

*Harakka T. & M. Koskela (toim.) 1996. Kieli ja tietokone. AFinLAn vuosikirja 1996. Suomen soveltavan kielitieteen yhdistyksen (AFinLA) julkaisu no. 54. Jyväskylä. s. 59 – 71.*

## **THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE - A TRIANGULAR CONFLICT OF INTERESTS?**

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In 1993 and 1994, 3 events took place in Denmark with the objective to focus on language technology:

1. The Association of Business Language Graduates ran an information campaign on language technology in the monthly journal "Sprog og Erhverv" and supplemented it with courses and lectures on the subject.
2. The Danish Board of Technology appointed a committee of Danish experts to survey the state of language technology, uncover possible problems and make proposals for solutions.
3. The EU Commission arranged a conference under the title "Multilingual Communication - Denmark, the EU and the Nordic Countries".

These events increased interest in language technology, especially among language specialists in enterprises. Thus, towards the end of 1994, 4 partners joined in a project to introduce language technology on a large scale into a Danish company.

The 4 partners were

- a large Danish company,
- a union, the Association of Business Language Graduates in Denmark (or EsF - Erhvervssprogligt Forbund)
- a research and educational institution, Southern Denmark Business School
- a commercial research institution, Institute for Business Research

As the company plays a central role in the project the following general information is relevant.

It was founded in the fifties and operates within two product lines that are both experiencing growth - one is a highly technological product. It operates in many countries. In 1994 there were approx. 800 full-time employees. The company emphasizes that its solutions are aggregate solutions and that they are consultants from the very beginning of the project and long after the product itself has been delivered. It owns 4 subsidiaries: three sales companies in France, China and the US and a service company in Germany.

On a general level, the 4 partners had a common interest and objective in the project, namely:

With the introduction of language technology alongside other types of technology the productivity of language work can be increased at the same time as an improvement in quality takes place. Naturally, only in cases where the tools are applied by qualified employees.

However, many consider this to be a claim as language technology has not yet been introduced into enterprises in a structured way, and thus there is still uncertainty about the effectiveness and usefulness of these tools. (my translation)

However, the motivation of the partners is quite different

- *the company* states that an important element of the company's strategy is to reduce costs. As the volume of translation increases rapidly due to the rapid development of products, larger orders and increased sales, it is necessary to make the translation process more efficient in order to keep costs at a reasonable level.

- *the union* states that it is important to obtain knowledge about language technology in order to keep members informed. At the same time, focus on the work of language specialists will contribute to a more general acceptance that language quality is a competition parameter and thus contributes to a more marked profile of language specialists

- *the research institutions* state that an empirical base is necessary in order to document whether the tools in question can contribute to efficiency and quality improvement and to measuring, registering, analysing and evaluating the consequences of the introduction of language technology in enterprises.

It was decided to focus on the documentation process as the object of investigation among the many processes in the company in which language work is

an essential part. The introduction of language technology in this process includes tools for terminology work, for automatic and semi-automatic machine translation and for a company specific corpus to work with, because the volume and the range of documentation are impossible to handle manually.

As it is an objective of the project to conclude on the consequences of the introduction of language technology after the planned 3 year project period, the first task was to investigate the situation in the company today. The following aspects were considered:

- language policy in the company. Is there a formulated language policy, and if this is the case, how is it formulated, or is it included in one of the company's other strategies or policies;
- type and extent of the language work;
- the level of qualification of the employees;
- supplementary training activities. If employees are trained what type of training has priority;
- where in the organisation does language work take place
- resources allocated to language work;
- hardware and software applied to language work.

The investigation was to take place in two phases: 1) as a questionnaire survey (applying a quantitative method) and 2) through interviews with selected employees (applying a qualitative method). In order to get the most reliable results, the investigation was carried out by only two people, myself and a representative from EsF, Anne Møller. We guaranteed that no one except us would ever see the questionnaires or the transcripts of the interviews. Only the conclusions would be made public in the form of a status report and in such a way that no single person could be identified.

Two questionnaires were worked out: one for language specialists and the other for non-language specialists. The criteria for selection of employees to participate in the investigation were defined by us.

Language specialists included all employees whose main function in the company is to do language work - 20 in all. Non-language specialists included department heads (18), selected employees who supply the language specialists with language work (27) and members of the Board of Directors (3) - 48 in all. The names of the employees were supplied by the project manager in the company, a language specialist herself.

Of the 68 questionnaires, 57 were returned. After having studied the answers to the questionnaires which were registered in the system ACCESS and statistically elaborated in SAS, we started the interviews. A criterion for being selected for an interview was that the questionnaire had been returned. All

language specialists were interviewed (19), all members of the Board of Directors (3) and 23 randomly selected among department heads and language work suppliers. On average the interviews lasted 45 minutes, and a transcript was made immediately after the interview.

In the following I would like to focus on the findings of the questionnaires and interviews relating to the role of languages, the language policy of the company and the attitudes towards language work.

In order to ensure that there is no misunderstanding I will define what I mean by “language policy” and “language” in this context.

A “language policy” is a decision concerning the resource area language which can guide employees, that is, the framework within which employees can work. A language policy does not have to be written down to be valid or known. However, in order to serve its purpose all employees must be familiar with it which requires careful consideration of media and channels. It may include guidelines for the following areas:

- which language is to be used as corporate language
- which documents are available at any given time in which language
- which markets require language skills
- which employees are to speak which languages
- at which linguistic level is each employee to speak
- quality level and criteria
- language quality differentiation
- procedures to secure language quality
- resources allocated to the language domain
- how to use the linguistic resources optimally

The term “language” includes both the native language of the employees of the company and the foreign languages required to conduct business. However, if we are talking about foreign languages, communication, of course, becomes even more complex due to the barriers inherent in foreign language communication: lack of correct terms, syntactical and stylistic problems and not least, intercultural misunderstandings. Communication problems in foreign languages become more apparent and for that reason I concentrate on that. But many of the problems have to do with the native language, too.

Language work in a company involves three interested parties: 1) the company, 2) the language specialists and 3) the suppliers of language work. And one question that can be put forward is: Do all three parties view language and language work in the same way?

## THE COMPANY

As for the company, I take my point of departure in the reason given for the company to enter into the language technology project, and there is no doubt that the motivation "to keep costs at a reasonable level" is consistent with the overall objective of this company and companies in general.

The company employs 20 language specialists in two overall functions: 1) a central secretariat, in which the major task is to make translations or revision of texts coming from all parts of the organization and 2) a decentral function in various departments, in which the tasks of the language specialists are more varied in that they work as secretaries for a group of engineers and technicians.

A company is in business to make a profit and expand. In order to make a profit, costs have to be kept down at all times. Employees are fixed costs. Therefore, as it was expressed by one interviewee: "A company like ours lives of the world market and is incredibly dependent on being able to keep costs down. It can be done by making employees more efficient - not by increasing the work load but by making available the tools that make work easier". This company is no exception although the strategies to obtain this goal may vary from company to company.

A company operating in the international markets is to a certain extent aware of the fact that knowledge of foreign languages is a necessity. This manifests itself in two ways:

- 1) When a company is advertising for new employees, language qualifications are a prerequisite. This is, of course, obvious when employing language specialists. But 72% of the suppliers indicated that this was stipulated in the job advertisement they reflected on. 87% indicated that they were asked directly about these qualifications during their job interview and 25% that they were in some way tested although it was not a formal test.
- 2) All categories of employees are offered language courses. During the past 2 years, 46% of the non-language specialists had attended language courses, primarily in German and English. The language specialists attend language courses, too - often courses within specific areas in which they feel a need for upgrading areas such as contracts or annual accounts.

This need for language is a consequence of the awareness that language plays a role not only as a means of communication but also as both a competition and image parameter.

Language becomes a competition parameter because customers ask directly in which languages the company can operate. For example, is it a necessity to be able to negotiate, maintain relations and in the end to deliver documentation in the language required by the customer. Thus, language qualifications are one among many factors on which the company is evaluated. At the same time language is an image parameter as it is difficult to maintain trust in a partner that cannot express thoughts, ideas and facts in a comprehensible way, whether in writing or face-to-face.

The importance of languages is not specifically reflected in a policy. However, during the interviews, many of the interviewees stated that they had seen some text that resembled a language policy. Based on this we pressed our company contacts for some sort of document on this. We were presented with an extract of the minutes of a board meeting that dealt with the subject of language work:

1) Based on some unfortunate examples it is necessary to impress responsibility for quality in this area both on the language specialists (have to answer for the quality) and suppliers (have to provide reasonable work conditions).

2) It is necessary to strengthen the cross organizational cooperation - also the ERFA cooperation (exchange of experience) in order to:

- maintain standards and guidelines for language work (avoid anarchy and maintain our image externally);
- optimum use of tools (maximum rationalization advantages on large investments);
- supplementary training of language specialists (development of competence also in the language area).

This is a statement from the Board of Directors distributed to department heads for further action. When board members were asked more closely about language policy, the answer was that the company has no tradition for formulating rules and regulations of any sort, but that policies are communicated more informally to employees in line with company culture in general. The company is, for example, not certified according to ISO 9000 as the attitude is that it is not necessary.

There is no doubt that the company is quality-oriented and that quality in language work is of importance. However, one interviewee expressed his view in the following way: "The company objective is to make money. However, the function of language specialists is to secure that communication is unambiguous, precise and efficient. Quality must be high and communication must be efficient. There is an inherent paradox in this in that the two objectives may be in conflict with one another".

## THE LANGUAGE SPECIALISTS

The language specialists have a built-in language quality standard. Their work primarily consists of language-related tasks - predominantly written tasks: making documents on the basis of drafts (95%), translating technical material (84%), revising texts (69%), writing minutes and resumés (63%), translating legal material (57%), formulating letters on their own (48%). And they have been trained for years to set high quality standards.

A language policy would emphasize the importance of their work and acknowledge their pride in their work. At the same time it would justify their attitude towards high quality standards of the suppliers of their work when under pressure.

Currently, there is some frustration among the language specialists about their working conditions. The most important are the following:

- lack of understanding of the translation process. Many of the suppliers consider translation to be a mechanical process of substituting one word in the source language for another in the target language. This is by some interpreted as a lack of respect of the complexity of language work in general.
- competence conflicts of various sorts with the suppliers. For example, criticism by the supplier of the result of a translation without having considered the quality of the source text or suppliers overrate their own language competence and therefore feel free to make all kinds of corrections in translations made by language specialists.
- the quality of the source texts. The language specialists struggle with various problems in the source texts: lack of cohesiveness (88%), jargon (77%), grammatical problems (65%) and terminological problems (65%). This is a delaying factor in a pressured work process but is also considered a professional challenge.
- the all-pervasive time pressure. Practically every single language specialist mentioned that they had hardly ever time to do the work satisfactorily. One interviewee expressed it in this way: "Never being able to do a thorough job makes you lose interest in the work". There was a certain understanding that the suppliers themselves ran into many delays, but nonetheless the final deadline was always to be met by the language specialist.

The language specialists were in no doubt that the standard of the language work and thus of the communication could have consequences for the volume of business - either positive or negative.

## THE SUPPLIERS OF LANGUAGE WORK

The suppliers of language work had a somewhat more relaxed attitude towards the language work and operated with several quality standards. The differentiation that was made was

- between written and spoken language;
- the type of document
- the addressees.

In spoken language, the general indication was that the quality was of no great importance as long as the listener understood the message. Most felt that there were no major problems with English and German which are a basic requirement for all employees. They were more subdued about French and Spanish.

In written language, the picture was more varied. The suppliers basically agreed that there should be quality standards and quality control. It was important that, for example, documents leaving the company for customers and authorities have as high a quality as possible. However, if the addressee was a supplier or an employee in one of the subsidiaries then the quality was of no major importance. The same was true of short notes and faxes.

Several suppliers mentioned that they worked with the fax facility on their personal computers. The attitude was clearly that faxing from the computer had the nature of a personal letter and was therefore not subject to any quality standard. In the future it will therefore be interesting to find out what role this direct facility will play and the consequences for quality and thus of communication in general.

Among the suppliers there was frustration concerning the language process. As practically any document leaving the company has to undergo some language process it becomes a bottleneck. According to them the language specialists become a bottleneck for two reasons: 1) there are not sufficient language specialists and 2) they always want a high level of quality. Therefore, documents drafted by the suppliers themselves increasingly left the company without having been through any sort of revision.

The employees were very much aware of the fact that the amount of foreign language documents will increase dramatically. The world in which businesses operate is changing and becoming more international. Borders and distances are becoming less important and are no longer commercial barriers.

In Europe we are committed in the European Union to achieving economic and social goals for an integrated Europe by ensuring that all citizens of the union have an equal access to information, opportunities, rights and privileges that the integration process involves. You will all be familiar with the volume of translation and, consequently, of the problems that this involves in the European Union where members of the Union have the right to receive all material in their native language.

The goals have ramifications in the economic sphere where products are to flow from one country to the other without barriers. Thus the requirements to, for example, product documentation both in one's own country and across borders will become stricter. In some cases this is to safeguard the end-consumer in the form of informative labels on foodstuffs and directions for use of various devices. But to an increasing extent it is also to protect the industrial customer from losses in the form of time, money, industrial injury, false claims, etc by demanding product liability of the seller. The Americans have been leading in this area but are setting a general trend for the rest of the world. An example of a this is "Bekendtgørelse om indretning af tekniske hjælpemidler", which comprises machines, containers, apparatuses, tools and similar devices which requires clear guidelines for documentation of products to be sold in foreign countries. This states that:

"...der til hver maskine skal følge en brugsanvisning, som mindst omfatter oplysninger om: igangsætning, anvendelse, håndtering, vægt og dens forskellige dele, montering og demontering, indstilling, vedligeholdelse og evt. fornøden oplæring". Dette skal leveres på følgende måde "Fabrikanten eller hans i fællesskabet etablerede repræsentant udarbejder brugsanvisningen på et af de officielle fællesskabssprog. Når maskinen tages i brug, skal den ledsages af en oversættelse af brugsanvisningen til anvendelseslandets sprog samt af den oprindelige brugsanvisning".

The Danish statutory instrument is a consequence of decisions taken in the EU and to comply with the law, communication across national, linguistic, cultural and economic borders must be secured.

So if in the company there is a general agreement among the 3 parties involved in the language process that language plays an important part in international communication and contributes to the goals of the company, why then are the results of the work not always satisfactory?

After having read all the questionnaires and the transcripts of the interviews it became clear that the problem is the process - both the responsibility of the individual in each step of the process but also coordination of the various steps of the process. To illustrate this I will use the documentation process which - as mentioned earlier - is the focal point of the project in general.

Documentation is the material that must accompany every product sold. In the case of the company in question the documentation can consist of up to 2000 pages, which are made up of descriptions of the parts of the product, instructions, pictures, drawings, diagrams delivered by the departments that are responsible for the various elements of the product. The documentation department is responsible for collecting, gathering, structuring, formulating, translating and presenting the final documentation material in a user-friendly way. Thus, they have the responsibility to fulfil the part of the contract concerning documentation. If the documentation is not delivered at the time stipulated in the contract, it may have financial consequences for the company.

Contributors to the documentation are:

- engineers and technicians in the various departments: development, construction, design, hardware and software etc.;
- sub-suppliers;
- documentation designers;
- language specialists.

The documentation process is structured and described in a documentation-process outline which comprises

- project description;
- requirements to documentation material: type of software in which to be delivered, number of copies, language;
- sub-supplier documentation;
- the flow: contents, responsible person, department, deadlines;
- deadline for the project;

Despite the fact that this is worked out for each project, the documentation department states that

- it is difficult to collect the necessary material;
- that the material received is inadequate and heterogeneous concerning content, structure and terminology;
- each contribution is characterized by the professional point of view of each contributing department which affects the complexity of the material and the communication value;
- that the final deadline has to be met by the department, that is by the language specialists despite all the delays at other places in the process.

The process initially depends on the various technical contributors to the documentation. They acknowledge the importance of the documentation material but point out that working on the product itself is the most impor-

tant task for them. They feel that documenting the work is a boring task and for that reason it is always postponed to the last minute.

As to the process, they lack guidelines for how to write the documentation - a problem that in the end complicates the work in the documentation department.

The contributors write in the language of their choice. There is no requirement for the language in which the documentation must be written which means that some write in their native language, and some in English because most of the material they read is English. This complicates the translation process in the documentation department if the final documentation has to be delivered in German. If later the same or a similar product must be accompanied by an English or a Spanish version, then the source text is suddenly German. The result is that the quality of the documentation varies to a great extent.

The terminology of the documentation is not controlled. Each contributor uses his choice of terminology. This is further complicated by the fact that a sub-supplier to the company may also be a contributor to the documentation. In the same document different terms may describe the same object and this cannot be controlled as a documentation material of 2000 pages delivered too late cannot be translated or revised by one person alone. Furthermore, new objects and concepts are named somewhere in the process by someone. The language specialists mention that suddenly a new term appears, and maybe only one person in the company knows what the term covers. No language specialist participates in this naming process.

Furthermore, the different backgrounds of the various contributors are also reflected in the material. When a subject specialist writes, his professional expertise is reflected in the text in the form of focus, priority, complexity and jargon. Therefore, it is no surprise that the texts may become incomprehensible to, for example, the language specialists and thus difficult to translate but also to experts involved in the same project but with a different background. In the end the customer is left with a poor quality and somewhat fuzzy text.

All the problems result in an increased work load in the documentation department that has to sort, coordinate and standardize the various contributions under time pressure.

It would be evident to recommend that language specialists be involved in the process at a very early stage. And when I say language specialist I also mean a language specialist in Danish as the diversity of languages for documentation requires that the source language be Danish. This because it cannot be taken for granted that the language skills of language specialists in the company in all cases include English at this high competence level al-

though most will have certain skills in English competence. This is also true of the documentation designers that are not always language specialists.

Involving language specialists from the very beginning of a process would quite obviously eliminate some of the problems mentioned above:

- the documentation process would be forced to start early on,
- involving a non-subject specific expert would require that the subject expert formulate texts that can be understood by others,
- terminological problems, both the use of a standard terminology and the naming of new objects or concepts, could be solved in the process, including the registration of terminology in the database;
- a language specialist could be the coordinating person in the process securing the flow.

The company is aware of the fact that barriers between various occupational groups need to be broken down - that creating space for each individual within which to work and cooperate will result in a greater synergy and efficiency. Presently, the reorganization into team-building groups will bring about some of the changes more locally. Team-building means that a team is built around each project in the company which then dissolves when the work is done. Language specialists are to participate in these groups.

If we as teachers and researchers are to contribute to the improvement of language work we have to take the needs of the users of LSP into consideration. Through the years, we have missed the dialogue with the LSP-users in enterprises. They sometimes look upon the work carried out by researchers without great understanding because our research results seldomly match their research carried out at research institutions and institutions of higher education is necessary, especially for students of languages, and that language teaching has to focus on all aspects: syntax, phonetics, morphology, text linguistics, stylistics and pragmatics. Research cannot exclusively be dictated by corporate or specialist user needs.

But to match the need of LSP-users better, we have to look at LSP from the point of view of the enterprise, that is as a communication process. LSP is the means of communicating within a given subject field (the horizontal stratification) between speakers with the same, similar or different backgrounds (the vertical stratification). For this purpose it is important to do research in all the above-mentioned research fields but more importantly to integrate the results in the communication process. Thus, it is not sufficient to view communication as the process that takes place between two communication partners in the traditional communication model. It is necessary to see communication as the process throughout the organisation as a whole.

A company does not have to be very large before communication becomes complex and no matter what kind of structure the company has, there will

be subdivisions either in the form of subsidiaries, divisions, departments, working or ad hoc groups and thus a structure that requires communication to flow in many directions: from upwards and down, from downwards and up, across and criss-cross various subdivisions. This involves many types of occupational groups that have to work together in order to achieve a better communication flow towards the common goal.

Therefore, it is important in language work to think of quality not only in terms of the specific contents but also the process. Quality can be viewed from both perspectives.

In the contents orientation the concern is **what** is being translated. It is customary to say that quality is what the customer requires. In view of the fact that the customer must receive documents in his own language the quality of language used will be an image parameter as well as a competition parameter. However, I have attempted to demonstrate that **how** things are done is equally important. The process quality plays a part not only for the satisfaction of the individual, but also in order to ameliorate conflicts of interest among the various interest groups. Thus, the process orientation has to take into consideration that the interest groups involved have different motivations.

- the enterprise wants to keep costs at a minimum level;
- language specialists want communication quality to be at a maximum level;
- language work suppliers want the tasks to be done.

All groups involved have a point, and a policy must reflect this.