AL-FARABI KAZAKH NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Department of International Relations

Chair of Diplomatic Translation

**Translation business in the field of international and legal relations**

**“Translation of Scientific and Technical Documents”**

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**Lecture 9**

**Module 2: Resources for scientific and technical translation**

**Lecture 9**: Translation features of technical instructions and brochures

Many of us may have become frustrated at some point with deficien- cies in the set of instructions we were working with when trying to use or install something, especially for the first time. Perhaps we lost our way because the instructions were pictorial only? Perhaps there were verbal instructions but none available in our preferred language? Perhaps the instructions were in our language but we could not make sense of them for some reason? We may even have suspected that flaws in a translation were to blame for our problems.

In this chapter we examine the genre of technical instructions. We start by thinking about what it means for instructions to be usable. We then focus on the genre in more detail by considering the different types of information contained in instruction manuals and the ways in which they can fulfil a range of communicative purposes. We con- clude by discussing some common difficulties faced by translators of technical instructions. A key criterion for designers of any technical documentation is usabil- ity. This is particularly salient in the case of technical instructions. Instructions must enable users to perform a given task. This operative function is a key aspect of the genre. However, as noted by Alexander (2013) and others (and as captured in the exasperation of the crude instruction in English slang to RTFM!), users often have negative per- ceptions of instructions and try to proceed with their task without reading them or may merely skim them. Ganier (2004) points out that instructions are often written to be followed in a linear fashion (to be read before performing the task), but that users frequently use the instructions in a more interactive fashion, turning to them (only) when they need help with a particular feature, function or problem. Eiriksdottir and Catrambone (2011: 750) also make the point that users often opt for a technical product to improve performance in some way and, if the product is used incorrectly or inefficiently, this potential productivity gain is lost and users may be rather dissatisfied. For these reasons it is important for instructions’ authors and design- ers to focus on producing instructions which are usable, so that the operative function can be fulfilled. There is an extensive literature on usability and usability testing, often related to products, for example consumer goods. The usability of instructions can form part of the usability testing of the products. For many purposes usability is understood, as in the ISO definition, as ‘the extent to which a system, product or service can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use’ (British Standards Institution 2010). ‘Effectiveness’ relates to the accuracy and complete- ness with which users achieve intended goal(s). ‘Efficiency’ refers to the resources (time, effort) expended by users in achieving the goal(s). ‘Satisfaction’ is about users’ attitude towards the experience (ibid.).

Another aspect of the user’s experience that is sometimes also dis- cussed in relation to instructions is meaningfulness. Steehouder et al. (2000), for example, argue that a set of instructions might enable people to complete a task, but that it is not enough to measure success in terms of accuracy or time taken. They suggest that instructions have to be meaningful too, that is, they have to ‘enable the users to build a mental representation or model of the technological device and its use’ (ibid.: 464).

Some research on instructions (Eiriksdottir 2011) also distinguishes between usability and learnability, that is, a distinction between instructions that enable users to carry out a one-off task and instruc- tions from which users learn and can transfer their knowledge. For example, Eiriksdottir and Catrambone (2011) show how users per- form well when given quite specific instructions, requiring relatively low cognitive effort to process. However, users appear to learn and transfer their knowledge better when they work from more general or more abstract instructions, which require more cognitive effort for processing in the first instance.