

Translators and Editors: The Case for “Preferred Partnerships”

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Freelance translators can be—and frequently are—rather complicated personalities. That’s not really all that surprising, given the fact that we keep impossible hours, most if not all of which we spend by ourselves in some sort of a secluded area in our homes (not readily available to family members, but, strangely, to our pets), and that we measure our achievements by how many words we have translated on a given day before our wives or husbands suggest we crawl into a virtual bedroom somewhere in our PC.

Yes, we can be somewhat idiosyncratic. And there aren’t a lot of people out there who really, truly, understand us, except of course other translators, which is why we like to come to these conferences and why we tend to spend more time contributing to our various discussion lists than we can reasonably justify.

Nobody, though, understands us as well as a colleague who we have been working with on particular assignments and for particular clients for a long, long time. Colleagues such as those who get our translations—that we have doubtlessly toiled over, finessed and massaged until we were ready to let go of them—so they can edit, that is “improve” them. What a delicate proposition, fraught with danger! Sensibilities may be hurt, egos may be crushed. A thankless job, indeed!

Reality, of course, is different. In most cases, the project manager gets the just completed translation and almost immediately outsources it to an available editor, who may or may not have been lined up beforehand. The editor may or may not be informed of the translator's identity, may or may not care, or may—or may not—be told not to worry, because, after all, this particular translator has been working these kinds of projects for ever. One agency I used to work with, years ago, actually insisted on keeping the translator's identity a secret, probably to prevent any kind of collusion between translator and editor or to dissuade the editor from “going soft” on a translator because of an unfortunate desire not to step on his toes. Did this ever happen? Perhaps, but I find it hard to believe. After all, the finished job will be a coproduction of some sort, with both translator and editor sharing responsibility for its quality, and no agency and certainly no client will accept as an excuse that a more rigorous editing would somehow have been indelicate. The translator knows this, and the editor knows this. Case closed.

So let me go to bat for a system that I'd like to refer to as a “preferred partnership” between two language professionals who want to create the best possible translation.

So what do I mean by a “preferred” partnership? Well, my own experience as an independent German to English translator has led me to the conclusion that it is beneficial for all parties involved to create 2 person teams of translators and

editors who work together on many of the same projects, whose roles can easily be reversed and who can point to a track record of excellent translations. Such “proven pairings” have a lot going for them.

Let me start with an entirely practical and somewhat selfish point. It’s 4.30 pm and Patricia over here calls me to ask if I could edit a 2000 word PowerPoint presentation for a chemical client by noon the following day. That’s a bit tight for me considering my other commitments, but doable under normal circumstances. My first question for her will most likely be: “Do you mind telling me who the translator was?” If she tells me (and you’ll know in a second why this is a completely hypothetical scenario) “some new guy who sent us a really convincing resume and comes highly recommended by some agency we’ve never heard of”, I will probably decide that this is a chance I am not willing to take. Many of us have been stuck too many times with quite a lousy translation that took forever to clean up, and we know better than to buy a pig in a poke. She may, on the other hand—again very hypothetically—tell me that the translator is XYZ whom I respect, except that XYZ is known to me as a superb legal translator and not exactly as a technical expert. Again, I may hesitate. Or, in the most likely scenario, Patricia will tell me that the translation was done by translator ABC whom I know well and with whom I have worked before on similar assignments. No problem, bring it on!

So, for the prospective editor to know whose work he will be reviewing will have a direct impact on his scheduling and his productivity. To avoid a misunderstanding: Of course I am not advocating anybody turning down an editing assignment purely on the basis that the editor is unfamiliar with the translator and/or her work. That decision, however, may significantly affect how much time a busy reviewer should allot to the project in question.

Obviously, an experienced linguist who has seen the work of innumerable colleagues come across his desk for review, will have a distinct advantage in this regard over a newcomer to the profession. After a dozen years as a full timer who does a lot of editing, I still come across a new name every now and then, but for the most part I know the translators and their areas of expertise. As a matter of fact, I can in some instances determine who the translator was without actually knowing her identity—by her style, her choice of terminology etc.

Another very hands-on aspect of working as part of a team that's comfortable with each other is the opportunity to exchange information during the actual creation process of the translation. I enjoy working on projects where the project manager states upon assigning the translation who the editor is going to be. Odds are that I have worked with her before and that we get along just fine. So here I am sitting over a rather technical document that takes a lot of research and still occasionally has me wondering about a particular term or turn of phrase. Before I send out an email to my language division list trying to enlist the help of

a knowledgeable colleague, and certainly before I compile a list of questionable items for the project manager to ask the client about, I will most likely fire off an email to my editor, or just pick up the phone and ask her what she thinks. If she knows, great! If not, at least she'll know that there is a problem area in the text that requires additional attention. Eventually, the translation will land on her desk anyway and she will have to deal with the problem one way or another. It just makes a lot of sense to me to involve her right away and try to solve the issue with her help, or at least come up with a solution that we both agree will work. It's a much better approach than leaving the trouble spot for the editor to deal with, hoping and expecting that she will fix a problem that I was unwilling to resolve when I encountered it first. And the project manager will appreciate the fact that she doesn't have to bother the client.

In a translator-editor-team that is used to working with each other, the editor can make certain assumptions about the translator's thoroughness, willingness to engage in terminology and other research (such as looking at prior client publications on the Internet to perhaps determine their preferred style), ability to use CAT tools properly, and about whether the other team member will still be sitting at his desk at 11.30 pm willing to answer an email. Let me look a bit closer at the terminological aspect. I know fully well that one of the most important qualities an editor should have is a healthy mistrust that a term chosen by a translator is indeed and definitely the right one. Editors *should* be suspicious, but in our deadline and word count driven business, they can't afford to be too

suspicious, at least not all the time. Clearly, there are degrees of suspiciousness. When I am asked to edit the translation of somebody whose work I have never seen before, I am very, very suspicious. When editing the work of a well-known translator, whom I have by sheer coincidence never worked with, I am still suspicious. And when I review the work of a “preferred partner”, I like to apply the old Reagan/Gorbachev motto “Trust, but verify”.

In my view, the greatest, if somewhat intangible, benefit of working with a proven partner is that I can indeed make assumptions as to his expertise. Double-checking every unknown technical term a translator uses is extraordinarily time-consuming and quite impractical. Generally, as an editor I confirm the first five or ten such terms in any given document, and if I agree with the translator’s choice, I move on. In my mind, I have satisfied myself that the translator knew what he was doing and focus on other aspects of the translation. This decision becomes a lot easier and is usually made sooner and faster when dealing with a translation that was created by a trusted partner.

As I have suggested before, this is not a clear-cut area. Your preferred partner may have been stressed for time and can most certainly have had a bad day. As the editor, I will probably know this, either because the translator has already told me, his trusted team member, that he had to rush this assignment, or because I can see that the job is not up to his usual standards. But if no such special conditions apply, I will most definitely expect that he did his homework. I will still

verify, but I will presuppose that he did everything on his end to ensure that the text in front of me corresponds to his best intentions. This creates a *comfort zone* for the editor; it does not mean that he should blindly accept every term chosen by the translator, but it does mean that he can focus on other areas of the translation.

Frequent collaborations between a translator and an editor enable a transfer of knowledge between them that will improve the competence of both. When I first started out in this business, translation assignments were hard to come by, but I did get a break early on with an agency that made me the editor of record for a series of manuals in the automation industry. Honestly, I knew little about automation when I was brought on board, but over the course of over two years, during which I edited perhaps two 30.000 word manuals a month, I learned an awful lot. I was very lucky, though, in that I got to work with two expert translators who had been handling this account for years and were just awfully good. After taking a very long time initially attempting to confirm the terminology—this was pre-Google, pre-Internet, actually—I eventually realized that I should focus on other matters, that were important to the translators—style, for instance. Today, I list automation among my areas of special expertise, and I owe a lot of what I know today to the knowledge passed to me by those two translators.

I am aware that this knowledge transfer took place in one direction only, from them to me. Under different circumstances, where the translator and the editor

are truly peers, one can reasonably assume that knowledge is passed in both directions. Both learn from one another for the benefit of future projects.

From this somewhat intangible advantage on to a much more obvious, practical one: I have already remarked upon the fact that we are almost constantly working against deadlines and have to gauge almost instantly upon being asked to work on a particular project how long it will take us and to what extent it will affect deadlines we have already committed to. Consider this: You are offered a translation project—say, a software manual—with a due date of December 10th. That's the day the job will go to the project manager who will then forward it to the editor. The editor must deliver a week later, December 17th.

You, the translator, accepts the assignment, only to find out that, for whatever reason, December 10th becomes a problem. Perhaps other regular clients have started calling and you are once again paying a price for not being able to say “no”. You can still make the deadline but don't feel good about rushing to the finish line. Well, if you know your editor, you can call her and ask if she will still be able to make her deadline if the translation arrives a day or two later. The way I manage my own time, that is usually not a problem. If my due date for an editing job is December 17th, and the job takes 2 days or so, I will most likely start it around December 14th. Of course, everybody plans these things differently, but many of my colleagues who work with me regularly know this about me. And so, if the translator needs two extra days, that's just fine with me. The project

manager, in most cases, won't care either, as long as the agency's own obligations to the client aren't jeopardized.

I started out talking about fragile egos, implying that an editor should show some sensitivity towards the translator as he goes about his business. Naturally, that is baloney. Obviously, a good editor does what needs to be done and shouldn't be particularly concerned about the effects of his corrections, changes, comments and recommendations on the translator those are directed at. Translators, too, understand this and will not be offended or even piqued by legitimate changes. I have however, found myself in situations where, as the translator, I disagreed with a particular correction marked by my editor and, as result of that one debatable call, felt less inclined to go along with his other changes. Or how about the editor who likes to make stylistic changes that amount to a paraphrasing of the original text, but not to an actual improvement? You know what I mean: changing passive voice to active voice, replacing perfectly appropriate words with synonyms, that kind of thing. This tends to create "issues", especially between translators and editors who do not know each other and can't readily address them (by way of a quick phone call or email) to move past them. Editors make mistakes. In an established partnership, these mistakes, if noticed, generally will not bias the translator against the reviewer, while in an untested relationship, they may spoil the whole process.

I have been very fortunate over the years to have been in many such preferred, proven partnerships. I do not mind at all working with translators I have never worked with before, but doing so changes the parameters of an assignment. Project managers, it seems to me, are becoming more aware of the benefits of pairing the same linguists for the same clients or types of projects. The logistics of such an arrangement are probably more challenging, since this will only work if both translator and editor are available at about the same time. And yet, I seem to be getting more and more editing requests by many of my agency clients that indicate the name of the translator and make it clear that my services are requested because the translator and I have demonstrated in the past that we work well together and that we are familiar with the material in question. Similarly, project managers looking for a translator ask me more often than ever before to suggest an editor who I like to work with and who might be interested in their project. Clearly, they understand the benefits of working with a team of linguists as opposed to two language professionals who prefer operating on their own.

Thank you very much.