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A Guide to Buying Translation Services

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A Guide to Buying Translation Services

Paul Flint

Japan Association of Translators

翻訳サービスの利用手引

日本翻訳者協会

Abstract

This article gives a brief, broad description of the translation industry, and offers tips to buyers on choosing translators, working with translators, and translation prices.

本稿は、翻訳産業について簡潔、概略的に説明し、翻訳者の選定、翻訳者との作業および翻訳料について、消費者側にヒントを提供する。

The Translation Industry

For the purposes of discussion, the translation industry can be divided according to language pairs, language direction, and subject matter. These three factors define different markets because changing any one factor usually changes the group of translators to be considered, or the prices involved.

A 'language pair' refers to the source language and target language, involved when translating a text, for example French and English, or Spanish and German. Among all possible language pairs in the world, that of Japanese and English has been one of the highest paid. The underlying reason for this is the strength of the Japanese economy—creating high demand for translation services—and the relative lack of competent translators, which may be due in part to the dramatic linguistic differences between English and Japanese.

Language direction is the next important factor. Japanese to English (J to E) translation is best done by translators who are native speakers of English (NSE), but the relative scarcity of NSE translators with Japanese skills makes them more expensive. This scarcity has left space for a market segment of J to E translation done by native speakers of Japanese (NSJ). When J to E translation is done by NSJ translators, a monolingual NSE editor is often also employed. This additional person also raises the price of J to E translation.

Obviously English to Japanese translation is best done by NSJ translators, but since there is no lack of NSJ, there is no significant market segment of NSE translators who do such translation, as far as I am aware.

Subject matter also greatly influences the price of translation. Translations in fields like chemistry, law, medicine, automobiles, and patents command higher rates because familiarity with specialized terminology is needed. While the translators in these fields do not have to be chemists, lawyers, doctors, or engineers, many of them are or can become familiar with a particular field through extensive reading and translation experience. This learning process can be helped by the experience of working under an established translator in a particular field.

Quality Counts

Those who offer and request translation services should care about quality. If the source text is important enough to translate, it is important enough to translate well. The impression of a bad translation is immediate and negative. Quality is not much of an issue when the translation is for 'information' purposes only – for example, the translation of business news or financial information for private use by traders. More often, however, a translation is needed to communicate something to someone outside an organization. Most people do not notice the fact of translation when a translation is done well, but everyone notices when it is done poorly. Oddly though, the reader does not blame the translator but instead makes a judgement about the author of the source text.

How can you judge the final quality if you do not speak the target language? Find someone who does and ask him or her to read it. If the translation is Japanese to English, find a native speaker of English to be a reader and judge of quality. Though it takes training and experience to write well, almost any native speaker can tell when something is written poorly.

It is important to understand that translators are essentially writers. For a translation to sound natural, the translator must be able to write well. Ironically, writing natural English does not come naturally—it is a skill usually acquired through a great deal of effort, practice, and experience. This is true for the writing of any language.

Although translation needs vary, the bilingual college student or former student who liked studying English in school is usually not up to doing even mildly important work. Good translators are accomplished writers, and good writers are usually people who work hard at it.

Something else the translation buyer needs to know is that machines cannot translate. Anyone who has used machine translation can tell you that the results are of very limited value. A machine can match words and some phrases to similar words and phrases in another language, but this does not mean that the result is a coherent sentence, let alone a coherent paragraph. Machine translation can be useful, say, when searching through 2,000 documents for those that you are interested in, which are then given to a human translator. Machine translation has

the advantage of being fast and cheap. It will not replace human translators any time soon, if ever.

The quality of a communication has everything to do with how successful that communication is, and when it comes to translation, quality does usually count. Quality does cost money, but fortunately there are ways of making sure that the money is well spent.

Buying Translation Services

Whether you buy your translation through an agency or directly from a freelance translator, it is most important to the final product to develop a good working relationship with the translator. Of course this is more important for customers who have a regular need for translation services, but even for the one-off job, it is useful to build a good relationship.

It is the fate of the translator to work with incomplete, incorrect and un-proofed source texts. The translation process fits somewhere between the writer and the reader, and often there are several people in between (layout people, printers, sales people) and deadlines and rewrites and other things to contend with. Nevertheless, do your best to give the translator a complete and error-free source text. The end result will be much better.

Even with the best of manuscripts, there are often questions. Ideally the author should be available to answer questions in person, but often someone else who is close to the project can answer the translator's questions just as well.

If you require translations for documents concerning a range of fields, use the same translator more than once for a particular field. Translators cannot be expected to know all the quirks of every particular field, but translation quality can be improved by using the same translator repeatedly. The knowledge a translator picks up from one job can be useful in the next.

The translator you employ should be honest, fast, skilled, flexible, and deliver on time. Of course, if you want cheap, then you will have to sacrifice one or many of the above.

Prices and Billing

Translation costs go from very low to very high depending on the factors detailed earlier. In Japanese to English translation, I have heard of rates as low as fractions of a penny per word of finished output. I have seen rates as low as 2000 yen per 'page' (more on this below). I have heard of rates as high as 15,000 yen per page. The highest I have seen personally is 12,000 yen per page.

The 'page' mentioned above is not the page we normally think of when we hear that word. For translators, a page has several possible definitions. The particular definition used depends on the translator and the customer. Here are some

common definitions of a page: 200 words of English, 400 characters of Japanese, 1000 bytes in a text file, 8.5 x 11 page double-spaced using 12 point type. There are others. The more common definitions are 200 words of English or 400 characters of Japanese. Precise definitions are needed because the number of words or characters that fit into a physical page of text can vary wildly.

Despite all this talk about pages, the billing or pricing for a translation job can be done with one of several units, not just the 'page'. The most common units for billing are by the page, half-page, word, or character. Many translators prefer to bill by the word of English output. This has the advantage of being easy, with automatic word counting provided by many popular word processing programs, because it avoids the need to count words or characters manually.

Unfortunately, billing by the word rewards the J to E translator for being wordy and penalizes the translator for being concise. Good English is often described as concise, so this billing method may work against getting a quality translation. A good translator will probably not become wordy even when billing by the word, but the temptation is there.

Billing by the Japanese character for J to E translation has the advantage of making it possible to calculate the cost of a translation before starting the job. This makes estimates very accurate, but manually counting is required when working with non-electronic media.

The page defined in terms of words or characters is easier to grasp intuitively, but is still based on the word or character count. When billing by the page it is common for translators to round up to the half page (for portions over one page and under a half page) or to the next page (for portions over a half page).

Learning about translation is a trial and error process, so I suggest that buyers start small. Do not give a 500-page job to a translator who is unknown to you. I do not advocate 'trials,' because I do not accept them myself. A good translator is likely to have lots of work to do and may not want to bother with a trial. Pay the translator to work on a few pages and see what comes back. If the results are not acceptable, you will have learned something without losing much. If all is well, give that translator the rest of the job.

Where to Find Translators

Many of my first-time customers are so relieved to find a translator who is easy to work with, and who can actually translate, that it leads me to believe that good translators are not easy to find.

Translators in general are easy enough to find, just pick up the phonebook or look on the Internet. Unfortunately, finding a good translator for a particular job is

a matter of trial and error. Some countries have systems for translator certification, but worldwide, the number of uncertified translators may equal or exceed the number of certified translators. To make matters worse, certification does not guarantee good quality, and a lack of certification does not always mean poor quality.

The Internet is a good source of translator contacts. The *Japan Association of Translators* (www.jat.org) has a searchable database of translators. The *American Translators Association* (www.atanet.org) also has a useful web site, as does the *Institute of Translation and Interpreting* (www.itl.org.uk) in the United Kingdom. Many local companies and translating groups, in Japan and other countries, can also be found on the Internet.

