

Chapter VI

Linguistic Qualities of International Standards

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic qualities are essential for the fitness for 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 chapter addresses the topic for standards at the global and regional levels using a case study about the linguistic qualities of the standards published by the IEC (International Electrotechnical Commission). Most IEC standards are bilingual (English and French), and they are frequently 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, the particular linguistic aspects of the standards, the process of standards development, national translating practices, and 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 and political dimension.

INTRODUCTION

Obviously, standards are developed in order to be read and used. They should therefore 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 directly associated with its fitness for use. In the case of international standards (ISs), the number of user complaints concerning language equals the number of complaints about technical content (Aben, 2002). Standards, but also other technical documents such as specifications and instructions for use, are often 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 and scientific texts are hardly studied in a systematic manner (Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000). Among the rare exceptions are Kocourek (1982), Sager, Dungworth, and McDonald (1980), and Von Hahn (1983). The equally limited literature on technical and scientific translating includes Jumpelt (1961), Maillot (1981), Pinchuck (1977), and Wright (2004). On the other hand, the literature on standardization in general does not cover issues of linguistic qualities (e.g., Ailleret, 1982; de Vries, 1999; Diesken & Hoffmann, 1992; Egyedi, 1996; Fomin, 2001; Higgins, 2005; International Electrotechnical Commission [IEC], 2006; Winckler, 1994). Similarly, the general literature on applied linguistics (which includes translating) appears to neglect the field of international standardization (e.g., Beardsmore, 1986; Catford, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Hatim, 2001; Newmark, 1986; Nida, 2001; Nord, 2005; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Wilss, 1982).

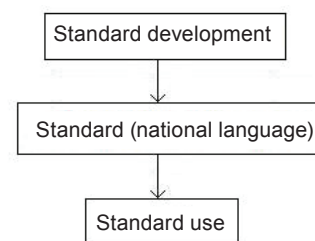
Technical and scientific translating involves much more than the mechanical looking up of equivalents of special terms in dictionaries. It requires a good knowledge of the source language

(SL) and the target language (TL), a good general education, the knowledge of any text-specific conventions if applicable, and a solid technical and scientific background. The inappropriate use of calques should be avoided (A.6 in Appendix A). According to Maillot (1981), the difficulties of technical translating are frequently 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 (2003b) on translating texts of the IEC; we shall refer to this publication in the present study.

This chapter 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 standard's developers have to use both natural language and nonlinguistic means (e.g., formulae, drawings, and figures) to express the intended technical contents (International Organization for Standardization/International Electrotechnical Commission [ISO/IEC], 2004c; Sager et al., 1980). The user has to interpret the final text and hopefully fully understands what the standard's writers had intended.

By far, most standards are developed in an international setting where the English language dominates, though many of the participants will not have that language as their mother tongue. However, English is not the only major world

Figure 1. Untranslated monolingual standards



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