

# **A Proposal for Improving the Marking Guidelines of Advanced Translator Tests**

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**Submitted to  
The Qualifications Assessment Advisory  
Committee of the  
National Accreditation Authority for Translators  
and Interpreters  
(NAATI)**

*Submitted by*

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*12 May 1998*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This draft proposal is submitted to NAATI's Qualifications Assessment Advisory Committee (QAAC) in response to an invitation by the Committee for comments and proposals for amendments to the marking guidelines for Advanced Translator tests.

This draft proposal is based on a research paper written in 1995 and on a PhD research by the author (1993-1998).

## PREAMBLE

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NAATI's Qualifications Assessment Advisory Committee is currently reviewing the marking guidelines for the Advanced Translator Test.

NAATI's current marking techniques can be simply described as a jigsaw puzzle — an approach that is largely concerned with the microstructure of text/translation at word and sentence levels, and with how word-pieces fit into their corresponding slots. It is source text-focused and examiner-centred.

This approach, which has been a source of confusion, apprehension and argumentation among some NAATI examiners and within the translator community at large, is basically inadequate because it is both unreliable and invalidatable.

However, the problem NAATI is facing today is not that of marking techniques only, but also of the entire approach to testing, which encompasses the design, the candidate's performance assessment and the examiner's skills, attitude and approach.

## BACKGROUND

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For many local and international educational institutions and accreditation bodies, written translation tests have always been the primary if not the only criterion for assessing translation candidates (who are often already practising translators). Passing a one or two hour test simply determines whether a candidate qualifies as a translator. Certain institutions, such as the British Institute of Linguists, seek to assess the translation, summarization and note-taking skills of translation candidates. Others, such as the Australian National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), go as far as assessing the professional ethics and cultural perspectives of candidates.<sup>1</sup>

At first blush, these tests might seem to be adequate. However, the appalling standards of practising accredited translators (as frequently and in part attested by translation users and clients), the general apprehension and antipathy in the community towards translators and the translation profession, the high percentage of candidates who contest their test results every year, and the vast discrepancy between the marks of various examiners raise some serious doubts about the quality, reliability and validity of these tests.

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<sup>1</sup> It is debatable however, whether an accreditation body should examine the ethics of candidates since it seems the preferred answers are to a certain degree personal and to some extent legally argumentative. Besides, NAATI has no means, and probably no wish, to police the ethics of its candidates. Passing the test does not automatically guarantee observance. This role should be left to educational institutions to train translators in the protocols of the profession and to translation organizations, such as AUSIT, to instill professionalism in their membership.

## DISCUSSION

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Generally speaking, any form of translator performance assessment should have the following basic characteristics: **uniformity**, **validity** and **reliability**.

### **Uniformity**

Uniformity refers to a standardized procedure for designing, managing and marking tests that ensures the test designer and test marker follow the same norms and standards and have the same expectations about the test. Uniformity also refers to the consistency of interpretation by all examiners of such a procedure.

### **Validity**

Validity refers to how well the test fulfills its function, the degree to which the translation test actually measures what it is supposed to measure and the means and techniques by which such measurement is achieved.

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to how objective and consistently dependable a test is. It also refers to the consistency of scores obtained by the same person when re-examined with the same translation test on different occasions. Accordingly, a translation test should enable the candidate to produce more or less the same results under the same conditions. In other words, it should bring out the best in him or her. It should also enable the marker to replicate the resulting score consistently.

Without appropriate criteria against which a translation test can be validated, it will not be a reliable tool for measuring the candidates aptitude.

Let us examine NAATI's current testing techniques against these characteristics.

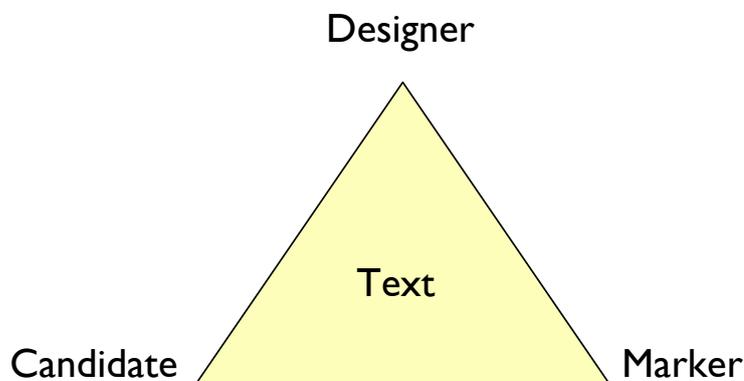
By and large, NAATI's translation tests focus on linguistic data and on the extent of transfer from source language to target language. They are largely concerned with the finished product as the sole means of assessing the translation candidate's aptitude. Because of the constraining nature of these tests, no attention is given by examiners to the analytical techniques and translation strategies the translation candidate has employed, or to the paralinguistic and extralinguistic factors that enter into the translation candidate's decisions.

In addition, the translator's work environment, the translation process and the collaborative nature of the translator's work seem to be totally overlooked. As such, translation tests focus on text out of context — and although NAATI has recently introduced co-textual elements into the tests (before and after passages), it still has not addressed the fundamental issues of intertextuality, contexts of situation, and utility. Furthermore, NAATI's tests fail to address critical questions such as why the translation is needed and who is going to use it, when, where and how, what the purpose of the translation is vis-à-vis the original text, the target user and the environment(s) in which it is going to be used, and what translation strategy is appropriate for such a purpose.

These questions, and many more, are important simply because they consider translation a process of re-engineering the transactional and interactive properties of discourse within clearly defined parameters. These parameters should be set by the translation test designer against a set of criteria defined by NAATI, should be made apparent to the translation candidate and should be considered by the test marker.

## ***Designer-candidate-marker relationship***

One of the major problems, if not the main problem, in assessing translation candidates is the mismatch between the test designer's assumptions about the test, the candidate's analysis of the test requirements, strategies and intentions, and the test marker's expectations of the test.



The translation test designer's assumptions or design criteria are not apparent to the translation candidate simply because they are not spelled out in the test papers. The candidate's intentions are not apparent to the test marker, and the marker's expectations and evaluation criteria are not defined. To illustrate, the following scenario is always possible.

1. The test designer chooses a technical medical text that is aimed at medical professionals assuming that the translated version will be aimed at the same type of reader.
2. The candidate translates the text for a non-technical reader, assuming for whatever reason that the translation will be used by a non-technical reader.
3. The marker, who is almost always not the test designer, assesses the translation with another reader in mind.

In this case, there is a clear mismatch between the criteria that all three players apply to each of their tasks. No doubt, this state of affairs invariably results in discrepancies and incorrect and unfair assessment of candidates — above all, it does not reflect real-life situations.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly however, NAATI's guidelines for marking the Advanced Translator test naively ignore this vital aspect of assessment and of the nature of translation work. They simplistically demand that the finished translation "must be accurate as to content, with no margin for error. It must read fluently, and *should accurately reflect the register, tone and style of the original...*"<sup>3</sup>

## ***The translation process***

As we all know, translation is a dichotomous, cumulative and iterative process. It musters a host of cognitive activities relating to language, writing, rhetoric, linguistics, communication, culture and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> In real-life situations, both the reader/user of the original text and the reader/user translation often have different information needs that require different approaches to information presentation, even if they both belong to the same field of specialization.

<sup>3</sup> NAATI's Manual for Interpreter and Translator Examiners, p F-24. Emphasis added.

It is dichotomous because it deals with two languages that have different linguistic and cultural norms and patterns and different communication codes. It is cumulative because knowledge gained in translating one piece of discourse is applied to translating another piece of discourse. And it is iterative because it undergoes a repetition of a sequence of events yielding results successively closer to the finished text.

That is why finding out whether a translation candidate has selected the correct “equivalent” of a word should not be the sole focus of a translation test. The focus should rather be on how the candidate has gone about producing the translation to achieve a certain purpose. Dwelling on isolated errors and dissecting these errors into spelling, grammatical and syntactical within the same error, as has been the trend with many NAATI examiners, is a gross error in itself. Many examiners are bogged down in this area and completely lose sight of the purpose of the test. In fact, some examiners treat the test as a battlefield for their “*Don Quixote*” duels with the candidates.

This negative attitude might have its roots in NAATI’s approach to the candidate’s performance assessment and the penalty marking system it employs — “Errors are to be *penalised* as follows:... the candidate is to be *penalised* similarly for inconsistencies and errors....however, examiners should exercise discretion in *penalizing* obvious typing errors...”<sup>4</sup> — an approach that subconsciously permits the examiners to sit on their high horse of translation perfection and condescendingly shred the translation test to pieces.

A translation should be seen as a wholesome product that serves a specific **purpose**, fulfills a specific communicative **function**, and satisfies a specific information **need**. Shifting the emphasis from one component to another within the overall entity of the product without considering these aspects of the product, or focusing on lexical units and isolated instances of mismatch (or even personal preferences on the examiner’s part), within the translation yields lopsided results, gives a false sense of quality and limits the range of expression that languages offer. For these reasons, a translation test should be more aptly analyzed in terms of information integrity, strategies, fitness for purpose and translation dexterity rather than in terms of lexical units.

### ***Optimal approximation***<sup>5</sup>

NAATI’s marking of translation tests seems to start from the assumption that the candidate must produce a supposedly perfect translation that perfectly matches a supposedly perfect original. As such, many examiners embrace the antiquated notion of total equivalence.

Here, we can argue that the notion of equivalence is essentially a false one; an illusion that has deluded so many scholars and practitioners for so many years. Instead of equivalence, NAATI translation examiners need to be concerned with translation approximation, that is the degree of approximation between the translation and the original in terms of impact and meaning making. However, translation approximation does not seek to match the target language text to the source language text at any isolated level of meaning. Instead, translation approximation

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<sup>4</sup> *ditto*. Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion, see “Translation as a Decision Making Process under Constraints”, a PhD thesis by the author.

seeks to juxtapose target language text to source language text in terms of parallel functions in both languages. Consider the following example.

*Era de noche. En las calles bien iluminadas del centro de Madrid la gente todavía paseaba, las mesas en las aceras delante de los cafés están todas ocupadas y en las plazas los niños jugaban mientras los padres descansaban y tomaban el fresco.*

Rendition
Night time. In the streets well illuminated in the centre of Madrid, people are still walking, the tables on the pavements in front of the cafes are fully occupied and in the plazas the children are playing while their fathers are resting and taking the air.
Night time. In the streets well lit in the centre of Madrid, the people were still out and about. The tables on the footpaths in front of the cafes were full, and in the squares the children were playing while their parents were resting and going for a walk.
It was night time. In the well-lit streets in the city centre of Madrid, the people were still out and about, the tables on the sidewalks in front of the cafes were all taken, and the children in the squares were playing while their parents were either resting or strolling by.
It was night time. In the well-lit streets of central Madrid, the people were still out and about, the cafes sidewalk tables were all taken, and in the squares the children were playing as their parents rested or strolled by.
At night, the well-lit streets in the heart of Madrid still bustled with people; the cafes sidewalk tables all taken, in the city squares the children played as their parents sat down leisurely or strolled by.
In the centre of Madrid, the illuminated streets were still bustling with people at night. The street cafe tables were all taken, the children played in the plazas, while their parents sat down or went for a walk.

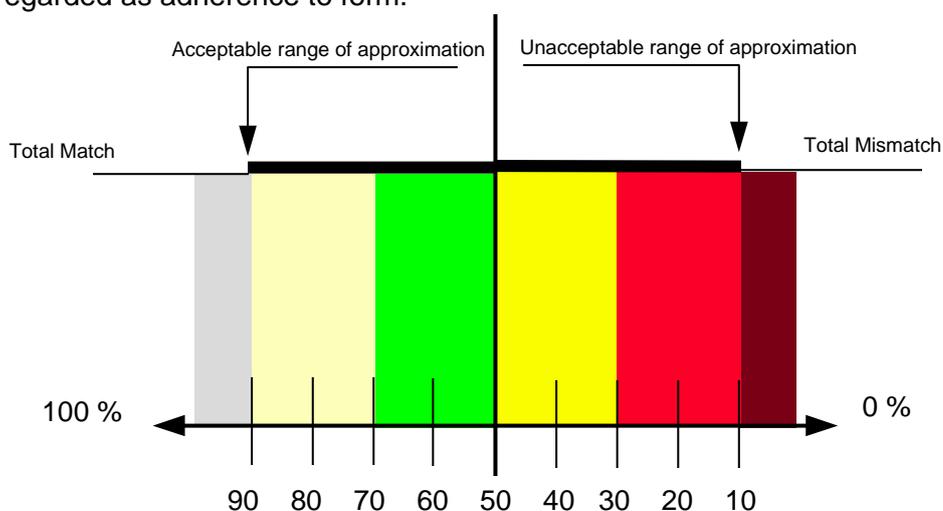
Here, we can see the range of possibilities available to the translator. Which one of these renditions is the optimum (or falls outside the acceptable range of approximation) will greatly depend on whether the translation is source-bound or target-bound — hence on the purpose and function of the translation in relation to the original text and the purpose of the translation in the target language (and of course on the translator’s aptitude). Furthermore, in terms of the linguistic aspects of the text, optimum approximation must be assessed on both the micro and macro levels, that is at the word/sentence level and the paragraph/text level. Such assessment must take into account the compounding and incremental effect of approximation within the overall frame of reference and function of text.

## A HOLISTIC<sup>6</sup> APPROACH TO TRANSLATION TESTS

Translation is a multidimensional communication process that takes place in a temporal-spatial environment. It operates at several levels simultaneously: linguistic, cognitive, cultural, psychological, geo-historical (time and space), and aesthetic. These levels are bound to be in conflict with one another across languages. A certain expression in one language might find its equivalence only on one or two levels — not all levels are matchable at once. So, when Robert Burns’ “My love is like a red,

<sup>6</sup> Rather than *wholistic*, which some writers prefer.

red rose.” is translated into another language, all six levels become active in terms of the intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives of communication and linguistic, social and cultural reality— the translator’s ability to understand and communicate the socio-cultural reality embedded in the text will always govern his or her distance from the text. Communicating such sociocultural reality through the medium of translation involves a process of reconstructing and imaging reality in the target language. The imaged reality, no matter how close it is to the original, is bound to be an approximation only. How exact the image depends only on the degree of matchability between source and target realities and the distance between them and on the translator’s ability to understand, interpret and match. On a percentage scale from zero to 100, there must be two ranges of approximation: an acceptable range and an unacceptable range as shown in the following illustration. In this sense, matchability must not be construed as a full 100 percent equivalent, nor should it be regarded as adherence to form.



Here, we could stipulate that the range of acceptable approximation is 50 to 90 percent with the last 10 percent for complete match (which is not always achievable at all levels). The same applies to the range of unacceptable approximation however in reverse, that is 50 to 10 percent, with the last 10 percent for full mismatch. The mismatch at more than one level creates uncertainty that leads to conflict which is bound to dictate the translation type and approach.

The acceptable percentage within the range of approximation will ultimately depend on the purpose and function of the translation itself, which in turn will determine which levels of the multidimensional communication event (that is linguistic, cultural, psychological and so on) is more important. Once determined, these levels can be weighted to enable a more realistic and pragmatic assessment of the translation.

## PROPOSED MODEL FOR MARKING TESTS

As we have already discussed, NAATI’s marking is based on the penalty system and deduction of marks for errors. Marks are deducted from a total of 100. The deducted marks are added up and subtracted from the total. In many cases, by the time the marker finishes the deductions, there is nothing left. That is why issues such as disallowing negative marking have been noted by the QAAC.

This approach raises the following fundamental question: Does a translation, no matter how remote it may be from the deemed-correct translation, really have a zero value? If the answer is yes, it raises serious doubts about NAATI’s admission criteria.

If no, a more positive approach is needed, assuming that the candidates have already qualified for the examination and have already attained a certain standard that will qualify them for accreditation on passing the test.

Therefore, let us reverse the process and assume that the translation candidate develops the translation from scratch with a set of options and within constraints. Instead of deducting marks, let us credit the candidate “for getting it right” and then add the marks to produce the final result.

In designing a translation test, the passage can be selected to contain a number of sentences (or logical translation units). Each unit is given a number of credits. The overall passage is given a total number of credits of 80 marks, with 10 credit marks reserved for overall performance.

The translation test should be assessed in terms of **comprehension** and **production**, that is the candidate’s ability to comprehend the source language and to produce that which is comprehended in the target language. Within this overall division, the errors should also be judged in terms of **interference** and **intervention**, that is whether the candidate has unjustifiably interfered with the text or legitimately intervened, for linguistic, cultural, information need’s consideration and so on, to render the text intelligible to the target language reader.

Currently, NAATI’s guidelines do not define what is justifiable and what is unjustifiable modification (be it omission or otherwise), and it is left almost entirely to the examiner to decide what constitutes unjustifiable omission, basically given the marker a free hand to “justify or not justify” according to his or her interpretation of what makes up NAATI standards.

Within this framework, the test should be marked on a rising scale from 1 to 5 as follows:

*Table 1 Marking Criteria*

Score	Information Integrity	Linguistic Integrity	Translation Dexterity	Fitness for Purpose	Aesthetic Effect
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					

**Information integrity** refers to the ability to retain the same information in terms of accuracy, correctness, completeness and intention (both informative and communicative).

*Table 2 Information Integrity*

Information integrity	Scale 1 to 5					
Accuracy						
Correctness						
Completeness						
Intention						

**Linguistic integrity** refers to the ability to render the text in a sound language in terms of grammar, structure (both micro and macro levels), coherence and cohesion.

*Table 3 Linguistic Integrity*

<b>Linguistic integrity</b>	<b>Scale 1 to 5</b>					
Grammar						
Spelling						
Unity of sentence/paragraph						
Cohesion						
Coherence						

**Translation dexterity** refers to the candidate’s translation skills and adroitness in terms of strategies, comprehension, production, matchability, and approximation.

*Table 4 Translation dexterity*

<b>Translation Dexterity</b>	<b>Scale 1 to 5</b>					
Strategies						
Comprehension						
Production						
Matchability						
Approximation						

**Fitness for purpose** refers to the ability to render the text suitable for its purpose.

*Table 5 Fitness for Purpose*

<b>Fitness for Purpose</b>	<b>Scale 1 to 5</b>					
Usability						
Satisfaction of specification						
Satisfaction of user information needs						
Readability						
Legibility						
Cultural appropriateness						

**Aesthetic effect** refers to the ability to employ appropriate rhetorical techniques. This is an overall artistic impression, in terms of “tellability”.

Checklists, templates, prototypes and blueprints can be developed to ensure that these factors are considered iteratively, that is on first, second and third passes etc.

The first pass for example considers these factors at sentence level, the second pass at paragraph level, and the third pass at passage level (macro structure).

## Informed Performers

In real-life situations, professionals are supposed to be informed performers. In other words, they are clearly briefed on what is expected of them and the tasks they are assigned to perform. Translators should not be any different. As professionals who know the processes, procedures and protocols of their profession, translators are briefed on the task at hand or seek clear instructions from their clients and customers. Therefore, translation tests should take this aspect into consideration if they are to be realistic and not haphazard or erratic.

Accordingly, a translation test should include a clear brief about the purpose of the translation, a clear profile of the translation users and a description of their information needs. This should enable the candidate to perform better to meet specific user requirements, and produce usable translations that should be so assessed.

## CONCLUSION

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It is inevitable in any objective endeavour to have an element of subjectivity. However, the extent of such subjectivity can be controlled and the urge to inject one's own opinion into the process of assessment can be curbed by imposing stringent measurement criteria.

NAATI is urged to provide a positive approach to translator assessment that takes the issue of informed performers as its central point. In the age of the information superhighway, it is no longer the translator's sole responsibility to unravel the mysteries of text and to wrestle with ambiguities and antiquated practices. Accordingly, the translation test should reflect this reality. NAATI is in the business of accrediting translators who are going to be working in the community, who will have access to texts written for the community dealing with community issues and who will have access to the authors of the original. As such, NAATI's translation tests should become in tune with real-life translation processes and requirements.

In summary, the translation test should:

- simulate a real-life situation
- include a translation user profile
- include a checklist of translation strategies indicating the choice a candidate makes (semantic, communicative and so on)
- insist on a draft copy to enable the examiner to analyze the approach taken by the candidate
- allow editing and other corrective conventions in the finished copy to enable the examiner to analyze the conscious decisions made by the candidate

In addition, a translation test should provide answers to the following questions:

- Who is the audience of the source language?
- Who is the audience of the target language?
- What are the source language audience's expectations?
- What are the target language audience's expectations?
- What are the source language audience's information needs?

- What are the target language audience's information needs?
- How is the source language audience is expected to use the text?
- How is the target language audience is expected to use the translation?
- What type of translation is appropriate in this case?

Certainly, the proposed approach demands additional effort on the examiner's part in the first place. It requires training and retraining in new methods of assessment and a total overhaul of NAATI's approach to translation that will bring it into line with modern trends in large international organizations. This approach focuses on translation engineering. It takes the process of translator assessment out of the confines of the school teacher mindset into the practical world of business and industry. Above all, this approach helps ensure that translation tests are reliable and valid.

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