

HOW TO APPROACH SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS

WISE AND EFFECTIVE WAYS TO DEAL WITH SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS



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INTRODUCTION

When a potential client sends you an email asking for a sample translation, what is your reaction? Do you feel willing and eager? Or, does it make you cringe with irritation? A sample translation is a great opportunity to secure a long-term client by investing a small amount of your time and effort, so you should be enthusiastic. After all, you don't need to show up in a suit for an interview or submit a grandiose document, and it really is a pretty simple process.

But in reality, most translators would frown when they receive a sample translation request for a variety of reasons. And they are likely to be thinking the following:

- "Is this a scam disguised as a test?"
- "The kind of text doesn't seem sufficient to test my ability"
- "Why do I need to translate so much for a sample?"
- "I was told I didn't pass the previous sample test, and I still don't understand why."
- "I've seen how they "test" me and leave me hanging, so why should I bother with it again?"
- "I already have several years of translation experience. Do I really need to do this?"

Of course, it's only natural that you'd be thinking these thoughts. In fact, there are many instances of scams disguised as sample tests, which breed suspicion.

But before you start cringing in protest, consider this. If sample translations are such a huge problem, why have they become an accepted custom in the industry? Why do so many agencies keep insisting that translators submit a sample translation? That's because sample translations indeed have huge advantages for both clients and translators. Once you understand this, you will find the key to passing the sample translation test. And this E-book is designed to explain just that. By reading this E-book, you'll understand the role of sample translations from the clients' point of view, and derive important strategies which you can employ to pass your test. You'll also learn when you should reject a request for a sample translation, how to respond when you feel you've been wrongly disqualified, and how to recognize scammers who are out to abuse sample translations.

CHAPTER 1: WHY DO I KEEP GETTING ASKED FOR A SAMPLE TRANSLATION?

It is a customary industry practice to ask translators for a sample of approximately 300 words to assess their skills. Of course, there are plenty of people who abuse this custom, which has resulted in many translators who are highly skeptical or who flat out reject any request for a sample translation. But the fact that this practice has remained unchanged points to its many advantages. So what exactly are the advantages and the reasons why sample translations persist despite the fact they are highly burdensome and even costly to clients? This is important to understand if you want to produce a great sample translation. First of all, let us take a look at this situation from the client's point of view so we may better understand them.



1. CLIENTS WHO REQUEST A SAMPLE TRANSLATION ARE MOST LIKELY IMPORTANT CLIENTS.

Whether it's an agency or an end client (unless they are scammers), the fact that a client has requested a sample translation indicates translation quality is important to them. It also signifies they have a high volume of translation work. We can assume that clients would ask for a sample translation because quality matters to them and also because they have a lot of work to assign to translators. Looking at it this way, one can say clients who ask for a sample translation are desirable and important potential clients. Clients who only dole out small projects once in a while don't normally place high on the list of important clients for translators, but clients who value quality AND have a lot of work to give are more likely to provide consistent work and also offer higher rates for it.

2. SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS ARE ACTUALLY QUITE TRUSTWORTHY.

I know the above statement may have raised some eyebrows, but it makes sense if you think about it from the client's point of view. Any translator can put up a flowery profile listing their prestigious degrees and certifications online, and no client could truly verify these credentials in reality. Have you ever seen a profile where the person wrote that they were just 'ok' at translating? Of course not. Everyone's profile reads as if they were the best translator to have ever walked the earth. Even if some of these clients had the means to confirm the online credentials of translators, that is still no guarantee their actual translation skills will be good enough. So, the proof is in the pudding. And for clients who are looking for translators to collaborate with long-term, it makes sense they would want to see definitive proof rather than a list of credentials written on paper.

3. SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS CAN REVEAL A LOT ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR.

There are instances where sample translations are given out by clients who have no idea how to implement or evaluate them, and they end up making unfair evaluations, defeating the sample's purpose (as to how to deal with such situations, I will get to it in chapter 4). However, when handled correctly, a short sample translation can tell the client a lot about the translator (which I will talk about in chapter 3).

The bottom line is that despite a large number of scammers and some incompetent clients who don't know how to properly implement sample translation tests, they are a very useful tool for many clients. And for translators, they provide a great way to get connected to important potential clients.

For these reasons, sample translations provide **an excellent opportunity** for new translators and those who don't yet have a fancy profile. Recently, I've watched a TV show where a singer was performing on stage with his/her face covered in a mask while the judges evaluated. Sample translations are similar to this. With it, you can see right away whose translation is better. For example, you may have someone with 30+ years of experience and another person with one year of experience, and a sample translation can quickly reveal it is not always the person with more experience who produces the better translation. Our world is changing fast and so are knowledge and skills. It's very possible that a hard-working translator with a year of experience can produce a higher quality translation than a complacent translator with 30 years of experience who's been slacking off on upgrading his/her skills. Thus, sample translations equalize the playing field and are an extremely fair method for evaluating translators' skills. As long as sample translations are in place, the door will always be wide open for qualified new translators to enter the industry and establish a place for themselves.

SUMMARY

1. Clients who request a sample translation are important clients.
2. Sample translations are actually quite trustworthy.
3. Sample translations are a very good opportunity for new translators and are a fair evaluation method.

CHAPTER 2: CAN I BYPASS THE SAMPLE TRANSLATION?

Before we start talking about how to pass the sample translation test, let's first discuss how one can bypass it.

Of course, this option does not apply to novice translators who don't have much to put on their profile. As I explained in Chapter 1, sample translations are a great opportunity for beginner translators, so anyone starting out should absolutely take advantage of them. But if you've been

working for a while, have already done several sample translations in the past, and compiled some positive feedback from clients, you can consider skipping the sample translation. After all, doing one means you could potentially waste an hour of your time working for a potential client whom you might not even end up ultimately working for.



1. HOW TO REJECT A REQUEST FOR A SAMPLE TRANSLATION.

This is quite simple. You just say "No". Of course, you should make it clear you're not refusing to work with the client but simply refusing to provide a sample translation for them. And this requires some tact.

- 1) First, thank the client for their interest in working with you and communicate clearly that you would like to build a working relationship with them. Being short or conveying your irritation at being asked for a sample in your rejection mail is unprofessional. It will also likely lead to a loss of opportunity to work with that client.
- 2) Offer to show them other proof of your translation abilities so they don't need a sample translation. For example, you could offer any of the following:
 - A detailed CV.
 - A sample test that you've already completed. (Of course, it needs to be from the same field. Submitting a sample translation for a marketing document when they've asked for a contract sample translation won't work.)
 - Your professional website or blog.

- ☉ Positive feedback you've accrued from other clients (Best if it's on ProZ)

3) Don't forget to say if they have any other questions, they are welcome to contact you any time.

So what will happen if you answer with such a polite rejection? Will it destroy the possibility of working with that client forever? Or, will they begin sending you work without getting a sample translation from you?

I don't have any hard statistics, so I can only say from my own experience. And in my personal experience, it's been fifty-fifty. In some cases, I've had clients reply with, "Unfortunately, it is our policy to only assign work to translators who have passed the sample translation", and other times, they have said, "It's fine," and sent me forms to sign right away. Thus, it's up to you which clients you decide to refuse and which clients you will agree to send a sample to.

2. WHEN IS IT POSSIBLE TO REFUSE?

You can stick to a single answer of a 'Yes' or a 'No' when it comes to sample translation requests, but you can also come up with a strategy as to when to accept and when to refuse a client's request. So, when is it a good idea to say 'Yes' and when is it better to refuse?

To answer that question, you need to first take a careful look at who has sent you the email. If the email you received came from a PM, it means he or she will need to assign the translation work to translators. It could also mean it's an urgent situation as in, if the PM can't find a reliable translator by the end of this week, this could get him/her in trouble. In these cases, if all other conditions are met, refusing the sample could still lead to you getting work from that client.

On the other hand, if the person who's sent you the email is not the PM but someone who's responsible for finding and recruiting translators, your refusal will usually terminate any possibility of working with that client. (The role of the sender is not always clearly spelled out. Sometimes they may tell you, but if not, you can figure it out by reading the email closely. For example, they might introduce themselves as part of the recruiting team or as a linguist (talent, translator, or vendor) manager.) If you think about it, if the job of the person sending you the email is to find good translators, assess them and hand them over to PM's, a sample translation undoubtedly plays a pivotal part in the assessment process. In this case, accepting your refusal would be like saying there's no need for their role in the process, so they wouldn't do it. Thus, a rejection will end the possibility of working with the client.

This makes sense logically and also mirrors my experience. (Of course if you're prepared to never work with this client, you can still refuse a vendor manager's sample test request. It's entirely within your right to manage your freelance business, and at times, it is wise to refuse sample translation requests.)

SUMMARY

1. Politely and strategically refusing to do the sample translation can sometimes work, and you may be able to bypass it.
2. If you refuse to a recruiter, it means there will likely be no future relationship, whereas refusing to a PM doesn't necessarily mean they won't work with you.

CHAPTER 3: IF IT'S A NECESSARY EVIL, HOW CAN I DO WELL ON THE SAMPLE TRANSLATION TEST?

In this chapter, we will explore how you can produce a great sample translation and pass the test.



First, allow me to state the obvious since it's still an important point to make. In order to produce a well-written sample translation, you need to have good translation skills. Otherwise, even if you passed the test, it wouldn't really do you much good. And that's because all the other jobs that will be assigned to you after you pass the test will actually continue to be tests of your skills. Translators are evaluated on the quality of their final translation. And it matters little if you've done a great job in the past because once you submit a poor quality work, the chances are high your clients will stop working with you. (And believe me, a poorly done job will surely cause you problems.) So allow me to emphasize that your priority should be consistently working on your translation skills well before you even attempt to pass the sample translation test.

Now, let's move on to the case of someone with good translation skills who nevertheless finds themselves unable to pass the sample test time and again. What could be behind this? There could be several reasons, but it's possible that this person might be missing the overall point of a sample translation. This is what we will be addressing in this chapter.

Normally, when people receive a sample translation request, they believe their job is to produce approximately 300 words of smoothly translated target text. So they focus on making their translation precise and seamless. Though this isn't entirely wrong, a smoothly translated text isn't everything when it comes to sample translation tests.

1. WHAT OTHER THINGS ARE YOU BEING “TESTED ON” WITH A SAMPLE TRANSLATION?

In your opinion, what do you think your clients are trying to accomplish by using sample translations? My bet is they're trying to find out as much as possible about the translator whom they might work with in the future. This means, other than your obvious translation skills, they are also trying to gauge the following:

- Do you meet the deadline?
- Are you polite and professional enough that working with you in the future would be enjoyable?
- When and how do you respond to their email request for a sample file (responsiveness)?
- Do you communicate in a vague or sloppy manner in your email?
- Do you write a lot of unnecessary information in your email?
- Is your attitude desperate or clingy?
- Do you cross the professional boundary and act as if you're acquaintances in your communication?
- Are you repetitive rather than concise in your communication?

The above factors may or may not influence whether you pass your sample translation test. However, they will absolutely influence the relationship you'll have with the client thereafter. For instance, most clients will want to stay away from working with translators whose communication style isn't concise (but vague, redundant, unorganized, and repetitive) since it will be a nuisance for them to deal with.

They will likely opt to only work with these translators when they are out of choices and will probably assign relatively less work to them. Also, if a translator gives off a desperate or clingy vibe, clients will likely offer lower rates or repeatedly ask them to take on an urgent job with a very tight deadline (and they have no one else to assign it).

Of course, such information about translators doesn't come from the sample translation itself. So how do clients get this information about translators? You may have guessed it. They get it from the emails you send back to them regarding the sample test. It's actually quite understandable. When a company tries to hire an employee, does the decision to hire depend solely on the interview answers the prospective employee gives? Of course the answers are important, but there are other factors which are just as important. We can say that the real interview begins the moment the interviewee enters the office space, as the recruiter will begin observing him/her right away. If the interviewee arrives late, litters trash, makes an inappropriate joke to an employee, or is looking hyper-anxious and sweating, their excellent interview answers will not take them very far. Similarly, from the client's point of view, everything that is conveyed in the communication between them and the translator (which can sometimes include a phone call, but most often are exchanged emails) becomes an important factor in their decision-making process.

2. WHAT IS BEING TESTED WITH A SAMPLE FILE?

Let us once again take the client's perspective here. If a client is looking for a translator to work with long term, what kind of qualities and skills would a qualifying translator need to possess? In other words, what skills can a translator bring that are valuable to the client? We can think of the following:

- The ability to express themselves precisely in their native language.
- A high level of professional knowledge that is beyond the level of an average person.
- Great research skills to correctly find even the most specific and particular facts and information.
- The ability to manage phrases and sentences that are very difficult or sometimes impossible to translate.
- A very high reading comprehension level to be able to detect any error or incompleteness in the original text and the communication skills to be able to point them out.
- The ability to understand and execute clients' specific translation requests.
- The ability to understand and utilize terminology from specialized fields.

A sample translation test can reveal such information to clients. But it is rare to find a sample test that is capable of showing every single one of these factors. If the client has simply cut off a small portion of a large source text to create a sample test, they won't be able to assess all these skills that might belong to the translator. Thus, any client who is truly looking for a quality translator will insert specific elements into a sample translation source file to find these things out. The most basic method used is a deliberate insertion of a typo, a grammatical error or a word or an expression that is almost impossible to translate (or awkward if translated). Or they may even insert something that is inaccurate. When you receive this kind of a sample text, you might look down on the client for sending such a poor quality source file, but in reality, these types of sample texts are an excellent tool for determining the various skills, attitudes, and work ethic of translators, and the clients who send them are the really good clients serious about working with qualified translators.

I'll cite an example here. Let's assume there is a text that reads, "The mascot for the 1987 Seoul Olympics was Hodori."

How would you translate this sentence? Your client could check your grammatical and linguistic knowledge by seeing if you've translated the name Hodori as a common noun or a proper noun, and they could also be looking at your research skills by seeing whether you've come up with your own spelling for Hodori or actually researched the name and got the correct official spelling. Proper execution of such aspects is just the basics. But if I were the client or the commissioned evaluator, I would also be paying attention to how the translator has dealt with the inaccuracy of the year 1987. (Seoul Olympics were in 1988.)

Let's go into a little more detail here for a second and dig a bit deeper. What would you do in the situation described above? There are several possibilities.

- 1) Since the accuracy of the original text isn't part of the translator's responsibility, you leave it and translate it as 1987.
- 2) Since 1987 is clearly an error, you correct it to 1988 without adding a comment.
- 3) You correct the error, translate it and add a comment about your correction.
- 4) You leave 1987 alone while translating, but add a comment this might be incorrect and should be double-checked.

While I am not saying my opinion is the only correct one, I would assess each of the responses as follows:

- 1) The translator who went with the first response did not even give their client a warning despite knowing that the mistake could be catastrophic(!). Anyone can make a mistake, so if the translator and the client are working as partners, it would have been the right thing for the translator to clue the client in about the

mistake. If I were the client, I wouldn't want to have this translator as my business partner. Therefore, translator who chose the first response would be eliminated. He/she would only receive 30 points out of 100.

- 2) The translator who chose the second response is the worst out of the four. This person has independently decided that there was an error, made a change but didn't let the author of the original text (the end client) know about it, which is completely irresponsible. This type of a translator should not be allowed to pass because such an action can lead to a great loss and damage for the client in the future. No need to even look further at how they managed the rest of the translation. This translator receives 0 point.
- 3) Though not the worst, the third translator is still not impressive. A translator's job is to translate the original text as it is written, not to change things as they see fit. If 1987 written by the original author was an error, this error should be faithfully translated. Though this translator did add a comment notifying the change that was made, it's still a failure to fulfill his/her basic responsibility and hence doesn't get a high score. Of course, if no one responds in the fourth way, the client might still decide to work with this translator after giving him/her a fair warning. (You never know the error was, in fact, intentional. Besides, in medical and legal translation, for example, you often have to translate whatever is written as it is. That is translation, in my opinion.) This translator gets 50 points.
- 4) Finally, this translator is the one who passes. It might seem that this one is similar to the first one, but actually, it is the only one that a client would find trustworthy and want to collaborate with long term and in a mutually-beneficial manner. This translator gets 100 points!



SUMMARY

1. Be mindful of the fact that it's not only the sample translation file but all your communication surrounding it that constitutes the entire test.
2. It's crucial to understand what the client is asking for from the translator and stay faithful to the basics even if you're only translating a single sentence. It's also important to pay attention to all the communication that is exchanged regarding the translated content.
3. Any grammatical, spelling, historical, scientific error or vagueness in the original text shouldn't be independently (arbitrarily) changed by the translator. While the translation should remain faithful to the source text, the client should be notified of possible errors in the original text using the comment function.

CHAPTER 4: I DIDN'T PASS THE TEST???!!!

Since everyone who's doing the sample translation is doing it to pass, when you fail, it's understandable that you'll be taken aback, upset, embarrassed or feel a loss of confidence. So how should you respond when this happens?



First of all, it is important to know why you failed. Normally, clients will point out to you specifically what you did wrong in your translation and even provide you with corrections. In some cases, they may even give you a breakdown of scores for different aspects of your translation. In doing so, they're reciprocating the effort you put into doing the translation for free. If a client sends you a feedback file, it's up to you to review it thoroughly, try and evaluate your work objectively, and ultimately use it as an opportunity to grow as a translator. Rather than feeling discouraged, accept the result with humility and try harder next time.

However, there may be times when you're confused and can't see why you failed the test even after looking at the feedback file. Such cases may be the following:

- The corrections that were made are not warranted. (i.e.- the evaluator's revisions make the translation worse.)
- Revisions are unnecessary (based on personal preference and style) and ends up reducing the overall quality of the sample translation.

Sure, anyone can make mistakes, but if you find yourself in one of the above scenarios, you would understandably be upset. So how should you handle these situations?

- 1) Since the client was offensive with their absurd and unfair evaluation, give them your angry rant and move on.

- 2) Sure it's unfair, but just forget about it. Tell yourself, "It's their loss for missing out on a great translator like me."
- 3) Tell them you think the evaluation was unfair and ask them for a re-evaluation.

You could respond in any one of these three ways, so what approach would you take?

Before we discuss these responses in more detail, I need to point out that in most cases, the person evaluating the sample tests isn't the client themselves but another translator whom the client has hired to do the evaluation. Personally, I've done this type of evaluation myself, and I still do.

Clients usually hire a third party for the evaluation because often, they are only fluent in one language and familiar with one culture.

Now, let's go back and go over each of the possible responses you could take when you find out you did not pass the test.

If you choose the first response, you might feel better after giving the client your piece of mind, but consequently, you will likely never be able to work with that client again. This would be like your putting your own stamp of approval on the failure notice, so it should be avoided.

The second response isn't bad. I do this sometimes when I am too busy (or lazy). Even though the client didn't make the ridiculous and unfair evaluation themselves (the third party evaluator did), they are ultimately responsible for it, so you could just let it be their loss. :D In fact, there are plenty of fish in the sea, and this isn't the only client you can work with. Not to mention it's quite difficult (if not impossible) to catch a train that's already left. So this response is actually not a bad idea.

However, I recommend the third response. There are conditions, however. You need to be absolutely sure your translation is good, and the evaluation you received is unfair. You've already spent your time and energy producing the sample translation, so it would be a loss to you if you missed out on the opportunity to work with a decent client. (By the way, I think I've already mentioned that you should only do the sample translation when you're sure it's coming from a good potential client. If I haven't, I will clarify that in the next chapter. On the other hand, if you did the sample translation just to test yourself, I recommend you take the second approach.) Furthermore, it's important to call out people who are giving out such unfair evaluations.

(Side comment: Though I cannot be 100% certain why people would give such unfair and absurd evaluations, after giving it much thought, I have concluded the following. Since people who unfairly cut others down usually have low self-confidence and self-esteem, I suspect this is the case with such evaluators.

My guess is these people are being childish, selfishly hoping their negative evaluations of other translators would land them more work from the client. Of course, the client has no way of knowing this, so the phenomenon continues.)

So, how should you approach this situation? There may not be a clear-cut answer, but let's think about the following three cases.

CASE 1: EVALUATION DONE BY THE CLIENT'S OWN EMPLOYEE

Strictly speaking, this is not a case of a sample evaluation. It was a project I'd worked on myself. I had been working on a project consistently for several years (an annually recurring project), and one day, for whatever reason, the end client must have asked one of their employees to evaluate my work (I only found out about this later). The staff was Korean, and though he or she spoke both Korean and English, I believe he/she had no actual translation experience. I don't think he/she did the evaluation with any malicious intention, but a lot of ludicrous changes were made which effectively wrecked the file. Things (mainly explanations) were inserted that weren't in the source text, there were incorrect spelling changes, and other completely unnecessary changes were made which basically turned the file into a bizarre explanatory-type note. On top of that, all of this was done with track changes, so you can imagine what the file ended up looking like. The end customer was a Canadian university. One can only guess how shocked the person in charge of the project must have felt upon receiving the revised target file. They probably thought they'd dodged a bullet and thanked God someone from their own staff had looked over the translation done so horribly.

If this had been an evaluation of an actual sample translation, I would have opted for response number 2. This is really a tough situation to be in. And it makes matters worse if the employee knows how to speak some Korean. If the person in charge at the client's company (or government office, hospital, school, etc.) is smart and has some knowledge about translation, he/she wouldn't have asked another staff to do the evaluation. But in this case, the person in charge seemed pretty much ignorant about foreign languages and translation, and furthermore, I couldn't just walk away because I was dealing with an agency that was my client. So, I took a long time to explain why the corrections made by the staff were incorrect, why they should use my original translation instead, and the general principles behind translating. I even provided detailed, individual comments for specific revisions, made other suggestions, and was finally able to move forward with the project. This cost me a lot of time doing totally unproductive work for which I was ultimately not compensated. If they weren't my client, I wouldn't have done it.

CASE 2: REQUEST FOR DEFENSE

This happened to me last year. A pretty good client asked me for a sample translation. Nearly after a month after I'd submitted one, they got back to me and told me I'd received a score of 3 out of 5. They said this could be either pass or fail and asked me to defend my own translation against the evaluator's assessment.

I took a look and saw they'd made some minor changes and some unnecessary ones and gave me a low score based on that. As I've described in the previous case, refuting an evaluation is tiresome and more importantly, unproductive. But then again, to just simply give up is also infuriating. So I sent them the following email. "I don't have the time nor desire to refute each of the corrections that were made. Please go ahead and consult a third party to see if my translation really deserves this score of 3 out of 5. Of course, it is up to you guys, but I will not do it myself." As you can see, I took a rather strong stance on this one. (Comment: You need to have enough clients to be able to take this kind of stance.) Can you guess what happened? Do you think they thought I was arrogant and cut me off? They didn't. About a month later, they contacted me and told me I had passed the sample test, sent me files and wanted me to sign a contract to work with them. (Of course whether or not I went on working with them is a separate issue. In my case, I stopped working with them later for a different reason.)

CASE 3: WHEN THE CLIENT SENDS YOU A FILE CONTAINING DETAILED CORRECTIONS.

This happened to me recently. A client sent me a revised file of my sample translation which contained very detailed corrections. They said that since my work didn't live up to their standards, they couldn't work with me. On most days, if I'm busy, I would have just let such emails go by. But on this day, I was rather free, so I decided to look at their file only to find they had made all sorts of unnecessary corrections. It was a translation from a specialized field which demanded accuracy and precision over style. Nevertheless, whoever had revised it had made all kinds of minor changes and even worse, had changed everything that was written in the respectful/polite form to the common form. This was an English to Korean (my mother tongue) translation, so if they wanted to make such corrections, they could have easily changed all the Korean sentences in the file! The file looked like it was raining red. For any client who couldn't read Korean, of course they would have taken one look at the file and thought my translation was sub-par. I could have let this case go as well (forgoing is not always a bad thing, by the way), but instead, I wrote the following email to the client. "Thank you for sending me the file.

Firstly, I want to clarify that what I'm about to say doesn't necessarily come from my need to work with you guys. I just want to work with good clients. I saw that most changes that were made on the revised file were stylistic ones. Also, everything that was written in the respectful form in Korean was changed to the common form, which is why the file looks like it has so many corrections. Rather than me explaining everything individually, I suggest you ask a third party to compare my translation with the revised file and give you their honest opinion on which one is better. You might be surprised by their answer."

That was the gist of my email. About a month later, they contacted me to let me know that my translation was satisfactory and sent me a vendor agreement form.

SUMMARY

1. There are several reasons why your sample translation could have failed. One of them could be due to unfair evaluation.
2. When you fail, turn it into an opportunity for self-introspection and development.
3. If you are sure the evaluation is unfair, you can ask the client to reconsider. In this case, you might have to provide a point-by-point rebuttal, but for the most part, you can simply tell them you believe the evaluation is unfair and ask them to perform a third party re-evaluation.

CHAPTER 5: HOW CAN I EFFECTIVELY DEAL WITH THOSE WHO ABUSE SAMPLE TRANSLATIONS?

In chapter 1, I emphasized that sample translations provide qualified new translators with a fair chance at proving their skills and thus are a necessary door to go through. However, this is not always the case, and there are many agencies that abuse sample translations, which is exactly what makes doing them burdensome and irritating at times. Let's take a look at the cases below.



- Case 1: An agency sends you a 900-word document as a sample translation. You do your best and submit the sample, but the agency never contacts you back. You try to contact them, but they don't answer you.
- Case 2: An agency sends you a 300-word document. The short text seems to be complete in itself and not part of a larger text, and can't adequately assess your translation skills (In other words, it's easy). You send the file back confidently and receive no reply. You try to contact them, but they don't answer you.
- Case 3: An agency sends you a 300-word document as a sample translation, and after you send them the file back, you don't hear from them. After 6 weeks, you have forgotten the whole thing, only to receive another sample request from the same agency that sent you the same file. You are speechless.
- Case 4: An agency sends you a 300-word document as a sample translation. The content is pretty difficult, so you put in a lot of effort to finish and send it back. A few days later, the agency contacts you congratulating you that the sample was good and asks about your rate. You offer your rate, and they say it's too expensive and suggest a 30% reduction. You are in a dilemma. You think to yourself, "Shall I accept the rate they are offering considering the time and effort I put into the sample translation?"

You mull it over for a while. It's especially tempting since you don't have a lot of other work coming in at the moment. Then suddenly, you are reminded of the post you read on Happy Translator Academy blog about how to make good use of a translator's time and think to yourself, "What am I doing?" You reject their offer.

- Case 5: You're fed up with sample translations and don't want to bother it again, but one day an agency contacts you about a 50,000-word project and tells you they need a sample test for this job. You decide to do it one last time. A week later, the agency gets back to you and says your sample translation passed. They send you a file for you to translate which only contains 1,000 words. When you ask them if there are more files, they say the project has been assigned to several different translators, so that's all you're getting.

5 CASES

The cases 1 and 2 represent cases where the translator has been duped. No one needs a 900- word sample to test a translator's skills. I've done plenty of sample translations in the past and evaluated them as well, and in my opinion, a 200-word sample test is enough. I'd say up to 350 words is tolerable. But if it goes beyond that, it gets tiresome for both the translator and the person having to evaluate the sample translation. If someone is asking you for a 900-word sample translation, you can safely assume this is not a sample request but someone trying to get a free translation out of you.



Also, even if you receive a 300-word document, if the document can't properly assess any translation skills, it's highly likely to be a scam. If the requested sample is a regular email or a technical document containing lists, assume they're not trying to test your skills but steal a free translation from you.

(Of course, there are cases where they have intentionally placed hidden traps, so don't rush to conclusions and always look at the document carefully.)

The third case illustrates just how some agencies treat sample translations as completely meaningless formalities. They will tell you that since their agency has certain "standards", you need to pass the test in order to be included in their database. But if you think about it, their tests are really meaningless. Sample translations should test you in a specific field. For example, if an agency is looking for translators for contract translation, it makes sense for them to send a part of a contract for a sample test.

However, if they simply send you a part of contract for a sample translation and say you need to pass this to be in their database, it means they don't take the test very seriously and consider it a formality. It takes a translator at least one hour to complete a 300 word sample translation. Depending on the person, it could take up to 3 hours, especially if it's a new field which requires research. You'd never want to work with agencies that don't value translators' time and effort this way. If an agency can easily lose a sample which took time and energy to produce or even worse, if they can't be bothered to remember that the translator had already done the test, this is a warning sign of more problems to come if you decide to work with them in the future. These agencies and the way they handle these situations should be reported on Blue Board so we can expel such practices.

Case 4 is a case where the agency mind-tricked the translator. They are attempting to psychologically manipulate the translator who understandably would like to get some type of return for the effort they already put into their sample translation. But if you think about it logically, giving into it means you're playing into the agency's manipulation tactic, and you'll most likely end up with greater loss if you agree to work with them.

Case 5 represents a strategy that is commonly employed by agencies that are located in certain countries. When they post a project for a bid, they'll typically say the project contains tens or hundreds of thousands of words. But if you think about it, how can an agency win a project of this scale without having first secured qualified and reliable translators? Moreover, slicing up a large project and assigning parts to different translators is like dividing a 10 chapter novel and having it translated by 10 different people. You will end up with 10 documents, each with a different style and vocabulary. All agencies know this, so it's safe to assume it's a lie when they say they've assigned a big project to different translators. It's a ploy to hook translators. (The exception is when the quality of translation doesn't matter that much, and it only needs to convey the meaning of the content. In this case, it's possible to assign a project to several translators, but this is rare, and for this kind of work, you wouldn't need a sample test anyway.)

FRUSTRATED TRANSLATOR

Looking at all these cases, you'd be right to start feeling worried about your chances for survival in this harsh ocean of Internet where shark-like agencies prey on innocent translators. But you don't need to be so worried. These types of people exist in all areas of life, and you just need to be informed and well-prepared to deal with them. You know the saying, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Likewise, you can survive by knowing they exist and being ready to make sound calls when they appear. (Reading these kinds of articles can make you start believing that all agencies are bad, but in my opinion, agencies that abuse sample translation are in the minority.)



Strategies to remember:

- 1) When you receive a request for a sample translation, make sure you check out the agency on Blue Board first before you read the email. If you can't verify their existence there, or if they have negative reviews, don't respond to their request no matter what they say to get you to respond. This is the single most important strategy, and if you stick to it, in most cases, you won't need to rely on other strategies so much.
- 2) Be suspicious of any sample request that exceeds 300 words. If a verified company approaches you with this kind of a request, try to negotiate and say you will only do a sample up to 300 words.
- 3) If a company asks you for a sample as part of a larger project, ask them to pay you for the sample. The agency should have no reason to decline since they'll be paying you part of the money they are going to end up spending anyway.
- 4) If an agency asks you for a sample as a condition to be included in their database, just decline. This requires too much of the translator's time and effort to be justified. Even without a test, if an agency is desperate, they will send you the file first. (Of course, if you have nothing to do and want to do it out of boredom to polish your skills, you could.)

- 5) Prepare a good CV and have a few sample translations ready so agencies can look at them along with your profile. Make sure to ask for positive feedback from your clients, and have references ready at hand. Include these items in your bidding template, and if an agency asks for your sample one day, tell them you won't do a sample, but they can look at the samples you have. Of course, this isn't easy to do when you're just starting out, but later on, you can begin adopting this strategy.
- 6) If an agency hasn't contacted you personally through email but asked for a sample in their bidding post, you need to think carefully. How will they be able to adequately assess the tens and possibly hundreds of samples that will be coming in? It just doesn't make sense. They'll probably read the first few and throw out the rest, and hence this is probably an agency that doesn't value or appreciate translators' time. Sometimes, agencies will put up just a few sentences, in which case it can't truly stand as an effective sample test. The bottom line is, if an agency isn't contacting you after reading your profile and being interested, and instead, they're shouting to everybody "Who wants this project?", it's usually not worth your time responding.

RELIEVED TRANSLATOR

If you stick to the above strategies when responding to any sample translation request, you really won't need to worry too much about being scammed.

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