

# Translation Quality Assessment: Bridge the Gap between Theory and Practice\*

WANG Jun-song

Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Northwestern Polytechnic University, Xi'an, China

Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) is a central concern for both academic research and translation practice. Yet consensus on the issue has almost never been reached among theorists and practitioners. In this paper, a detailed comparison between academic and professional assessment has been made mainly in terms of text type, assessment criteria and models. It is believed that a “one size fits all” model across academy and industry is neither possible nor necessary. However, the gaps in between could be narrowed down by increasing communication and cooperation between theorists and practitioners, who are advised to turn their focus to translator’s competence and evaluation process.

*Keywords:* Translation Quality Assessment, gaps, theory and practice

## Introduction

Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) is a core issue in translation studies and it has been a central concern for both theorists and professionals. But admittedly, consensus and coherence has almost never been reached among them. On the one hand, the models of TQA carried out daily in industry have been criticized for being subjective or impressionistic due to the lack of theoretical basis; while the models proposed by theorists, on the other hand, are rejected by practitioners for being too ideal to be used in practice. As Chesterman and Wagner (2002) addressed in the book *Can Theory Help Translators*, “there can be few professions with such a yawning gap between theory and practice” (p. 1).

This article aims to make proposals on how to bridge the gaps in between by exploring the differences and gaps between theory and practice in Translation Quality Assessment.

## Literature Review

Approaches to TQA in academy generally fall into two broad categories: equivalence-based approaches and functional approaches. Equivalence approaches view translation as the attempt to reproduce the source text as closely as possible. Translations are evaluated at different levels of equivalence, such as “dynamic equivalence” proposed by Nida (1964), “factual equivalence” by Van den Broeck (1985) and “functional

---

\* **Acknowledgements:** I'd like to acknowledge support from Ministry of Education in China Project of Humanities and Social Sciences (Project No.15YJC740083), Shaanxi Provincial Social Science Project (Project No. 2014J09) and scientific research plan project of Shaanxi Province Education Department (Project No.16JK1623).

WANG Jun-song, Assistant Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Northwestern Polytechnic University; Ph.D. candidate in Beijing Normal University.

equivalence” by House (1977, 1997, 2015). Functional approaches, on the other hand, are based on the assumption that “translating is not so much determined by the source text as by factors relating to the target culture” (Lauscher, 2000, p. 156). The purpose of target text is believed to be the primary criterion in translation. In most cases, assessment of translation is to see whether the target texts are functionally appropriate or not instead of being good or bad (Schäffner, 1998; Reiss, 1983, 2000; Vermeer, 1989, 1996; Nord, 1991, 1996). There are also other attempts to evaluate translation quality, such as teleological model (Larose, 1987), empirical/eclectic model (Al-Qinai, 2000), corpus-based approach (Bowker, 2001) and argumentation-centered approach (Williams, 2004).

TQA in industry is strongly characterized by its practicability. There are various models (LISA QA model, DQF, MQM) and standards (ISO 9000, SAE J2450, EN 15038, ASTM) that have been developed and applied in profession since 1990s. And the proliferation of professional translation also arouses the interests of theorists (Mossop, 2001; Gouadec, 2007; Drugan, 2013), and they began to approach the quality issue in industry from different perspectives.

But unfortunately, there are fewer attempts to make comparison and contrast in TQA between academy and industry, among which the article entitled *Translation Quality Assessment: Where Theory and Practice Meet?* by Lauscher (2000) initiated the study a number of ways to negotiate the gap between theoretical approaches and practical needs. Chesterman as a theorist and Wagner as a practitioner (2002) also addressed various aspects of TQA in manner of dialogue. Although great efforts have been made, so far no ideal solutions have been found to the problems.

## **Gaps Between Theory and Practice**

### **TQA Text Type**

In the field of Translation Quality Assessment, text type is a key factor that has to be taken into consideration. The texts to be assessed in academic studies are totally different from those in industry. There seems to be a tradition in translation studies that literary texts are the first choice both in translation criticism and Translation Quality Assessment. Most of the researchers, if not all, prefer to take literary texts, such as poetry, drama and novel as their object of study because literary texts, in their eyes, are worthy of more exploration compared with non-literary texts from the perspectives of linguistics, aesthetics, culture and philosophy. Though some researchers are aware of the discrimination and try to include non-literary texts in their research, the proportion is relatively low.

In industry, the situation is just the reverse. Most of the texts to be handled are non-literary texts and almost 90% are technical texts centered on the topics of engineering, communication, tourism, trade and finance, etc.. On the other hand, translation materials have been expanded with scientific advances and globalization of economy. The traditional printed texts have been replaced by electronic texts, and in many cases, translators have to deal with audiovisual texts, hypertexts and even localization of software or webpage. Assessment or evaluation of the emerging text types is unavoidable and at the same time full of challenges.

### **TQA Criteria**

There is a great discrepancy between researchers and practitioners in evaluation criteria. In translation assessment, evaluation criterion is a controversial issue and different stance may lead to different interpretations. For the researchers and scholars in academic field, translation is a product and its quality can be

measured by whether it reaches the standard or not. Generally speaking, faithfulness and expressiveness should be the basic benchmark against which translation should be measured. In other words, a translation should be adequate in the first place and acceptable in the second. Any translation fails in the above two aspects would be viewed as either inadequate or unacceptable. And the ultimate goal of translation evaluation is to distinguish the good from the bad, the right from the wrong and establish rules or theoretical framework for pedagogical and research purposes.

Yet, in practice, the same doesn't always hold true with the industry. For those who work in industry, translation is a kind of service and the evaluation of translation quality depends on how much the translation meets the needs or requirements of the clients. In other words, client's satisfaction can be regarded as the criterion against which translation quality could be measured. As the requirements and expectations of clients are various, translation quality is thus becoming a relative concept. To illustrate this point, let's take hotel as an example. As we know, there are various hotels at different levels, ranging from five-star hotel to motel. If a client only wants to find a shelter with little pay, a motel is a good choice. But if he wants to enjoy comfort and extra facilities, a five-star hotel may meet the needs. The same is true with Translation Quality Assessment, which means a good translation is the one that meet the clients' needs best. As a matter of fact, most of the customers just want good enough or fit-for-purpose translation. Therefore, the ultimate goal in industry is to increase efficiency and maximize interests by rationally allocating resources to meet the basic needs of the clients.

### **TQA Model**

Different motivations behind assessment and evaluation criteria may lead to different TQA models. Currently, error-based models are pretty popular in industry with EN15038, LISA QA model, SAE J2450, ISO 9000 model as the representatives. And some language service providers would have internal models based on specific requirements or conditions, for example with regard to laws or medicine. These evaluation models are based on "counting errors in random samples, applying penalties and maintaining thresholds" (O'Brien, 2012, p. 55). Take LISA QA model as an example, translation errors are categorized into seven types, i.e., mistranslation, accuracy, term, language, style, country and consistency, which are further divided into 26 sub-categories with each category is weighted as critical, major or minor level. In assessing the final version, an evaluation report with *Pass or Fail* would be given based on the model.

Besides error analysis, the evaluator would also take external factors into consideration. For instance, factors such as purpose of translation, quality and difficulty of the original, deadline and pricing, would all exert influence on final assessment. Though popular and practical in industry, these models are often criticized by theorists for the lack of theoretical support which is evidenced by the fact that most of the practitioners do have strong preference on tools over theory.

In the academic field, on the contrary, most of the models are qualitative in nature with profound theoretical basis. The most influential models are Reiss' text typology model, Juliane House's functional-pragmatic model and Williams' argumentation model. These models are not confined to equivalence at linguistic level, but place much emphasis on the role of text type, function, context and target readership. For instance, House's revised evaluation model has been recognized as the most influential model in the field. Based on Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics, the model focuses on the functional equivalence between the original and translation in terms of register. The revised model has three stages: first of all, the

original is analyzed in terms of field, tenor, mode and genre, which is followed by an overall summary of the statement of ST function. In the second step, comparison between original and translation is made to find errors and mismatches based on the above four parameters. Finally, an overall statement of quality for the given translation is given.

Few external factors are included in academic models because, in House's view, that would complicate the model and difficult to carry on. What's more, most of the models are qualitative and descriptive in nature whereas the industry expects quantitative and prescriptive assessment, so few academic models have been accepted by industry for being time-consuming and unrealistic.

### **Other Aspects**

Besides the above mentioned academy-industry divide, there are still some other differences. For example, it is a common practice to evaluate a sample of translated material for errors in translation industry because it is costly and time-consuming to evaluate the large volume of translated materials. But in translation studies, sampling is unacceptable and the translated texts, which are usually short, must be assessed as a whole. Another disagreement between them lies in the fact that most of the theorists attempt to search for a unified theory or model which can be used to evaluate any translation. For the professionals, searching for such a model may be seen as wrong-headed in the profession, "increasing pressures on the translation market, [...] combined with customer's general lack of understanding of the translation process, mean that systematic, all encompassing quality assurance is rarely financially viable" (Rasmussen & Schjoldager, 2011, p. 87). In fact, the models in practice are either designed for an industry (for instance, the LISA QA model is well known in localization industry), or designed for a more specific field (patent and law for example). In addition, there is no consensus between practitioners and theorists on what translation is and what good translation is. Different answers to these questions may account for the divide or gaps between theory and practice.

### **Proposals and Implications**

Translation Quality Assessment is a core issue both in translation theory and practice. Despite the gaps noted above, theory and practice in fact share much common ground (Drugan, 2013, p. 43). It cannot be denied that the theorists pay little attention to translation in profession and the practitioners rarely, if not reject at all, adopt the models in academic field, but they do have something in common and face similar problems and challenges. On the one hand, many industry models can be theoretically accounted for even if they don't label them as academics do. As Pym (2010) noted "all translators theorize, not just the ones who can express their theories in technical terms" (p. 4). On the other hand, the academic models cannot be convincing if it is totally isolated from the industry practice. Therefore, measures have to be taken to promote the development of Translation Quality Assessment by increasing communication and reducing misunderstandings.

First of all, TQA theory is supposed to be grounded in practice and in return be used to guide practice. Any powerful theory, which comes from practice, has to be tested by a large number of authentic cases. But in terms of TQA theory, "theorists rarely start from professional concerns in drawing up models, but rather devise models from theoretical principles then cherry-pick cases to test them" (Drugan, 2013, p. 39). Most of the cases are literary works, historic books or student assignments, not real cases from industry. The models devised in this way are limited in universality and doomed to fail in profession. Therefore, it is advisable for the theorists to test their models by enlarging the number of professional translation cases. If it is impossible to establish a

universally accepted model or framework due to the variety and complexity, a specifically designed model for the profession is also a good option.

Secondly, a channel of communication and cooperation is to be established. Translation Quality Assessment is acknowledged as a thorny issue not only because its complexity but also the lack of communication and cooperation between theory and practice. As mentioned in the early part of this paper, the models employed in profession are usually criticized by theorists for the lack of theoretical support but many of them do have theoretical basis. For example, many industry models put much emphasis on end user's requirement, target reader and text function, which fits well in with the functionalist theory. But unfortunately, the practitioners either claim their models are free from theory or use a different term for it. On the other hand, theorists find it difficult to get access to the professional materials for various reasons, confidentiality for instance. The better solution to these problems is to establish a channel of communication and cooperation. As Lauscher (2010) noted "translation quality assessment and judgment of translations are a matter of communication, co-operation and consent" (p. 164). Regular conferences and seminars are good chances for both sides to know each other and reduce misunderstanding. For example, scholars and researchers in academic field can be employed as counselors to help design a specific model for industry. The Dynamic Quality Framework (DQF) put forward by Translation Automation User Society (TAUS) serves as a good example for the industry to follow, thanks to the joint efforts from both the industry and researchers from Dublin City University. And another nice try is the teleological model proposed by scholar Larose who drew on some great idea from industry. To get authentic professional materials, theorists had better work with practitioners to build parallel corpora which may turn to be a win-win situation for both sides.

Finally, research on Translation Quality Assessment also has implications for translator training. In traditional translator education, the student's translations are evaluated by the criterion or principle in translation studies. But when they graduate from school and enter into industry, their translations are evaluated by another set of principles and criteria. It usually takes a long time for the newly recruited translators to adjust to the new situation and some of them have to be retrained before taking up the job. Therefore, it is advisable to introduce the differences or gaps between theory and practice in terms of translation assessment at the beginning of the training course. As most of the students will work as translators in the industry and the materials to be translated are mainly instrumental texts, the proportion of non-literary texts could be increased in practice. Accordingly, the industry models and evaluation methods should be also introduced into translator training so as to reduce the assessment shock when student translators just step into the job market.

### **Conclusion**

The assessment of translation quality has received much attention in the academic and professional sphere where translation quality is also ever topical and contentious. We have to admit that there are great differences and even gaps between theory and practice, but they do share some commons and could benefit from each other. It has to be made clear that the search for a "one size fits all" model is unnecessary and impossible due to the variety and complexity of Translation Quality Assessment. But meanwhile, joint efforts can be made on the models for specific fields, and theorists and practitioners are advised to turn their focus to translator's competence and evaluation process, which may be the breakthrough of future TQA studies and practice.

## References

- Al-Qinai, J. (2000). Translation quality assessment: Strategies, parameters and procedures. *Meta*, 45(3), 497-519.
- Bowker, L. (2001). Towards a methodology for a corpus-based approach to translation evaluation. *Meta*, 46(2), 345.
- Chesterman, A., & Wagner, E. (2002). *Can theory help translators? A dialogue between the ivory tower and the wordface*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Drugan, J. (2013). *Quality in professional translation: Assessment and improvement*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Gouadec, D. (2007). *Translation as a profession*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- House, J. (1977). *A model for translation quality assessment*. Tübingen: TBL Verlag Gunter Narr.
- House, J. (1997). *Translation quality assessment: A model revisited*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
- House, J. (2015). *Translation quality assessment: Past and present*. Oxon/New York: Routledge.
- Larose, R. (1987). *Théories contemporaines de la traduction (Contemporary Translation Theories)* (2nd edn.). Sillery, Quebec: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Lauscher, S. (2000). Translation quality assessment—where can theory and practice meet? *The Translator*, 6(2), 149-68.
- Mossop, B. (2001). *Revising and editing for translators*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Towards a science of translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Nord, C. (1996). Text type and translation method: An objective approach to translation criticism. *The Translator*, 2(1), 81-88.
- O'Brien, S. (2012). Towards a dynamic quality evaluation model for translation. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, (17), 55-77.
- Pym, A. (2010). *Exploring translation theories*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Rasmussen, K. W., & Schjoldager, A. (2011). Revising translations: A survey of revision policies in Danish translation companies. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, (15), 87-120.
- Reiss, K. (1983). Quality in translation oder wann ist eine übersetzung gut? (Quality in translation or what is a good translation?). *Babel*, 29(4), 198-208.
- Reiss, K. (2000). *Translation criticism: The potential and limitations* (E. F. Rhodes, Trans.). Manchester: St Jerome.
- Schäffner, C. (1998). *Translation and quality*. Clevedon: Multilingual.
- Van den Broeck, R. (1985). Second thoughts on translation criticism: A model of its analytic function. In T. Hermans (Ed.), *The manipulation of literature: Studies in literary translation* (pp. 54-62). London & Sydney: Croom Helm.
- Vermeer, H. J. (1989). *Skopos und translationsauftrag—aufsätze (Skopos and translationsauftrag—essays)*. Heidelberg: THW.
- Vermeer, H. J. (1996). *A skopos theory of translation: (Some arguments for and against)*. Heidelberg: Textcontext-Verlag.
- Williams, M. (2004). *Translation quality assessment: an argumentation-centered approach*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.