

# Localization and writing for the international market

The number of technical products has rapidly increased over the last decades. This brought along a greater number of user manuals and the need for technical documentation is still not satisfied. But the quantity of technical documentation is not the only aspect; increasingly the quality of technical documentation is gaining focus. In particular companies from the US are worried about wrong usage of and potential damage to their products, or even worse, injury to the users resulting from poor instructions.

By **Melanie Siegel and Andrew Bredekamp**

In the US, more and more technical products are purchased by users who are not native English speakers. This led to the development of a controlled simplified technical English that would make it easier for native and non-native readers to understand instructional text.

High-technology products are usually operated by people with a good demand of the English language, thus vendors need to provide well-written high quality controlled English documentation. For consumer products, however, documentation has to be provided in the reader's native language. Nevertheless, there are cases in which technical writers (e.g. while preparing translations) have to write documentation in English, although it is not their native language. And, even if they write in their native language, they have to keep the translation process in mind.

## Writing for the international market

When writing for the international market, authors first have to decide whether to write in their native language or in English. The answers to the following questions can help with the decision:

- In what languages will the documentation have to be provided?
- How reliable is the quality of the author's English?
- Are translators available for the native language to English?
- Are translators available for English to the native language?
- Are tools available to support the writing and translation process in the native language or in the non-native English?
- Will the technical document be distributed in the country, where the author's native language is spoken?



Photo: Janaka Dharmasena

## Writing in the native language

Writing in one's native language has the clear advantage that the linguistic quality of the document is stable. Of course, the author still needs to ensure the document quality in terms of correctness, clarity, tone, consistency and translatability.

**Correctness:** Even if the writer is a native speaker, typos and smaller spelling and grammar errors can happen. The type of mistake that can occur depends on the language. For example, spelling mistakes in a language like German can be an inversion of characters, while spelling mistakes in a language like Chinese represent the use of a wrong character in a certain context. The same applies to grammar mistakes. It is necessary to analyze the grammar of the involved language in order to find potential grammar mistakes. For example, subject-verb agreement can only be wrong in languages that contain this concept in the grammar.

**Clarity:** Technical documentation needs to be as clear as possible. This is primarily the case when describing warning messages or actions to be performed by the reader. Unclear descriptions can lead to situations where the reader performs an action in such a way that he damages the device or even hurts himself. Therefore, sentences must be short and clearly structured.

**Tone:** The author must be clear about the expected audience. Choosing the correct wording for a certain audience is also highly dependent on the language.

A language like Japanese, for example, has much more variability in tone than a language like French, whereas French allows more variability than English.

**Consistency:** The author needs to make sure that terminology and grammar are used consistently. Consistency allows the readers to search and find information in the document, and to recognize instructions or terminology they have seen and learned before.

**Translatability:** Documents that will be translated for the international market have to be written with the translation process in mind. For example, the use of anaphora (as in "Turn it on") has to be avoided, as tools supporting the translation process are mostly based on sentences. The other quality principles support the translatability as well as the quality of the source document: if the document is correct, clear and consistent, it is very likely that it is easier to translate.

## Writing by non-native English speakers.

Writing in English has the advantage that standards and tools are available. Moreover, English is understood in many countries. Translators who translate from English into various languages are easily found, thus, English works very well for the base document. But this approach places high expectations on the quality of the base document. Low quality source documents make translations difficult and may result in inconsistencies or even errors in the target language documents. Therefore, if the author is a non-native English speaker, writing in English requires:

- High proficiency in English spelling and grammar (correctness)
- Knowledge of the style guidelines for English technical documentation (clarity, consistency, tone)
- Knowledge of English technical terminology (consistency)
- Knowledge of translation mechanisms for English to other languages (translatability, consistency)

The author needs to be conscious about the differences in the structures with regard to their native language and English. Analyses of texts written by non-native writers of English have shown that speakers of different native languages make other mistakes. The reason can be found in the linguistic difference of the languages. For example, the Japanese language does not differentiate between the "l" and "r" sounds. Therefore, we find many examples, where one of these is omitted ("nealy" instead of "nearly") or where they are interchanged ("signal" instead of "signa"). Mitton and Okada (2007) give another example: "The word library illustrates all these problems, and the Japanese corpus contains misspellings such as libelary, liberary, liburally, liburary, liveraly, liverary and liverely (and many more)". European non-native writers of English have a strong tendency to mix US and UK variants, because both are equally present in English texts that can be easily accessed in Europe every day.

With regard to grammar, there are mistakes that represent the structure of the native language. For example, speakers of languages without determiners have problems to choose the correct determiners in English. A comparison of texts by German and Japanese speakers showed that most style problems of Japanese speakers had to do with readability and translatability, while the main problems of German speakers referred to the simplicity of language: the German language has a tendency to build long and complex sentences.

So, what can a non-native English speaker do in this case?

- Have a specific view on errors that are likely to be made by Japanese non-native speakers, because of the structure of the Japanese language
- Use a checking tool for spelling, grammar, style and terminology
- Before using a checking tool, make sure that it is adapted to your needs:
  - to the text type of technical documentation
  - to the domain you are writing documents for
  - to your native language
- Validate the terminology you are using
- Use a term database with term checking.

## Summary

The decision whether the first version of a technical documentation is written in English (by a non-native speaker) or in the writer's native language is based on a number of factors concerning the author, the product, the target audience and the translation process. Writing in the author's native language has to be done with the translation process in mind, to keep the document consistent, clear and translatable. When writing in non-native English, the author needs to also focus on correctness, and especially on the mistakes he or she is likely to make, because of differences in the language structures.

## contact



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