



Of Translation Jobs and Glossaries

Some words of advice for outsourcers

One of the worst nuisances in my job as a translator for some 10 years has been the constant increase in 'clever' glossaries for technical jobs.

A glossary is fine as such, provided it deals with **technical terms** only. It can be a great help in conveying the client's preferred choices or internal trade language, but this requires that whoever is creating the glossary is sufficiently skilled in linguistics as well as the technical theme at hand to be able to sift out what belongs in a glossary and what does not.

In case the source language is English, it has to be taken into account that one word in English may be used as a noun, a verb, an adjective, and an adverb. This is not necessarily the case in the target language, and most certainly not in my native language, Norwegian.

Please consider the following exchange I had with a customer (agency) this summer concerning a client «Quality Report» which consisted of an automated comparison of the translated text against the glossary:

You asked me to accept the glossary as is, but that becomes very difficult as a huge part of their 'errors' are just different verb declensions, definite/indefinite form of nouns, and similar. I do not know their proficiency in Norwegian linguistics, but what they're in fact asking me to do is to disregard a multitude of basic grammar rules just to make the text fit the glossary. I hesitate strongly to do that, and I feel it is my duty to make you/them aware that the text will be severely mangled and quite possibly embarrassing to the client in the Norwegian market!

The problem is that they have erroneously supposed that a term may be used as both a noun and a verb, like in English, and also that the glossary may state, for example, the infinite tense of a verb, while the context may require imperative tense in the text - totally altering the meaning!

*An example of the present/imperative problem would be «Before accepting an XXX plan, check that the XXX time and the coordinates for each YYY are reasonable as judged by your experience». Client Comment: «Glossary Entry: Check => kontrollere» But «kontrollere» is infinite tense, not imperative, thereby losing the notion that you **should** check the XXX time...*

As for the noun/verb problem, it would be a bit similar to say in English: «If you own a horse, you may be «horsing» (riding) around the countryside all day long» Maybe a far-fetched illustration, but the point should be clear – sometimes the English original has to be rephrased in Norwegian to convey the intended meaning – you cannot just assume that the translation of a noun will be exactly the same as a verb.

*This is the very weakness of using strict glossaries for translation jobs – either you have to break grammar basics to fit whatever is in the glossary into the text, or you have to rephrase the sentence to convey the meaning faithfully. Looking at the Client Report, I'd say it has not been prepared by a sentient being, most probably it's just an automated comparison between the text and the glossary with no consideration of what is suitable in the context. Accordingly, we cannot accept that all of the noted 'errors' actually are **errors**.*



I painstakingly went through all 1,239 'errors' in their report and compiled the following statistics (The total word count for the job was 91,656, so the actual error count wasn't all that bad...):

Error Category	Explanation	Number	% of total count
0	No error according to latest version of glossary (e.g. «XXX»), or wrong meaning of word in glossary	303	24
1	Error - inconsistency or incorrect term	23	2
2	No error - Product name, not to be translated	56	5
3	No error, idiomatic rephrasing necessary to fit context	128	10
4	No error - corrected as per trade language or factual meaning	279	23
5	No error - correct term used, but different verb declension	162	13
6	No error - verb/noun issue with glossary	194	16
7	No error - verb/adjective issue with glossary	51	4
8	No error - correct term used, but difference in plural/singular	13	1
9	No error - adverb/adjective issue with glossary	3	0
10	No error - correct term used, but difference in definite/indefinite noun form	27	2
Total:		1239	100

This clearly shows that a carelessly prepared glossary adds no quality gain, just a lot of wasted time and work, both for the client and the translator.

I would advise anyone involved in preparing glossaries for translation jobs to use only top notch translators who are capable of understanding the implications of choosing which terms should be included in the glossary, as well as understanding which words may have several meanings. There is no sense in putting «time» in the glossary, translated as hours/minutes, if the usage is «1st/2nd time». This was in fact done in the case story above.

Above all, **do not** think that you do not need a highly skilled / expensive translator to prepare the glossary, as if «It's just single words, anyway»...

In fact, translating the glossary is far more demanding than working with the actual text due to the lack of context in a glossary, requiring the translator to **know** what the component/unit is and what it does, without any support from the context.

In highly specialized, technical texts, this is not as obvious as one might think – I shall not soon forget the «Pitman» in the manual of a rock crushing plant some 7 years ago. It was listed in a maintenance schedule, and for the life of me, I couldn't understand why this mining worker should be monitored/tested for fatigue every 100 hours...

Well, it turned out to be the 'piston rod' driving the actual crushing jaw on the machine, not so readily deductable from a 'dry' text with no illustrations, I say!



Conclusion

The following procedure will secure that the client's prepared glossary will actually add to the quality, not just create wasted man-hours in the project:

1. Have your Engineering/Construction Department create a list of components/units/parts that are unique to the equipment/technology and ask them to omit standard parts, such as valves, pipes, brackets, plates, tubes, fittings and handles, unless they are designated in a special, preferred way in your manuals
2. Hire a high quality translator (agency) to translate the list, making sure (by references, samples, etc.) the candidate is sufficiently experienced in the technical field at hand.
Do not pinch pennies on this step!
3. Have the translation validated by your native distributor/affiliate company, securing that all translations are in line with the preferred terminology/trade language at their site
4. Have the validated translation scrutinized by a skilled linguist in the target language, sifting out possible grammar errors, typos or overly colloquial language
5. **Now** you are ready to hand over the glossary to the translator/agency and start the actual translation project

Keep in mind that the glossary will be your foundation for the whole project, meaning that errors/ambiguities in the glossary will be propagated throughout your manuals, so this is the place and time to spend the bulk of your QA funds!

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