

Monitoring Potential Risks in Translation Activities

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Abstract: *This paper proposes an approach to translation from the point of view of risk management issues. Specialists in this field are only starting to realise that general Risk Management concepts are equally applicable to “desktop” activities such as translation. By taking into account the specific features of translation as an intercultural mediator and open resource, the author justifies the importance of including this subject in the curricula for the Master’s Degree in Translation. This essay is part of a larger project aimed at offering a course about Risk Management in Translation for second year Master trainees.*

Key words: *Translation, Risk Management, Assessment and Control.*

INTRODUCTION

Any human activity has a purpose and a final goal; a strategy is needed in order to reach that goal. An important element in any strategy is that of assessing potential risks and finding solutions to solve, or at least to avoid those risks.

Translation and Conference Interpreting are two important practical activities of mediation between people and cultures. They are meant to render the essence of an uttering or of a written text in a different language, for the use of people belonging to a different culture. Theory has taught us that, in order to achieve this fundamental role, the target audience must be taken into account at all times; specialists in translation and interpreting are also called upon to prove, in practice, a wide range of extra-linguistic competencies enabling them to choose the appropriate variant in order to make the original text or utterance equally comprehensible in the target language.

RISKS AND THEIR MANAGEMENT

A simple definition of *risk* tells us that it is the unexpected and unwanted result of an inappropriate decision, or of an incorrectly performed activity. In general terms, dictionaries enlist it as “the possibility of incurring a misfortune or loss” or even as a “hazard.”¹ The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), in turn, defines “risk” in a more general way, as an “effect of uncertainty on objectives.”² ISO 31000:2009 proposes a number of suggestions on how to deal with risk:

- a) Avoiding the risk by deciding not to start or continue with the activity that gives rise to the risk
- b) Accepting or increasing the risk in order to pursue an opportunity
- c) Removing the risk source
- d) Changing the likelihood
- e) Changing the consequences
- f) Sharing the risk with another party or parties (for instance, in the case of legal contracts and economics)
- g) Retaining the risk by informed decision

But “risks” can be understood in different ways, depending on the field in which the term is used. For instance, in International relations, risks are perceived as potential menaces to international peace; in medicine, they are related to the danger of losing lives due to illness; in economics and finance risks are closely linked to the failure of an investment; in environmental terms risks are linked to the destruction of the environment; and the list of examples may continue.

¹ In the *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1991... 2003

² The definition is included in standard ISO 31000 as well as in its ISO Guide 72 of 2003. See http://www.iso.org/iso/catalogue_detail.htm?csnumber=43170 for the complete text.

By comparison, translation seems a far more peaceful activity in which risks could only negatively influence the readers of a text or audiences in a conference hall. Yet, from a professional point of view, translation is also a field of excellence in which the accuracy of a message is critical.

In all fields concerned, the effect of risks can be largely reduced through competence, good planning and the choice of an appropriate strategy, all of which contribute to risk control – or *risk management*. Being prepared for **identifying potential risks** and making one's own priorities list for solving them is the best way for maintaining excellence in one's exploits in this complex area of activity, in which individual talent must always be doubled by thorough theoretical knowledge.

In short, risk management is necessary in all activities which are **purposeful** (have a clear purpose) and which **require constant decision making**. Human decision, however, largely depends on the requirements attached to the respective job, as well as on the needs of the client.

Factors which influence risk management in translation

A quick look at all the participants in the act of translation shows that each is relevant and can become a factor of producing risks, but can also help in solving them.

In the case of translations, Christiane Nord³ proposed a number of “**constituents**” – all fundamental in understanding the complexity of this activity having a marked intercultural and communicative value, as well as a *purpose*:

- a) The source-text producer or *initiator* (**the author**);
- b) The source text *sender* (e.g. the publishing house commissioning a translation);
- c) The source text itself;
- d) The source text *recipient* (**the translator**) who is also the target text *producer*;
- e) The target text, as a final product resulting from translation, and finally
- f) The target text *recipient* (**the readers** and **critics**).

These “constituents” are important in determining the level and effects of various risks. For instance, the source text sender provides the job requirements and is responsible for clearly expressing the client's needs and requests; the text sender's budget limitations may also influence the choice of staff responsible for the translation, in which case they must choose between accepting the job at a lower fee and rejecting it.

There is also a degree of vulnerability in connection with the target text producer (the translator), in connection with his/her previous experience in the required domain, or with reference to specific cultural norms or limitations. All these require adapting one's tools and activities so that the final product becomes acceptable in the target culture.

End beneficiaries (the general public or specialists) are also a source of risk; there is a wide range of possibilities regarding their demands and their needs and interests must be predicted properly. Also, their attitude towards the translated text depends on specific cultural norms or limitations which influence the way in which the target text is actually received and accepted in the target culture and promoted on the competitive market.

Ethical issues are another source of risk, both from the point of view of the loyalty to the source text and that of confidentiality, impartiality or conflict of interests. Focusing on the same issue, Anthony Pym⁴ raises interesting questions, among which the translator's ethical responsibility towards the author of the source text, as well as towards the translation itself. In his opinion, the professional translation should constantly be

³ Nord, Christiane (1991): *Textanalyse und Übersetzen* - translated into English as *Text Analysis in Translation*, Heidelberg: Julius Groos

⁴ Pym, Anthony (1992): *Translation and Text Transfer: An Essay on Principles of Intercultural Communication*, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Vienna: Peter Lang. Revised edition: Tarragona: Intercultural Studies Group, 2010, p. 81. ISBN 978-84-613-8543-0

concerned with ethics – especially from the point of view of *the loyalty to the source text*. At the same time, there is a code of ethics written for the control of translation as a profession, with regard to the translator's relationship with the author, with clients, with official secrets which must be kept, and with other translators. As the author points out: *"this means that, since the historical development of the profession concerns a collectivity – translators as a social group - it is misleading to formulate translation rules as simple precepts for individuals who might be morally right or corrigibly wrong. The essential problem of translational ethics is not how to translate in any given situation, but who may decide how to translate."*

Last but not least, a limited knowledge, by the translator, of the local legal provisions related to intellectual property rights and individual liabilities could affect both the translator's activity and the promotion of the final, translated text.

RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The traditional risk management diagram proposes four distinct phases of a strategy meant to reduce potential risks in any activity (**PLANNING → RISKS ASSESSMENT** (including two sub-phases: **Risk Identification** and **Risk Analysis**) → **CHOICE OF A RISK MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUE → MONITORING RESULTS**). This minimal expression of a plan can, however, be extended and differentiated according to the number of people participating in the respective activity and to the specific responsibilities involved by each category. By taking into account each of these factors, the risk management strategy would take the following form:

Planning phase

Risk Planning is the continuing process of developing an organized, comprehensive approach to risk management.

The initial planning includes **establishing a strategy**; establishing **goals and objectives**; planning **assessment, handling, and monitoring activities**; identifying **resources, tasks, and responsibilities**; establishing a method to address specific risks; and deciding on the **type of feedback needed** for the next phases.

The planning phase must make clear the answers to several important questions (*What / When / How*); these are meant to make it easier to understand the detailed features of the source text, the author's point of view and purpose, as well as to elicit the expected reaction of potential readers to the translated text.

(a) What? The author writes the text having in mind a specific purpose, a certain message (the communicative value) and a target audience;

What? The source text sender may have a different purpose than the author's;

What? What are the expected risks related to the degree of text difficulty?

What? What primary and secondary tools are needed?

What? What do potential readers expect?

(b) When? (Timeframe, deadlines and related risks)

(c) How? (Personal approach to the task)

Each of the factors involved in the translation activity can be treated in a similar way. At the same time, if this activity is viewed as the work of just one individual, an initial planning is meant to emphasize both the actual strategy chosen and the specific resources and tasks which are to be used according to a person's norms and habits.

Risk assessment phase

Risk assessment refers to the processes of *identification and analysis* of the risks associated with the life cycle of the system. These two sub-phases are fundamental in a translator's strategy in view of achieving a quality work.

Risk Identification

These activities are meant to establish the weight of different types of risks, as well as an order of priorities. In the case of any human activity, risks can be quantified as being HIGH – MODERATE – LOW. According to this threefold evaluation those risks which are considered higher must be addressed first, then followed by actions focusing on moderate ones; finally, low risks are the last to be taken into consideration.

Risk Analysis

The purpose of the risk analysis stage is to isolate the cause of each specific risk, to determine the potential impact in each case, and to choose the appropriate action needed to solve it. Risk analysis is useful in order to determine what risk should be tracked, what data is used to track risk, and what methods are used to handle the risk.

Bradford and Duncan state that "risk analysis explores the options, opportunities, and alternatives associated with the risk" and, at the same time, that "it addresses the questions of how many legitimate ways the risk could be dealt with and the best way to do so."⁵ In our opinion, among other benefits, the risk analysis stage provides a chance to assess any *collateral effects* of an inappropriate choice of action, the way in which it affects either partly or entirely the project at hand.

Choice of a risk control method

An important factor in controlling risks is to *acknowledge* the fact that there is always a degree to which risks are acceptable. Consequently, the main purpose of risk management (or control) is to maintain any potential risks within acceptable limits.

In practice, choices range from *avoiding risks* to *transferring* (delegating) them to a different "constituent". For instance, in the case of multiple tasks (especially in cases of group activities, such as software localization) tasks with a higher degree of risks must be assigned to those who are better prepared (e.g. IT specialists) to assume them. However, even in such cases, the final product is perceived as a result of group efforts and the entire group risks to be criticized by end users or other stakeholders.

It is also important to note that risks *are not passive* and the *level of risk may change* during a specific activity. It is difficult to anticipate all potentially negative consequences, irrespective of the complexity of the chosen strategy.

Results report and further monitoring

When a practical activity such as translation comes to an end it is easy to review the various risks which were related to it (those expected to appear and those which were unexpected and possibly influenced the accuracy of the final product).

As a rule, task coordinators (especially in the case of translation projects involving team work, as in the case of software or games localization) require the presentation of a full report because such data may be very helpful in future activities. Any monitoring of future activities with a similar purpose thus becomes easier. At individual level, writing down such a report with the positive and negative issues regarding the project can also be of help for future activities.

⁵ Bradford and Duncan (2000). *Simplified Strategic Planning*. Chandler House, p. 37

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

By evaluating the risks involved by any human activity and by using a good strategy the final product resulting from that activity has a good chance of being optimal and useful for its users. Translation is useful for large numbers of users and, therefore, the quality of the final product becomes even more important. The practical application of risks management is an area of study that must receive further consideration from theorists and translators themselves.

The research conducted in this field has shown that applying an individually adapted strategy and carefully approaching each potential risk is critical for a job well done. As shown above, risk management is **a process** whose phases are closely linked and depend on each other. In other words, if one phase is understood correctly, the next will have a good basis for being performed in the right manner. Conversely, if one phase of the risk management strategy is missed or approached incorrectly, the results of the next phases may be affected as well.

As part of a larger project, this study aims at offering Master trainees a useful tool in their efforts to become widely appreciated translators, able to transfer the meaning of the source text into the target culture and meet the expectations of the target readers. Therefore, it is the duty of translation trainers to raise their students' awareness in the field of specific risks management.

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This paper has been reviewed.