

Sue Dobson

Beware: Technology at work!

I have worked in the software industry for almost twenty years now. Not as a technician, I hasten to add, but in various marketing and communications roles in which I have often felt like an interpreter myself, mediating between the highly technical and the business experts.

Most of the work I have done has been in the area of banking systems applications. As a result, I was immersed in two new languages, which, if not actually foreign, were certainly alien to me. These were the languages, or perhaps I should say jargons, of the computing and the international banking industries. Indeed it probably took most of my first decade in this industry to feel comfortable with these “languages”.

So in agreeing to write about the “challenges” of editing computing-related text, while I can in no way claim to be an expert, I have picked up some useful “beliefs”, which have served me well along the way and which I am happy to share.

There is one more dimension to include and that is the additional dimension of working with non-native English speakers. I am writing for an audience of translators and interpreters who are much better qualified than I to comment on the difficulties of converting information from one language to another, so I will limit my comments here to a single observation. It is easier to edit contributions from people with a more limited grasp of English than from those who speak and write English fluently!

Why should this be?

In the former case, it is easy to spot when things are wrong grammatically or stylistically and correct them, without altering the meaning. In the latter case, vocabulary and syntax are more sophisticated and the text flows well so it is much more difficult to spot the word or phrase that is not quite right – a word in slightly the wrong order or an inappropriate idiom, for example. These are not major mistakes, but they can disrupt the flow for the reader and they are not always spotted by the editor.

Pitfalls ahead!

So what are the principal pitfalls of editing in the technical field? I have already referred to the computing language or jargon. There have been times when I have read through texts and understood little more than 50% of the content! Eventually, I made a startling revelation. I began to realise that there was a tendency to hide behind technical jargon. The more prone a person was to using it, the less he or she really understood the subject in question. (I have to say that this was based on qualitative observations rather than quantitative studies.)

The solution to this?

The “Which means that?” technique. When faced with complex strings of technical terminology, keep asking “Which means that?” until the information is given in normal language, preferably in words of two syllables, that a nontechnical person could comprehend.

A second major pitfall, is to slip into the jargon trap oneself. It is often easier to repeat highly technical terminology in an article or leave it in when editing, than to understand exactly what

is meant and then rephrase it in more easily digestible terms. In my experience, the level of interest in an article or piece of writing decreases in inverse proportion to the amount of jargon used.

To disassemble meaning still further, technical terminology, perhaps more than in most fields, relies on the use of acronyms. Again, as an editor, it is tempting to simply reproduce these in the text – particularly those in common use. It's only fair to the reader, however, to at least expand them and preferably explain them too. While it is not possible to launch into a lengthy treatise on a technical topic in the middle of an article, an explanatory sentence can be most useful.

Of course, different audiences have different “thresholds“. Most of the editing I have done has been for a business audience, interpreting technical trends and concepts and translating these into business benefits. If you are writing for a gaggle of computer programmers, disregard all of the advice given above!

Steps along the way

When working in a technical area, which is new, it is important to do some preliminary work before launching into the article or text.

Firstly, it is very helpful to read around the topic to get a feel for the subject matter itself and an appreciation of the key issues - also, to see how the industry terminology is used. For this, the web sites of industry commentators and consultants can be extremely useful, as are those of the major companies in that particular technical field. Of course, industry publications are also good for highlighting issues and explaining trends and new developments.

This research also helps to identify an angle or “hook“ to use as a basis for the article, together with a title which will hopefully grab the reader's attention. (The tabloid newspapers in England are particularly skilful at doing this, although I would not recommend imitating The Sun's more lurid headlines!)

It is always useful to incorporate direct quotes from the author of the article or the interviewee. This helps to add interest to a technical text – especially if these people are prepared to make a bold statement or prediction relating to the topic under discussion, and avoids the monotony of a straight narrative. It also adds a human element.

It is similarly useful to incorporate charts and tables if available – provided that these serve to enhance the reader's understanding rather than confuse further.

Finally, always get at least one other person other than the author and/or editor to read through the article or text, not just for proofing, but to make sure that the messages are absolutely clear to the target audience.

Translators and interpreters operating in the technical field can sometimes lack the time to carry out the preliminary research or go through the steps outlined above, for every topic they are called upon to translate and I appreciate the difficulty of their task.

In general terms, I would offer the following advice:

- Many technical terms cross language boundaries – often it is appropriate to leave in the original Anglo-American term rather than try to translate them;
- Try to understand the technical concept rather than translating word for word, which can result in some very tortuous, meaningless sentences in the translation;

- Technical dictionaries are obviously important, but white papers or articles by industry commentators and press can be more useful in giving an understanding of the meaning behind technology issues and giving a background knowledge which will help with the translation;
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification from the author, if feasible.

There was once a belief that eventually computers would be able to take over the work of translators. Could this ever happen? I think not. Too much nuance and sensitivity to context is required of the translator – as of an editor, to make computerised translation feasible in any other than very simple circumstances. In translating, as in editing, judgement calls have to be made about the use of one word or phrase in preference to another, the adoption of this style rather than. At the end of the day, such decisions come from experience and intuition rather than programming. Or will I be proved wrong?

useful sites:

www.gartner.com

www.butlergroup.com www.metagroup.com www.forrester.com

www.bloor-research.com www.it-director.com

www.aberdeen.com

www.idc.com

www.ovum.com

www.oracle.com

www.hp.com

www.ft.com (especially FT-IT special reports)