

# Handling client demands

There is no simple calculation for setting fees, so factor in time and effort before rushing in with a figure, says **Sue Young**



Sue Young is a freelance translator and reviser working from German, French and Dutch. She also teaches translation at postgraduate level and runs revision and proofreading workshops. Sue is currently ITI German Network Coordinator and Chairman of the Admissions Committee. You can email her at: [sue@sueyoung.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:sue@sueyoung.freeserve.co.uk)

**O**nce we have established exactly what the client wants us to do (see my article in the May-June *bulletin*), there comes the frequently knotty problem of negotiating payment and deadlines.

Before the days of the computer, revisers wrote in their corrections on a typescript and the whole text was then retyped and given a final check. The computer has, of course, speeded up the process considerably, but not always to the reviser's benefit.

Translation companies often allow only very limited time for revision, in terms of both the actual deadline and the time for which they are prepared to pay. The only fair way to charge for revision is on a time basis, not a word-count basis – the length of time required to revise 1,000 words of translation may be anything from 45 minutes upwards, depending on not only the difficulty of the subject matter, but also the quality of the translation and the standard required of the finished document, ie whether the client is concerned only with overall accuracy or also register, style and general readability.

Yet at least one international translation company (let's call it TC 1) expects the reviser to 'proofread' (the company's term, but it means what is more properly called revision) at least 2,000 words an hour and sets the deadline and fee payable accordingly. So how does the reviser respond to this expectation?

## Fee system

First, a reliable rule of thumb. When I first began revising on screen and returning a 'finished' product electronically, a longstanding client, a translation company (not the same one, so I'll call it TC 2) for which I had frequently revised using pen and paper, told me it operated on the basis that if a 1,000-word translation took more than one hour to

revise, it meant there was something seriously wrong with the translation. Over the years since then, I have found this to be absolutely accurate – and if 1,000 words can be revised in only 45 minutes, that means it is a very good translation indeed. The fee system I agreed with TC 2 was that when it sent me a revision job, I would assume that I could handle it at a rate of 1,000 words per hour. If I found on initial read-through or soon after starting that I was going to need longer, I would contact TC 2 immediately and we would agree a reasonable time that its job budget could stand. In practice, it has never quibbled if I need even twice as much time for the job because it is a matter of re-translation rather than revision. This means that we are both happy – I because I am being paid for the amount of time I need to do the job, and TC 2 because even in the worst-case scenario the job has been 'rescued' and sent out to the end client approximately on time. In addition, TC 2 welcomes feedback from its regular service providers (I translate for it also) and takes on board any lessons learned, so in practice it is very rare for me to have a problem with the standard of any of its translations.

Back to TC 1, which expects 2,000 words of revision an hour, whatever the translation quality. I have evolved a way of dealing with TC 1 which, while not wholly satisfactory, at least doesn't leave me feeling exploited. Having learned from bitter experience that the quality of the translation work it sends out for revision varies widely, I now ask, without exception, to see the job before agreeing to accept it. If the translation quality is very poor, but it is a subject I know well and I feel competent to 'rescue' it, I contact TC 1 and ask if it is willing to pay for additional revision time. If the answer is yes, and we can agree on the amount of additional time payable, I accept the job. It is rare for the answer to be a straight 'no', but all too often TC 1 is willing to pay for a certain amount of additional time, but not the amount that is really needed.

## Unreasonable demands

The decision I have to make then is more difficult, but if I've happened to have spare capacity I have sometimes agreed to accept the job and found myself rushing to finish it within the time for which I'm being paid and then working on for half an hour or so because it couldn't be done. And then I've felt resentful, though it's essentially my own fault. So I have now stopped doing this – if it is genuinely going to be difficult for TC 1 to find another reviser within the time available, I agree to work on the translation for the amount of time for which it is paying, and then to return it with a disclaimer, saying that more revision is needed.

Of course this is not wholly satisfactory either, so in practice these days I just tend to say 'no'. However, the important point here is that too many translators who offer a revision service assume it is their fault if they need more time and simply put in the extra work unpaid. I would never suggest that one shouldn't put in an extra five or ten minutes unpaid in order to do the job properly, but anything beyond this should be paid for.

In other words, it is up to us to stand up for ourselves and not accept unreasonable demands or blame ourselves if we find we cannot fulfil them. We are not employees but service providers, and we understand the service we are providing better than the TCs that are making unreasonable demands. So get that message across to them (nicely), and good luck!

**'Too many translators who offer a revision service assume it is their fault if they need more time and put in the extra work unpaid'**