Linguistic Qualities of International Standards

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic qualities are essential for the use of every standard. The intentions of the standards developers should become perfectly clear to those who will finally use the documents, but language barriers at several project stages may hinder this. This article addresses the topic for standards at the global and regional levels. Most IEC standards are bilingual (English and French) and frequently are translated into national languages. Feedback on standards use, translation practices, and user satisfaction has been obtained by means of two questionnaires sent to the IEC National Committees (NCs). These data are assessed with respect to the language skills of the technical experts concerned; to the particular linguistic aspects of the standards, the process of standards development, and national translating practices; and to standards user satisfaction. Standards development in two languages adds to their fitness for use, but this advantage should be balanced against the cost of bilingualism. The current practice satisfies more or less all parties involved; nevertheless, some improvements can be suggested. The issue of bilingualism vs. unilingualism also has an important cultural/political dimension.

Keywords: bilingualism; IEC; international standards; linguistic qualities; standardization; translating

INTRODUCTION

Obviously, standards are developed in order to be read and used. Therefore, they should be fit for use. The main element of this fitness for use concerns the technical contents: do the specified provisions meet the user’s requirements? As a technical standard is necessarily a written document, its linguistic qualities are associated directly with its fitness for use.

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the case of international standards, the number of user complaints concerning language equals the number of complaints about technical content (Aben, 2002). Standards and other technical documents such as specifications and instructions for use often are available in more than one language. In this context, the quality of the translation is also of importance for the evaluation of fitness for use.

The linguistic qualities of technical/scientific texts are hardly studied in a systematic manner (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000). Among the rare exceptions are Kocourek (1982) and Sager, Dungworth, and McDonald (1980). The equally limited literature on technical/scientific translating includes Maillot (1981) and Pinchuck (1977). On the other hand, the literature on standardization in general does not cover issues of linguistic qualities (Ailleret, 1982; de Vries, 1999; Diesken & Hoffmann, 1992; Egyedi, 1996; Fomin, 2001; Lelong & Mallard, 2000; Winckler, 1994). Similarly, the general literature on applied linguistics, which includes translating, appears to neglect the field of international standardization (Beardsmore, 1986; Catford, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Hatim, 2001; Newmark, 1986; Nida, 2001; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Von Hahn, 1983; Wilss, 1982).

Technical/scientific translating involves much more than the mechanical looking up of equivalents of special terms in dictionaries. It requires a good knowledge of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL); a good general education; the knowledge of any text-specific conventions, if applicable; as well as a solid technical/scientific background. The inappropriate use of calques shall be avoided (A.6 in Appendix A). According to Maillot (1981), the difficulties of technical translating frequently are underestimated. Kocourek (1982), for instance, claims that technical translating is not a very difficult task. A study on language issues specific for the domain of standardization is the publication of Teichmann (2003a) on translating texts of the IEC; we shall refer to this publication in the present study.

This article concerns the fitness for use of standards as far as their linguistic aspects are concerned. In its most basic form, a standard is developed and, subsequently, used (see Figure 1). The standards developers have to use both natural language and non-linguistic means (e.g., formulas, drawings, and figures) to express the intended technical contents (Sager, Dungworth, & McDonald, 1980; ISO/IEC Directives, 2004b). The user has to interpret the final text and, hopefully, fully understand what the standards writers intended.

By far, most standards are developed in an international setting where the English language dominates, although many of the participants will not have that language as their mother tongue. However, English is not the only major world language (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000). Some figures, in millions of first-language

Figure 1. Untranslated monolingual standards
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