

A translation buyer reflects on standards



Under a contract designed to save the UK Ministry of Justice £18 million a year, Applied Language Solutions (ALS) started to provide them with court interpreting services on February 1, 2012. UK professional interpreting organizations have mounted a campaign against this contract because it significantly reduces interpreters' earnings.

According to the *Law Society's Gazette*, nine out of ten court interpreters are boycotting the ALS service. Protesters claim that hundreds of court and tribunal proceedings have been cancelled because of a lack of interpreters. The campaign also urges statutory regulation of the interpreting profession and protection of the title of legal interpreter.

Alarm bells should be ringing loud and clear that it is time to intervene in the language services industry. How can this "cottage" industry, which is struggling to mature rapidly and effectively, support exports at this critical economic time? On the one hand, the industry bemoans in an interminable, internal debate how it is undervalued and constantly undercut in pricing, while on the other hand, it quite frankly delivers uneven quality standards from its various practitioners.

If the mighty Ministry of Justice has experienced quality issues with its new interpreting service contract due to its pure focus on cost reduction, what hope is there for an inexperienced interpreting or translation buyer? Industry professionals constantly complain about their low fees. With translation charges based on a cost per thousand words, hourly rates can work out at less than most skilled tradesmen, despite the high levels of education required. Specialization is the key to commanding higher fees. However, as the Ministry of Justice has discovered in the legal field, there are only a handful of truly experienced professionals in many specialized fields in some languages.

Is it time for the language services industry to be regulated? Left to its own devices, it seems unfortunately likely that the internal debate will continue about minutiae and that there will be a failure to meet the increased demand. If translation buyers often struggle to identify quality suppliers for the major European languages, how much harder is it going to be to exploit the best export opportunities that are now in emerging markets? Companies require their language service providers (LSPs) to be strong, united, reliable and confident partners for export success. Buyers of language services should insist on dedicated standards to help sort the wheat from the chaff.

Many first-time language service buyers experience a baptism of fire. The world economy needs innovative small and medium enterprises to drive growth, and these enterprises should not find themselves hampered by translation errors and cultural communication problems. The wide range of languages required of experienced legal interpreters in modern-day courts is highly indicative of the specialized interpreting and translation services required for successful exports. The UK court chaos is therefore a warning of the havoc that could stifle export efforts.

In the twenty-first century, we cannot still labor under the misapprehension that everyone can and will speak English so that we can sell to them. Back in the twentieth century, the German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, famously remarked: "If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, *dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen*" (. . . then you must speak German). Now, we must speak Chinese, Japanese, Russian, South American Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Arabic, Indic languages and even African dialects. Cultural advice is of ever increasing importance to localize sales and marketing campaigns for these new markets. Sales and marketing buyers are LSPs' most important clients.

Translation buyers often find themselves in the unenviable position of having to trust that their supplier is providing a good quality product, because they have no means to judge it for themselves. It is imperative to find an LSP that inspires trust and displays integrity. It is also critical to find a supplier who maintains that trust by continuing to deliver quality and continuing to display integrity. The old motto "once bitten, twice shy" is particularly relevant to translation buying. If a buyer has a bad experience due to a poor quality translation, he or she will be especially suspicious of any

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LSP making quality claims in the future. Thus, a reputable LSP can be tarnished by the poor quality translations and services received elsewhere. Everyone promises "quality" to the bemused client, and it is hard to differentiate between the good and the not-so-good. You have only to consult a few websites to be mesmerized by the industry's vague promises about quality.

Entrepreneurs and salespeople in fast-growing businesses have a tendency to promise more than can confidently be delivered. In the language services industry, it is particularly counterproductive to raise client expectations, as true quality is elusive in some specialized fields and more minor languages. Quality can be improved with time and effort, but the industry is not always good at conveying what it needs from the client's side to ensure a quality end product. While some LSPs make real efforts to get to know their client's business and familiarize translation teams with their corporate style and terminology, others still seem to be delivering translations with poor grammar, typographical errors and inaccurate terminology. The latter simply fail in the basics of selecting the right linguist for the job and neglect quality assurance procedures.

Over the years, there have been a series of standards applied to the translation industry across Europe and worldwide. In other industries, standards are a common tool for buyers to differentiate between suppliers. The translation industry has a tendency to balk at being treated like the manufacturing industry. It prefers to see translation as an art, focusing on the subjective and variable elements that make standardization tricky, rather than tackling and nailing the main quality issues. The standards of the least quality-conscious LSP need to be raised in order to improve the quality perception and professional image of the whole industry. LSPs need to work with their competitors to ensure that poor performers are frozen out or forced to raise their standards.

Many translation buyers may be surprised to hear that there has been a dedicated European translation standard in place since 2006: EN 15038. The various European Union of Associations of Translation Companies (EUATC) member countries were required to drop their conflicting national standards and adopt EN 15038 by November 2006. In Britain, the standard goes under the descriptor of BS EN 15038, in Germany DIN EN 15038 and so

on. Unfortunately, in the United Kingdom the standard almost seems to have been strangled in its infancy. Those translation companies that have submitted themselves to the full, recommended certification process remain relatively few in 2012.

Back in 2007, two UK companies claimed confusingly to be the first with the new standard. Some UK companies added to the confusion by displaying the German designation of the standard, DIN EN 15038. Investigations revealed that DIN CERTCO, the commercial wing of the well-respected German standards institute DIN, contacted their existing customers and offered an upgrade from their previous DIN 2345 standard to DIN EN 15038. A press release revealed that no additional checks were required and translation providers could simply have their registration certificate transferred. Many European and even worldwide LSPs took advantage of this apparent shortcut to gain the new standard, including a number from the United Kingdom. The EUATC found itself powerless to revoke any such registrations, clearly demonstrating the industry's need for some teeth in regulating its members. ALS was the first to claim compliance via the DIN shortcut. London Translations was the genuine first company to be certified to BS EN 15038 in the United Kingdom.

The ability to place details of standards awarded on your company website is undoubtedly a great marketing tool. The cart should not go before the horse, however. The industry needs to be reminded that language standards are not primarily for its marketing purposes, but for buyers to use as a tool to recognize the quality essentials and place business with a quality supplier. Buyers have a right to expect and trust that such a company has engaged in a full and thorough examination of its compliance with the standard before displaying the insignia on its website.

The task of creating EN 15038 was undertaken by dedicated industry professionals to try to differentiate service providers and raise standards. In the United Kingdom, the end result currently seems somewhat murky. It is disappointing that many quality LSPs have not undertaken certification in BS EN 15038. Given that DIN CERTCO's terms and conditions stated a validity of up to five years, it is to be hoped that those LSPs that took the shortcut are now seriously preparing to undertake full certification upon expiration of their DIN EN 15038.

Many LSPs have rejected the special translation standard in preference for ISO 9001. The standard has undoubted value in getting a company to review and document its processes. Given the experience in Britain, it should perhaps be questioned



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whether ISO 9001 is sufficient for LSPs and whether it is possible to document and receive the standard's certification for a process that is fundamentally flawed.

The selection of experienced and competent legal interpreters for court work must be a prerequisite. It is hard enough to follow court proceedings in your own tongue; it must be much harder to do so in a foreign tongue hampered by misinterpretations from your interpreter and with the added stress of your liberty potentially being at stake. We do not accept quacks if we go to the doctor, so why do we allow specialist language skills to be so poorly appreciated and remunerated? Do minimum professional rates need to be set? As the UK Ministry of Justice has discovered, buying language services cheaply often costs more to correct afterward. LSPs need to communicate more effectively to buyers how to achieve cost effectiveness for their companies rather than cost reductions. Often the savings are to be made not in the base translation cost, but in the streamlining of processes for related services.

Work is now beginning on an ISO translation standard. In the meantime, it is recommended that translation buyers obtain a copy of their national or the European standard. They should question their existing and potential sup-

pliers about how their services comply with the standard and ask whether they have any plans to gain certification. In most industries, it is the buyers that push compliance with a standard. So perhaps the time has come for language services buyers to push for just that?

The requirement for proofreaders to be domain specialists as well as the translators has been an area of some concern, especially in specialist fields in rare languages. However, LSPs should simply be honest with clients when the full requirements of the standard cannot be applied. Much irritation with the industry emanates from raising quality expectations that it cannot currently, instantly or consistently deliver. The translation industry is right to have some misgivings about the application of standards to them. Standards have become too inflexible in some industries to the detriment of customer service. If a standard is allowed to become too restrictive and impractical in application, a quality LSP could find itself unable to serve a long-established client in some languages. That client could then be at the mercy of poor performers and left to take a risk with his or her company brand in unfamiliar territory.

Renegotiating the parameters of what is possible within the new market and how best to ensure the best quality achievable in both the short and longer term would

seem much more preferable. Any translation standard should be seen as a basis for an LSP and client to work out the quality details that apply to their relationship. It should not be a strait jacket that fails to adapt as client projects, technology and the industry evolve.

Having no client-recognized and industry-upheld standards in common use leaves the industry open to all-comers and no means of differentiation for buyers. Consider an athletics analogy: if all competitors are not prepared to submit themselves to drug testing (read standards certification), then how can they complain if the cheats beat them to the gold medal?

It is high time that the aimless drifting in the translation industry ceased. LSPs need to get together and fully engage with standards. Concerns about details should not hold the industry back from taking action. British interpreters have admirably thrown down the gauntlet for the whole industry, showing how working together can prevent the undercutting of professional rates and unprofessional practitioners from operating in their field.

It may seem incongruous for someone in the finance industry to pass comment on standards. However, the financial world is being forced to change. Even out of the front line in this regulated industry, we get regular reminders from our compliance departments about money laundering, market abuse and insider trading, as well as gift and entertainment policies and bribery laws. By contrast, the language services industry is unregulated. Standards of conduct are highly topical in Britain as a result of revelations from the Levenson enquiry, which is examining the ethics of the British press. Corruption is not endemic in the United Kingdom; however, Transparency International UK has warned of the risks of unfair competition if key institutions are complacent toward or refuse to confront bribery. Language service buyers need a forum to relate their experiences, both good and bad, and get the drive to raise standards as a matter of urgency. They need the quality freelancers, small independents and larger LSPs in the industry to rise to the top, to make themselves heard and to be recognized. A dedicated but practical standard that is in active use, together with an enforceable code of ethics, is the way forward. **M**

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