



Back Translation Revisited: Differences that Matter (and Those that Do Not)

By Richard S. Paegelow

Another article about back translation? This is definitely not a popular topic among many professional translators and translation companies. The unpopularity of the “back translation approach” to quality assurance is reflected in the relatively new ASTM translation standard that states: “back translations are no guarantee of accuracy.”¹ Nevertheless, many of us receive requests from

clients for a back translation “to verify the accuracy” of the original translation. Legal departments seem to be particularly enamored of this concept. Curiously enough, a more recent ASTM publication promotes the concept of having “a qualified second person, fluent in the specific language or dialect, back translate to assure the original meaning.”²

As a review, back translation is the

practice of taking a translated document and translating it back into the original language as a means of checking the accuracy of the translation. For example, you deliver the translation to the client, who then hands it to another translator for translation back into English. The client then compares the back translation to the original and checks for inaccuracies. The problem is that the client’s

Table 1: Back Translation Error: Example

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Original source text: | premium (of an insurance policy) |
| English-to-Spanish translation: | <i>prima</i> |
| Spanish-to-English back translation: | female cousin |

Table 2: A Difference that Matters: Example

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Original source text: | water penetration |
| English-to-Korean translation: | 홍수 |
| Korean-to-English back translation: | flood |

Table 3: Differences that Do Not Matter: Example A

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Original source text: | physician |
| English-to-Spanish translation: | <i>médico</i> |
| Spanish-to-English back translation: | doctor |

Table 4: Differences that Do Not Matter: Example B

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Original source text: | Genes are tiny things you can't see that tell your body how to grow. |
| English-to-Spanish translation: | <i>Los genes son muy pequeños y no se pueden ver, pero le dan instrucciones al cuerpo sobre cómo crecer.</i> |
| Spanish-to-English back translation: | Genes are very small and cannot be seen, but they give the body instructions about how to grow. |

translator might introduce errors into the text. Writing in the August 2005 issue of *The ATA Chronicle*, Mike Collins outlined two useful strategies for making back translations work:³

Method 1: When the client asks for a translation and a back translation, get them to agree to wait for delivery until the back translation is complete. Use one team to do the translation and another to do the back translation, and then do a source-to-back translation comparison and correct any discrepancies in the translation. Deliver both documents to the client.

Method 2: In some cases, the client will request delivery of the translation as soon as it is finished, followed later by the back translation. When the back translation is completed, compare the back translation, the translation, and the source document and correct any errors in the translation. When finished, deliver the back translation and a revised copy of the translation, along with a list of the corrections made to the translation and explanations of why they were made.

Both of these strategies presume that the same translator or translation

company will manage both the original and the back translation (albeit with different translators). What happens when a client insists on contracting independently with a second translator or translation company for the back translation? On the surface, such an approach seems reasonable enough, since any real or perceived conflict of interest inherent in either of Collins' approaches is avoided. Nevertheless, without careful client management and education, a major analytical task could easily be thrust upon the original translator or translation company.

Because most clients believe that a good translation will result in a back translation that parrots the original source text—ideally word-for-word and in the same order—it is highly probable that the client will send the back translation to the original translator with instructions “to fix the translation.” My company has had clients who changed the word order of several sentences in the back translation and instructed that the same be done in the original translation (to the detriment of a perfectly good translation). Unfortunately, this worst-case scenario is also a very likely one.

Some Guidelines

In order to streamline the process and hopefully avoid the worst-case scenario, let me suggest four guidelines that clients can use when they commission independent back translations. Such guidelines are necessary because a back translation by itself provides no guidance on how to fix the original translation.⁴

1. A back translation should be done by a professional translator and edited by a second professional. Errors in a back translation cast unnecessary doubt on the validity of the original →

Table 5: Source Text Ambiguity: Example

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Original source text: | The unauthorized employee and supervisor were fired. |
| English-to-Spanish translation: | <i>El empleado no autorizado y su supervisor fueron despedidos.</i> |
| Spanish-to-English back translation: | The unauthorized employee and his supervisor were fired. |

translation. They are time-consuming to resolve and can actually result in the end of a client-translator relationship.

For example, the Spanish word *prima* has more than 15 possible translations, including “the cost of an insurance policy” and “female cousin.” An incorrect back translation leads to a false conclusion about the accuracy of the original translation. This was the case when one of my company’s clients incorrectly back translated *prima* as “female cousin” and insisted that we use a different Spanish word for insurance premium (see Table 1, page 23). Lacking other choices in Spanish for premium, we held our ground. Unfortunately, the issue escalated up the company’s monolingual English-speaking management chain of command to the senior vice-president level. Several days later and after more than 10 telephone calls, we lost the client.

In summary, a quality back translation is essential so that “false positives” (i.e., errors in the back translation itself) are minimized.

2. A comparison of the back translation with the original document should focus on the “differences that matter.”

Table 2 on page 23 presents a real-life example from an English-to-Korean translation project for an insurance client who later commissioned a back translation. The term “water penetra-

tion” appeared in an insurance brochure as a covered item. When translated into Korean, the meaning was changed to “flood” (as evidenced by the back translation), which was NOT an item covered by the insurance policy. The difference is that “water penetration” from wind-driven rain is covered by the insurance company, while flood damage is specifically excluded. In this case, neither the translator nor the editor

caught the error, which was uncovered during the back translation process. Clearly, this is a case of a difference that matters, and anyone who manages the back translation process should focus on this type of difference.

3. Ignore “differences that do not matter.”

In Spanish, the word *médico* means both doctor and physician. No improvement is possible by asking either the original English-to-Spanish translator or the back translator to make a change because we are really dealing with a synonym here, so *médico* is correct (see Table 3 on page 23).

In the second example (see Table 4 on page 23), taken from a child assent form for young subjects in a diabetes study, the original English and the back translation vary considerably in sentence structure and word choice. The content, however, is the same. Very

Back Translation Guidelines

1. A back translation should follow the same quality control procedures as the original translation.
2. Comparisons of the source text with the text from a back translation should focus only on the “differences that matter.”
3. Ignore the “differences that do not matter.”
4. Source text ambiguities may arise that should be resolved by the author of the original source text.

little improvement, if any, will result from trying to force the back translation to be a word-for-word equivalent of the original English by editing the Spanish translation.

Both of these examples and many more like them can be quite time-consuming to resolve. They arise when clients fail to focus on the underlying meaning and seek to measure accuracy by focusing on how closely the source text and back translation match.

In general, appearances of synonyms and alternative word order in a back translation are examples of “differences that do not matter.” *The key to using back translation successfully hinges on the ability to distinguish between differences that matter and those that do not.*

4. Source text ambiguities may arise that should be resolved by the author of the original source text.

Sometimes a translation can reveal a problem with a word or phrase that no one ever considered when drafting the original English source text. The translator (and the back translator) can only offer their interpretations of what they thought the writer meant to say (see Table 5 on page 24).

Were *both* the employee and the supervisor “unauthorized,” or just the employee? The original English-to-Spanish translator and editor both assumed that “unauthorized” modified only the noun “employee,” which may not be what the original English author meant. At this point, it is critical that the author of the original source text clarify any ambiguities that have come to light before editing the translation.

Is a Full Back Translation Necessary?

Many of us have tried to dissuade clients from undertaking a complete

(and expensive) back translation as a means of quality control because we know that a back translation will not catch all the errors. For example, spelling errors, missed diacritical marks (such as accent marks), and incorrect foreign language punctuation (such as omitting the *¿* or *¡*) in the original translation will usually be overlooked by the party doing the back translation, since their job is to transmit the meaning of the source text to the target text. It is usually impossible to replicate a spelling error, incorrect punctuation, or missing diacritical marks in a back translation, unless the meaning has changed. The back translation process is simply not designed to catch these types of errors.

Like it or not, back translations are here to stay. Yes, they can flush out serious translation errors that even the best translator/editor teams make. But they are expensive—at least twice as expensive as a one-way translation—without allowing for the additional analysis of trying to explain and resolve differences between the original source text and the back translation.

Is there any way our clients could benefit from something less than an expensive back translation? Perhaps it might be more useful to limit the back translation process to a handful of critical terms in the more sensitive documents clients want to translate. After all, companies often invest a great deal of time drafting selected sections or phrases in a document. This “wordsmithing” has specific purposes such as limiting the company’s liabilities in the case of insurance carriers.

With the benefit of hindsight and the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina-related insurance controversies, we might want to make sure that critical terms such as “water penetration” are subject to back translations

(even if the original translation was done in total conformance with the ASTM translation standard). Such an approach would be significantly less expensive than a complete back translation. Now all we have to do is convince our clients who think they need a complete back translation to settle for something less. When a client does insist on a complete back translation, hopefully the guidelines and examples provided in this article will help bring closure to a process that otherwise could be painfully long.

Notes

1. The ASTM International translation standard, formally known as “ASTM F2575 - 06 Standard Guide for Quality Assurance in Translation,” was developed after several years of discussions involving translators, academicians, and industry participants in the U.S. and Europe. It was published in June 2006. For complete information, go to www.astm.org/Standards/F2575.htm.
2. “International Consumer Product Testing Across Cultures and Countries,” edited by Alejandra M. Muñoz and Silvia C. King (ASTM International, June 2007), 13.
3. Collins, Mike. “Medical Back Translation: Strategies for Making it Work.” *The ATA Chronicle* (August 2005), 19-24.
4. “Why Back Translations Are a Bad Idea.” *ProTranslator* (Volume V, Number 1), www.inlinela.com/newsletter/inline_news_vol5_1.pdf.

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