What to Do With a Translation Complaint

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You've received a complaint about translation quality from a distributor, an in-country stakeholder, or a coworker down the hall. Ouch. What do you do next?

Opinions are inevitable in translation. Before you take any action, it's important to recognize that there are several possible reasons you received this feedback:

- there is an error in the translated content
- your distributor, in-country stakeholder, or bilingual colleague has particular terminological preferences of which your translation vendor is currently unaware
- the negative feedback is actually about the English content, not about whether that content was faithfully replicated in translation

In order to address the complaint, you will need to determine which of these possibilities is the true cause, decide what you want to do about the document in question, and, finally, find a way to ensure you don't field similar complaints in the future. All of these steps require close collaboration with both your translation provider and with the reviewer who initially raised the red flag. This executive brief guides you through each step to ensure that you can resolve the complaint without causing further friction across your team.

Step #1: Get Concrete Examples

If your reviewer has included specific problems as part of their complaint, you are already halfway to the finish line. In order to ensure that the dialogue with your translation provider is immediately productive, it is vital that the complaint discussion focus on concrete issues in the translation.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to receive vague (but clearly negative) feedback from the field, such as:

> "It just isn't good."
> "I don't think the translation makes sense."
> "It sounds like Google Translate."

You will need to push your reviewer to provide more specific details. Imagine you order a hamburger, take a bite, and send it back to the kitchen. If you only tell the chef "I just didn't like it," you limit your chance of getting a burger that better meets your expectations on the second round. Even the chef with the best of intentions needs to know your specific preferences; so if you like your burger well done or you hate mustard, this must be clearly communicated to ensure that you are more satisfied with the second burger coming out of the kitchen.

Although you do need concrete examples from your reviewer, you don't need a hundred of them. A few, key examples of changes that the reviewer would like incorporated are sufficient to kick-start the conversation with your translation provider.

Step #2: Talk to Your Provider

The next step is to share these concrete examples with your translation provider to get their perspective on whether the suggested changes are:

a. the correction of errors in their original work
b. the suggestion of valid terminological preferences
c. the insertion of content changes against the original English source

If the suggestions are the correction of actual errors in the translation, your translation provider should immediately suggest next steps for how they intend to amend the document. A provider with a robust quality system will also initiate an internal CAPA process to identify the root cause of the error and plan to avoid future recurrence. Depending upon the severity of the error and its impact on your organization, you may consider opening a SCAR.

Sometimes, your reviewer has rewritten sections of the document. Translation providers typically call these changes "deviations from the source." This sounds scary, but it simply means that your reviewer did not feel that the original English content was a right fit for their market. In trying to make the translated document meet local market needs, they are forced to add or remove content from the English original. Your team may want to use this modified document, and your translation provider can offer suggestions for how you manage document control when the translated version needs to be different from the original source.

In most cases, however, negative feedback is about terminological preferences. No matter how skilled and experienced a translator is, he or she can never talk about your product exactly like your in-country team without a strong feedback mechanism through which your team's preferred terms can be learned. A good provider will always be willing to integrate valid preferences from your in-country stakeholders that add value to the translation process and ensure that your in-country colleagues are working with documentation that accurately reflects how they talk about your product.

Step #3: Handle the Current Content

If there is a mistranslation, you likely want it corrected without delay. A good provider will immediately begin a correction process when they confirm that their work contains an error. Depending upon the complexity of the document and the root cause of the error, it may only take them an hour to implement the correction or it may take them several days. Your account manager should keep you updated so that you know precisely when to expect the corrected version.

For subjective changes to terminology or to the overall content, you have two decisions to make:

a. Do you want your translation provider to review and implement these changes?
b. If so, should they do so now or as part of the next content update to the document?

You must make these decisions based on the needs of your in-country team, the demands of your quality system processes, and your available budget. If you choose not to make any changes to the current document right now, this is the perfect time to plan for how you will handle future translations to ensure you don't repeat the cycle.

Step #4: Plan a Future Process

In general, negative feedback on translations is typically a sign that either:

a. your in-country stakeholders (including distributors) want to be more involved in the content creation and translation processes, or
b. the individuals performing translation review need more guidance on what is expected of them.

If you can figure out which of these is the primary culprit for the process breakdown, you can tackle it directly to ensure that your next translation project runs more smoothly.

Involving Stakeholders

Committed stakeholders are a tremendous asset to your translation process, provided that you involve them early. For cases where your reviewers are rewriting the content, you will want to involve them in the creation of the English content. You can create one primary English version, then work with each stakeholder to adapt that English content to meet the specific regulatory demands of their target market. In this way, your translation provider will be translating from an English version that already matches the content expectations of your in-country reviewer.

Alternately, if the primary issue is training your translation provider to use the terminology preferred by your in-country team, you should have the in-country stakeholders create a glossary of key terms and build a review cycle into each translation project so that they can provide ongoing feedback to your translation provider, one document at a time. Ideally, your translation provider should submit a draft translation prior to any layout step. Typical translation productivity software enables a side-by-side comparison of the English source and the suggested translation so that your reviewer can perform a line-by-line review and mark their preferences. By having reviewers provide their feedback before layout, you save time and money on the translation cycle because your provider only performs document layout once, not twice (first for the version that your team reviews and then again to incorporate your team's feedback).

One major pitfall that you want to avoid is inconsistency created by launching a line-by-line review cycle for some of your translated documentation after other, similar pieces have been translated and distributed. Translation productivity software makes it possible to up-rev individual documents without re-translating content that hasn't changed between the two versions. For instance, if your provider translated revision A back in 2017 and you send them revision B today, you would not want or expect them to re-work any of the content that didn't change between those two revisions, nor would you want to pay extra for it. However, if your team performed a line-by-line review of a similar document in 2018 and made terminological changes, you will need your translation provider to perform additional work on rev B in order to incorporate those terminology updates. Ideally, when you set up a review cycle, have your team review all similar documents as part of a comprehensive first review so that your translation provider has the opportunity to update your translated documentation globally with requested in-country changes.

Providing Guidance

Whenever you ask a stakeholder to review a translation, be sure to establish clear guidelines on what you expect. Reviewers should be native speakers of the target language and be intimately familiar with how your product and its associated procedures are described in the local market. They should understand that the translation team who submitted the draft for their review is comprised of professional linguists who are native speakers of the language and have significant experience with the kind of content involved (for example, medical device instructions for use or clinical trial protocols). They should be educated that their role is to work collaboratively with the translation provider, offering a vital in-country perspective on key terminology. Without clear instructions to focus the review and without solid training to understand the required timeline and the form in which to provide feedback, reviewers may not perform the review in the way you have envisaged.

You also want to consider the impact of using multiple reviewers, either reviewing the same piece or reviewing separate pieces (possibly even separated by time). If reviewers are allowed to make preferential changes beyond key terminology, you may find that your team is sending mixed signals to your translation provider, which results in inconsistencies between translated documents. Find a way for reviewers to work collaboratively within your organization so that the feedback from each reviewer today, as well as the feedback from future reviews, aligns to build a cohesive voice for your product.

Most translation complaints can be quickly and easily rectified by identifying the root cause of the dissatisfaction and working collaboratively with your translation provider and your internal team to adjust the document creation, translation, and review processes accordingly. Of course, at the end of the day, ongoing quality complaints from the field may be a sign that your vendor is underperforming. If so, it may be time to evaluate a new supplier and transition seamlessly to permanently solve your translation headaches.

About Idem Translations

Founded in 1983, Idem Translations, Inc. is a full-service provider of translation and localization services. Idem specializes in certified translations for medical device, biomedical, and pharmaceutical companies, as well as other organizations and entities working in the life sciences sector, such as contract research organizations, healthcare research centers, and institutional review boards. The company is a WBENC-certified woman-owned business and holds certifications to ISO 9001:2015, ISO 13485:2016, and ISO 17100:2015.

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