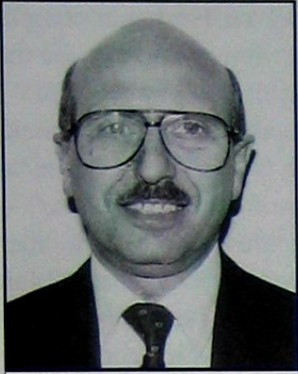
**FEATURED  
LANGUAGES:  
SLAVIC**

*Industry &  
Technology*

A black and white photograph of a man in a dark suit, white shirt, and tie, sitting at a desk. He is looking at a computer monitor which displays a pie chart. His hands are on a keyboard. In the foreground, there is a binder with papers. The background shows a typewriter on another desk and a bookshelf with books.

# Translation Quality: The Price Tag

By Igor Vesler



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This article is devoted to matters that are likely to seem trivial and self-evident to members of our fraternity of translators and interpreters. However, we are prone to delude ourselves, believing these things to be similarly self-evident to outsiders—particularly our English-speaking customers (i.e., U.S. firms doing business in the nations of the former Soviet Union, necessitating the translation of various documents into Russian, Ukrainian, etc.) Some of these customers (primarily oil companies, trading companies, financial organizations, and banks) are by no means newcomers to Soviet and post-Soviet markets, and thus are familiar with the ins and outs of overcoming language (and frequently also conceptual) barriers. Others (and these are in the majority) consider the problem of translation trivial - a purely clerical task (“translation is merely typing in a foreign language”) that can be performed by any college graduate or even nongraduate so long as he or she can use a computer. It goes without saying that such customers are likely to conclude that translation services are a good place to economize. Here are several examples illustrating just what such “economizing” can lead to.

The following classic example concerns an expensive translation error that took place in the mid-1970s. A Western firm sold the Soviet Union a machine for the hot extrusion of plastic parts, which was equipped with an automatic system that shut down the process when the temperature of the plastic dropped to an unacceptable level. The translator of the users’ manual made a careless error that was not caught in editing. Where the instructions should have said “AUTO DISABLE ON,”(АБ ВКЛ) they said “AUTO DISABLE OFF”(АБ ВЫКЛ). The acceptance testing went off without a hitch, since when the machine was turned on, the Auto Disable system was on by default. When, several months later, the machine was shut down for scheduled maintenance and then put back into operation, the process engineers followed the instructions to the letter, which meant that they turned off the Auto Disable system. One week after this, a voltage surge in the power line caused a power shutoff in the unit that maintained the temperature of the plastic mixture, but, because the Auto Disable system had been shut down, the machine continued to operate, feeding cooled plastic into the extruder. As a

result, a single incorrect letter in the Russian translation cost the firm approximately \$10,000 for repair of the machine and replacement of units.

Errors in interpreting are frequently just as expensive. Here is a recent example. Negotiations were being held between an American and a Russian company to finance a complex transaction, one of the components of which involved establishing an escrow account (i.e., a conditional trust bank account in which one of the parties to the agreement is permitted to draw on only if it fulfills its contractual or other obligations). The interpreter, who did not understand the essence of the term “escrow,” translated “escrow account” as “deposit account.” As a result, the Russians were completely unable to understand why they had to fulfill a number of conditions before they could draw on this account. A total of 11 people participated in these negotiations, including four U.S. lawyers, whose rate ranged from \$250 to \$400 an hour. The misunderstanding that arose because of the interpreter’s error took more than three hours to resolve, costing approximately \$5,000 in lawyers’ fees alone, to say nothing about the time of the remaining participants.

I am sure that any translator or interpreter can cite similar (possibly, considerably more colorful) examples. It is just a shame that these cases remain unknown beyond the confines of our professional folklore, but that is another matter.

Why do so many clients have such an irrational (to put it mildly) attitude toward translation? Of course, there may be any number of reasons, but I believe that one of the most important is the paradox involved when U.S. clients commission a translation from English into a foreign language. In this situation the client is generally not the consumer of the final product, and is therefore unable to evaluate the quality of the product that he has paid for.

What does the U.S. client see when he receives a finished translation into Russian? He sees a text written in a weird alphabet (once a client, showing off his erudition, referred to it as the “Acrylic” alphabet) mixed with Arabic numerals. He may be able to guess at some of the names, but all the rest is a “black hole” to him. So when he sees that it is neatly done, and the format looks the same as the original—he assumes that everything is in

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## Translation Quality

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order. Only later, when the Russians he is dealing with start to ask questions which reveal their lack of understanding of what the "translation" is supposed to say, does the client begin to be dimly aware that he has ended up with a wooden nickel. He's in the situation of a man who has just purchased a car in which everything seems to be in its proper place—the seats, the steering wheel, the engine, however, the only problem is—it doesn't run. Ultimately, this translation may cost him a lot more than a car.

How should we define translation "quality?" The absence of grammatical and spelling errors and omissions; the accurate and complete reproduction of numerical data; or conformity with stylistic requirements and epistolary etiquette? These are necessary but not sufficient. Traditionally, a technical or legal translation is considered a professional (i.e., high quality) job when a specialist can read it as if it has been originally written in the language into which it has been translated (in the same way that, in a well-tailored suit, the work of the tailor is not obvious). Of course, this is all ideal, but rarely achieved in real life, and the reasons for this may not be under the translator's control—for example, the style, terminology, and structure of the source text may be very far from perfect. Sometimes it happens that the target language of a translation simply does not contain the appropriate concepts and terms, and this makes it difficult to render the meaning of the text, even if the translator provides a great many explanatory notes.

A poor quality translation leads, at the very minimum, to two unfortunate consequences (which can be assessed in monetary terms). The first is the loss in terms of the time that is required to correct errors in the translation or to simply retranslate the text from scratch. If this is a relatively short document, such losses may be measured in hours. However, if this is the translation of, let's say, several volumes of technological documentation or the feasibility study for a large project, etc., the delay in implementation of the project may amount to several weeks or even months. Frequently in such situations, the "domino effect" comes into

play—the absence of Russian documentation leads to equipment downtime, production delays, suspensions of negotiations, etc.

The second (and frequently more important) consequence is the damage to the reputation of the U.S. party. After all, it is very natural for the Russian-speaking counterpart to conclude that if the U.S. partners cannot even find a good translator, it is not likely that they can be relied on with regard to more serious matters. The monetary equivalent of loss of confidence is difficult to measure precisely, but, I think, it is quite substantial.

We professional translators and interpreters have a good idea of what precisely has to be done to ensure translation quality. But what should a client know before he places an order for a translation? How can he protect himself against poor quality or illiterate work performed by a dilettante? Can he make up for the insufficient time available for translation by employing more than one translator, and under what circumstances? What can be done in the initial production of documents to facilitate their translation into another language? What is the difference in quality between translations obtained from an agency and those obtained from an individual translator? If the client doesn't have answers to these questions—that in itself is not fatal, but if he does not even ask them, he is putting himself at risk, and this risk increases rapidly as the scale and significance of his project grow.

Who should answer such questions? Who can give the client an objective idea of the nature of translation services? This service is performed by professional associations in other industries. It would seem that the time has come for us to also begin to think about publishing a kind of users' handbook for our potential clients, one that would explain to them the underlying principles and role of translation and interpreting into Russian and Ukrainian, and especially, the criteria for evaluating translation quality (for example, the presence of a quality control system, ability to compile project glossaries, documented translator qualifications, etc.), and the technological aspects of translation. *ata*

*Many thanks to Lydia Stone who helped me with the preparation of this article.*

# WORLD CLASS WORK!

**Polyglot provides integrated language services to leading companies in the U.S. and abroad. As we continue to expand, we are interested in world class candidates for the following positions:**

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