

# ***Are Technical Translators Writing Themselves Out of Existence?***

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I argue that technical translation is wrongly perceived as a terminological exercise and all that that entails. In reality, technical translators are technical communicators with a clear understanding of concepts such as usability and knowledge of information design, instructional design and communication theory.

## **Introduction**

Technical translators have traditionally been regarded as being concerned almost exclusively with matters of specialised terminology and the factual accuracy of texts. This is hardly surprising when we consider that the primary aim and function of technical texts is to convey information as clearly and as effectively as possible. Consequently, the issue of writing skills in technical translation has not received much attention with the prevailing view that as long as what was written was clear and concise, there was nothing to worry about. Similarly, technical translation has also managed to avoid the debate and intellectual wrangling among literary translators as to the limits of a translator's power to intervene in a text precisely because technical translation has always been considered to be more concerned with the faithful reproduction of information rather than creativity. The question as to what extent a translator can modify the form and content of a text before it becomes an adaptation or something other than a translation has rarely been an issue since the days of the compilers in ancient Greece (Montgomery 2000) or, more recently, the handbook writers in Renaissance England (Tebeaux 1997).

But the role of the modern technical translator has evolved to such an extent that it bears little resemblance to the traditional notion of a translator. Various external factors have resulted in technical translators implementing writing strategies more commonly associated with areas such as technical writing, information design and even creative writing. This places technical translation firmly at the frontier of the accepted view of translation and it is now time to

decide whether to press on into uncharted territory or whether to turn back and return to safe, familiar ground.

This paper will discuss how traditional distinctions between the work of translators and writers are rapidly fading and examine ways in which a translator's writing skills play a central role in the evolution of technical translation. Using a number of examples drawn from the author's professional practice, it will show how the task of the technical translator can sometimes veer perilously close to the boundaries of what is commonly regarded as "acceptable" in technical translation and examine the strategies that must be employed to enhance and modify the nature of the technical translator's role. The paper will conclude by questioning whether it is time to re-examine our understanding of technical translation and translation in general.

### **Conventional views of technical translation**

Once upon a time, translation could be regarded as depending on just two things: your ability to understand the source language so that you could correctly understand the source text, and your proficiency in the target language so that you could write a text which presented this information clearly. As translation moved more towards a communicative purpose, the emphasis on target language skills became more important. When we add to this the need, particularly in specialised forms of translation, to understand the subject matter of the source text, we can say that technical translators also need to have a certain level of extra-textual, real-world and subject-specific knowledge. This is especially true of technical translation although first and foremost, the primary concern has always been to comprehend the source text and present the information in clear language. Indeed, as Mark Herman wrote in 1993:

Clarity, concision and correctness, the principal stylistic goals of technical writing, are simultaneously those of technical translation; an excellent technical translator is an excellent technical writer. (Herman 1993:11)

When it was first published, this was an extremely important idea as it served to draw attention to the fact that technical translation was concerned with more than just specialised terminology. As Horn-Helf observes (1999:101-102) technical translation had been reduced in some quarters to the replacement of source language terms with target language terms. In some respects Herman's assertion is also

reminiscent, to a certain extent, of Douglas Robinson's argument that a translator is like an actor getting into character, that

“translators...make a living pretending to be (or at least to speak or write as if they were) licensed practitioners of professions they have typically never practiced” (2003:128).

In other words, as long as a translator possesses the requisite linguistic skills to impersonate the writing of an actual expert in the specialist field, they would be capable of producing translations of a suitable standard. However, this quote is also indicative of a prevailing view of translation in general, and technical translation in particular, namely that it is primarily reproductive activity requiring little in the way of creativity but a lot of expertise in producing clear and simple prose. As long as the information is conveyed accurately and completely and as long as the language in a translation is clear, a technical translator's job was done. Unfortunately, though probably unintentionally, this quote echoes Schleiermacher's (1813) rather dismissive and unfounded claim that technical translation is a mechanical business that anyone with two languages and a good dictionary could do.

It is for this reason that technical translation has rarely been regarded as a creative activity but rather simply as a one of transmission unless we regard the issue of lexical creativity involving our handling of unusual or atypical terms or phrases (of the type discussed by Kenny 2001 in relation to literary translation). Ironically, it is the very notion of creativity that has been central to distinctions between translation and writing over the decades and centuries. Received wisdom tells us that writers utilise their creativity to conceive, design and create works whereas translators are charged simply with reproducing or transferring the products of this creativity for another target audience. While the lines between writing and translation have long been blurred for the likes of literary and advertising texts, technical translation has remained firmly within the confines of non-creative, faithful and constrained text reproduction.

Given this backdrop and the rather one dimensional view of translation which prevailed, it is not surprising that considerably more attention has been devoted to issues of subject knowledge and terminology in technical translation than any other area (e.g. Hann 1992, Newmark 1988:152), even though authors such as Wright (1993) and Herman (1993) both point out that merely being correct is not enough to ensure the quality of technical translations.

## An evolving discipline

More recently, however, it seems that Herman's quote has taken on a much deeper and more significant meaning. While at first glance the quote seems to take a rather one-dimensional view of what it is a technical writer does and could be interpreted as perpetuating the purely reproductive perception of our role, it is, in hindsight, rather prophetic. Various environmental changes affecting the very nature of technical documentation and the way in which it is produced and translated have given new meaning and dimensions to Herman's assertion that to be a good technical translator, you must first be a good technical writer. But rather than merely being someone who can write clear technical prose, the writer which we must become in this case is someone who designs, plans and creates communicative tools on the basis of a sound understanding of the principles of instructional design, of audiences and how they assimilate information and, of course, excellent writing skills.

These changes have come about as a result of new research, increased co-operation on professional and academic levels, new technologies and dissemination media as well as various legal considerations (see for example Byrne 2007) and they have changed the role of the technical translator so that we don't **just** translate any more; we write, we create, and more recently we design and engineer texts. Nowadays, translators are more than just people with good writing skills although they often need to become writers in the broadest sense. With increasing emphasis on the usability of technical documentation to ensure that readers are not merely presented with information but rather that they are presented with *the right information in the right format* so that they can use it effectively, the demands on both technical writers and technical translators alike are becoming more complex.

Technical documentation is subject to various national and international laws which seek to ensure access to information and to ensure the quality of that information. In Europe at least, these same regulations also apply to technical documentation which is translated with the result that rather than being solely a concern for technical writers, ensuring compliance with the various legal requirements is something which now affects translators and translation providers.

But it is not only changes in the way documentation is produced that are presenting new challenges for technical translators. Changing industry practices as a result of companies operating on a global,

rather than local, scale means that documentation must now be adapted to account for cultural and social differences in different audiences, even where, on the surface, they share the same language (see Hoft 1995).

The translation industry too, as a result of more sophisticated projects, clients and technologies, presents translators with a much more varied array of work, for example editing and proof reading translations (Mossop 2007), cultural adaptation and localisation (Esselink 2003; Chandler 2004), language quality reviews, transcreation<sup>1</sup> and so on.

These changes in the environment in which we work, as well as the types of work we carry out, have resulted in increased expectations in relation to the quality of technical translation. In order to meet these expectations, it is necessary to move beyond the traditional view of translation as purely being a transfer activity, one which is concerned with terminological and factual accuracy, towards one which is concerned with the effectiveness and appropriateness of information. This would seem to reinforce the need for technical translators to become more than “just” translators and assume some of the skills and roles of technical writers. Indeed, as Schrijver & Vaerenbergh (2008:209) point out, recent decades have seen the roles of technical translators and technical editors change and expand not simply in terms of number and scope but also in terms of the responsibilities. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a clear line to differentiate between the two roles. The key question we should ask ourselves at this point is whether this is necessarily a bad thing or is it, rather, something to be welcomed and even encouraged.

Does this convergence of roles and activities overstep the mark in terms of traditional conceptions of what translators are allowed to do or does it represent a natural progression in the development of technical translation?

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<sup>1</sup> *Transcreation* is a portmanteau of the words *translation* and *creation* and can be defined as an extremely free form of translation (more so than adaptation) which probably has more in common with copywriting than it does with traditional translation. The aim is to produce texts which are fully adapted to the cultural and linguistic requirements of specific countries or regions and in which there is no trace of the original source text or culture. Transcreation is more commonly associated with advertising and marketing materials but it can be applied to other types of text where the resulting product needs to be tailor-made for the target audience and not contain any indication that it is a translation or that it was produced for anyone other than the target audience.

## **Observing the changes in technical translation**

To illustrate how the changing environment has affected our understanding of technical translation, the following paragraphs will examine some scenarios where translational success depends on strategies which do not necessarily conform to traditional notions of technical translation. In some cases the strategies may not even be associated with translation in general but they are nevertheless essential in order to meet expectations in terms of quality and effectiveness.

### **Recycling and repeating information**

The first scenario concerns the translation of a maintenance guide<sup>2</sup> for a large machine used in the manufacture of body panels for cars. In order to fulfil certain functional, legal and textual requirements the translation process called for significant restructuring and repetition of information in the document. The document itself was of a modular design<sup>3</sup> which meant that it was highly unlikely that anyone would ever read the text from cover to cover. Instead only certain sections would be read in isolation as required by engineers or machine operators.

In one of its later sections, the document provides detailed instructions on how to replace a faulty component from inside the machine. The procedure required an engineer to reach into the machine, underneath the large 2000 tonne hydraulic press which was used to die cast car panels. However, unless the machine had been deactivated and a number of safety measures put into place, anyone following the instructions would inadvertently activate the machine and suffer severe injuries or possibly be killed. The key information needed by readers to stop this happening does appear in the document, albeit in a chapter much earlier on in the manual, crucially, in a relatively unrelated chapter. However, the information is absolutely necessary in the later section because the procedure is required as part of another task. Without the information, anyone attempting the procedure described would undoubtedly be injured or possibly even killed.

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<sup>2</sup> For reasons of confidentiality it is not possible to identify the company or reference the publication which, in any case, was for internal use only.

<sup>3</sup> Modular documentation consists of multiple, discrete chapters and sections each of which is designed to function as a standalone unit of information and to be read in isolation. Like online help systems, it is very difficult to predict the "entry point" at which readers will start reading the text.

Strictly speaking, it is not a translator's job to rectify this problem as it is a shortcoming in the source text which is beyond the traditional remit of a translator. However, because of various European Union directives, it can be argued that a translator has a legal duty of care towards both the client and the reader (Byrne 2007:9-10). There is also the possibility that various contractual obligations would render the translator liable for any injuries or damages. Add to this, a translator's own personal sense of responsibility and ethics and it would appear that the only reasonable thing to do is copy the necessary information from one chapter to the other chapter.

Of course, it would have been easy simply to act as an advisor and recommend that the information be copied but the question arises of whether clients would actually follow up on the advice. There are no guarantees, especially if you are dealing with an intermediary such as a translation agency which lengthens the line of communication between you and the client. A translator could always duck the question altogether and take the easy way out by doing nothing and hoping for the best. But is it ethical to adopt an attitude of "it's not my problem" and let someone else deal with the problem? It could be argued that sometimes, a translator has to make tough decisions and do what needs to be done.

The decision to intervene in the text in this way did, admittedly, raise eyebrows at the translation agency for whom the work was carried out. Having consulted with the client, however, both the agency and the client were ultimately grateful that this had been done. It is hard to imagine, however, that this is something that fits in with conventional notions of translation as it is not a translation task – it is an information design task more typically associated with technical writers. But it is still something that a translator, it can be argued, would have to do whether for legal reasons, for reasons of conscience or out of a sense of commercial duty. After all, the secret of good business, particularly in a crowded market such as the translation industry, is providing a service which exceeds the expectations of customers and which distinguishes you from the competition.

### **Adaptation, constraints and creation**

Adaptation is nothing new to translation and most translators will have used this strategy many times in their careers when translating various texts such as literature, advertisements, newspaper articles etc. Adaptation is a highly creative strategy which, while acceptable in certain circumstances (with much discussion) in literary texts, is

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unusual in technical genres and it is not something which is usually associated with technical translation. The primary reason for this is that technical texts convey facts, procedures and concrete information which, by virtue of their empirical, real-world orientation, as a rule, require faithful and direct translation. This information should be regarded as universal and, therefore, should not in theory require adaptation.

The nature of technical communication has changed in recent years and, rather than being designed purely for expert audiences who require little in the way of clarification and explicitation, is now produced for widely heterogeneous audiences. Coupled with new approaches to the communication of information, this has resulted in a much richer variety of texts with a more varied range of features and strategies. Translating texts of this type requires high levels of creativity in language use while at the same time maintaining faithful references to both intratextual and extratextual material and concepts.

Let us consider the following scenario which involves the translation of a message written on a postcard.



**Figure 1:** Translating a simple postcard can present hidden challenges for the translator

Under normal circumstances, translating this postcard would be a straightforward task. However, if we discovered that this postcard came from a book on computer security (Plate & Holzmann 2009) where the authors are discussing steganography - the practice of hiding secret messages in otherwise ordinary-looking text – translating it might not be quite so straightforward. The purpose of the



text is to demonstrate how messages can be hidden in seemingly innocuous text. In the original source text, the following paragraphs appear after the postcard to explain how steganography works:

To decipher the message contained in the text, we need to count the number of characters, both letters and punctuation marks, in each word up as far as the blank space immediately after it and then apply the following rule: if the number of characters is odd, we assign a value of 0 but if the number of characters is even, we assign a value of 1.

Applying this rule to the first 8 words on the postcard from David we get 01010011. This corresponds to the decimal number 83 which is also the ASCII code for the letter "S". The next eight words on the post card give us 01001111 which is 79 or the letter "O" and the last 8 words again give us 01010011 which corresponds to the letter "S". So despite the seemingly positive tone of the postcard, David is really sending us an SOS message asking for help.

The traditional view of the translator's role is that it is simply to convey information accurately and clearly but to translate this postcard effectively, a technical translator first and foremost needs to make sure that the translation for this simple postcard actually complies with the rule described above. This may, depending on the target language, involve quite significant deviation from the source text in order to ensure the postcard actually makes sense in the context of the technical description which follows it. Even in the sample English translation given here which manages to stay quite close to the source text, we have had to sacrifice a certain amount of naturalness and fluency so as to ensure the factual content is preserved.

So what are the implications of this example for technical translators? Firstly, it comes from a highly technical text but it is not about a technical subject and secondly the language is not in the least bit technical but it is highly constrained by the technical concepts and language used around it. The reality is that this seemingly simple postcard may require the translator to effectively create an entirely new postcard rather than translate one and this must be done within very strict constraints in order to be effective. But while a postcard is unlikely to feature in the majority of technical texts, the idea of

presenting information in technical texts which will need to be adapted is really rather common. Typical situations where these skills are likely to come into play include case studies, example scenarios in training materials, websites and so on.

### **Usability in technical translation**

With so much energy and effort currently being devoted to ensuring the quality of technical documentation, whether as a result of improved awareness of customer needs or as a result of legal requirements, the issue of usability in relation to texts is assuming increasing importance. The way in which information is presented and sequenced in texts can affect the success of texts and the ease with which readers can assimilate the information presented to them and it is also an area where the traditional skills of translators and the limits of translation are tested.

Byrne (2006) for example discusses how eliminating variation and creativity in the translation process can improve the quality of translations by making them more usable. The process of introducing *iconic linkage* into translations essentially involves using one formulation to translate several sentences which mean the same thing but which may not be phrased identically. Such a strategy, while clearly beneficial in terms of text quality, runs counter to certain accepted views of translation and could be regarded as exceeding a translator's remit. But if such a strategy can be proven to improve translation quality, is there really any reason not to do it?

Similarly, Gerzymisch-Arbogast (1993) identified certain patterns and characteristics relating to the sequencing of information in texts and found that certain languages favoured a particular sequencing of information which could be perceived as *given* and *new* relative to the author's perceptions of the readers' background knowledge. She explains that in order to produce effective translations, a translator may need to alter the sequencing and even the proportion of *given* and *new* information within paragraphs or sections of text. In practice this may involve foregrounding certain information, omitting other information or even repeating information. Again, we find ourselves presented with strategies designed to cater to the needs of target audiences but which would appear to fall outside the traditionally accepted understanding of translation as it involves making the kind of structural and content-orientated changes to documents which are commonly carried out during the initial design stage of the text in the source language.

A more extreme example of instance of this is presented in a study by Ulijn (1995) relating to the sequencing of sections within a document. Ulijn's experiment showed that the structure of documents may need to be changed for different language audiences. He found that what might be perceived as the most logical sequence of information in a document for one audience might be counterintuitive or confusing for other language audiences. The following example illustrates how the structure of a user guide might need to be changed for two different target audiences.

Table of Contents ( <i>Language 1</i> )	Table of Contents ( <i>Language 2</i> )
1. Introduction	1. Introduction
2. Getting Started	6. Specifications
3. Advanced Features	5. Maintenance
4. Troubleshooting	2. Getting Started
5. Maintenance	3. Advanced Features
6. Specifications	4. Troubleshooting

**Figure 2:** Example of a table of contents modified for two different audiences

This is a very valid and indeed useful finding but it presents us with an interesting problem in terms of how documents can be adapted for different audiences and indeed who should do it. The sequencing of information in documents is an information design task carried out by technical writers in the source language and the design of the document is tailored to the needs of the source language audience. Texts for intended for other language audiences are produced by translators who are solely responsible for rendering what the original author has produced, not for redesigning or re-engineering it. Strictly speaking, a translator is the only person with the necessary expertise and knowledge of both cultures to spot this, but is not generally afforded the authority to make these changes. Even though the translator is the most logical choice when it comes to making these changes, both in terms of expertise and timing in the text production process, it is unclear whether industry as whole would find it acceptable for a translator to make this type of change. What do we need to do for this to become an acceptable job for translators? Although I can imagine such deeds leaving customers and writers apoplectic and stunned if this were done without any warning.

### **The way forward?**

Given the tasks and strategies outlined in the preceding paragraphs, the question arises as to whether we can still regard technical translation as "real" translation? Can technical translation really

function and be explained purely in terms of translation? In light of the clear overlap between the role of technical writer and the tasks now being performed by technical translators, something which has also been acknowledged by Schrijver & Vaerenbergh (2008:209), it would seem logical, surely, that technical translation be subsumed under the general classification of "technical communication". This point has been argued by Schubert (2009) and by Byrne (2006) who define technical translation as a form of technical communication, and indirectly by scholars such as Göpferich (2009) who proposes models of assessing technical translations which use methods whose origins are outside Translation Studies, more specifically in the realm of technical communication. Schubert, in particular, provides a detailed and highly convincing argument as to why Translation Studies cannot account for the reality of technical translation. Similarly, both Göpferich (1993) and Schmitt (1999:33) have described technical translation as a form of *interlingual* technical writing clearly positing that technical translation as a form of interlingual communication is distinct from translation and involves more than simply transferring information from one language to another using standard translation strategies.

But in order to carry out the types of tasks described above as effectively as possible a translator needs to be trained as a technical writer – someone who has been trained to understand issues such as usability, information design, instructional design and communication theory. Unfortunately, these are not typically things which are taught to translators because they were never really a part of their job.

This lacuna in translator training is thankfully gaining greater recognition and is being addressed by some universities where translation programmes incorporate modules in technical writing or in more sophisticated cases, where programmes provide equal amounts of training in both technical translation and technical writing. This is clear indication that the reality of the discipline is changing and that the old status quo no longer applies, at least to the same extent. There has already been enough debate in Translation Studies circles about the line between ordinary translation and adaptation and some people are wary of theories such as Skopos theory for this very reason. In view of this tension between traditional definitions and theories of translation and the work being carried out by technical translators, questions emerge as to whether we can still call ourselves translators if, as technical translators, we intervene in texts in ways which do not correspond to the standard repertoire of translation

strategies. Is it time to rename technical translators (perhaps as multilingual technical communicators) or at least realign technical translation so that it is "officially" a form of technical communication, albeit an interlingual one? Or is it time to redefine what we mean by translation so that it can account for this, and other types of professional translation which do not fit the prototypical view of translation set out in the literature?

We have two main options open to us: we can refrain from performing any task that does not involve translation in its purest sense, i.e. transmitting information faithfully even though this will inevitably have a negative impact on quality and our employability as translators, or we can embrace the changes but acknowledge the fact that this will require us to change the way we think about translation, the way it is carried out and how it is taught. Far from sounding the death knell for a profession the enhanced writing skills and strategies employed by technical translators, would appear to be writing a new chapter in its development.

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