Revision: Parameters and practices within the translation industry

Laura C. Collada Ali, Paz Gómez Polledo, and **Claire Harmer**
Freelance medical writers and translators

Correspondence to:

Laura C. Collada Ali
Freelance Medical Writer & Translator
Villaggio Cogne 57/A
11012 Cogne, Italy
+39 3203671224
laura.collada@teksema.com

Abstract

In this article we look at what it means to revise a translation, the parameters that should be taken into account, and the various challenges posed by the process. We also explore how the quality of a translation affects the revision stage, and various approaches that can be used to revise a text with the aim of delivering a usable piece.

Usually, when a translator has finished working on a given text, it means that he or she has both translated and revised the text. Revising a translation is essentially a very careful reading exercise: the text is read to spot problematic word choices, sentences, or paragraphs, and to correct or improve it if necessary.[1]

Much of what is done when revising is identical to what is done when editing. Nevertheless, revisers will often come across unidiomatic wording as a result of interference from the source language – a problem which editors will not normally encounter unless the writer is not a native speaker of the language. Revisers must also find and correct mistranslations and unneeded additions.[1]

With the increasingly widespread use of translation memories (databases that store segments of text that have been translated as translation units, in order to help translators in their future work by providing a repository of already translated text),[2] revising translations done by others is becoming more commonplace than it used to be – particularly when working for translation agencies. Many translators use memories that contain translations done by a large number of other colleagues. When material from these translation memories is imported into the translation on which a translator is currently working, he or she must decide to what degree the imported wording is usable in the current context.[1] It may be necessary to make changes for a variety of reasons:

- the meaning of the imported text is different;
- the imported text is stylistically inconsistent with the translator's own wording;
- there is a lack of cohesion between an imported sentence and the preceding or next sentence;
- different imported sentences are not consistent with each other in terms of terminology.

While the above considerations are important even when importing material from a memory that only contains the translator's own translations, the revision burden is greater when importing translated segments written by others, since there is far less certainty about the readability of work done by the others.[1]

Much of what is done when revising is identical to what is done when editing

Why revising translations is necessary

There are several possible reasons why someone other than the translator should check a text, and perhaps make changes, before it is sent off to readers:

- While translating a foreign text into the target language, it is extremely easy to write sentences that are structured in a way that will lead readers to misunderstand them or find them difficult to understand.
- It is also rather easy, while translating, to forget about future readers and write something which is not suited to them or the intended use of the translation – which may differ from the intended use of the source text.
- A text may fail to conform to society's linguistic rules, or the prevailing ideas about the proper way to translate for a particular genre.
- Finally, what the author or translator has written may conflict with the publisher's goals.

To deal with these problems, revisers and editors amend texts in two ways: they correct and they improve. Revising is not a matter of a vague "looking over". There are specific things the editor or reviser needs to look for – these will be analysed later on in this article.

Quality in translation

In ISO 8402 from 1994, the International Organization for Standardization defines quality in general as "the totality of characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs".[1] Thus, quality is always related to needs, which also means that there is no such thing as absolute quality. Different translations will have different quality criteria because the texts have different needs. In one translation, readability may need to be improved to a very high level, while in another a lower degree of readability will be enough. Sometimes, some documents obey two different degrees of quality: information quality (when the document will be used in-house by a small number of people for information only and then discarded) and publication quality (when the document will be read by a large number of outside readers over a period of time).[3]

Different concepts of quality

There are several broad concepts of quality that are currently used in the world of translation, and these lead to different "philosophies" of revision.[1]

- **Quality means satisfying clients.** This may lead a reviser to pay most attention to finding errors such as not respecting client-related terminology.
- **Quality means that a translation is fit for purpose.** The translation is, in the reviser's view, suited to the people who will be reading it and the purpose for which they will be reading it. This concept is endorsed by ISO EN 15038 "Translation services – Service requirements", which state that "The reviser shall examine the translation for its suitability for purpose".
- **Quality means doing what is necessary to protect the target language.** This view will typically be found in language communities where translators want to counter the effects

of a formerly or currently dominating foreign language. This is rather common in English to Spanish translations of medical texts, for example.

What are the specific things the editor or reviser needs to look for?

Due mainly to the time constraints imposed by deadlines for each revision, an experienced reviser will become accustomed over time to not thinking about what kind of errors to look for and in what order of priority, but instinctively tries to identify them simultaneously, covering all kinds of translation errors, while comparing the target text with the source text sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Also, revisers instinctively act as proofreaders would, checking spelling, punctuation, words and phrases which are in bold, underlined, or italicised, and presentation. Even if a full revision is not possible due to time constraints, especially if the client asks for specific house style and glossaries to be checked, an experienced reviser's eye may also catch consistency and content errors.

Things that can go wrong when translating would entail a long list, but Brian Mossop has been able to elaborate, in his book *Revising and Editing for Translators* (2001),[1] a reasonably short list of translation error types. He sums up 12 revision parameters, divided into four groups, which identify and classify these errors:

- Transfer: accuracy and completeness
- Content: logic and facts
- Language: smoothness, tailoring, sub-language, idiom, and mechanics
- Presentation: layout, typography, and organisation[1]

Mossop states that, "obviously [a reviser is] not going to go through each sentence twelve times".[1] In our experience, an experienced reviser actually checks those 12 parameters simultaneously by instinct when going through each sentence.

Mossop's model for translation revision is very useful for revisers, regardless of their level of experience, but also for translators, because questions asked in each of the four groups of parameters help to produce a better translation.[1]

Accuracy, completeness, and logic are the main parameters to check. Among them, accuracy is the most important feature of a translation. It requires a correct understanding of the source text and the ability to ensure that the translation expresses that understanding. The reviser has to guarantee that the translation conveys the message of the source passages – even if it is not a close translation and doesn't reproduce the original vocabulary and sentence structures. He or she must check that the source has been correctly understood and expressed in sentences that are not linguistically ambiguous, since ambiguity may lead readers to interpret the wording in the wrong way. Also, if numbers are central to the message of a text, it is a good idea to do a separate check for their accurate reproduction.

Regarding completeness, revisers have to ensure that translations render the entire message of the source text (but not necessarily its wording) with no additions and no subtractions – the so-called NANS principle. The most common completeness error is unintentional omissions, but the translator may also have unwittingly added ideas that are not present, even implicitly, in the source.

A translation has to be logical: it must make sense to the reader in its context. If it doesn't, maybe the source text is illogical and the translator didn't check the meaning with the client. Sometimes the logical connections between sentences in source texts may be very unclear because they are a collage of sentences from a variety of materials. In other cases, it is the translator who has introduced an inaccuracy or contradiction, maybe due to mistranslation or bad interpretation. We agree with Mossop that readers may not find much difference between content errors (in facts and logic) and transfer errors (in accuracy and completeness) if they compare a translation to its source, but they may appreciate them differently.[1] For example, if transfer errors make sense, these may pass unnoticed. By contrast, content errors, in particular logical error in facts, will immediately be spotted by experienced reviewers or subject-matter experts, and this will make them doubt the competence of the author or translator of the text.

Degrees of revision

There is no set definition of revision within the translation industry. This is primarily because the discipline of translation studies is relatively new, so there is a lack of terminology that is used consistently and by everyone – some terms are used interchangeably by some revisers, and various terms overlap (e.g., editing, proofreading, revising, reviewing, and rereading). Also, the term "revision" is used in different ways by different disciplines. For example, in publishing, revising often refers to amending a previously published work before printing another edition of it, which is very different to the way "revision" would be viewed by translators.[4]

Similarly, there are no set terms to denote the degrees or levels of revision. We, the authors of this article, use the following levels, all of which can be used as part of a *bilingual revision* (comparing the entire source text with the translation) or a *monolingual revision* (revising the translation as a text that stands alone, only consulting the source text when the translated version cannot be understood).

Full revision

This is where a translation is revised, ideally using the 12 parameters set out by Brian Mossop.[1] If the translation is particularly poor, this may involve re-writing parts of the translation, although this should always be discussed with the client beforehand.

General revision

We use the term *general revision* for a project where we decide to revise a handful of the 12 parameters. As an example, a client might state that he or she wants to ensure that spelling and punctuation are correct, and would like all medical terminology to be checked, but don't want to lose the author's voice in the revision process. In this case, we would make sure that we don't re-write any parts of the text.

Partial revision (a "good enough" approach)

This is the most difficult kind of revision. We normally use this approach when the budget and/or deadline are limited, and explain to the client that we will not be able to improve the translation to the extent we would like, asking them what they would like us to focus on. Some examples include correcting spelling and punctuation, improving coherence, readability, and phrasing (ensuring that it doesn't "sound" like a translation), and checking the accuracy of terminology. We would only focus on one or possibly two of these areas. The "good enough" approach allows us to focus on delivering a translation that the client is happy with, without spending unpaid time on making extra corrections. In *Revising and Editing for Translators*, Brian Mossop emphasises the importance of reminding yourself: "Do not ask whether a sentence *can* be improved but whether it *needs* to be improved."[1] This is something we often need to remind ourselves of, particularly as linguists, because refraining from improving the writing quality can sometimes be a challenge!

Scan check (quality control)
This is generally carried out as part of a bilingual revision, flicking between the source text and the translation to check the following: a. spelling, b. completeness (ensuring that all the text is there), c. that the layout of the translation mirrors the source, d. that any visuals such as tables and graphs have been reproduced correctly, and e. that any numbers in the translation match the source.

How to determine the degree of revision required

One thing we have learnt through editing and revising translations is to always ask the client: Who is the translated text aimed at? (e.g., international clients, members of the public, healthcare professionals). We would say that this, together with the client's budget and deadline, are the main points to take into account when determining the degree of revision required. In general, we would inform the client of the kind of revision we think is needed, ask them whether they agree with our suggestion, then take it from there.

The views in this article (particularly regarding the different levels of revision) are held by the authors but are not necessarily shared by all translators. Degrees of revision are very much subjective.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Stephen Gilliver for assistance in editing this text.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

References

1. Mossop B. Revising and editing for translators. 3rd ed. Oxon: Routledge; 2014.
2. Translation Memory. Frequently asked questions. SDL. 2018 [cited 2018 June 28]. Available from: https://www.sdl.com/software-and-services/translation-software/sdl-trados-studio/translation-memory/faqs.html.
3. ISO 8402. Quality Management and Quality Assurance. 2018 [cited 2018 June 28]. Available from: http://aei.pitt.edu/37641/1/A3617.pdf.
4. Robert I, Remael A, Ureel J. Towards a model of translation revision competence. The Interpreter and Translator Trainer. 2014;11(1):1–19.

Author information

Laura Carolina Collada Ali is a medical writer and translator in Italy with more than 15 years of experience in delivering multilingual authoring and translation services for leading independent research organisations and pharmaceutical and medical device companies.

Paz Gómez Polledo is a Spanish licensed physician and Doctor of Philosophy in Medicine with 32 years' experience as a freelance medical translator, reviser, proofreader, writer, and medical translation instructor.

Claire Harmer is a UK-based translator and editor specialising in medicine, pharmaceuticals, and packaging. She translates from French and Spanish into English and helps healthcare non-governmental organisations, hospitals, medical journals, and pharmaceutical companies to make their documentation accessible in accurate, effective English.

…readers may not find much difference between content errors (in facts and logic) and transfer errors (in accuracy and completeness) if they compare a translation to its source, but they may appreciate them differently. For example, if transfer errors make sense, these may pass unnoticed.