

## **Translating Technical Manuals – Part II**

**by João Roque Dias, Technical Translator  
Lisbon – Portugal**

**[www.jrdias.com](http://www.jrdias.com)**

**edited by Peter Ingham, Translator  
Oeiras – Portugal**

**[peteringham@mail.telepac.pt](mailto:peteringham@mail.telepac.pt)**

### **The many faces of technical manuals**

Look for manuals in many different shapes and forms. Each one serves a unique purpose: to convey the proper information to a well-defined audience:

- Simpler manuals: intended for the general public (electric shavers, microwave ovens, coffee makers, vacuum cleaners...)
- Full-size manuals: intended for split audiences. The operation manual is given to the general public and the service/maintenance manual is intended for service personnel and other specialists. Examples: automotive manuals, commercial equipment and some industrial equipment.
- Extremely complex manuals: never seen by the general public. Typically, manuals for industrial machinery and installations. Examples: a new coal milling plant for a cement industry or the service manuals for an aircraft.

### **With so many faces in front of me, what hat should I wear?**

In a word: the Translator's hat (noticed the capital "T"?). Meaning:

- Simpler manuals: write clearly, so everybody can understand the information conveyed by the manuals. Simple, direct language will do the trick...
- Full-size manuals: again, clarity is a must. Profound knowledge of the process and its terminology is also a must.
- Extremely complex manuals: not for the faint of heart! Either you're part of the loop where the manual will be used, or you become part of it. Flaws (no matter how minor they may be...) are, usually, not excused. In this Premier League of translation you're either awarded a Medal of Honor or you're disposed of with no mercy...

### **And, what's my role in this play?**

It really depends on what you've been hired for and why...

- As a specialized translator, you should be hired to translate within your fields of expertise. Then, a specialized editor should go through your translation and eliminate any minor inconsistencies and other glitches. Because a specialist has produced it, the editor shouldn't find any major errors... The client should also expect to pay for such expertise...
- As a specialized translator, some clients tend to look at you (and hire you...) as a walking specialist dictionary: translation is given to the cheapest translator they can find and you're supposed to make his/her work "good enough" to send to the final client. Of course, as a specialized translator, you'll be paid "editing fees"...
- In these scenarios, it's up to you to decide what you're doing...

### **I have one manual to translate. A big one. Now what?**

Read it! From top to bottom! Period. Outside the environment where the manual was produced, you're probably the first person to read it. Everything in it has to make sense to you. Everything!

- Translate the index first (that will define the bulk of the terminology)
- Never translate the index, without checking the body of the manual first.

### **I have several manuals to translate. Same subject. Now what?**

You already know it: read them! From top to bottom! Period.

- Tackle the more complex one, first (e.g., the one intended for a specialized audience). That will define all the terminology you'll need.
- Translate the easier one, next (for a more broader audience). Don't forget to adjust the style of your translation.

**Is there a strategy to translate technical manuals?**

I'm glad you used the word "strategy", because, some translators (notice the small case "t"?) ask me if there is a translation "technique"...

- Get familiar with some common terminologies used in a wide variety of industries: an electric motor used in a dishwasher may be exactly the same motor used in a glass-making machine. They also use exactly the same fasteners...
- Industries very far apart in what they produce may use the same machines: the same bucket elevator will be used in a sugar refinery and in a cement plant...
- Remember: "strategy" is what you prepare, before you engage in a certain task, "technique" is what you actually do when engaged in that task.

**I've been asked to translate a manual written in BASIC English. What's that?**

Do you mean BASIC (British, American, Scientific, International Commercial) English or "basic" English? If it's BASIC, then be aware that your source text will include a very reduced lexicon and also very simple grammar rules. Of course, your translation should also "translate" this well. In its original form, BASIC English, developed by Charles Kay Ogden in 1932, contained only 850 words that could be learnt all over the world within one month. After the language confusion of Babel, this was the first attempt to confront the world with just one language.

- If it's just "basic" English, then you should have no problems...

**Now, they told me that the manual was written in some sort of "Controlled Language". Should I go back to basic school? Or, should I say BASIC school?**

A Controlled Language is simply a method to assign one word only to a select number of actions, things and other concepts, such as quality. Caterpillar, Inc. developed the first CL, in 1970 and it was named "Caterpillar Fundamental English", or CFE. It was based on Ogden's BASIC English. In 1972, Caterpillar published "A Dictionary of Caterpillar Fundamental English". As trade and technological achievements grew, CFE became limited. Early in 1990s, Caterpillar brought out a new Language: Caterpillar Technical English (CTE). It includes 8,000 general terms and 50,000 technical terms. Is 58,000 terms a lot? Actually, no, since there were over 1 million possibilities to choose from...

Other organizations followed in Caterpillar's footsteps: AECMA's Simplified English, Boeing's Simplified English Checker (BSEC) or Xerox's TermChecker are just some examples.

**How interesting! But, as a Translator, what's in all this for me?**

Nothing out of the ordinary, really! Just be aware that you are dealing with an already structured language and vocabulary, in which consistency can already be taken for granted. Therefore, your translation should reflect this reality: it should be consistent, (crystal) clear and highly readable. But, again, that's what your translations already are, right?

- And, even if your source copy was not written in CE (Controlled English) or SE (Simplified English), the more you know about these subjects, the better your final work will be!

**My manual is to be sent to European users, say in Portugal (\*). As I translate into European Portuguese (\*), there will be no problem with my translation, right?**

Basically, yes. But, be aware that manuals intended for use in Europe often include terminology and conventions called for by legislation from the European Union, especially those referring to the compliance with EU Directives. You should be thoroughly familiar with such terminology and conventions; as well as with their proper translation...

(\*) Replace by your own country and language.

- Almost all EU Directives have been translated into the 11 languages of the Union. They're all available, for free, in various EU web sites. Do a little data mining and you'll save yourself a lot of work. Your translation will also be better and your Client will notice that, too.

**Data mining? But, where is the mine?**

**Ogden's Basic English**  
<http://www.basiceng.com/>

**Natural Language Software Registry (NLSR)**  
<http://registry.dfki.de/>

**AECMA's Simplified English**  
<http://www.aecma.org/Publications.htm>

**A Plain English Handbook (for SEC Disclosure Documents)**  
<http://www.sec.gov/investor/pubs/englishhndbk.htm>

**European Union Legislation**  
<http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/>

**My own Translation Links (more than 5500 glossaries and other links...)**  
<http://www.jrdias.com/jrd-links.html>