

Technical writers and translators: a win-win relationship?

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Abstract

Traditionally, technical communication leverages both technical writing and translation expertise. As both professions share some common skills and objectives, the activities of technical writers¹ and translators are sometimes mixed up. However, they remain two clearly separated occupations and thus complement each other. Based on our working and academic experience as technical writers and translators, we are particularly aware of the importance of a balanced collaboration to align the documentation process with the requirements of today's industry practice. Current research on the relationship between technical writers and translators mainly focuses on the study of their competences². This paper intends to go beyond the mere analysis of competences and to explore some best practices in order to bridge the gap between both professions: more specifically, to which extent can we consider the translator as a useful resource to improve the writing process? Firstly, we examine why technical writers and translators often collaborate to deliver efficient documentation in their respective fields of expertise. Secondly, we try to understand how technical writers and translators develop shared tools, such as style guides, in order to take advantage of each other's work. Finally, we show that enhancing this relationship is not the only way to deliver professional documentation.

Keywords

collaboration, consistency, documentation, style guide, technical communication, technical writer, technical writing, terminology, translation, translator, writing rules, writing tools

¹ Today, the technical writer profession has multiple denominations: information designer, content strategist, information architect, technical communicator, among others. To avoid any confusion, we decided to only use the term *technical writer* throughout this paper.

² See the definition of *competences* in "Competences for professional translators, experts in multilingual and multimedia communication", European Master's in Translation (EMT) expert group, Brussels, January 2009, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/key_documents/emt_competences_translators_en.pdf, visited 27 May 2014.

Introduction

Although both professions share common objectives and competences, such as linguistic skills, their main difference is that technical writers design content from scratch, whereas translators handle a text that already exists. However, they both aim to deliver useful and clear outputs, and can help each other achieve this goal.

With a common background in translation, we are studying at Paris Diderot University to become technical writers (Master 2 CDMM). We are particularly aware, therefore, of the importance of translators and writers working together to set up the most efficient documentation process and to produce quality deliverables. Having apprenticeships in three different global companies we have used our own experiences, current and previous, to observe distinct writing and translation processes.

In the first company (case study #1), an Enterprise Resource Planning software publisher, translators and writers share the same office, working closely together. In the second company (case study #2), a pharmaceutical software publisher, there is no visible translation cycle. In the third company (case study #3), a large computing hardware and software company, the translators are separated from the in-house technical writers, and often work in different countries.

Based on our observations in different working environments we asked ourselves how we could improve the writing process by collaborating with translators, even though they are not the target of our output. We found it useful to list some best practices already in place that help technical writers and translators work together, and we also attempted to find other ways to optimize the quality of the documentation.

Technical writers and translators: working hand-in-hand

Technical writers and translators often find that working hand in hand enables them to deliver efficient documentation in their respective fields of expertise. We started our research by observing what happens when these two professionals work closely together. What are their secrets for a successful collaboration?

Taking into account the translation constraints to improve the writing process

In today's globalized world, knowing that their documentation is likely to be translated into multiple languages leads technical writers to create content that is as understandable and consistent as possible. The objective is to make the downstream translators' work easier to avoid multiple questions and mistranslations. In turn, taking the translation constraints into account helps improving the writing process.

First of all, to prepare the translator's work, following strict writing rules and using precise terminology with a simple syntax, enables technical writers to produce clear source documents.

For example, technical writers should not hesitate to apply repetitions when needed, even at the cost of style. The use of Simplified Technical English (STE) can be helpful, especially in complex fields such as aerospace and defense industries. The aims of this specific language are to reduce ambiguity for non-native English speakers and thus make translation faster and more cost-effective. With translation in mind, technical writers leverage these rules to clarify their documentation.

Moreover, technical writers should be aware of the consistency of their output, a key element in the translation process. Indeed, if a concept is not always referred to with the same term throughout the documentation, the translators might think there are as many concepts as different words and not translate accurately. It is important to use the same terminology and syntax in all the contents delivered: knowing exactly what each word or expression refers to, translators will ask less questions and translate more accurately.

Feedback from the translators to make the documentation cycle a two-way process

When technical writers receive feedback from translators it can draw their attention to specific points and lead them to rephrase some of their content. Indeed, even though translators are not testers, they can point out some real problems. Most of the time, they are the first reader of the technical documentation, so they can be part of an early review process. For instance, in case study #1, the company co-develops its software in several countries. The documentation, which is produced in different languages, is likely to be translated so special attention must be paid to the writing. However, English output is sometimes created by employees without English or technical writing skills, so the translation team has to double-check all content and ask more questions than usual, which enables clarification of the documentation.

For a technical writer with translation skills, the author of the documentation can also act as a linguistic reviewer with a more critical approach regarding their own work. In this case, the writer knows what questions to expect and thus how to avoid them. One of us has been a translator for 10 years before studying to become a technical writer. She is then particularly aware of what can be improved during the writing process: clarity and consistency, as stated above. Moreover, many of the translators' main skills are competences we can expect from a technical writer: linguistic knowledge, attention to detail, experience of complex tools, curiosity, ability to adapt to any technical field, amongst others.³

In companies where there is no visible translation process, the linguistic approach of a 'first reader' does not exist. Even if subject matter experts (SMEs) or testers review the documentation, they do it with a content-oriented approach and they generally do not detect terminology or consistency problems. However, in case study #2, technical writers review each other's work: they benefit from an expert linguistic review, so they manage without the help from

³ See Minacori Patricia, Veisblat Lucy, "Translation and Technical Communication: Chicken or Egg?" in *Meta: Translators' Journal*, vol. 55, n° 4, december 2010, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, p. 752-768.

translators. Unfortunately, due to tight deadlines and a lack of personnel, this is not the case in most companies.

It is therefore possible to consider translation as an important step in the documentation cycle. By making translators' life easier, technical writers improve the quality of their work. In turn, by giving feedback that can make technical writers rethink and rewrite some of their output, translators improve their own documentation.

Collaboration between translators and writers: how to improve it

We have seen that it is important for technical writers and translators to work together in order to produce the best documentation possible. Our researches revealed that two significant sets of tools can enhance this collaboration: one that improves consistency and one that improves communication.

Common and complementary tools to improve consistency

Both technical writing and translation teams have access to a set of tools enabling them to be consistent while writing or translating technical documentation in a standardized way.

First are the multilingual glossaries, that provide the right equivalent for each term in different languages. Moreover, each term and its translation comes with a specific definition that allows both teams to know what they are referring to. These glossaries are indeed useful, but they need to be updated with every version of the product. Most of the time they are documented with the help of the SMEs.

Similarly, we often use style guides that are written by technical writers or editors. They list all the rules which must be followed to produce clear and consistent documentation. Both technical writers and translators can refer to them in order to deliver standardized output and make the user think only one person wrote the documentation.

To check for consistency, other tools can be used by both teams. One such tool is Acrolinx, a software used in case study #3 that can be added to writing tools such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint or an XML editor, and enables checks for:

- The number of words per sentence
- The respect of the punctuation rules
- The respect of the writing guidelines
- The use of forbidden words in the documentation

Using Acrolinx can be useful for both translators and technical writers as it helps them make sure they produce consistent documentation without constantly referring to the writing guidelines. However, this tool relies on very specific rules and is not always accurate.

In addition to these tools, which are common to both professions, it is worth mentioning the use of complementary tools to remain consistent while writing or translating technical

documentation. For instance, as mentioned earlier, technical writers can use STE (Simplified Technical English), even though it is mostly used in the aerospace or the defense industry. As they enable the reuse of content whenever possible, single sourcing tools are another way to make the documentation consistent and less costly. As for translators, they can rely on terminology databases, corpuses, translation memories, and glossaries. All these tools help them define the right word to use, and most importantly, how to use it: they contain examples of words in context, collocations and even some fully translated sentences, so that translators can keep their work as consistent as possible.

A set of tools for a better communication

Consistency can only be possible if there is good communication between both professions. Again in this case, each company has its way of working: translators and technical writers share the same office, or translation is handled externally, but it is essential for both teams to exchange efficiently.

First of all, the use of a common FAQ can be helpful. In all documentation and translation processes the same questions often come back. To avoid wasting time it is important that some questions are documented and available online for everyone to see. If each team regularly updates the FAQ, it is beneficial and time-saving for both.

Wikis can also be used in the same way. Both teams can document the tools available for translators and technical writers, which limits the number of emails exchanged when trying to understand how each tool works. Wikis are also a handy way to identify which member of the technical writing team is in charge of which part of the documentation.

Teams can also use forums put in place through tools such as TCT (Translation Communication Tool) in case study #3, where translators can use a forum to ask the entire technical writing team a question. This enables them to receive answers from the whole writing team on one subject which could be an issue. TCT also lists each writer's fields of expertise, so that translators know who they can contact.

Finally, communication between both teams can also be improved with planned meetings and/or informal discussions: they are an excellent way of dealing with comprehension issues or when questions arise.

In order to improve the collaboration between technical writers and translators, both teams can use a set of tools to improve their consistency and their communication: the key to a good technical documentation. However, there can be limits to such objectives.

Limitations: is documentation translatable at the cost of other objectives?

Considering the translator as a leitmotiv to write clear and accessible documentation is obvious. However, we should be careful not to use the translation objective as the only means of improving the writing process, and by extension the documentation as a deliverable. The risk is to excessively simplify the content and to miss some important information and objectives.

The importance of writing with other objectives in mind

Technical writers should put things into perspective. Forgetting that end users are their target audience when documenting a product would be an error of judgment.

Beyond translation, globalization constraints are another objective. As documentation might be used within different cultures, writing rules can be very specific. Once more, terminology has to be adapted. In study case #3, for example, writers cannot use the verb *to kill*, even if this term has a very specific meaning in computing. *Country* is also forbidden because some nations do not officially recognize some entities as legal States.

Is translation especially a European issue?

Being French professionals, we may be more concerned by translation issues. Indeed, translation concerns seem to be a European matter. In the current global context, more and more people speak English, which generally stands out as the common source language. However, in practice, previous generations do not speak fluent English in some European countries. Translating documentation in the languages of co-workers and end users is then required.

On the contrary, translation is not such an issue in English-speaking countries. Thus, the documentation might be much more user-oriented. Moreover, English language is clearer than other languages, such as French, so that ambiguity and syntax differences within the same document are less frequent, making the translation activity smoother.

Furthermore, the technical writing profession was created long ago in North America, whereas in European countries, until recently, documentation was, and sometimes it is still written by non-linguistic professionals. It is the reason why, in French output for example, we still find complex texts, not user-centric, and with language mistakes.

A three-person relationship

Choosing effective terminology is a hard task, of which SMEs such as product analysts and developers are often in charge. However, they do not always have users and localization constraints in mind.

In case studies #1 and #2, SMEs define the terms used in the product, but field labels, function or button names may not be totally satisfying from the users' point of view. Very often, documentation and translation teams detect questionable terminological choices. Recently in

case study #1, specialists in ergonomics have also been pointing out obvious terminological inconsistencies in the product and have been part of the review process for the next product release.

Indeed, dealing with terminological issues is so time-consuming that writers or translators' work is affected - sometimes, in case study #1, they spend days trying to answer questions coming from different sites. A terminologist could build databases containing terms, definitions and contexts, and any other useful information. Writers, translators, as well as SMEs, could benefit from this tool and contact this dedicated person for any additional questions. This language specialist could also participate in the product development process to ensure that terminology is chosen accurately.

In case study #3, there is a writing guideline specialist called an editor. They provide writers with advice beforehand, so that translators do not have to contact them about ambiguous sentences. Sometimes, the editor reviews new topics and checks if they match the guidelines. Writers benefit a lot from this specialist and they can also ask them to consider a new term to include in the word usage database. In a translation company where one of us worked, she also observed the language analyst role: this professional was in charge of all the linguistic tasks that were not translation: analyzing technical terms and phraseology, handling glossaries, centralizing and managing questions, so that the translators could focus on their work without wasting time.

Therefore, such a language specialist would be seen as the bridge between SMEs, writers and translators, to serve quality, not only for documentation, but also for the products. The win-win relationship does not come down to a dual vision. As long as good practices are set in all teams, the documentation process can involve as many professionals as needed and improve thanks to this multiple collaboration.

Conclusion

From our observations, we have noticed that working physically together and having informal discussions are an unquestionable advantage to enhance collaboration between translators and technical writers. Nevertheless, the risk is to miss information if it is not stored in specific tools. Indeed, creating such databases enables all exchanges to be listed, new terminology to be defined and new practices to be referred to. However, it requires a dedicated professional as it is a specialized and time-consuming task.

In all, the essential question remaining is that technical documentation and its translation should be handled by professionals. Nowadays many companies would rather have SMEs write the documentation. As a result, outputs are too complex, not straightforward, and quantity overcomes quality. Further research would need to be done in this field, focusing for instance on the different roles that can complement each other to improve the documentation process.

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