Localizing Packaged Software: Linguistic and Cultural Problems

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1. Introduction

In software development and production, products are structured into three basic components – documentation, software and packaging – each consisting of different subcomponents. Documentation – the set of general instructions and explanations for using a computer program – refers to hard-copy manuals, online help files and interactive computer-based training (CBT); Software – the user interface – applies to menus, commands, options, interactive messages etc.; and Packaging concerns such diverse elements as the actual carton, the copyright page, disk labels, the license agreement etc. All texts to be translated in a software package are user-oriented and, with the possible exception of software, multifunctional, with the three main functions being instructions for use, description and advertising: consequently, a functional translation approach is required aiming at both referential and pragmatic equivalence. Thus in the translation of software products into foreign languages, the term localization has been coined to indicate that, alongside translation proper (ie. the purely linguistic work and the technical expertise that are obviously involved), the translator's task entails also an understanding of the different cultural requirements of the computer users of various countries and ensuring that the products meet those needs. For example, localizing an American product into Italian not only involves a reproduction into that language of a well-defined referent, ie. the directions to the user for making a specific program work, but also ranges from customizing the so-called 'country specifications' – eg. the conversion of the decimal point to a comma or the inversion of the date order Month/Date/Year into Date/Month/Year – to a more thorough socio-cultural adaptation such as the total rewriting of an example – eg. references to a baseball championship may be changed to a soccer league instead. Moreover, the task of producing in the target language texts that satisfy the three main requisites of accuracy, brevity and clarity is hampered by the fact that the source texts are not always characterized by such requisites but are often linguistically non-homogeneous and redundant as well as presenting different stylistic norms from the same text-type in Italian.

After providing a brief overview of the translation problems posed by the language of software and packaging, the second half of this paper will focus on
the documentation where, alongside language-related issues, stylistic considerations are all-important, thus requiring a considerable amount of adaptation and reworking. As software giant Microsoft have a corporate translation policy in place to ensure that the same level of quality in its products is achieved also in product localization, all examples will be taken from Microsoft Windows applications (eg. Word, PowerPoint, Excel), which are aimed at inexperienced and informed users alike. All the aspects of software localization being dealt with here, however, are largely representative of the problems of localizing from American into Italian virtually any type of software package.¹

2. Localizing software and packaging

Mixed computing environments (eg. MS-DOS and Macintosh) are becoming more common and more important as the market evolves, thus boosting the demand for a single, user-friendly graphical user interface (GUI), regardless of the specific underlying computing platform the computer users operate from. Standardized menus and commands for identical actions and, more generally, a consistent use of terminology make moving files from one machine to another easier and reduce the cost of training and support. Consequently, in the localization of software for GUI platforms it is essential to achieve standard translations not only for essential screen elements (Menu bar, Tool, Scroll arrow, Checked command, Dialog box title etc.) and the common terms that are used in data manipulation (press, hold down, type, point, click, scroll etc.) but also, and above all, for the names of menus and menu items, dialog boxes and options etc., ie. for what appears on the screen.

Whilst being a very important feature of the whole process of localization, lexis is without doubt the most distinguishing characteristic at the level of software, where grammatical forms and structure take second place to the issue of consistency of terminology. In software development and production, terminology standardization is still far from being achieved as different

¹ Very similar difficulties were in fact found in the localization of a product which is directed to intermediate/advanced computer users, the manual (Addison-Wesley, 1988) and the software of the AWK programming language, a tool designed to provide the users with a variety of computing and data-manipulation tasks. Moreover, the same problems were encountered also in the localization of the "Guide to Network Resource Tools", a document available in electronic format on the network (listserv@eamcc.bitnet) whose purpose is to supply information on resources and services available to anyone who is already familiar with the basic tools of networking (ie. electronic mail, FTP and Telnet). Both products are the topics of two unpublished dissertations that I have supervised (Ottino 1992-1993; Castellani 1994-1995).
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Corporations have evolved separate terminologies for the same referents, e.g. the verb *save* has at least three different translations in Italian: "salvare", "archiviare" and "memorizzare". Consequently, when localizing a product for any software firm worth its salt, a translator should be provided either with a hard-copy glossary or a machine-readable database containing all the source and target technical terms (and, possibly, recurring phrases and sentences) occurring in the textual elements of the product. Even when such tools are available, however, terminology management can still pose problems to the translator: firstly, terminology inconsistency often characterizes also the source texts — e.g. the difference between the verbs "Clear", "Delete" and "Cancel" is far from being unambiguous — thus making the ideal 1:1 correspondence between source and target terms difficult to achieve; secondly, many of the new terms used in a specific product are not provided with a ready-made translation, the meaning of a term often being made clear either only by its immediate context of occurrence or by the function it serves within the program (e.g. "column balancing"/regolazione delle colonne (di testo) in Word for Windows 2.0).

Other than at the lexical level, linguistic problems in software localization are provided by all those instances where standardization is required at the syntactic level, as in the case of on-screen messages. From the functional point of view, messages can be broadly divided into 'interactive' messages, which in the GUI window are displayed in the message boxes and require the user's endorsement before an operation is performed, and 'informative' messages, which are displayed in the message line or in the status bar at the bottom of the application window and require no user response. At the linguistic level, the specific function of a message is reflected in its syntactic form: thus interactive messages use a non-finite infinitival clause without "to" (e.g. "Save document now?"), whilst, in the case of informative messages, a variety of syntactic structures are used. An informative message clarifying the function of a certain menu will use a non-finite infinitival clause without "to" (e.g. when selecting the File menu in Word for Windows 6.0, the message "Create, open, save, print documents or quit Word" appears in the status bar) but an informative message

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2 Quite apart from such "commercial variants", in the particular field of computer technology other instances of competition amongst different terms for the same referent, both intra- and interlinguistically, are: "variants of domain", e.g. "hard disk" is translated in Italian by *disco rigido/fisso* whereas computer programmers and technicians usually prefer using the American term; "temporal variants", e.g. "computer" was originally translated in Italian as *calcolatore/cervello elettronico*; and "variants of length", e.g. an important factor in choosing to translate "abort" with the hideous *aborto* is that the more elegant variant *termine anormale dell'operazione* is far too long (cf. Bédard 1986 for these different types of variants in technical translation).
providing feedback on a certain command will use the third person singular of the present tense (eg. when selecting the command "New" on the dropdown File menu in Word for Windows 6.0, the message "Creates a new document or template" appears in the status bar), and, finally, informative messages communicating to the user that a certain operation is taking place contain a non-finite "-ing" verb (eg. "Saving document..."). In Microsoft products, prescriptive guidelines ensure that such a conventional diversification is carried on in the localized version of these messages in Italian: consequently there is a different standardized translation for the infinitive verb according to whether it occurs in an interactive message or in an informative menu message, because in the first case the infinitive is maintained in Italian (Salvare il documento ora?) whilst in the second an infinitive preceded by the preposition per has to be employed (Per creare, aprire, salvare, stampare i documenti o uscire da Word). Lastly, the conventional translation of the other two types of informative messages requires the use of the third person singular of the present tense in the command messages (Crea un nuovo documento o modello) and the nominalization of the original "-ing" verb followed by the adverbial form in corso (Salvataggio del documento in corso).

In software localization, screen items and key words (the latter being terms referring to specific features of a program) can represent a problem from a cultural point of view because their imagery or metaphorical associations might be too culture-bound and therefore impossible to carry into the target culture. An example is provided by the key word "Wizard", which is found in Microsoft products such as Publisher, Cirrus and Project for Windows. This feature enables the semi-automatic creation of documents and its reference to magicians (and 'computer wizards') symbolizes the 'philosophy' underlying Microsoft products: once the users know one program they basically know them all because of their common features. In Italian products, however, "Wizard" has different translations (Assistente, Auto-composizione) because the reference to magicians was considered unsuitable for the target users. Quite apart from the inconvenience of having to diversify the translation of an important key word, the inability to find a single translation for Wizard meant also that the Wizard button, featuring a magician's hat, as well as all the sorcery-related screen items displayed in other parts of the programs, have become totally inappropriate in Italian products. The cultural adaptation of software to the target market can be an especially time-consuming and expensive process in the case of on-line documentation and CBT because the particularly 'user-friendly' approach that characterizes these two subcomponents of software can give rise to a great

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3 This example has been drawn from Corbolante (1992). Licia Corbolante is senior Italian Language Specialist at Microsoft World Product Group and is currently based in Milan.
number of examples drawn from everyday (American) life, which sometimes can even be a recurrent theme of the whole software. Consequently the developers and the technical writers of the original products to be localized should become more aware of the different expectations of the American users and their international counterparts by using more universal imagery.4

The localization of software, however, predominantly involves issues of a purely technical nature that often overrule considerations of any other type: screen space is a case in point. The space of the GUI window is limited and instances of space saving in menu names even in the original language include efforts at avoiding the use of the capital letters "W" and "M" as too space-consuming and the filling up of spaces between compounds. To save space on the menu bar, the Help menu appears often as question mark "?" in localized products. As a general rule, the brevity of the original language cannot always be matched in Italian (eg. the command "Size" has to be translated with the excruciatingly long Ridimensiona): space becomes a crucial issue especially in the menu bar, on dropdown menus and in dialog boxes, where menu, command and button names respectively have to be as short as possible. For example, in many cases where the Italian translations of such names would require articles and prepositions, these have been omitted ("Filename"/Nome file; "Select column"/Seleziona colonna); in some cases an abbreviated name on screen (eg. Nome gloss., Comb. colori) is not matched in the documentation, where it is referred to in its 'full' form instead (Nome glossario, Combinazione colori).

Another technical problem is provided by the localization of shortcut key commands (CTRL+key combinations which are often listed in menus) and access keys (ALT+key combinations which appear underlined on the screen), ie. letters of the alphabet that provide instant access via the keyboard to menu names, menu commands, dialog box labels and command buttons. The access keys of the most common functions use the first letter of the name and are consistent across Microsoft products because they must be easily remembered by the user (eg. File/File; View/Visualizza; Bold/Grassetto etc.). A letter can appear only once in any menu, window, dialog box, as in the following example that reproduces the Italian localized version of the Edit menu in WinWord 2.0:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edit</th>
<th>Modifica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undo</td>
<td>Annulla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>Ripeti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut</td>
<td>Taglia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 A very recent reminder of the importance of cultural issues in software localization has been the outburst against Microsoft from Spanish and Mexican irate users of Word 6.0 Spanish thesaurus where, among the 'racist' examples, the word "Indian" was offered synonyms such as "savage" and "man-eater" (Durban 1996).
Consequently, when assigning unique access keys, if the first letter of the first or of the most important word of a menu, command etc. cannot be used, the localiser should use a distinctive consonant (eg. Personalizza) or any other unique letter.

As far as the translation methodology is concerned, the knowledge by the translator of the standardized terminology and special syntactic conventions that characterize the textual elements of the software component both in the source and the target language makes the localization of software a relatively straightforward process. With the possible exception of cross-cultural issues, translation deals essentially with accuracy and consistency, the main aim of these functional texts being overwhelmingly that of providing an interface between the user and the machine. Thus, in the case of isolated lexical items (names of menus, commands, buttons etc.), a word-for-word translation approach is required. Even interactive messages, which can be seen as more 'communicative' because they activate an immediate user response, are user-oriented exclusively in the sense that they aim at conveying a message as clearly and concisely as possible to their readers.

In the case of packaging, however, referential equivalence in translation is only appropriate for a minority of its subcomponents, ie. disk/CD-Rom labels and hard-copy manual titles. As for the textual elements of the other subcomponents of packaging, these can be ascribed to two completely different genres, ie. legal (the copyright page, the license agreement etc.) and advertizing (the text appearing on the carton). The texts dealing with the legal aspects of a software product belong to the "non-procedural component" (Cortelazzo 1994: 61) of the software package and need not concern us here: their localization is in fact more of an adaptation of the text to the specific legal system of the target culture than a translation, so much so that the standardized versions of texts are produced by lawyers rather than translators. On the other hand, the text that appears on the carton of the package is of crucial importance in the success of the product on the market as it usually provides the first direct contact between the consumer and that product. Thus, not only the appearance of the box must capture attention but the text must also speak directly and persuasively to the potential users. Though broadly falling into the 'persuasive texts' category and thus being culture-specific, such texts are also 'informative' inasmuch as they aim at communicating to the reader the specific features of the product: in this
sense they can be compared to ads proper in that they "merge the features of public and private discourse, and the voices of authority and intimacy, exploiting the features which are common to these poles" (Cook 1992: 214). Consequently, the degree of necessary adaptation required in the localization of these texts is limited to their formulation, the discoursal features of which are heavily influenced by the tastes of the consumers they are intended for. Thus, for example, the stylistic expectations of the Italian users include a higher degree of formality and impersonality, though not quite as high as the formal register that characterizes the component of documentation, and a tuning down of any overpraising of the product. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the layout of text, photographs and illustrations is not going to change in the localized version: this means that, as with software, space is an extremely limiting factor that cannot be ignored. At the linguistic level, all this entails that active and personal constructions may be maintained, the user can be addressed directly in the second person plural voi (eg. "And if you are an old pro"/Se invece siete degli esperti) and colloquial markers such as exclamation marks, idioms and superlatives may be sprinkled less sparingly than in the documentation (eg. "Incredibly easy to learn and use!"/Facilissimo da usare!, "in about 10 minutes"/in un batter d'occhio, "terrific online tutorials/esercitazioni in linea sensazionali"). The specific strategies that a translator can be expected to use when dealing with text on packaging include: the nominalization of the titles of sections dealing merely with the technicalities of the product (eg. "Works needs"/Requisiti di sistema, "If networked, you need"/Requisiti di rete, "To print, choose from"/Stampanti) in accordance with the standardized Italian titles for such technical requisites to be found on the cartons across Microsoft products; the shift of person in verbs addressing directly the user (eg. "View", "Work" and "Run") which in the target version may be referred to the product instead (Visualizza, Funziona, Esegue); and the shift Adjective --> Noun/Clause of lexical items occurring in initial position and followed by an exclamation mark in bullet lists grouping the features of the product (eg. "New!/Novità!, "Easy!/È facile!, "Timesaving!/È veloce!).

3. Localizing documentation

Broadly speaking, documentation belongs to the text type 'instructions for use', its main function being that of activating the users by instructing and training them. However, as Ciliberti (1990: 301) has pointed out, additional functions are carried out – eg. describing the various features of a product, publicizing it and

5 All the textual examples of packaging are drawn from the carton of the first version of Microsoft Works.
pleasing the reader. Consequently, a functional approach to translation is required in order to convey in the target text the various functions of the source text, whilst achieving at the same time the three main requisites of accuracy (ie. factual correctness), brevity and clarity. However, the linguistic and stylistic conventions adopted by the target-text genre are also an all-important consideration and a comparison of such tendencies in 'parallel texts' (ie. the source-text genre and the target-text genre) should be the starting point for the translation of any special language text, with the elimination of the differences between source and target texts at the pragmatic level being obviously the next step. In the specific case of Microsoft products, as with software and packaging, the localization of documentation is a highly conventionalized process where a number of prescriptive guidelines ensure that the translators produce a version of a specific product having the same quality standards as the other Microsoft products in that language. As Microsoft is currently the most successful software manufacturer in the world, these guidelines aim not only at standardizing the communication between the user and any Microsoft product in the target culture but also at setting the virtual standard for register and genre-specific characteristics of computer manuals in that culture.

A good instance of what is meant by 'consistency' across products is provided by the guidelines for translating titles and headings. In the Italian version, chapter as well as first/second/third level titles and headings should always start with a nominal group. Consequently, if the original version contains a non-finite "-ing" verb or an imperative, these should be nominalized6 (and not translated with an infinitive as it is often the case in Italian technical texts): eg. "Getting the Most Out of Word"/Ottimizzazione dell'uso di Word (chapter title); "Before You Set Up Word"/Prima dell'installazione di Word (first level heading); "Use styles and templates for consistency"/Utilizzo di stili e modelli per rendere coerente il testo (second level heading). An exception to this rule is provided by purpose clauses functioning as third level titles of paragraphs where the series of instructions for achieving a specific purpose is made explicit: these "to" plus infinitive clauses are in fact translated in Italian with a per/come plus infinitival clause: eg.

To start Word
- Double-click the Word icon.
- Or -
1. Select the Word icon using the arrow keys.
2. Press ENTER.

6 In some products like Microsoft Excel 3.0, however, the "-ing" verb in third level headings has been consistently translated with come plus infinitive: eg. "Displaying short menus or full menus"/Come visualizzare menu brevi e menu completi.
Come avviare Word

- Fare doppio clic sull'icona Word.
- Oppure
  1. Selezionare l'icona Word utilizzando i tasti di DIREZIONE.
  2. Premere INVIO.

I have dealt elsewhere (Scarpa 1990a; 1990b) with such microtextual aspects of Microsoft localization guidelines and, in particular, with the specific problems posed by prepositions (eg. "choose the command X on/in the menu Y"/scegliere il comando X dal menu Y), abbreviations and acronyms (eg. in file names having an 8-character maximum length), articles (eg. their omission in front of program and key names), punctuation and pre-/postmodification in noun compounds (ie. "text-object"/oggetto di un testo, but "bullet chart"/grafico puntato). Here I will focus instead on the guidelines that aim at localizing the register of the source text by imposing communicative structures at the syntactic and macrotextual levels.

Given that the register of a text is determined by the socio-situational variables of the text-production and use, Sager (1993: 28) identifies three communicative variables at the pragmatic level of any special subject text: the topic (or subject field), the situation and the user group. As regards the first two variables of topic and situation, in the case of documentation there seem to be no fundamental differences between source and target texts: both contain deictic reference to the software for which they serve as instructions and both are the product of the specific situation where there is a user who is reading the manual whilst running the program. However, when it comes to the anticipated readership, the expectations of the target-language readers differ from those of the source-language users in terms of the power relationship between the author of the manual and its user. Thus, even if both source and target texts are ideally aimed at complete non-specialists, the register of instruction manuals tends to be more user-friendly and less detached in American than in Italian, where the potential readers are addressed less directly and there is a higher degree of formality and 'factuality'. For example, in the source text direct instructions are personalized and expressed in the imperative mood, whereas in Italian the linguistic realization of direct instructions is best expressed in an impersonal way by a verb in the infinitive mood. Indeed, Microsoft localization guidelines require that all personal constructions of the source text, where the reader is directly addressed through the personal pronoun "you", should consistently be made impersonal in the target text: eg.

If you want to deselect a slide, press the SHIFT key and click on it.

Se si desidera deselezionare una diapositiva, premere il tasto MAIUSC e fare clic su di essa.
Another way of achieving a higher degree of formality in the target text is through the normalization of textual variables such as colloquialisms and figurative language: eg.

Now that you know the main features, it's time to climb behind the wheel and start the engine.

Ora che si conoscono le principali caratteristiche del programma si può procedere ad apprenderne il funzionamento.

In some extreme cases, entire sentences have to be eliminated in the localized version because they are deemed to be totally unsuitable for Italian readers, as in the following example where the two final sentences in italics should be omitted tout court in the target text:

You've concluded the fourth mini-lesson and learned the basics of using some of the drawing tools and the Text Editing buttons. If you're ready to do more, just keep going. Or you can take a break and come back to Mini-Lesson 5 another time.7

This last example helps to introduce another related culture-specific difference between American and Italian hard-copy documentation: the source text can in fact be patronizingly over-explicit in that its author expects from source users a rather lower background knowledge both in the specific field of computer literacy, eg.

The following procedure describes one type of title page. Study carefully the use of the commands and how they work together in order to adapt this procedure to other types of title pages.

Per ottenere qualsiasi tipo di frontespizio occorre eseguire la seguente procedura.

and, more crucially, in other fields of knowledge: eg.

The word 'thesaurus' is derived from the Greek word for treasure or treasury. Word offers you a treasury you can use to spruce up the wording in your documents.

In all these cases the translator needs to be less explicit than the source text author and eliminate all redundancies in order not to insult the target readers who, otherwise, would be implicitly expected not to know information that is taken for granted in their culture. This brings about the general problem in the

7 For both the last examples, taken from the "User's Guide" of PowerPoint 3.0, I am indebted to Licia Corbolante (cf. note 3).
localization process which we have already seen in the case of software, ie. that
the source text is not written in the first place with the aim of being translated:
situations and examples, instead of being drawn directly form the American
culture, should be less culture-bound and more universal (eg. international sports
championships, cinema festivals, rock star tours, universal foodstuffs etc.).

Another time-consuming and expensive localization problem is that the
source text sometimes is badly written and needs to be improved during the
translation process: eg.

When you quit Word, TMP files are erased. You do not need to delete
these files. Word should delete the TMP files it made during the current
session for you the next time you quit Word.

Quando si esce da Word, i file TMP che sono stati creati durante la
sessione di lavoro verranno cancellati automaticamente.

A case in point is provided by unnecessary redundancies, ie. repetitions which
are not functional to the explicitness and clarity of the text. Bearing in mind that
Italian documentation is normally at least 30% longer than its original (thus
involving higher costs for the final product), such repetitions should be
substituted in the target text either with an anaphoric element or, where it exists,
with a shortened lexical form: eg.

The active presentation is "Columbus". Hence your new presentation will
have the same format as the "Columbus" presentation, but none of the
"Columbus" slides.

Poiché la presentazione attiva è "Colombo", la nuova presentazione avrà
lo stesso formato di "Colombo" ma nessuna delle sue diapositive.

If text of all the same font is already selected, the name of that font is
checkmarked.

Se tutto il testo compreso nella selezione corrente contiene un solo tipo di
carattere, il nome di tale carattere apparirà spuntato.

However, in accordance with Puglielli's observation that "from a statistical point
of view the anaphoric dimension of these texts [instructions for use] is
completely irrelevant" (Puglielli 1990: 319), the general rule of thumb in the
localization of documentation is that, whenever the use of anaphora might
remotely affect the clarity of the text, it is better to repeat an item rather than run
the risk of the text being ambiguous.

Another instance of bad writing in the source texts that the translator should
rectify is the occasional absence of the rhetorical device of parallelism, ie. "a
syntactic device that operates as a structuring principle" for obtaining clarity and
which "can be applied to all levels of discourse structure: to ideas, paragraphs,
phrases and their parts, and individual words" (Ciliberti 1990: 305). This rhetorical device is particularly important in sequences of instructions (ie. procedures), where the unmarked sequencing of instructions matches the natural order in which the various actions should be performed, thus presupposing what Cortelazzo (1994: 64-65) calls a "fractioned reading" by the reader, who is alternating between reading an instruction and executing the relevant command. In a procedure, each paragraph associated with an action should have a parallel grammatical construction with the verb in sentence-initial position. eg.

1. Choose Format Division Margins.
2. In the "left" and "right" fields, type a measurement for the odd page margins.
3. In the "mirror margins" field, select Yes to mirror these settings on even pages.

For information on starting applications, see Chapter 3, "Starting and Quitting Word" or see your Windows documentation.

When Setup asks if you want to update the startup file AUTOEXEC.BAT, do one of the following

At the level of discourse structure, both syntactic parallelism and lexical repetition can be considered as the most recurrent devices used in documentation to signal textual cohesion, instead of other more obvious devices such as reference and ellipsis.
4. Conclusions

The multifunctionality of the text type 'instructions for use' leads Ciliberti (1990: 300) to add, rather cynically, that such additional functions might explain at least partially why numerous potential instructees are reluctant to use the manual, and prefer to adopt a procedure of trial and error through which they eventually succeed in getting the apparatus to work without it.

In the case of documentation which has been translated from a foreign language, however, it is arguable whether such unfortunate behaviour on the part of the users is prompted solely by the multifunctionality of the manual. With all the importance that the process of localization is theoretically given in software development, the reason why computer manuals should be considered in such a sceptical way by the average user can possibly find an explanation in these concluding remarks. As I have tried to show in this paper, even in the relatively restricted domain of software localization there is a cross-cultural variability between American-style texts and Italian ones. Moreover, not only do the two cultures have different stylistic norms and expectations, but documentation can also be badly written in the original language. Consequently, a very high degree of bilingual computer literacy to produce a target text which is factually accurate is only one pre-requisite localizers should possess. In fact, they are ideally expected not only to master the skills of the technical writer to modify the original text by making it clearer and sometimes even more accurate, but also to act as a cultural mediators between the two cultures by adapting the ways in which information is provided to the target readership. However, because of the clash existing between the large volume of the documentation to be localized and the short time frames demanded for producing the translation, the translator is not allowed to perform such a difficult and time-consuming task under ideal conditions. Another obstacle standing in the way of a truly high linguistic quality of the final translation work is the fact that a real cultural adaptation of documentation is partially doomed to failure right from the beginning of the localization process: whereas the very conventions by which information is presented are to some extent culture-specific, the translator is in fact usually instructed not to alter the layout of the documentation, down to its organization into paragraphs.

As in the field of software localization the saleability of a product is of paramount importance, the 'quality' of the translation at the stylistic level is usually taken to be synonymous with 'acceptability' to the end-user. Thus the assessment of the localized product lies ultimately with the latter, whose
evaluation of the localized text rests mostly on its usefulness in relation to running the software: to quote O'Hagan,

The quality of translation judged in absolute terms can sometimes be irrelevant in the real world of commercial translation particularly if that is the trade-off for lower charges and quicker turnaround. [...] 'Quality' clearly has a different significance in every translation job. (O'Hagan 1996: 28)

However, why should the expectations of the Italian readership concerning the standards of the language used in computer manuals be not very high in the first place? One possible explanation can be found in the sociolinguistic background to the translation of computer texts from American to Italian, i.e. the variable that Godman and Veltman (1990: 195) call the "context of translation". Among the factors giving rise to translation they quote "the pairs of languages concerned and their relationships, and the relationships between the communities which speak them". In the international scene, American English is the dominant language in computer science, as in the majority of all fields of science, and such a supremacy has not failed to affect Italy – technologically advanced as it may be – at the linguistic level. Italian can in fact be considered as an 'undeveloped' language when it comes to the field of computer technology, where a totally autochthonous specialized register to translate into does not exist. Thus it has been inevitable that a new 'americanized' register – with calquing being the norm even at the grammatical level – should emerge and become acceptable to Italian computer users, with translation (or, rather, 'bad' translation) directly contributing to this development. However, as in all other fields of scientific and technical translation, where the focus must be more on accuracy and consistency than on the fluency of the target text for its readership, Italian users have accordingly become accustomed to the gap between the register of computer manuals and 'normal' language use. At a more general level, this is reflected in our becoming accustomed to less than perfect translations in a variety of topics and situations, due to the unprecedented increase in the translation work being taken in today's world resulting from the globalization of information. Labour saving devices such as the already established computer assisted translation (CAT) tools (especially Translation Memory) as well as the emerging Machine Translation (MT) technology and teletranslation services are in fact helping translators enormously to achieve linguistic standardization at the level of both terminology and recurrent phrases and sentences.  

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8 Localizing documentation seems to be ideally suitable to be handled by MT systems. Virtually all the parameters defining MT 'friendliness' devised by the Japan Electronic Industry Development Association (O'Hagan 1996: 29) seem to fit the specific environment of this translation activity: regular demands for large
though improving efficiency and productivity in the translators' work, often bring about slightly awkward and unidiomatic expressions in the target language. Yet, these somewhat sinking standards in the quality of translation in our information society are a relatively small price to pay for the lowering of language barriers, which in turn is leading to the improvement of cross-cultural contacts and the promotion of a greater understanding among the peoples of the world. And this opportunity we simply cannot afford to miss.

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