

Mind over matter

Before revision, clarify your's client needs. **Sue Young** advises on how to avoid any misunderstandings



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The first meaning given for 'revise' by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)* is 'examine and improve or amend (written or printed matter)'. Thus it is logical for 'revision' to be the preferred word used to describe the reading through, checking, and correction where necessary of a translation. 'Revision' is more accurate than 'editing' – to quote *COD* again, the first meaning it gives for 'edit' is 'prepare (written material) for publication by correcting, condensing, or otherwise modifying it'. In many years of offering a revision service, I have never been asked – or authorised – to condense a translation or to modify it in any way that is not covered by the words 'improve or amend'.

However, it is also important to remember that in addition to 'editing', a number of other words are frequently used by both translation businesses and translators to cover the act of examining and improving or amending a translation. They include checking, correcting, reading through and reviewing.

Potentially the most confusing word used for 'revision', and also the commonest, is 'proofreading'. *COD* again: 'proofread v. read (printer's proofs or other material) and mark any errors'. I understand there are now some software programs available that make it possible to proofread in the true sense on a computer. However, the word is still most often used for proofreading in what some people may now consider the old-fashioned sense, ie using standard proof correction marks to mark up errors on hard-copy proofs for a printer to correct. The proofreading stage comes after the revision stage, and it is always to be hoped that there are no remaining substantive errors to be corrected, so

the proofreader should concentrate on the practical aspects (layout, punctuation, typos, use of initial capitals, bold/italic, etc), while not losing sight of the content. In revision, the emphasis is on the content, although the reviser should also bear the practical aspects in mind.

This means that if a potential new client asks you to check, read through, review or proofread a translation, it is essential to ask exactly what they wish you to do. If it emerges that what they mean is revision, there are still some further points to clarify, but at least you have a clear starting point. Two important rules are that you can only revise a translation from a language that you understand, and that the client must send you a copy of the source text.

Source of concern


There are two exceptions to this, the first being the increasing requirement for revision of a text written in English by a non-native speaker. (I'm not qualified to state whether a similar requirement arises in other languages.) Bear in mind that this may be much more difficult, as you have absolutely nothing to check the text against, so that if any part of the text is completely incomprehensible, you can only query it. In my experience, it is somewhat easier to revise such a text if you know what the writer's native language is and it is one that you understand.

The second exception is one I encountered for the first time recently, when I worked on a set of conference proceedings produced from interpreters' transcripts, without access to the source texts. I can only say it was an interesting challenge, and that fortunately the client understood the potential problems and I was able to highlight the passages of which

I could make no sense whatever.

To come back to a 'standard' revision job, in purely practical terms, you need to know whether your client wants you to deliver a clean text, ie ready for printing, or whether the client wants you to use Track Changes, so that somebody at the other end can both see what changes you have made to the text and decide whether or not to accept them. Bear in mind that in either case there may be some queries that you have been unable to resolve. Although the translator should have flagged up any unresolved problems, sadly you can't rely on this having been done. As a reviser, it is your responsibility to research any (remaining) problems, but there may be some you cannot resolve (eg inconsistent spelling of an obscure proper name in the source text). You should check with your client how they wish you to draw attention to any queries – some clients will be happy to have them highlighted in the text, with or without an accompanying note, while some may wish you to include them in your covering email, or even in a separate file.

There are some other practical points to be considered here. Does the client have any specific spelling requirements? The translator may have been inconsistent in the use of 's' and 'z' spellings, and you need to know which your client prefers. If the purpose of the text isn't obvious from the subject matter, you need to know the intended readership. If the text is highly specialised, has it been translated by a subject specialist? This is something else you can't always assume. Is the subject within your own competence? Is there any particular aspect on which your client wants you to focus? A reviser would normally adjust the register of a translation if necessary, but not the style, unless there is a major problem with it. Tempting though it may be, it is not part of the reviser's brief to change the style.

The question of handling client demands, time and payment issues will be covered in a separate article, but if there are any relevant questions I haven't answered here, please email me (address, above left), and I'll do my best to answer them next time. 

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