

Communication and Quality in Official Statistics Translated into English

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at connecting language and English translation to quality in statistics; providing information on ELF(English as a Lingua Franca) as a language tool for improving communication; deepening the role of terminology as the key to quality in specialized translation; providing some hints for a style-guide in translation of statistics from Italian into English.

Keywords: Communication, English translation, clarity

1. Introduction¹

This paper deals with statistics dissemination particularly when the use of English is required by those who are not mother tongue or when European statisticians interact. In a knowledge driven society, language as communication enables access to specialized information also to non-expert/non-specialized users. We can consider translation into English language as part of the issue of Quality in Statistics for international use.

1.1. Language and quality.

So far Quality in statistics has been mainly related to methodology. By including the new criteria of Clarity and Accessibility, by means of the Code of Practice, Eurostat affirmed that assessing ‘quality’ is not circumscribed to the scientific community of statisticians. Tests on ‘clarity and accessibility’ also rely on users’ assessment, therefore ‘quality in statistics’ is no longer a matter to be discussed exclusively within the statisticians’ scientific community,

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but both expert and non-expert users are involved, as mentioned in the ESS vision 2020: “The general public is commonly served by the press or National Statistical Institute (NSI) websites”. As a consequence nowadays statisticians are impelled to deal also with this change and growing need of statistical information to be expressed by means of a new language use. On the other side also new visual presentation, such as dashboards are crucial in these path, but their role is not going to be discussed in this paper.

The focus will be on language in European official statistics with a specific reference to statistical output translated into English. The perspective from which we analyze the topic is quality achievement meeting the principle of Accessibility and Clarity and Eu Regulations related to the topic (2005 European Statistics Code of Practice- princ.15² and Regulation (EC) No 223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2009 - Art. 12. Statistical Quality³).

As a background, some references will be presented on the state of the art and the various initiatives and steps made in Europe at different levels (Fight the Fog campaign, Rei, Dg for Translation, Unece), followed by a description and analysis on ELF (English as a Lingua Franca).

A short historical excursus will be presented on Istat path in the process of Italian official statistics translated into English up to the present time and with examples on specific flagship products and integrated press-releases. The presentation of national statistics to an international audience with reference to Ess Vision2020 is the common thread.

2. Language and statistics

² ACCESSIBILITY AND CLARITY - European statistics should be presented in a clear and understandable form, disseminated in a suitable and convenient manner, available and accessible on an impartial basis with supporting metadata and guidance. (Principle 15) [...] Indicator 1: Statistics are presented in a form that facilitates proper interpretation and meaningful comparisons. [...]

³ 1. To guarantee the quality of results, European statistics shall be developed, produced and disseminated on the basis of uniform standards and of harmonised methods. In this respect, the following quality criteria shall apply: (e) ‘accessibility’ and ‘clarity’, which refer to the conditions and modalities by which users can obtain, use and interpret data; [...]

Language in statistics has hardly ever been considered particularly relevant. Specific attention was paid to terminology since all tables and graphs are labeled and provided with headings which are the key to read numbers. In this sense we should just recall the importance of international classifications. So far, this exact correspondence could be established for some specific fields only. However, the interest shown by a larger public has impelled statisticians to comment on, and provide explanations to the statistical output in a way that is understandable by the general public as well. Such questions involve the issue of clear writing which has been a concern of the Eu in its effort to reach out Eu citizens and act in accordance with the European “Fight the Fog” campaign.

The effort to clarity is amplified when dealing with translated texts which overcome the borders of a homogeneous cultural setting to target an international audience. This is especially the case within EU where English is used as a language of communication among non-native speakers. In this specific case of statistical output the information exchange is from a homogeneous cultural setting towards a inhomogeneous cultural setting, better to a varied cultural setting made of different European backgrounds.

2.1 Clear writing

By improving the way to write, comment and translate statistical data will make statistical texts clearer and usable by all European educated people and not by experts only. This goal is also pursued by ESS Vision 2020 when it refers to a “communication strategy that satisfies divergent and ever-changing user needs at both national and European level”.

The mentioned “Fight the Fog Campaign” has worked on this field from the end of the 90s. In 2010, the EC Directorate General for Translation published a booklet on *Clear Writing*, which, in the same line as the “Fight the Fog Campaign”, offered and illustrated ten tips for achieving clarity, such as “Prefer active verbs to passive – and name the agent. If you change passive verb forms to active ones, your writing will become clearer because you will be forced to say who is responsible for the action.” Other publications followed and developed

the same topic.⁴ These tips are very useful to the drafters of statistical publications no matter the language, but also to translators' work, who face the additional challenge of transmitting to a multicultural setting information by means of L2 (non-native language) and specifically by means of English.

2.2 REI network

The *Rete per l'eccellenza dell'italiano istituzionale* (Rete Rei, Network for the excellence of institutional Italian) was established in 2005 as a group of experts of the European Commission and over time has better defined its tasks and membership conditions. At present members (University professors and professionals of European and national institutions, experts in the fields of linguistics and translation) sign an agreement in which they engage "to improve the quality of institutional texts produced by public administrations and by national and international institutions", as well as to make communication in clear, understandable, accessible Italian in all the institutions that are in contact with the citizens every day. Their common purpose is to improve the overall quality of texts, also using validated and reliable terminological resources. The Rei network resources are freely available in the website of the EC: (http://ec.europa.eu/translation/italian/rei/index_it.htm), and experts are also available for answering questions on terminology and translation doubts.

Linguistic resources are divided into two main groups: those for texts drafting and those on the terminology side, including mostly glossaries and terminological entries. Some years ago a work was done to assess the quality of glossaries in the website (CENTIS, 2011). Translators at Istat often use Rei tools to solve practical problems in translation.

⁴ ec.europa.eu/translation/documents/clear_writing_tips_en.pdf

2.3 Making data meaningful

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has published a guide titled *Making Data Meaningful*⁵. This guide, which is divided into three parts, is a very useful tool to help in the difficult task of presenting data. The first volume, published in 2006, provided guidelines and examples on the use of effective writing techniques to make data meaningful. The second volume (2008) provided guidelines and examples to prepare effective tables, charts and maps, and to use other forms of visualization to make data meaningful. The third volume (2011) mainly focused on communicating with the media. A useful example to our topic is provided by *Making Data Meaningful* (2006):

For data to be meaningful to a general audience, it is important to find meaning in the numbers. The word “story” often alarms people in the statistical/scientific world, because it has overtones of fiction or embellishment that might lead to misinterpretation of the data. [...] This occurs because we, the people who produce data, fail to make them relevant and explain them in terms that people can understand. Without a story line, a release becomes just a simple description of numbers. [...] use only key rounded figures. Less important numbers should be relegated to accompanying tables. Use the text to present analysis, trends and context, not to repeat values in the tables.

This extract suggests that statistics should be looked at from the reader’s point of view. And we are in fact in the session on user’s need. In the guide, emphasis is on the relevance of readability and intelligibility rather than extreme correctness: “use only key rounded figures”. Another aspect which is relevant to the aim of the present work is the explicit hint to use “text to present analysis [...] not to repeat values in tables”. This goal is neglected when we read in the texts which are supposed to provide an explanatory overview on tables passages which are a repetition of tables. An example follows:

Focusing on the most recent years, 2010 is characterized by a recovery of economy after the recession of 2008- 2009, value added grew again (+2.8 percent), while the decline of labour input persisted (-0.6 percent), labour productivity increased by 3.4 percent. In 2011, the slowdown in growth of value added and a rise in hours worked (+0.5 percent) has resulted in a slowdown in the growth of labour productivity (+0.4 percent). (Noi Italia 2014)⁶

3. Europe and ELF

⁵ <http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/writing>.

⁶ www.istat.it

ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) is used for communication in Europe and not only. In this section aspects of ELF in the European context will be analyzed and discussed with reference to the discourse of statistics.

3.1. *What is ELF*

The debate on the use of ELF has developed especially in Europe during the last decade, therefore whoever deals with this topic handles a developing phenomenon, as remarked by Jenkins and Seidlhofer (2001)⁷ :

A European variety of English, sometimes labelled “Euro-English”, is in the process of evolving to serve as a European lingua franca. As yet, however, this new variety of English has not been described, largely because it is at such an embryonic stage in its evolution. All we can say with any degree of certainty is that English as a lingua franca in Europe (ELFE) is likely to be some kind of European-English hybrid which, as it develops, will increasingly look to continental Europe rather than to Britain or the United States for its norms of correctness and appropriateness.

ELF is still under study, and its development grows together with the growth of the EU. However, some features of ELF are already known, for instance, the loss of ‘s’ for the third person or the way the definite article “the” is used, usually overused. ELF has been found to differ from British and US English as “a reality”: “Whether pragmatic or ideological or both, this use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a reality. It declares itself independent of the norms of English as a native language (ENL)” (Seidlhofer / Breiteneder / Pitzl 2006: 4).

The need for communication among EU members has led to the use of a communication language and ELF meets the requirements needed. We can therefore speak of a “functional profile” of English in Europe (Seidlhofer / Breiteneder / Pitzl 2006: 2). Its main function is to enable communication among people of different mother-tongues. Scientists, whatever their background, and statisticians as well can be considered members of an international community sharing a common language, which is English or rather ELF, English used as a contact language. “Standard English is the unquestioned prestige variety at the moment, but since the status and varieties normally follows that of their speakers alterations in social and

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/apr/19/languages.highereducation1>

political power on the international scene may well affect the balance between different Englishes as well” (Mauranen 2012). On the British Council webpage⁸ ELF is considered a specific topic to be taught both for syntax and for pronunciation in order to achieve a successful communication rather than proficiency. This is a key issue because ELF is a tool which doesn’t fully meet norms but interaction and communication.

3.2. *ELF features*

EU documents that are drafted in English use a variety of ELF, since they are written by native and non-native English speakers who are experts on a specific matter (Murphy 2008: 22). Hence, these texts are not embedded in any particular culture. The use of English is not expression of, say, British, Irish, American or Australian culture, but of EU intercultural situation. ELF is the language that can overcome national, cultural and linguistic borders to create direct communication and to strengthen the common European identity.

Some specific collocations characterize ELF, for example the use of adjectives and past participles in post-modifier position (Taviano 2010: 29) as in “*The action monitored*” “*Definitions used*”; or the large use of nominalization which prefers nouns to replace verbs (Taviano 2010; Murphy 2008) as in “*At a European level, statistics are increasingly important for **the definition, implementation, monitoring and evaluation** of policies.*” Some features of American English (e.g. ‘z’ spelling and others), which are (somewhat surprisingly in Europe) preferred to British ones.

In 2013 a study was carried out (Scambia 2013) comparing corpora made of Eurostat yearbooks, Irish yearbooks and NSIs yearbooks translated into English forming monolingual comparable corpora. The study gave evidence of a higher rate of similarity between Eurostat and translated texts rather than with Irish yearbooks. An example is the preference of “*can*” both by Eurostat drafters and NSIs translators rather than “*may*”.

Another aspect to be deepened is the interchangeable use of “s” and “z” spelling within the same product of translated statistics as well as the use “o” or “ou” as in *labour* . In some

⁸ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-teach-english-lingua-franca-elf>

aspects we could speak of ELF both for statistical texts translated into English and addressed to an international audience and for Eurostat English. We could assume that the use of ELF is also related to the addressee of texts. Because ELF is the result of a communication effort. This would mean that when an English text is intended for an international public then some ELF features and strategies are also adopted by English native speakers who are in charge of translation.

4. Statistics and English translation

When writing on statistics we refer to a specialized language which makes use of a specialized lexis that is not much varied to avoid ambiguities. Lexis standardization is a goal to be achieved in statistical translated texts. An easy-to-make observation is that even-though Eurostat defines member state bodies producing official statistics as ‘National Statistical Institutes’(NSIs), however different names are still found on official websites, such as - ‘National Institute of Statistics’, ‘National Statistics Institute’ or “Statistics Portugal”.

An harmonised translation is aimed at disambiguation, which is a way to avoid misunderstandings and produce a clearer translated text, this phenomenon can be implemented for example replacing pronouns with nouns or repeating prepositions. In the case of statistical translation disambiguation involves also terminology standardization in order to avoid ambiguities and to grant quality. In this perspective Istat experience in developing the translation process is interesting.

4.1 Istat path in translation

At Istat the most relevant experiences as far as the production of texts in English is concerned, at least referring to the last decade, are the following: in 2006-2008 the back cover of the statistical books was presented both in Italian and English, and in the same period, the Italian statistical abstract – a compendium of the statistical production at Istat - was provided with parallel text in Italian and English, meeting the requirement of the 2006 Peer Review team to increase accessibility of Istat production (principle 15 Accessibility and Clarity). Both these activities were performed in-house, with internal resources, that is not given to external

contractors for translation. Tables and tables updates were translated consulting the EC regulations and checked by the statisticians for the correct terminology, and the presentation texts were also translated internally, without further controls by statistician since the texts had already been controlled.

In 2009-2011 a further advancement came out. A working group was established to produce some products for the new website, with the specific purpose to define procedures for the translation activity of prototypes for press releases, volumes, data tables and information system. A sort of relevance was also given to the language aspect, since to the larger offer of statistical products attention was to be given to the linguistic and terminological aspect of products, since they were more numerous and also more detailed than before. The activity focused on denotative-informative texts (that is, the presentation of materials) and binding texts of statistical tables.

2011-today. The activity has become ordinary and standardized. Since 2011 the new website has had English corresponding pages presenting shorter versions of products. The first page of calendarized press releases – containing the main results - is in fact being offered in English. The workflow is now standardized. Statisticians provide the texts, and a language expert reviser in the press office edits them from a linguistic point of view. Materials are then made available simultaneously for the international reader.

4.2 The translation of press releases at Istat

Press releases are texts scarcely culturally-marked, they are indeed highly standardized since they describe common contents for EU countries. The first page presents the Main results, giving the dynamics of economic indicators contained in the Multilanguage statistical regulations (they are actually contained in the appendices to the Regulation, prescribing the variables of the tables). Consequently they do not present those peculiarities connected with the socio-linguistic features of national languages. They do not have those pragmatic and cultural problems “connected to the changing situation of communication between the text of origin and the target text respectively (different addresses, communication channel,

communicative intention)”⁹ and to the diversity between norms and conventions generally accepted in the Specialized discourse and in its specific genres in the language/culture of origin and the target one as described by Scarpa (2012). They are supranational materials with common addressee.

At Istat, after considering the corresponding press releases by English mother tongue NSIs, Eurostat language was chosen as the reference. In particular attention was given to the English register used for the Euro-indicators. The comparison was quite easy since each release provides data referring to the short-term indicators prescribed by EU regulation (published in all the official EU languages). The direct interaction with Eurostat allowed us to learn about their workflow for quality in English language in press releases, which pays particular attention to “clarity, style and grammar”. On the other hand, it has to be recalled the attention given by the EU Commission to Clear writing and to the editorial quality, with the aim to achieve a clear communication with European citizens, as recently noticed (De Stefanis, 2015).

4.3 A style-guide

A style guide for translation, even a short one, could be a useful tool to enhance quality level and to make the workflow smoother, easier to be checked. It could be useful especially for the products which are directly produced by statisticians. Basic rules of English style could be recalled in a contrastive way to Italian style, an example of which is the tendency to use simple present in Italian to describe phenomena (also when happened in past times); impersonal forms such as “It is necessary to count...” while it would be better to use the verb as a subject “Counting is necessary” the use of *infatti* at the beginning of Italian sentences in order to explicit a consequence or a cause and which should not be translated with “in fact” which has a different meaning, function and collocation. Examples of these type, which can

⁹ The original text is in Italian: “Non presentano i problemi pragmatici e culturali connessi rispettivamente alla variazione della situazione comunicativa tra testo di partenza e testo di arrivo (diversità di destinatari, canale di comunicazione, intenzione comunicativa)”.

ensure quality also at institutional and brand levels are the Interinstitutional style-guide of the EU and the *Manuale per la traduzione delle pubblicazioni della banca centrale europea*.

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