Public procurement of
translation **services**

VADE MECUM
for authors of
tender specifications

A joint initiative of the
Belgian Quality Translation Association (BQTA) and the
Belgian Chamber of Translators and Interpreters (CBTI)

Chambre
Belge des
Traducteurs
et Interprètes

Belgische
Kamer van
Vertalers
en Tolken

BQTA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is a professional human activity which generates a great deal of economic value, but which is largely unknown to most people. As in all professional activities, there are best practices. Disregarding those best practices can lead to unexpected results: sometimes amusing, more often embarrassing – and in some cases harmful enough to make the headlines of the international press.

This vade mecum is aimed primarily at public authorities that procure translation services. It describes the fundamental concepts required to write effective tender specifications guaranteeing seamless collaboration with tenderers and maximum satisfaction for the contracting authority.

Only the translation-related aspects of the tender specifications are addressed in this guide. Legal and financial considerations are beyond the scope of this document.

Effective tender specifications elicit clear responses to the needs expressed by the contracting authority. As such, when drafting specifications, authors should seek to formulate tender requirements as accurately as possible, use commonly accepted terminology that is comprehensible to all parties involved, and take into consideration the constraints under which translation professionals operate.

The aim of this vade mecum is to familiarise the authors of tender specifications with best practices in the translation sector and allow them to set realistic requirements for translation professionals.

Examples of these best practices as well as templates for tender specifications can be found on the **BQTA** and **CBTI** websites. ▪

2. DEFINITIONS

The terminology used in an invitation to tender should be clear and unambiguous. Below we define a few terms that are commonly used in the translation profession.

Translation

The **intellectual process** that involves grasping the meaning of a text written in one language and reproducing the meaning, in writing, in another language without altering the original message or style and while adhering to prevailing linguistic rules.

Source language and target language

The **source language** (SL) is the language in which the text to be translated is written. The **target language** (TL) is the language of the translated text. The term **language pair** is the SL-TL pair which defines a given translation task. Professional translators typically only translate into one language, generally their mother tongue.

Revision

Revision means performing a **detailed comparison** of an original source text and the translation of that text. In the translation workflow, the task of revision follows the actual translation phase. Its purpose is to detect any omissions and/or imperfections and to correct them so that the translation meets the requirements set out in the specifications.

Proofreading

Proofreading consists of checking the target text to ensure that the translation meets quality requirements.

Desktop publishing

Desktop publishing (DTP) consists of organising the layout of a translated text so that it has the same visual effect as the original text. ■

3. ECONOMIC OPERATORS

The demand for professional translation services is met by a highly fragmented translation services industry.

On the supply side, the market consists of a large number of independent contractors – operating either as sole traders or one-person companies – and translation companies or agencies. The latter generally provide translation services in a wider range of language pairs. They organise and coordinate translation projects, and may also provide other types of services.

At the same time, small economic operators can also join forces in groups to deliver more agile services. ◼

4. SPECIFIC FEATURES OF TRANSLATION

Like any other profession, the translation profession has its own constraints. A solid understanding of those constraints is useful when writing correctly targeted specifications. It is important to ask the right questions.

Complexity of the original text

What is the ultimate purpose of the source text? Is it a technical text intended for a specialist readership? The clearer the original text, the easier it will be to translate it correctly.

Target audience

Who is the translation intended for? Experts in a specific technical domain or the general public? Is it an administrative document to be read by office staff or a text that has been popularised for readers of a specific age?

Translating a press release or the minutes of a meeting is not the same as translating an instruction manual or a legal document.

Volume and turnaround times

What is the deadline for delivery of the translated text?

Producing an accurate, reliable translation which does justice to the original text can easily take as much time as it took to write the original itself.

As a rule of thumb and under normal working conditions, a translator can translate between 2,000 and 2,500 words of a moderately difficult text per working day.

The practice of assigning a translation job to several translators to shorten turnaround times is generally not recommended as this could lead to terminological and stylistic inconsistencies.

Additional work

Is the original document an editable file? Is the translator responsible for DTP work? Are any technical pre-processing tasks required (alignment, creation of translation memories and/or glossaries)? Does any reference material need to be consulted?

Documentation

Can the contracting authority provide any duly validated reference material in the source and target languages? Such material could contribute to the consistency — and thus the quality — of the translation.

Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tools

Is the use of CAT tools required? CAT tools fall into two major categories: translation memories and machine translation.

Translation memories

A 'translation memory' (TM) is a database in which previously translated text segments (i.e. sentences, sentence-like units or entire paragraphs) are stored for reuse. While the use of translation memories generally increases productivity and enhances consistency, it does not dispense with the need to revise the translated text.

Machine translation

Machine translation engines do not actually perform translations (since translation is an intellectual activity). Rather, they make use of computer algorithms to automatically transform source language texts into target language texts.

Outputs generated by these tools always require in-depth revision. The task of revising machine translation output is called 'post-editing'. ◼

5. ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF THE TENDER SPECIFICATIONS

To make it possible to properly assess the tenderer's professional and technical capabilities, tender specifications should specify the components of the required service as clearly and in as much detail as possible. These components include:

- » **Type of economic operators** sought (individual translators, translation companies, groupings of individuals and/or companies);
- » **Tasks** to be performed (translation, revision, proofreading, desktop publishing, etc.);
- » **Subject area** of the texts to be translated (technical, scientific, administrative, legal, financial, etc.);
- » **Author(s)** of the source text (who can be contacted should any explanations and/or clarifications be required);
- » **Target readership** (in-house staff, external specialists, general public, etc.);
- » **Language pairs** (it is recommended that each work package be restricted to a single language pair);
- » **Computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools** to be used, if any (including which version);
- » **Format** of the translated file and of any other files to be delivered, such as translation memories (doc, xliff, tmx, etc.);
- » Degree of confidentiality;
- » **Policy on subcontracting** (authorised or not; if so, under what conditions);
- » **Volume and turnaround** requirements or delivery schedule;
- » **Urgency rates** and the conditions under which they apply. ■

6. SELECTION CRITERIA

Freelance translators

International standards (see below) do not apply to independent contractors. The same is true of minimum turnover criteria. When selecting independent contractors (individually or in groups), assessments should be based on **profiles**, taking into account following criteria:

- ✓ Professional translators;
- ✓ Translating into their mother tongue only;
- ✓ Specialisation(s) (legal, IT, technical, administrative, medical, financial, etc.);
- ✓ Academic qualifications (degree in translation or other disciplines);
- ✓ Experience (type and duration of work experience);
- ✓ Continuing/further education;
- ✓ Professional references;
- ✓ Membership in **recognised professional organisations**.

Translation companies

Additional selection criteria may apply to translation companies, including:

- » **Solvency** criteria;
- » Guarantees as to the **traceability** of subcontractor supply chains;
- » Compliance with international **standards**, as attested by relevant certifications. These standards include:

    - o **ISO-17100:2015** (which replaced standard EN-15038:2006)
      This standard provides requirements for the core processes and resources required for the delivery of high-quality translations.

    - o **ISO-9001:2008** (currently being updated)
      This standard provides the minimum requirements for a

quality management system. These requirements cover control over the organisation's operations (and particularly non-conformities) as well as corrective and preventive actions to be specified in the organisation's quality manual.

References to be provided by tenderers

Regarding certifications relating to exclusion criteria (non-bankruptcy, payment of taxes, VAT, social security contributions, etc.), it is recommended that contracting authorities request only those documents that they cannot obtain themselves. If references attesting to translation outputs are required, the contracting authority should clearly define the conditions governing the provision of such information. ■

7. EVALUATION OF TENDERS

The evaluation criteria of tenders should be clearly defined. These include price, text comprehension, quality of writing, quality of presentation, work experience, methodological approach, project management, profiles of proposed human resources, specialisation, technical support, etc. The weighting assigned to each of these criteria will depend on the type of task required.

For invitations to tender for the procurement of high-quality translations, it is recommended that quality be assigned a weighting of at least 70 per cent. ■
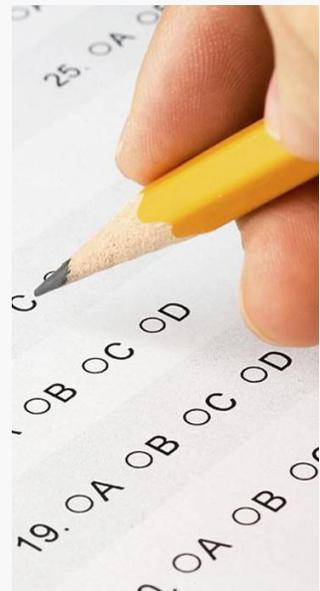
8. DOCUMENTATION PROVIDED BY THE CONTRACTING AUTHORITY

The tender specifications should mention – for each language pair, if possible – any reference documentation that may be available for the creation of translation memories, corpora, terminology databases, glossaries, etc. If a style guide exists, this should also be mentioned and provided. ■

9. PRICE

The tender specifications should require tenderers to clearly state all prices (or rates) and the basis for their calculation. The following should be specified:

1. The required **tasks** (translation, revision, proofreading, DTP, etc.) and their corresponding rates;
2. The applicable **count unit** (character, word, line, page, hour or flat rate). For counts based on 'line' or 'page', the number of characters/words per line/page should be specified;
3. The **count language** (source or target language);
4. Applicable **surcharges** (for urgent requests, non-editable source documents, etc.) expressed as percentages of the base price/rate;
5. Discontinuous text (**tables** of numerical data, **charts**, **graphs**, etc.) may be priced separately;
6. Pricing of internal and/or external repetitions. ■

10. TESTING

Tests can be useful for providing an objective assessment of the quality of translations submitted by tenderers.

When used for this purpose, the following should ideally be taken into consideration:

» Test texts should be **representative** of the type of text for which the invitation to tender is being issued;

» Test texts should not exceed **300 words** per language pair;

» The method used to evaluate test translations should be clearly described in the specifications and based on objective criteria;

» Tenderers' **test results** and the track-changes version of their revised translations should be made available to tenderers upon request;

» The specifications should clearly indicate what **traceability** processes have been put in place to ensure, insofar as possible, that translation work is assigned to translators who have been selected on the basis of their test results.

Several testing methods and test evaluation rules exist and are used or recommended by various organisations. Examples can be found online in the Annexes section. ◼

11. FINES AND PENALTIES

The specifications should clearly mention which sanctions apply in the event of late delivery or substandard quality (fines, termination of contract, etc.) as well as the terms of tenderers' right of appeal.

They should also define the concept of 'quality' and include a matrix specifying the quality assessment criteria (similar to those used for the tests).

The BQTA and the CBTI recommend that quality-related disputes be referred to an arbitration committee. ■

12. CONTRACT AWARD NOTICE

Once the tendering process is completed, an award notice specifying the number of tenders received as well as the winning tenderer(s) and tender price(s) should be published, as required by the relevant legislation. In the interest of full transparency, tender prices should be published as submitted by the tenderer(s).

The tender award report should be made available to all tenderers. ■

13. CONCLUSION

The **Belgian Quality Translation Association (BQTA)** and the **Belgian Chamber of Translators and Interpreters (CBTI)** are committed to promoting excellence and the delivery of high-quality translation services for the benefit of all parties concerned.

To that end, they wish to engage with authors of tender specifications in order to inform them about the specific features of the translation industry.

The officers and members of both organisations welcome contributions from anyone wishing to contribute to and participate in this effort. ■

ANNEXES are available on
the BQTA and CBTI websites

www.bqta.be   www.cbti-bkvt.org

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