

IS QUALITY STILL FASHIONABLE?

Philippe Pailhé

Discourse on quality is well diffused in all sectors, including that of localisation, thanks in particular to the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) and its components and more recently ISO certifications. This article contains some elements of reflection gleaned from day to day localisation project management.

Most companies are preoccupied with customer satisfaction. Its central role is recognised, accepted and taken into account as yet another competitive pressure.

Furthermore, the quality approach has long presented a strong business argument in the conquest of new markets. Associated with a controlled pricing policy, it makes it possible to preserve all the competitiveness necessary for the economic survival of a company. Management technique then consists of correctly controlling quality over the long term. Too many companies redouble quality-related efforts to obtain markets, and then let these efforts subside once the relationship with the customer is established.

EVOLUTION OF QUALITY

In order to sustain this approach and, at the same time, maintain good customer relations, it is necessary for both the customer and the service provider to jointly define the level of quality that is expected at the proposed price. Indeed, it is the customer who is most qualified to define the quality of a service as they are paying for it.

However, it is necessary to guard against excess: the effort put into achieving customer satisfaction is sometimes extreme, even counterproductive, because some of the expectations ascribed to the customer have not been confirmed by any analysis. In

these cases, there is a major risk of focusing on issues that the customer may be unaware of and are immaterial while leaving real issues unresolved and actual expectations unsatisfied.

How many times have we worked long hours tracking inconsistencies in a product while letting some misprints and unfortunate phrases slip by, even though the customer seemed more attached to the quality of the language. When this happened, our approach remained unchanged, because the service corresponded more to our own definition of quality than to the real expectations of our customer. It was, therefore, necessary for us to highlight the improvement in linguistic quality whilst pointing out to the customer the importance of consistency for the end-user. This shows us that you cannot focus on one qualitative aspect without detrimentally affecting the other. As a result of this, there has been movement away from the old process of “unacceptable quality” to that of “super-satisfied customer.”

Does unacceptable quality result from the statistical methods of the MIL STD (Military Standard) type? MIL STD “authorises” a level of non-quality (Acceptance Quality Level or AQL), that is to say defects being allowed to remain which ruin a batch, despite being within acceptable levels. This approach represents a compromise between the level of quality, the quantity delivered or the price negotiated, which was acceptable in an economy of excess demand. Today, however, supply exceeds demand and so no defect should ever be allowed to reach the customer.

Quality should be controlled to the point where only products with no defects are released and even if the majority of companies are not at that level of control, they should perceive this as an attainable objective. But at which stage can quality be best controlled?

CONTROL: AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS OR THROUGH FILTERING?

When defining a successful “quality control” method, it is helpful to keep in mind the original, tried and trusted method, where tight controls are placed on all translated documents from the beginning to ensure that no sub-standard material reaches the consumer, and also the filtering method that controls the operations and processes and places the priority on prevention of errors in these areas.

Current opinion advocates the passage from one to the other; control from the outset replacing filtering efforts using a progressive approach. The practical impact of this course of action is known, but the levels of its development vary considerably.

For example, in order to apply the preventative approach and control the processes, an organisation must possess resources and competences that are generally lacking in smaller, more modest companies.

This approach is inadequate. It should be regarded as a temporary solution pending more efficient responses and improvement of the source material. In fact, filtering allows one to forget that the origin of quality is in the operations themselves and not in control and sorting. The cost involved in using filtering as a form of quality control can be prohibitive, and in the face of competition, the long-term risk involved in this method is an important factor. Costs incurred because of poor quality can amount to up to 25% of production costs.

Suppliers do not control markets, customers do, and no customer is willing to pay for poor quality products. Customer power combined with the pressure exerted on prices by competitors, means that a lack of quality is a tangible element that must be taken into account when calculating a company's profit margin. This can be done using the following equation.

$$\text{PROFIT MARGIN} = \text{PRICE OF SALES} - \text{LOSSES DUE TO LACK OF QUALITY}$$

When a procedure is complex, and difficult to control, the filtering process tends to reflect this and become entrenched over the long term. Even on a temporary basis, one ends up getting accustomed to this manner of organisation, and integrating it into daily management practices.

Any interruption in this filtering process could affect quality, and cause it to deteriorate rapidly. This means that at first glance, filtering seems to be a legitimate form of quality control, while in reality it addresses only the symptoms and not the root causes.

When problems are brought to our attention we are embarrassed and irritated, we say that we have tools to resolve the problem, and pledge to change our approach so that causes are addressed but urgency, the need to compete, means that we interest ourselves in finding effective short-term solutions that allow us to be competitive.

This urgency has existed for months, even years. The parable of the woodcutter illustrates perfectly our obstinate behaviour and failure to address this issue.

A person out for a stroll sees a woodcutter weary from trying to cut wood with a blunt axe.

The stroller asks: “Why don't you sharpen your axe? Your work would be so much easier.”

“I do not have the time,” answers the woodcutter, sweat dripping from his brow. “I must cut wood.”

Redoubling efforts to counteract effects rather than daring to pause, analyse the situation and address the causes is a common occurrence.

Recently, one of our customers asked us whether we could carry out an update on one of their products. We had been working on this product for years and managing this project had always been difficult due to large unplanned volumes of material, inflexible deadlines and poor organisation in general. This update consisted of approximately 80,000 new words to be translated within seven days. In deciding whether or not to take the project, we were faced with two choices: 1) accept the offer by distributing the volume of material among several translators, being aware of effect that the time limit, the large number of translators needed and guaranteed editing problems would have on the already compromised quality of the product, or 2) refuse, and thus allow our competitors to criticise our work, and risk losing our customer.

Our solution was to use the update as an opportunity to inform our customer of the problems arising from their imposition of these conditions. In order to ensure that a situation of this type did not arise again, we decided to rework (at our own expense, as the customer only pays for an edited, final version) all the documentation (more than 500,000 words) for the product and explain, to the customer, the problems that their conditions caused. However this extra work and cost could have been avoided if we had tackled the causes of the quality deficit, in partnership with our customer, from the beginning. As it was, the situation had to change as the previous method induced too much stress, caused supplementary expense and allowed the delivery of sub standard versions of the product. No one could benefit from this.

QUALITY CONTROL: A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

We understand, that actual demand is based on three requirements: a high quality service, speed and the best possible price. Current trends place these three requirements on the same level:

$$\text{Quality} = \text{Time} = \text{Minimum price}$$

This equation is only relevant as long as the fragile balance between these three elements is preserved. The three requirements are strongly dependent on one another, and importance granted to one is at the expense of the others. For example, if one restricts oneself to the aim of providing a minimal price whilst respecting impossible delivery times, quality will inevitably suffer.

$$\text{Quality} = \text{Time} = \text{Minimum price}$$

$$(-) = (+) = (+)$$

Afterwards, if one wishes to improve on the quality of the documents, they will need to be edited, incurring additional costs and delay.

$$\text{Quality} = \text{Time} = \text{Minimum price}$$

$$(+) = (-) = (-)$$

In the end, none of the criteria will have been fully satisfied.

Quality = Time = Minimum price

(-) = (-) = (-)

Quality must be considered a paramount element and not relegated to third place. We work for the constant improvement of quality while trying to learn from the lessons previous problems have provided.

QUALITY: A SHARED EFFORT

Chief amongst these lessons are problems dealing with spelling, grammar, formatting, syntax and style. It goes without saying that these quality problems lie within the scope of responsibility of the language service provider. However, there are other recurring problems, running parallel to these linguistic issues, that simple precautions would eliminate.

LOCALISABILITY

Localisability refers to the process of making an application localisable.

An application being prepared for localisation is split into two conceptual blocks: a block of data and a block of code, the data block contains all the resources for the user interface while the code block contains only the code for all the local environments and language versions. The code block will, therefore, be identical

for all languages but will be adaptable according to the selected languages. In practice this phase of preparation is not always carried out correctly. Indeed, we regularly find ourselves confronted with problems that are directly related to a lack of file preparation.

Examples of problems arising due to lack of file preparation, which can lead to quality issues, include the following:

FORMAT PROBLEMS

There is no universal address, date, hour and measurement unit format and as a result all input fields should be able to manage a variety of address formats. The fields "State" and "Province" are used in many English applications and while they refer to an existing concept for the Anglophone users, they mean absolutely nothing to the majority of other users. In the same way, postal codes differ from one country to another, and while some are numerical, others are comprised of both numbers and letters.

The same applies to date and time formats and also measuring units.

For example, see Table 1.

Country	Date format
United States	10/12/04
Spain	12/10/04
Japan	04/10/12

Table 1

	String 1	String 2	String 3
English	one after the other	The directories will be removed	The tables will be removed
French	un après l'autre	Les répertoires seront supprimés	Les tables seront supprimées

Table 2

	String 1	String 2
English	Create Wizard	'String 1' did not complete successfully.
French	Assistant de création	"String 1" a échoué

Table 3

STRING CONCATENATION PROBLEMS

String concatenation, while making it possible to reduce the size of a string, can represent a real problem with regards to localisation (See Table 2).

Taken separately, these strings are completely correct. In English, the concatenation of Strings 2 & 1 and 3 & 1 gives a satisfactory result. However, the result is less effective once these strings are localised into French: for grammatical reasons, the word *tables* being female, the concatenation of Strings 3 & 1 is not correct, because String 1 should post *une après l'autre* and not *un après l'autre*. The same applies to many other languages. This problem can be easily circumvented by avoiding the concatenation of strings in resource files.

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

Another problem that arises often is that identical English words are not translated in the same way. (See Table 3)

In the English version, String 1 (the title of a dialogue box) is also used in an error message (string 2). In French, String 1 functions perfectly as an autonomous string, but not in String 2, the error message, because the definite article is necessary in French (*L'assistant de création*).

USE OF VARIABLES

The use of variables can also lead to errors and affect the quality of a document because while variables

can represent savings in English, they can prove to be a great source of doubt and error for a translator. For example, in the following sentence, the variable *{0}* can be substituted alternatively with "classification category" and "access group":

"Optional: Type a description of a {0}"

A correct translation of a *{0}* is impossible in French because the two variables supplied are of different genders.

RESOURCE FILES

If the possibility of localisation at a future date is taken into consideration during the development of an application, it is possible to save time, and, by the same token, money because the application will not have to be revised later in the development process. While this may mean more initial work during the technical drafting stage, future work will be greatly facilitated.

MESSAGES AND DIALOGUE BOXES

English strings are generally shorter than translated strings, and as a result potential text expansion must be taken into account when designing the user interface so that messages in other languages can be displayed without having to revise the original text.

IMAGES

The use of images containing text is not recommended because of the lengthy and difficult editing process and, furthermore, the obstacle which can be represented by the size of the text.

HELP FILE PREPARATION

The technical drafting of help files must be simple and coherent to permit easy recycling of previously translated segments. Particular attention must be paid to the drafting of the software options in help files, as modification of an option can involve a lot of research for the translator.

DEADLINES

Localisation and translation's position in the editorial chain implies a lot of pressure in terms of planning. Indeed, the schedule established by the software publisher includes specific, and separate, timeframes for the development and multi-lingual localisation of a product. Any problems encountered during the development phase can delay the provision of files to the translator(s) and hence delay localisation. This means that the deadlines set for localisation, which along with marketing occurs at the end of the development process, are often reduced to their minimum and this tends to make it difficult to provide high quality work. Moreover, as time allotted for translation is often inflexible, we are often forced to sacrifice valuable editing time, which, once again, can affect quality.

Better planning that allows contingency time for possible slippages would allow for better management of localisation projects, on all levels.

IN THE END ...

All these problems can, on the whole, be avoided or circumvented by keeping localisation in mind during product development but if localisation is ignored costs can increase appreciably and quality problems may be more difficult to identify and correct.

We can presume that everyone is aware of the impossible equation between quality, ever-faster delivery and constant price reduction but due to the growing complexity of international competition on all levels, the current priority seems to be focused on price and speed. Some clients may acknowledge this issue, while others simply pass the "hot potato" on to the external vendor, letting them deal with the problem.

While time and cost have a simple relationship, quality is antagonistic to both. Linguistic quality is necessarily based on human process, which means it takes time and costs money. If you cut back on both, quality will suffer. ■

Philippe Pailbé is a Project Manager at WH&P. He holds a Masters in French translation and a BA in French law. He can be reached at p.pailbe@wbp.fr

