Translator Certification: Sound and Defensible?
FIT 2014 presentation in session 334, August 5, at 16:00
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In the abstract for this presentation at the FIT 2014 Congress, it states the “[t]he moderator will prepare a set of proposed criteria for translator certification programs around the world that want to be sound and defensible, based on ISO 17024 (requirements for organizations that certify persons) but tailored to the area of translation.” Those proposed criteria are found in the present document, which first discusses various means of evaluating and selecting translation service providers (both companies and individuals), then introduces translator certification (the primary concern of this panel) and the problem of evaluating a certification body, and finally proposes, as promised in the abstract, a set of 17024-based criteria to be met by translator certification bodies.

Approaches to Selecting a Translation Service Provider
There are three roles in any translation project: requester, provider, and end-user. The provider can be a language services company or an individual translator. Sometimes the requester and the end-user are the same person, but often the requester is not the end-user of the translation and is not in a position to directly assess it. Indeed, the requester often does not even speak the target language. In such cases, the requester needs some method of selecting a provider that is likely to produce an acceptable result by an agreed-on deadline. There are many approaches to selecting a provider, such as:

1. Recommendation/references: The requester could ask a colleague to recommend a provider that provided satisfactory service in the past or ask providers to produce references.
2. Certification: Potential providers can be screened by determining whether they are certified. In the translation industry, there are two types of certification: (1) certification of a company (even if the company consists of only one person) according to the process it follows, and (2) certification of a person’s translation competence. (At present, two standards for certification of companies are under development, one within ISO Technical Committee 37, and the other within ASTM International Technical Committee F43; however, at present there are no widely accepted, formal, minimal requirements for organizations that certify the competence of translators as persons.)
3. Education: Requesters may screen providers based on their educational experience under the assumption that formal education, such as an MA in translation, is a predictor of the quality of the provider’s output. Of course, some MA programs in translation and are better than others, and not all graduates of a degree program are equally competent or remain at the same level of competence during their practicing careers they had when they graduated. One method of judging whether an MA program in translation is good is to determine whether it has received the EMT quality label (see http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/). However, this method is only applicable to European programs. An international quality label for a degree in translation is whether the institution offering the degree is a member of CIUTI (www.ciuti.org).
4. Years of experience: The length of experience as a translator is often assumed to correlate with skill, although individual variation at a given level of experience will still be considerable.
5. Other approaches: The article by Arle Lommel from a recent special issue of the journal TransInt (available as a free download via www.tinyurl.com/ticert) discusses various approaches to selecting translators seen as alternatives to certification, including the option of a company or individual signing work. As in other industries, a combination of factors is used as evidence of professional competence.
Certification

Many organizations certify translators. Most of them are professional associations of translators that are members of FIT. As with educational programs, some translator certification programs are better than others. How does one determine whether a translator certification program is good? For example, one translation service provider states the following (anonymized) statement:

[Translation Company X] moved traditional professional translation to the Internet. We created a unique platform that enables customers to get high-quality human translation by certified translators in a very efficient and affordable way.

This statement raises an obvious question: what organization certified those translators? Suppose one asked and found that they were certified by Saskia-Jessen Unlimited, a fictitious translator certification body. How would a requester determine if this certification has any real value?

This panel is about how to determine whether a given translator certification body is sound (that is, whether those whom it certifies are indeed competent translators) and defensible (that is, whether external challenges to its certification process can be met through documentation available to the public). In particular, the focus of the panel is a discussion of whether ISO 17024, an international standard containing minimal requirements for bodies (that is, organizations) that certify persons, is sufficient to ensure that certifications from ISO 17024-compliant bodies meet the needs of the various stakeholders.

The requirements of ISO 17024 are not the only available means to evaluate a particular certification claim. For example, some individuals believe that only government-issued translator certification should be considered when evaluating the credentials of a translator. In this view, one approach to determining whether a certification body is sound and defensible is to ask whether the certification body is a government agency. However, this approach may not be the ultimate answer, given that most national governments do not certify translators, even if they certify court interpreters and that government certification arrangements range from the independent and rigorous to token: a translator recently told me that he took some classes on translation at a university, asked the university to send a transcript of those classes to a government agency, and that agency then designated him a certified translator without further investigation of his competence. He was not even asked to take a translation test, a common requirement in many translator certification systems. (Detailed debate about the relative merits of where a certification body reports—e.g., to a national government or to an association of professional translators—is interesting and important, but it is beyond the scope of this panel.)

The panelists will each obtain a copy of ISO 17024, study it, and provide an answer to the following question: Is meeting the requirements of ISO 17024 (as applied to the translation industry in the following five areas) sufficient to make it sound and defensible? If not, what else is needed?

Scope of this Proposal

The following proposal is not intended to create any new translator certification bodies. It is not designed to rank certification bodies that meet the minimal requirements, relative to each other. It is not designed to compete with academic degrees in translation. Its purpose is to provide a minimal set of requirements for all translator certification bodies. Those certification bodies that meet the requirements can still seek ways to distinguish themselves from others that also meet the requirements. It is anticipated that it will be sufficiently difficult to obtain certification from a sound and defensible body that a translator who recently earned a degree in translation will still need some professional experience before having a good chance of passing a certification exam and those who do not have a degree in translation should obtain several years of industry experience and positive customer recommendations before applying to take a certification exam.
Five Proposed Requirements for a Sound and Defensible Translator Certification Body

1. The translator certification body must:
   a) have a mandate from all stakeholder groups, which include
      i. professional translators, typically represented by an association that is a member of FIT
         (www.fit-ift.org),
      ii. translation companies, which are typically represented by a national or international
          trade association,
      iii. academics who educate translators and who are represented by associations such as
           CIUTI (http://www.ciuti.org/), and,
      iv. in some countries, a government body; and ideally includes
          v. requesters and end-users (in so far as feasible)

      (Note: This multiple stakeholder mandate requirement is not explicit in ISO 17024 but is logical
      for the translation world, for certification to enhance the image of the profession.)
   b) be a legal entity or part of a legal entity (see section 4.1)
   c) possess sufficient resources to run an office with according to the governance principles found
      in sections 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10 (which are general business practices not specific to translation)

2. The certification body must use a certification scheme that has been developed according to the
   requirements of section 8; in particular, the certification scheme must:
   a) Include the elements in section 8.2 (translator competence and code of conduct, etc.)
   b) Follow the certification process requirements in section 8.3 and section 9
   c) Have been developed or reviewed according to the requirements of section 8.4. (including
      conducting a job/task analysis involving all categories of stakeholders)

3. The assessment process in the certification scheme must include an examination process that has the
   following assessment attributes named in section 9.3
   a) Fairness, which includes keeping the cost of the examination affordable for a typical translator
      and making the eligibility requirements non-discriminatory
   b) Validity, which includes accounting for all aspects of the competence of a professional
      translator identified in the job/task analysis required by section 8.4, meeting established
      requirements for competences, such as those that have been developed within the EMT
      (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/)
   c) Reliability, which includes determining that exams in various language combinations are of
      comparable difficulty, that the successive exams over time in a particular language combination
      are of similar difficulty, and that multiple graders working independently arrive at similar
      results

4. The certification body must:
   a) Be impartial as required by section 4.3 and elsewhere
   b) Be transparent as required by section 7.2 and elsewhere
   c) Separate training and examination according to section 5.2

5. The certification process must include the following aspects:
   a) Initial certification (with clear eligibility requirements, which can include factors such as
      education, experience, and recommendations, thus incorporating other approaches to translator
      selection)
   b) Periodic recertification (see section 9.6)
   c) Possible suspension or withdrawal (see section 9.5)
Limited additional detail is available from a set of slides available at http://www.ttt.org/FIT2014

Some notes on ensuring that certification is sound and defensible

Certification of individual translators is an important and contentious topic in the translation business. Some regions favor government licensure of translators while others have third-party certification and yet others currently either have no certification or rely on the certification regimes in place in other countries (e.g., some translators seek ATA certification even if they do not reside in the United States). There is more government-issued certification of court interpreters than of non-judicial translators. As translator certification becomes more and more common, a problem has emerged: how can translators and their customers be certain that a certification actually means something? Currently a number of bodies offer certification, but the criteria for certification vary widely. Some translation companies offer “certification” to their free-lance translators after they pass a test, but there is an inherent conflict of interest in such programs: some translation companies claim to use only certified translators in their marketing and so have a vested interest in making certification easy to obtain. At the opposite end of the spectrum, certification can be used as an unfair barrier to market entry (particularly in countries with a legal requirement to use certified translators) that keeps the supply of translators artificially low and raises wages for those lucky enough to be certified.

According to ISO 17024, a certification must be fair, valid, and reliable if it is to succeed. “Fair” means that all applicants must be judged fairly, with no pressure or prejudice. A certification process that excludes classes of applicants on irrelevant grounds (such as gender, sexual orientation, race), that is too expensive for a typical translator to complete, or that requires membership in a particularly organization, would not be considered fair. “Valid” means that the certification must actually be an indicator of competence in the subject of certification. A translation certification test that tested terminology research skills but did not actually test translation skills would not be a valid test for translation. “Reliable” means that the certification must consistently deliver the same results (within an allowable degree of variance), even when different evaluators are used, and that the different versions of the test are of similar difficulty. If a translator produces an identical test result on two days and is determined to be a “high pass” on one day and a “failure” on another day or if assessors cannot agree on whether the candidate has passed the test, the testing process is not reliable.

Determining validity is a complex task that requires a careful Job/Task Analysis (JTA) to determine the key knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required for a job (translation in this case). KSAs are determined through consulting experts on the work of actual translators to see what tasks they perform and the KSAs needed to complete those tasks. A valid certification test must then test and accurately measure those skills while not introducing extraneous factors. In the end it must accurately predict the likelihood that the individual seeking certification would be able to succeed as a translator, assuming s/he also possesses the KSAs, if any that are transparently listed as not being part of the certification process.

Very importantly, a JTA that is acceptable for ISO 17024 must take into account all stakeholder groups. In the world of translation this means at least the following five groups: buyers of translation services (sometimes called requesters or end clients), translation companies (large and small), translators, end users (individuals who use the translation and are often not the same as the buyer), and academics involved in educating and training translators. The provision directly addresses the concern of some that an organization from one stakeholder
group, such as a translation company, could set up ISO 17024-compliant translator certification without involving and obtaining support from associations of professional translators. In addition, requirement 1a in this document demands a mandate from a FIT member association.

Compliance with ISO 17024 should be determined by an accreditation body recognized by the International Accreditation Forum (IAF: http://www.iaf.nu).

The moderator believes that the requirements of ISO 17024, as here applied to the world of translation, are sufficiently rigorous and complete that certification from bodies meeting them will rise in recognition and impact to become the primary selection criterion for individual translators, except perhaps in the premium market, where signed work and personal recommendations will probably always be the main criteria.

The panelists are welcome to agree or disagree with the position of the moderator but not to remain neutral.

Additional materials for this panel will be posted to: http://wwwt.ttt.org/fit2014/