



capital translator

Newsletter of the National Capital Area Chapter of the American Translators Association
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September 1999

The Inaccuracy of Accurate Translations

by Mercedes M. Pellet

Whenever the subject of translator proficiency is raised, you can be sure that the word accuracy will not be far behind. Could **accuracy**, like beauty, be in the eye of the beholder?

In my role as ATA representative for the ASTM's Committee on Translation Standards, I have been reviewing the standards of other organizations, educational programs, and translation buyers. Without exception, they all stipulate "accuracy" as one of the requirements that must be met by a good translator. Although it is a laudable word, comparable to **prudence** or **accountability**, I inevitably remember a parking sign in Gaithersburg which was, helpfully, translated into Spanish for the growing immigrant population. The sign cautions drivers against parking in reserved spots with a succinct **Violators will be fined**. About a year ago, a companion sign in Spanish appeared which said: **Violadores serán multados**.

You cannot get more accurate than that! If the translator was asked to translate the words accurately, he or she accomplished the objective. In the face of such accuracy, it seems

almost churlish to point out that a minor parking infraction was turned into a felony by one little word.

Violador is the widely used euphemism for rapist since **violar** seems preferable to **estrupar**, which is the correct but lesser-known word for the crime. In our little corner of Gaithersburg, **Rapists will be fined**.

If we were to tell the person who paid for the translation what the sign actually means, the first head to roll would be the translator's. Why? Because it would be said that s/he embarrassed the client with a mistranslation. In all fairness, though, the translator could correctly say, *You told me to be accurate! And I was!* (Accuracy may not be as objective a quality as we like to think!)

Since this is always a sore subject in our profession, I thought it wise to *accurately* define **accuracy** in a way that can be helpful to both translators and purchasers of translation. I have recently had cause to ponder this exact point while reviewing a software translation that was accurate but useless.

Webster's Dictionary defines accuracy as **exactness; exact conformity to the truth, a rule or a model**. In translation, accuracy is generally

taken to mean exact conformity to the original. The following questions may be useful in redefining accuracy:

Cui bono?

One of the first questions in deductive reasoning is *Who benefits?* or *To whose advantage?* In translation, the response to this essential

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Editor: Ruth Zimmer Boggs
703-378-9305
REZB@aol.com

Assistant Editor: Dimitra Hengen
703-426-4938
DimitraH@aol.com

Production: Karin Wuertz-Schaefer
301-607-8036
wuertz-schaefer@erols.com

Deadline: No later than 5th day of month before the issue

Membership: Alissa Martin
301-718-0405
martina2@gusun.georgetown.edu

National Capital Area Chapter of the American Translators Association (NCATA)

President: Scott Brennan
703-393-0365
sbrennan@csi.com

Vice President: Sangeeta Prasad
703-369-2068

Secretary: Kriemhild Zerling
202-543-7574

Treasurer: Therese Hathaway
703-925-9087

Program Chair: John Vázquez
202-487-7878

Accreditation: Bill Keasbey
301-897-8318

The **Chapter Address** is P. O. Box 65200,
Washington, DC 20035-5200,
Tel: 703-255-9290
Web site: www.ncata.org

The **National HQ Address** is American Translators
Association, 225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590,
Alexandria, VA 22314-2840,
Tel: 703-683-6100, Fax: 703-683-6122
Web site: www.atanet.org

For address changes, please write to the chapter at
the above address, Attn: Membership

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please contact Angelika Spears, Advertising
Coordinator, Tel: 301-464-8309,
e-mail: 102502.3224@compuserve.com



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President's Corner

by Scott Brennan



Welcome back from the long, hot summer! Those of us who survived have a busy few months ahead, so let's get right to it.

First on our Fall schedule is NCATA's annual luncheon with the Society of Federal Linguists (see announcement on page 3). Our guest speaker, Dr. Richard Brecht, is Director of the National Foreign Language Center at The Johns Hopkins University, Co-founder of Project ICONS (International Communication and Negotiation Simulations), Director of Research and Development at the American Council of Teachers of Russian / American Council for Collaboration in Education and Language Study, and Executive Director of the National Council of Organizations of Less Commonly Taught Languages. Dr. Brecht holds a master's and doctorate in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Harvard University and is currently professor in the same field at the University of Maryland at College Park. He has authored numerous books and articles on Slavic linguistics, Russian language, and second language acquisition.

In his talk, Dr. Brecht will argue that the US faces a language crisis of unprecedented scope and depth. Yet, we focus on questions such as: Should everyone learn English? Should Americans study foreign languages? Should that language be French (or German, Russian, etc.). Those are all the wrong questions,

Dr. Brecht believes, and addressing the crisis in language competence requires a fresh approach.

Moving right along. Building on the well-received program at the National Geographic Society this past May, NCATA is organizing an October meeting especially for German/English translators and interpreters. We are actively recruiting members to help develop an informal program.

The idea behind language-specific meetings is to give translators and interpreters the chance to get together, discuss special problems, and share experiences and expertise in a way they cannot do at language-neutral events. As I see it, the program itself should be brief and more a point of departure for discussion than the final word: perhaps a ten-minute walk-through of an interesting document you translated recently, which posed special challenges or illustrates special terminology. Two or three short talks like that, and we have the makings of an interesting evening of shop talk.

Member interest is key. To help make this German/English meeting happen, contact me at (703) 393-0365 or sbrennan@csi.com. Details will be announced in next month's *Capital Translator*.

And don't forget about the ATA Annual Conference in November and NCATA's Annual Meeting and Holiday Party on December 12. Good luck to those taking the ATA accreditation exam on September 18th. I'll see you on the 25th! ✍

A warm welcome to our new members

Ms Collette Abdul-Karim, Dr. William Brown, Ms Zilda Buzack, Mrs Maria T. Gil-Montero, Dr. Judith Lee, Ms Soo Lee Han and Ms Julie Porter.

NCATA Elections

NCATA's member volunteers are its lifeblood. Without them, there would be no *Professional Services Directory*, website, job fair, professional development seminars, ATA accreditation workshops, networking events or *Capital Translator*. Consider taking on a leadership role. The offices of **president, treasurer and accreditation chair** come up for election at the end of this year. Serving on NCATA's Board is an excellent opportunity to make professional contacts and actively influence the direction the chapter will take over the next two years.

The **president** oversees all aspects of chapter operations and is responsible for making NCATA a valuable part of members' professional lives in the broadest sense. From the administrative standpoint, the president is the chapter's liaison with ATA, coordinates the organization of events, chairs and sets the agenda for board and membership meetings, and makes appointments as necessary.

The **treasurer** receives and disburses all NCATA funds, maintains financial records, presents an annual report to the membership, and is responsible for the chapter's financial affairs in general.

The **accreditation chair** works closely with ATA headquarters to arrange accreditation exam sittings and recruit qualified proctors, schedules and organizes accreditation workshops, and is responsible for all matters relating to the local administration of the ATA accreditation program.

All three officers are elected to two-year terms and are voting members of NCATA's Board of Directors. Elected officers must be members in good standing of both NCATA and ATA. ATA's bylaws require the president and vice president to be voting members of ATA. Note that a recent ATA board resolution has decoupled ATA accreditation and active (voting) membership status.

NCATA's board meets once a month, nine months a year, to coordinate work done by each officer in his or her respective area with a fair degree of autonomy. Interested but want to know more? Contact NCATA's current officers at the numbers given on page 2.

All candidates must submit a 150-word statement by October 5 to the election coordinator, chapter vice president Sangeeta Prasad; she can be contacted at (703) 369-2068 or SSPrasad@aol.com. The candidate statements will be published in the *Capital Translator*, and the election results will be announced at the 1999 Annual Meeting held before the Holiday Party on Sunday, December 12 (see announcement below). ✍

NCATA/SFL Annual Luncheon: September 25

NCATA's 1999 joint luncheon with the Society of Federal Linguists will be held on September 25 at the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) at The Johns Hopkins University from 12 to 3 p.m. This year, NFLC Director Dr. Richard Brecht will speak on "Language in the US: All the Wrong Questions."

Sign up early! This is a popular event, and space is limited. Send your check for \$10 made out to NCATA, to cover the catered buffet, to NCATA Program Chair, P.O. Box 65200, Washington DC 20035-5200.

NFLC is located at 1619 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 400, in downtown Washington DC. Parking is available on the street and at pay lots in the 1700 block of Massachusetts Avenue and on the corner of M Street and Rhode Island Avenue.

From the Dupont Circle stop on the Red Line:

Exit the station at the 19th Street entrance. At the top of the escalator, walk up 19th Street to Dupont Circle. At Dupont Circle, turn right and proceed along sidewalk to Massachusetts Avenue. Turn right (eastbound) on Massachusetts Avenue. Proceed to intersection of 17th Street and Massachusetts Avenue (2 blocks). Cross 17th Street. NFLC is in the Rome Building, 1619 Massachusetts Avenue, second building on left.

Annual Meeting and Holiday Party

Mark your Calendars: NCATA's Annual Meeting and Holiday Party will be held Sunday afternoon, December 12, at the Old Ebbitt Grill in downtown Washington. The cost for the party will be comparable to previous years (about \$25 per person); there will be no charge to attend just the Annual Meeting. See next month's *Capital Translator* for details.

Buyer Beware

The Dictionary Debacle

by James F. Shipp



The dearth of bilingual dictionaries in the US has always been a pet peeve of mine. One has to wonder why, in a country that produces more translations than any other nation on Earth, the essential tools of the trade—especially those of domestic manufacture—are in such short supply.

Over the years, I have assembled a fairly substantial personal reference library, presently totaling some 300 volumes. However, the terms in many of the compendiums available today are listed in “reverse order”—in my particular case, from English into Russian. While this increases lookup time and decreases the chances of success in locating a particular entry, experience has shown that it is better to have these “backward” lexicons on hand than not, because “properly” sorted texts, especially those covering specific fields of endeavor, are few and far between.

In addition to my own dog-eared dictionaries, the pages of which are now covered with copious margin notes, I have at my disposal stack upon stack of rubberband-bound index cards containing terms collected over the course of my work. Moreover, with the advent of the computer, I am now in possession of numerous electronic files of similarly gleaned field-specific terms and abbreviations. Lastly, various clients who work exclusively in certain areas of science and technology have periodically provided and updated their own specialized glossaries, which are often a Godsend when translating the documents received from these firms.

Caution must be exercised in ordering dictionaries from foreign sources (or from domestic sources that purvey foreign literature). In

Russia, for example, many “new” texts are simply reprints of older works with a different cover and a current publication date. Not revisions, mind you, but exact “clones” of preexisting volumes.

Lately, some publishers have taken to advertising their wares on the Internet, which brings us to the case in point.

I recently happened upon the Web page of a Moscow publishing house (which shall remain nameless herein for obvious reasons). This firm offered several potentially invaluable Russian-English titles that I had not seen advertised before. Champing at the bit, I flashed them an e-mail of inquiry, which resulted in the receipt of a pro forma invoice by return “mail.” Appended to this invoice were meticulous instructions for transferring funds to the publishing house by wire, upon the receipt of which my books would supposedly be shipped.

In short, the deal was as follows: if I would wire the publisher \$314, he would immediately dispatch my dictionaries via air post (shipping costs included).

My bank was only too happy to effect this transfer, for which it charged me \$30. The clerk who handled the transaction assured me that this \$30 fee covered all banking services up until the subject funds actually entered Russia.

A week later, having heard nothing about my purchase, I again sent out an e-mail of inquiry. The overnight response from the publisher was that he had only received \$302.20 of the \$314 wired and that my order could not be processed until I sent them the difference of \$11.80. Aside from the fact that this would cost me another \$30 at my bank, wouldn’t the same mysterious

intermediate institution, I asked, again deduct a charge from the \$11.80, leaving yet another small balance due and requiring yet another \$30 wire transfer in order to cover it? I was reminded of one of my old grade school textbooks, the cover of which had a picture of a boy carrying that same textbook, the cover of which had a picture of—you get the idea. This could go on forever!

The publisher did not have an immediate answer. After looking into the matter at my behest, he advised me that the institution which had exacted the unexpected fee was the Bank of New York. Investigating from my end, I learned that this was essentially correct, with one not-so-minor caveat: it was the Moscow branch of the Bank of New York!

For a period of 10 days or so, we continued to wrangle via the Internet, the publisher and I, he steadfastly declining to ship my books until the missing \$11.80 had been received and I just as adamantly refusing to send an additional \$11.80 at the cost of \$30.

...continued on page 5

James F. Shipp is the author of four Russian-English technical dictionaries and nearly 80 published articles on various aspects of translation work. He recently moved back to his boyhood hometown of Hartselle, Alabama, after a 40-year absence and now lives in a “dacha” adjoining the farm on which he was raised. There, he continues to compile dictionaries, write, and translate on a fulltime basis.

Accuracy ...continued from page 1

question determines the perspective of the end user and the purpose of the translated text. Thus, an **accurate** translation may be one that captures the intent of the original, not the words.

For instance, in my example of the Gaithersburg parking sign, the people being warned may have belonged to a group that uses English words in conversational Spanish and, for them, the term **violador** accomplishes the objective: they know that if they park there, they risk being fined.

In my example of the software translation, the translator had correctly translated every single word that appeared in the English. Unfortunately, that resulted in an unwieldy translation that was 40 percent longer than the already tightly packed original. While wrestling with the oozing text, I thought about what I would say to the translator: *The translation does not do what the client wants. Or, Your translation is TOO accurate. Huh?*

By determining early on for whose benefit the material is being translated, you can work **with** the client instead of at cross purposes.

Is the Source Text a Source of Trouble?

A poorly written source text will sound doubly poor in translation. Here, too, accuracy will be the kiss of death. For example, verbose “spin” pieces or press releases can become incomprehensible when translated exactly, which defeats the purpose of the person requesting the translation. As an example, a government agency sent Spanish newspapers a press release to inform low-income families about home-owning opportunities. The general idea of the press release was to entice the readers to inquire about their eligibility to join the program. Unfortunately, the source text was so dense and so loaded with **governmentalese** that I am sure many immigrants

packed up and went home, concerned that the government was after them!

The only way to avoid problems like these is to review the text and quickly ask *For whose benefit are we translating this?* (See *Cui bono* above) Remember, your translation will not carry a disclaimer that says: **Think this is bad? You should have seen the source text!**

What Does the User Know Already?

Unless you are translating for someone for whom the subject of your translation is totally unknown, you must find out the terms that the target audience actually uses—instead of any convoluted translation you may be trying to achieve. I am thinking of words such as **Incoming Calls, Feature not available, International countries, domestic markets, telephone beepers, single parents, or multiple-dwelling facilities for low-income families.**

This question also reminds me of the time I was dutifully interpreting for someone and I relayed in Spanish the question of *Do you belong to a low-income or socially disadvantaged group?* The listener opened his eyes wide with terror as if I had asked whether he belonged to a subversive group. I quickly had to calm him down with *Are you poor?*

Why Are You Getting Paid to Translate?

In this era of instant gratification, Internet speed, and magic software that handles all complicated tasks, many believe that translation does not require translators for the simple task of ‘substituting words.’ Your role as translator in the business world is to be a language professional; that is, someone who does much more than replace words. As a translator, you **know** what you are doing; you can **evaluate, judge** and **advise**—to make sure that the client



will never suffer the indignity of ridicule. That is what makes **you** special and a **professional** translator.

Limiting yourself to exact conformance with the source text could make you a software! ✍

Mercedes M. Pellet is co-founder and Chief Operating Officer of M2 Limited, a localization company established in 1979. She is a Federally Certified Court Interpreter and ATA-accredited translator (Spanish \leftrightarrow English and Portuguese >English). As part of her commitment to the profession, she has served as ATA Treasurer, NCATA President and Membership Chair.

Dictionary ...continued from page 4

In the end, cooler heads prevailed: the publisher finally agreed to release my dictionaries if I would promise to add \$11.80 (plus enough to cover the enigmatic intermediate banking charge) to a future order.

As of this writing, my money reached in Moscow one month ago, but my eagerly awaited purchases have yet to arrive.

Banking difficulties aside, one has to wonder how the Russians define “air post.”

Then, too, yet another old adage has once again proven itself to be true: you can’t judge a book by its cover charge (especially if you never actually get to see the book). ✍

Active Status—What Does It Mean to Me?

by Muriel Jérôme-O'Keefe, ATA President

NCATA members who belong to the American Translators Association have read in the May *Chronicle* of a change in the procedure for becoming an “active” member of the Association. If you are an “associate” member of the ATA, and are professionally engaged in translation, interpretation, or a closely related profession, I invite you to consider becoming an “active” member.

You will need to submit evidence of three years' work in the profession; or, if you have a degree or a certificate in translation or interpretation, you may submit a copy along with a letter of recommendation. Upon receipt of your materials and the fee

of \$50, headquarters will review your application and, if all is in order, upgrade you to active status.

Active status does not mean that you are “accredited.” In order to be accredited, applicants must pass an examination administered by the ATA in their language pair. However, active members are entitled to vote and hold office within the ATA, as well as to serve on standing committees (doesn't that sound enticing?!).

But seriously, we live in challenging times for our profession. The ATA is responding to the demands of these times with new initiatives and new directions for our efforts. The recent institution of the “on-line” *Translation Services Directory* is

just one of the steps we have taken, for instance, to serve our members in the evolving world of cyberbusiness. The Ad Hoc committee, chaired by Director Marian S. Greenfield, recommended wider access to “active” membership to help position the Association for a more vibrant future. Other initiatives are also in the works.

We need your voice and your involvement if we are to choose the best possible course of action for our professional association. I invite all “associate” members of ATA who are interested in helping us move into the 21st century effectively to become “active” members at their earliest convenience. ✍

From the Editor



And Here We Go Again

Tans are starting to wane, kids are heading back to school, and the *CT* is starting another year.

Nine newsletters that need to be filled with interesting, informative and educational articles. Where do we get them? Good question. There are a few members who on their own initiative take some time, write an article, and send it along. Others will heed the call and cover ongoing events, such as NCATA workshops, etc. We thank all of them.

Sometimes we take interesting material from other newsletters and reprint it, after securing permission from the source.

But there is always room for fresh ideas, and no contribution is too small to be considered. This is your chance to be published! To have your voice heard! To contribute to your local chapter without holding office!

If you have an idea for something you think should be covered in this newsletter, let us know. If you see something in a magazine that would be of interest to our readers, send it along. And if you want to write an article, by all means, do so!

If you have any questions, please contact the editor at REZB@aol.com. Any contribution will be greatly appreciated.

Correction

R.B. Worobec, author of “Sequelae of Soviet Language Policy in Ukraine: Implications for Translators” in the June issue of the *Capital Translator*, has pointed out an error introduced into the article during the editorial process. The word “dismissed” in last paragraph on page 8 should read “liquidated,” as follows:

“In the thirties serious linguistic work came to an end, and 62 of the 85 researchers at the Institute of Linguistics in Kyiv were liquidated, as were 90% of those involved in the Ukrainian cultural renaissance and most top government officials.”

Onionskin

The "Onionskin" is a column in the ITI Bulletin (UK). ITI is the UK's foremost association of professional translators and interpreters. –Ed.

Smooth style at Gillette

by Chris Durban



Gillette. La Perfection au Masculin"/"Gillette. The Best a Man Can Get" reads the baseline of a bilingual package insert for Gillette's SensorExcel "shaving system", sent to us by a North American reader. Accompanying text reveals the US company to be as sensitive to the ears of its French-language customers as it claims its products are to their skin.

Does Gillette have a corporate translation policy?

Not as such, according to Patrick Boykin of Gillette's Paris-based PR agency S3C. Yet he did provide some information on how the corporation gets its foreign-language documents produced. Texts originate at Gillette's Boston office and are sent out for translation to the different countries where they will be used. "Input from language professionals in these target markets is essential," says Boykin. Adaptation or translation? "For our needs, a successful translation is always an adaptation." A sharp insight ✍

Chris Durban is a French > English translator specializing in finance and capital markets. Based in Paris, her extracurricular translation activities include coordinating the Paris Bourse workshop for financial translators, promoting signed work, and encouraging client education in general. She can be reached at 101327.35@compuserve.com.

Overheard in Cyberspace

Dr. Jennifer DeCamp, a Principal Engineer with Mitre Corporation, writes:

"Last night, I watched the new TV science fiction series, *Crusade*, which is by the makers of *Babylon V*. In the future, a spaceship goes off to contact new cultures to try to find a cure for the plague that is threatening to wipe out humanity. In a crew of 300, the Linguist reports directly to the captain and is on an equal footing with the chief medic. In fact, in this episode, the Linguist identifies that there are in fact two languages among the dead aliens, and that therefore a second species has taken over the first and is threatening to take over the spaceship and, of course, the universe. The Linguist also figures out a heretofore unknown language, using statistical techniques (sigh!), and is thus able to save the crew of 300, all humanity, and all of our future allied aliens. Of course, it isn't all realistic: the Linguist is accused of having a galactic-sized ego.

"So what does this say about the status of linguists that they are now the heroes of popular science fiction series? I haven't seen such a good sign since the trading cards for Wolverine (one of the X-Men) listed fluency in Japanese as one of his attributes (along with retractable metal claws)." ✍

DR. ASLAN ASLANIAN

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Jornadas de traducción e interpretación en español

Alicia Agnese & Associates will hold a two-day Spanish T&I Seminar on October 2-3, 1999 in Arlington, VA. Sessions will be in Spanish. Translation topics will include Contrastive English-Spanish Grammatical Structures, Business and Legal Terminology in Context, Idioms, Abbreviations and Acronyms, Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases. Interpretation topics will include Role of the Community Interpreter, The Interpreter in a Health Care Setting, Police and Victim Services Interpreters, Terminology used in agency forms, Interpreter ethics, Importance of interpersonal relationships and confidentiality, Depositions, Cultural Sensitivity Issues. Lecturers: Alicia Agnese, Pimpi Coggins, M.Eta Trabing and Cristina Helmerichs. For more information, call (703) 379-0653; e-mail: info@aagnese.com or www.aagnese.com.

Calendar

Date	Time	Event	Location
September 18, 1999	1:30 p.m.	Accreditation Exam	Graduate Education Center of The George Washington University, 1775B Duke Street Alexandria, VA, near the King Street Metro Station Contact ATA at 703-683-6100
September 25, 1999	12 noon	NCATA/SFL Annual Luncheon	National Foreign Language Center at the Johns Hopkins University, 1619 Mass. Ave., NW, Washington, DC (see page 3 for registration information and directions)
November 3-6, 1999		40th Annual ATA Conference	St. Louis, Missouri Contact ATA at 703-683-6100
December 12, 1999	12 noon	NCATA Annual Meeting and Holiday Party	Old Ebbitt Grill, Washington, DC Contact John Vázquez at 202-487-7878

NCATA
P. O. Box 65200
Washington, DC 20035-5200