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# BOLLETTINO

INFORMATION AND TIPS ABOUT THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE

## QUALITY: Form, Content, and Professionalism

At the meeting of the Italian Language Division during last November's ATA Conference in Los Angeles, the discussion focused mostly on quality, especially as it relates to the experience, compensation, and availability of Italian translators and editors. For the translation agency, quality means, not only "getting what you pay for," but receiving a professional service that guarantees the best overall performance in transforming English materials into foreign language products. This issue of *il Bollettino* explores some of the visible and hidden aspects of quality.

Although some of what follows may have a wider applicability, the comments and considerations offered here are directed mostly to technical translation work and should be viewed in such context.

When applied to translation, quality is an elusive characteristic. Typically we speak of quality, without much analysis or introspection, as a somewhat subjective impression of a person or that person's work. What is supposed to be an objective measure of excellence is often reduced to a subjective impression. Yet quality is very important as we acknowledge every time we say, for example, that we are willing to pay a higher price for better quality. In other words, we perceive that when we get better quality we are getting a higher value.

In Italian there is a saying: "Chi più spende meno spende", literally, "The one that spends the most spends the least", meaning that buying better

goods or services will prove to be the more economical decision over the long run.

### The Two Sides of Value

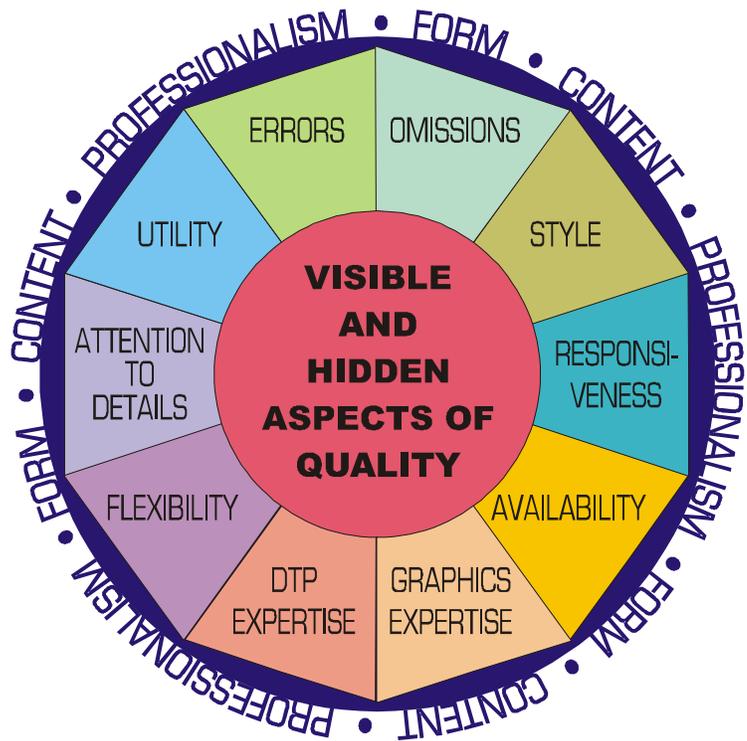
Understanding how quality relates to value is fundamental because there are two sides to value: Immediate quid-pro-quo and future or hidden impact.

The immediate value is the one given the buyer of a product or a service at the time of the

transaction and can be defined in terms of price paid as compared to other similar products or services or the same product or service acquired from a different source.

The future or hidden value is essentially the opposite of a hidden cost. It is value that is not immediately apparent but will reveal itself in the future, either through cost savings or avoidance.

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## Quality Is Relative

In either case, quality is typically defined in relative terms: the quality is better or the quality is higher. But what is "better"? What is "higher"? Is there a way to measure quality? What factors should be taken into consideration? Quality has many facets. Quality goes well beyond work that is complete and error free. Calculating percentage of errors and omissions will measure to some degree these very basic elements, but what about the rest?

## Errors and Omissions

Errors and omissions are the most objective elements of quality. Omissions are sentences or portions of sentences or even individual words that have not been translated and by their absence alter the original meaning or emphasis in translation. Errors are terms that are not translated correctly and consequently alter the meaning of the translation. Grammatical errors are simply errors in the structure and construction of the translated phrase. All these, errors and omissions, are typically corrected in the translation editing stage. A small amount of problems of this kind does not indicate a translation of poor quality. These oversights are very easy to make and are difficult to catch by oneself. That is why editing is best done by a reviewer other than the translator.

## Style

Style is something we may think of more often in literary rather than technical translation. But technical translation has its own stylistic requirements. It is not flair, as you would have in marketing, and it is not a certain phrasal structure such as you may have in a legal document. Technical writing must have what we could call a utilitarian style. Sentences must read well and need to be clear, concise, and unambiguous because their primary importance is in their usefulness. Instructions that are not clear, concise, and unambiguous do no serve the purpose of the documentation. The Italian language, like other romance languages, can become quite verbose, especially if the translator and/or the editor like a flowery style. Which is why the Italian word count of an Italian translation can be so much higher than the original English, although it doesn't necessarily have to be so. A good balance between the need to expand, or expound, on the English and excessive verbosity

is one of the elements that may negatively affect the overall stylistic quality of a technical translation. We are not talking about extraordinary linguistic ability. The recommendations for good technical writing are no different in Italian than they are in English, and they can be learned and refined with experience. In fact, technical style is no different than the style one would use to write a business report. A booklet, popular a decade or so ago among instructors giving seminars on the subject, used to state that you just have to "get the fog out writing".

## Utility vs. Function

Utility or usefulness is a true trait of technical translation. In academia, translation quality has been defined in terms of function (see "Where Do We Go from Here?" on page 26 of the February 2002 issue of *The ATA Chronicle*). Functionalism is basically seen as the effort needed to maintain in translation the full functionality of the original piece. In this view, if the original is an advertisement with a message that does not relate to the target audience, the translation should change the message. But who is the translator to say that the new message is the right one? This kind of rewrite is no longer just translation. It may be the job of a local advertising agency, for example, retained to develop a campaign targeted to the new audience. Certainly a translation should be viable in the target culture. It should not be offensive, but should not alter the original message. The purpose of translation is to correctly convey the message, not modify it. This degree of "localization" is a different job for a different kind of professional who may in turn employ translators, once the new message has been established. That is why in technical translations, where cultural problems do not normally exist, it is more appropriate to think in terms of utility or usefulness rather than function.

## The Hidden Aspects of Quality

Quality affects cost. A poor translation will affect the cost of a project if it will require more expensive editing, and possibly even more than one editing pass. Errors, omissions and style are the obvious aspects of quality that affect cost. However, there are other characteristics of translation work that will impact directly the overall project cost and thus should be regarded as part of quality. These are

aspects that are not obvious up front and will not reveal themselves until the translation is put into action in assembling the final product, for example a manual, a help file, or a software user interface. These additional factors include items such as attention to detail, responsiveness, flexibility, availability, understanding of typesetting and graphics, and reliability.

## Attention to Details

Attention to details is revealed in the ability of the translator to catch errors or inconsistencies that may have slipped into the original material, for example wrong measurement conversions, improperly spelled units and symbols, incorrect decimal separators, or other details that easily fall through the cracks, such as date formats or headers, footers, page numbers, and other internal document references.

## Responsiveness, Flexibility, and Availability

Responsiveness and flexibility go hand in hand and are critical when clients make small changes to a translation that has been completed and may be already in production. In these situations, availability is similarly critical. To make changes on the fly the translator has to be available on short notice, often in the same time zone.

## DTP and Graphics Knowledge

Understanding of typesetting does not mean that a translator should be expected to do extensive DTP work on the translation. However the translator should understand typesetting enough not to alter elements of the translation that will be needed to properly reformat the document in the target language. Deleting codes or line breaks or altering interlines or paragraph spacing can cost hours of extra work later on in production.

## Reliability

Finally, reliability is what makes a translator a true professional. A translator is part of a team. His/her ability to work independently, to ask questions, make comments, or provide suggestions when necessary, and ultimately be extremely respectful of deadlines are the traits that distinguish a quality professional—one that contributes to the total project effort and saves money rather than creating extra costs and delays.

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