

Translating Technical Manuals: What are they? What are they used for?

by João Roque Dias, Technical Translator
Lisbon – Portugal
www.jrdias.com

edited by Peter Ingham
Lisbon – Portugal
peteringham@mail.telepac.pt

So, what are technical manuals?

They are not some literary work with a few technical buzzwords. They're just a roadmap for the user of the system they refer to. Their purpose is to convey information. Remember: you don't read technical manuals for pleasure, you USE technical manuals because you need to know what they tell you. The translators of technical manuals must keep this in perspective. Otherwise, they become useless pieces of cheap literature.

Who writes technical manuals?

Professional technical writers with a deep knowledge of the subject matter, impeccable writing skills and an excellent command of the "manual style." Or, at least, they should. Reality is a bit different:

- Some know little about the subject and get the user confused about what to do and not to do
- Some are still learning how to write
- "Style" is reduced to a boring repetition of warning sentences and a mix of technical and legal words

Who translates technical manuals?

You're right! Professional technical translators with a deep knowledge of the subject matter, impeccable writing skills and an excellent command of the "manual style." Again, at least, they should. In the real world, however:

- Some translators have no idea of what they're translating
- Basic technical concepts (that should show in the translated text) are simply left out
- "Style" is reduced to a simple "word by word translation" (the *dictionary translation syndrome*)

I have a manual to translate. Now what?

Do you know the subject matter? How well? If you're unfamiliar with the subject matter and if to get well into it seems impossible or impracticable, be honest and don't accept the assignment. You'll save your client and yourself a lot of trouble and embarrassment.

I know the subject matter, and I still have the manual to translate. Any clues?

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! Otherwise, how are you going to convey to others who speak your language the "meat" of the manual?

OK! I've read it. Now what?

Establish the style of your translation. Which may be different from the one used in the source copy:

- An "informal" style may not translate well into your mother tongue
- Use the infinitive or the imperative form, as appropriate or customary in the technical world of the destination country of the manual
- Get familiar with the world where the manual is going to be used: the "sales office" of the source copy may have to become the "representative" or the "dealer" in your translation

My manual has lots of words related to buttons, dials and displays. Should I translate these?

I'm glad you asked. Because, most translators don't! Call your client and find out if the lettering on the buttons and dials and the text in the displays are going to be translated as well. Usually, they're not! For economy reasons, they claim. So, if you translate "LOWER" or "LEFT" into your language, the poor operator will be left looking for a button that doesn't exist. He/she is there to operate the machine. Not to do any translation. That's your job! Do it well!

**DANGER
WARNING
CAUTION
NOTICE**

How should I translate these words?

Get familiar with the standards governing the usage of these “safety words”, both in the source country and the target country. Safety words should NEVER be translated by looking them up in a bilingual dictionary. For instance, WARNING is a word that should convey the meaning of a less hazardous situation than DANGER (i.e., life threatening), but more dangerous than CAUTION (i.e., minor bodily injury and damage to the equipment). So, what is the right word in your language that conveys the same meaning and preserves the hierarchy of these safety words? Is there legislation in your country about this?

Should I convert the units of measurement that appear in my manual?

Yes, if that makes them usable by the user. But if the user is to press a button, when the needle of a pressure gauge (graduated in PSI) reaches 120 PSI, converting this to kPa will leave the poor guy/girl looking for something that doesn't exist. When it comes to units, there are 3 basic rules for the translator:

1. Learn the ropes about units of weight and measurement.
2. Make units usable. Quite often, this means not doing anything to them.
3. Avoid surprises! Ask your client what should be done about the units in the manual. Always!

My client sent me a list of words that are the captions for the illustrations of a manual. Now what?

Don't touch them, until you see the illustrations. That's if you want to provide a quality translation. Would you buy a house, just based on its description?

My manual has some words that I can't find in any of my dictionaries. Now what?

Before calling your client for assistance, try the Yellow Pages! Maybe you never thought about it, but they're the only “general technical dictionary” updated every year by the people who use the terminology themselves. I have several of these books in several languages in my library. They're simply invaluable!

The manual sent to me looks just great. I'm sure that it's well written and that its translation will not be that difficult.

You know what they say: “beauty is only skin deep.”

Under a glossy print and a 6-color cover, look for little things like:

- Poor copy written in “international” English
- Unclear sentences (English may be the writer's second language)
- Unusual acronyms/abbreviations known but to God
- Wrong captions in the illustrations
- Graphs with wrong information, labels or values
- 110 V power outlets in machinery exported to Europe (?)

Some “little things” in the manual don't look right to me. Why?

Typographic style is different from country to country. A few examples: text in spines is set differently in the US and in Europe and in Europe, periods and commas are set outside quotation marks, while in the US they're set inside. Get those little things right!

My manual asks the user to comply with American regulations, like OSHA, ANSI, NFPA, CFR, etc.

First, do you know what those acronyms mean? You should. Second, if they refer to materials, you're OK. But, if you ask people in your country to comply with foreign laws and regulations, something is wrong. Within proper context, OSHA may become “the company's safety regulations” and the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) may be best translated as the appropriate equivalent code used in your country. Find out.

My manuals include several references to other publications (either from the same company or just trade publications). I should translate their names, right?

No! Unless they've already been translated and you know their title in your own language. Otherwise, people interested in referring to those publications will not be able to locate them. Again, the name of the game in the world of technical manuals is *“every piece of information should be presented in a way that makes it usable.”* Anything less, will turn any useful information into just a bunch of “filler words.”

The manual sent to me includes a 3-page warranty section. Looks easy!

Don't be fooled about how easy a legal text looks like. For non-lawyers, legal texts will always be incomprehensible. If you still want to do it yourself, ask your client to have it reviewed by a specialist in the area. Or, at least, have your lawyer friend go through your translation. I call it common sense!

And a one-page “EC Certificate of Conformity” required by some EEC, EC or EU Directive...

“Certificate” and “Declaration” are both used. EC (European Commission) Directives have the “EEC” or “EC” designator in its official reference number. Leave this as it is. Refer to the name of the Directives by their official designation (there are 11 official names for each Directive). So, get some EU Directives in several languages from the EU official website (see the URL below). They have all the correct, validated terminology you need. Save yourself some time and provide your client with a top-notch translation.

In my last manual, this was called “Declaration of Conformity”...