

The Prism

Translation Framework

A decision-based model for choosing translation approach and process

AI: I used AI tools to refine this paper. The ideas, style and arguments are my own.

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About the Framework

This framework is a practical, combined process and approach for translation projects. It provides a clear process for translation projects, and a simple yet effective method for choosing the appropriate approach, helping translators make the important decisions early on. It also provides guidance on integrating AI into the process to reduce cost while maintaining quality.

Translation projects fail less because of language gaps and more because of **poor decisions made early**, or not made at all, like choosing the wrong approach, not having identified the audience for the work, an unrealistic scope, or blind trust in tools (human or AI).

This framework exists to answer three questions *before* mistakes become expensive:

1. **What exactly am I translating—and for whom?**
2. **How close or free should this translation be?**
3. **Which tasks should humans do, which should AI assist with, and where should humans stay firmly in control?**

Unlike academic models, this framework:

- Assumes **imperfect conditions**
- Assumes **solo translators wearing all hats**
- Treats AI as a **tool**, not a savior or villain

Do We Need Another Framework?

There are several frameworks for managing translation projects. What is unique about this framework is that unlike most other frameworks, it forces explicit approach selection and defends it early in the project and provides practical solutions for problems translator meet on a daily basis and helps them in making decisions to avoid such problems. In addition, other frameworks either focus solely on approach or on process, while this one combines both in a simple-to-implement method.

Who is it for?

- Beginner translators.
- Experienced translators systemically using AI for the first time.
- Translators moving from short jobs to book-length work.
- Experienced translators who are managing their first medium or large translation project.
- Experienced translators who were burned by one failed large project.

AI Integration

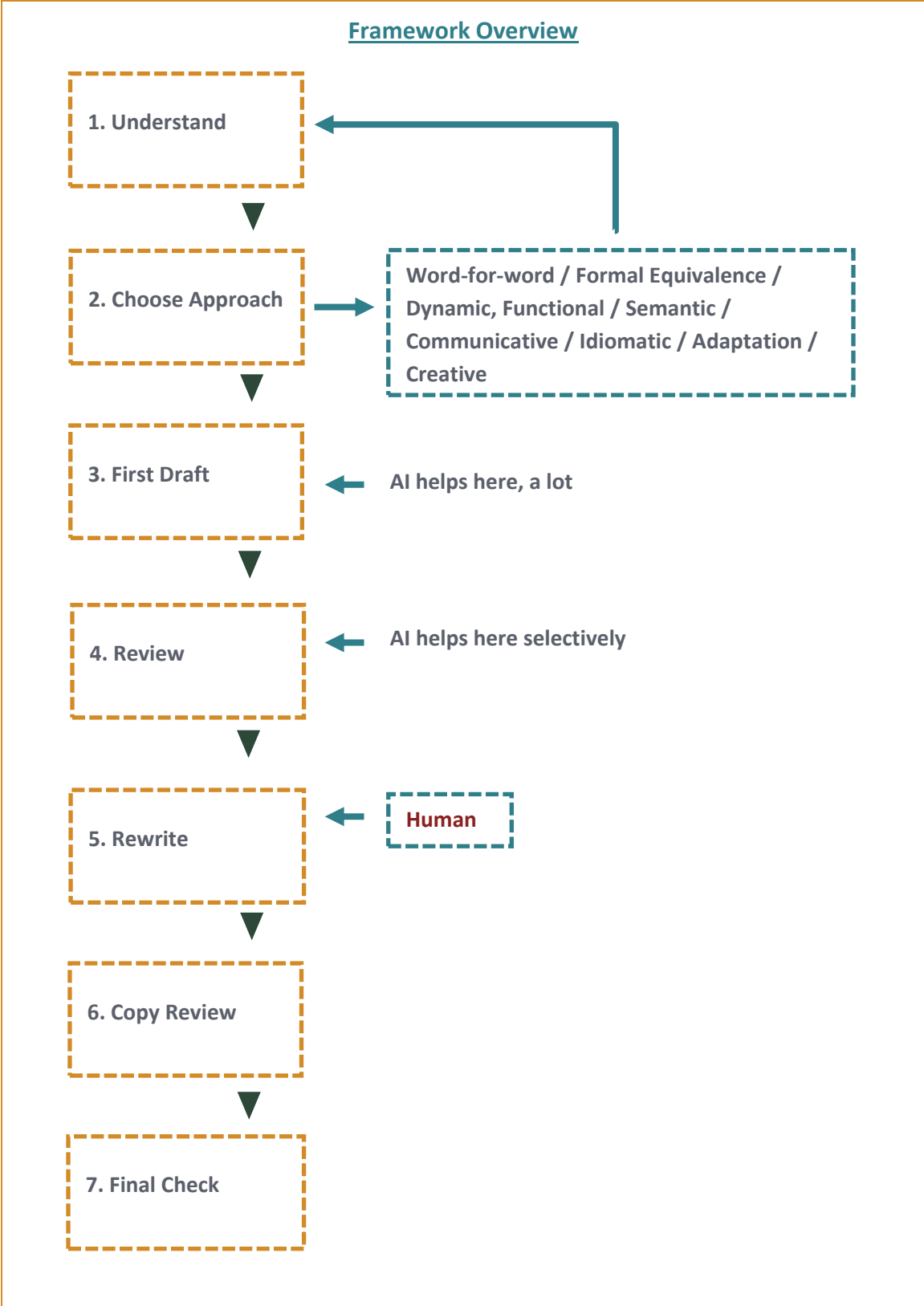
This framework helps translators decide which steps of the translation process can be executed by AI. It also provides methods for managing the AI component to achieve higher quality while minimizing cost and getting the best out of humans and AI agents working on the project. This part of the framework might become outdated quickly as AI tools are improving rapidly, but the core concepts will still hold true at least for the near future.

AI Integration Golden Rule

A helpful rule to follow when considering using AI for certain tasks is to think of AI as a **very good intern**. It knows a lot but needs close supervision - just like an intern. Also, interns are not the best at making decisions. They can, however, suggest creative ideas and solutions to problems. Human judgement is still required to **guide** AI and **supervise** its work (as of the date of writing this document in late 2025). In addition, translation is a creative process that involves some technical tasks. Humans are, to this day, the only source of creativity. AI, on the other hand, can be an **assisting creative tool**, and works best as a **technical** and **administrative** tool.

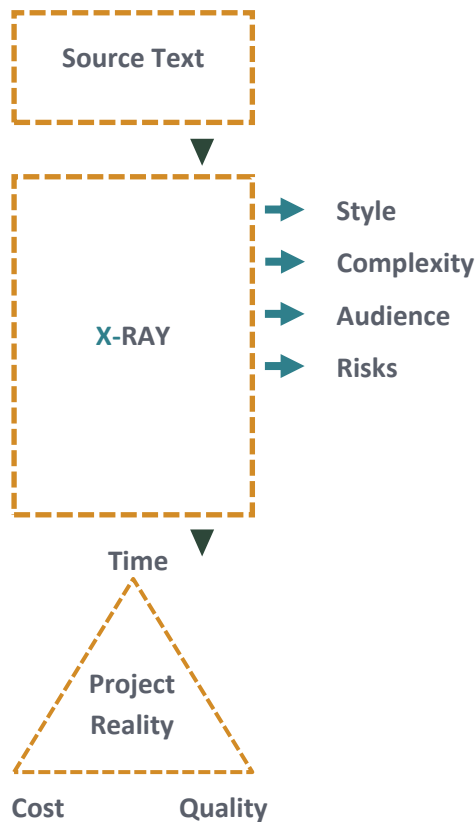
The 7-Step Translation Process Summary

Step	Description
1. Get familiar with the subject, text, and context	Background, context, text volume, style, target audience, field of knowledge
2. Select approach	Select among the 8 available approaches or a hybrid approach
3. First draft	Translate text to target language
4. Review translation	Completeness, accuracy, language and style
5. Re-write the text	Rewrite text based on selected approach
6. Review copy	Review for style and approach, completeness, accuracy and language
7. Final review	General overall review



The Framework in Detail

Step 1- Get Familiar with the Text



- Get familiar with the original text, the tone and style of the text, and the vocabulary used. Questions that would help in this step are:
 - Is the text well written and organized?
 - Is the text highly technical?
- Consider the target audience familiarity with the subject matter.
 - Describe the target audience
 - What are their expectations?
 - What knowledge do they have about the subject matter (assumed knowledge)
- Does the text require heavy formatting and does that need a special skillset? For example, are there many graphs and charts, or is it plain text?
- Create a rough time estimate for the translation project based on this overview.

Audience Snapshot			
Domain knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Medium	<input type="checkbox"/> High
Emotional state	<input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> Curious	<input type="checkbox"/> Skeptical
Reading context	<input type="checkbox"/> Study	<input type="checkbox"/> Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Leisure
Tolerance for foreignness	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	<input type="checkbox"/> Medium	<input type="checkbox"/> High

AI Integration



AI tools can **assist** in analyzing the text, identifying the style, pointing to issues and problems, and identifying target audience expectations.

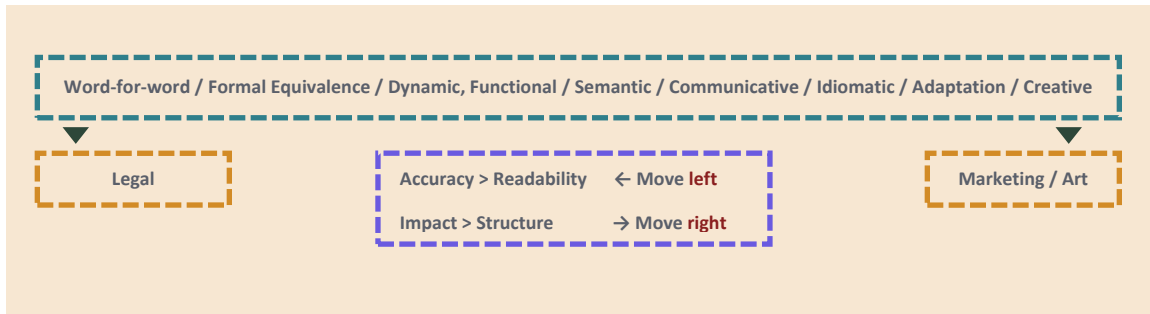
Step 2- Select Approach

Do you want to sound foreign or local? Do you need to keep the text within the context of the original language, or do you need to adapt it to the target language? Here's a list of well-known approaches with a guide on selecting the suitable approach. Using a hybrid approach is very common.

Approach	Description	When to Use
Word-for-word	Keep the exact words of the source language, often without considering the context or grammar of the target language.	Highly technical text, legal, contract, regulations. Accuracy is more important than readability.
Formal equivalence	Staying close to the source text, translating word by word or phrase by phrase while maintaining the grammatical structures of the target language.	Academic text, standards, frameworks, policies, audit and compliance.
Dynamic, functional	Recreate the contextual meaning of the original within the constraints of the target language's grammatical structures.	Non-fiction, education and training material, public-facing content Clarity is more important than accuracy.
Semantic	Preserve meaning and style, might sound slightly foreign.	Literature, essay, philosophy Author's voice matters.
Communicative	Easy to understand and natural flow in target language.	Instructions, websites, user guides, marketing. The text should feel like it was not a translation.
Idiomatic, equivalence based	Replace source language idioms and metaphors to target culture.	Dialogue, satire, proverbs, humor.
Adaptation	Replace cultural references to ones that target audience is familiar with.	Children's books, advertisements, humor.
Free, creative	Prioritize communicating the message, tone and impact.	Poetry, lyrics, experimental texts.

How to Select Approach?

One method for selecting the approach is by elimination. Start by eliminating the approaches that do not suit your project. List the remaining suitable approaches from most to least suitable. Keep eliminating approaches until you end up with one or two approaches. If you decide to use a hybrid approach, describe which elements you will choose from each approach and why.



How to Interpret the Graph

The relationship between accuracy and readability, impact and structure is not an either/or relationship. The above graph sets **priorities, not either/or relationships**. The text can be accurate *and* readable, but if accuracy has a higher priority than readability, move left.

This spectrum is not a value judgement. Moving right does not mean “less professional”, and moving left does not mean “better quality”.

Defend Selected Approach

You must have an answer for the question “Why did you select approach X for this project?”. The answer should be objective and unbiased. List your reasons for selecting the approach in your master planning document. Not being familiar with a certain approach is not an acceptable reason to not choose it, and being familiar with another approach is also not an objective reason to select it.

Step 3- First Draft

The goal at this stage is to develop a draft in the target language that is **truthful** to the original text, **complete** and **accurate**.

Whether using AI or solely relying on humans, the key quality control in this step is **immediate review** to prevent accumulation of quality debt (snowballing).

Translate a small chunk of the text, review it immediately, correct any errors, and provide immediate feedback to the person or system performing the first draft.

This method prevents

- **Error accumulation**
- **Glossary chaos**
- **AI hallucination snowballs**

Break to Parts

Attempting to translate 1,000 letter-size pages is quite a daunting job. Instead, break down your project into smaller chunks and set targets for finishing each part.

Decide Where to Start

You don't always have to start with page 1. The first part you decide to translate should include the core ideas, or core terms that will be repeated and expanded throughout the text.

Glossary of Terms

Some projects might require developing a glossary of terms before developing the first draft. In practice, 10 to 30% of the glossary might be developed first, then the glossary is expanded as the first draft is developed. Larger teams might need to fully develop the glossary first if several translators will be working on the first draft simultaneously.

Note on Format

If the project involves exhaustive formatting requirements, creating a template and style guide from the inception of the project would save a lot of time and effort. Formatting and correcting formatting errors becomes time consuming when translating books that include a lot of tables, charts and graphs. As a minimum, develop a style for the main text, bullet lists, headers 1 to 5, tables and charts.



AI Integration



Human-guided AI translation would save 30-40% of the overall project time if AI is used in this stage.

What to do

- Provide AI with clear detailed instructions. This includes the approach, the style, any dos and don'ts. Write a clear, detailed and complete prompt and update the prompt as needed as you progress.
- Give AI the text in small chunks.
- Have a human review the AI output immediately and provide feedback to AI.

What NOT to do

- Provide the text in bulk. AI agents tend to summarize the text if provided with large amounts of text.
- Feed all text to AI then review it. Again, think of AI as a good fresh graduate. It's hard-working but without proper supervision, it ends up making a lot of mistakes.

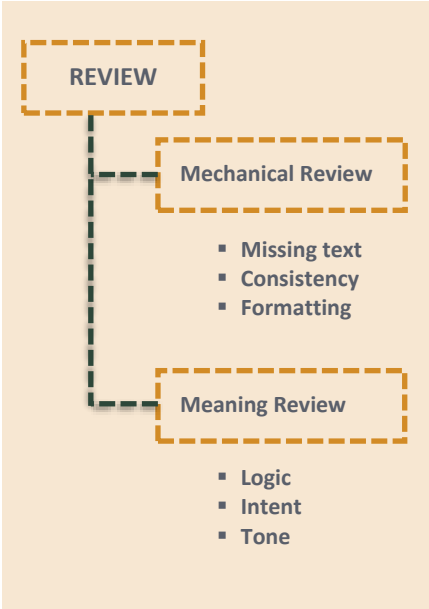
Glossary Maturity Levels		
Level 1	Seed glossary	Key terms only
Level 2	Growing glossary	Recurring concepts
Level 3	Locked glossary	Changes need justification

Step 4- Review Translation, Accuracy Review - Source vs. Target

Compare draft translation with original text to make sure

- All content is translated.
- The translation preserves the integrity of the original text (accuracy).
- The translation maintains consistency.

You can break down this process into two stages based on errors to look for: mechanical or technical, and meaning. The mechanical errors can be easily spotted by a junior translator, while errors related to meaning require more experience.



Overlap

For best results, this step should overlap with the previous first draft stage so that errors are avoided as much as possible during the draft development stage.

AI Integration



AI might be helpful in performing the mechanical review if provided with clear and specific instructions. AI fails in this task if the text is too large or heavily formatted.

Step 5- Re-write the Text

This step should be performed based on the approach selected at the start of the project. The resulting copy should convey the message clearly and succinctly while staying true to the identity or voice of the organization. Take a break between the draft and rewrite if you are a solo translator. You need to distance yourself from the text to clear your mind. Otherwise, the text will sound too familiar and “correct”.

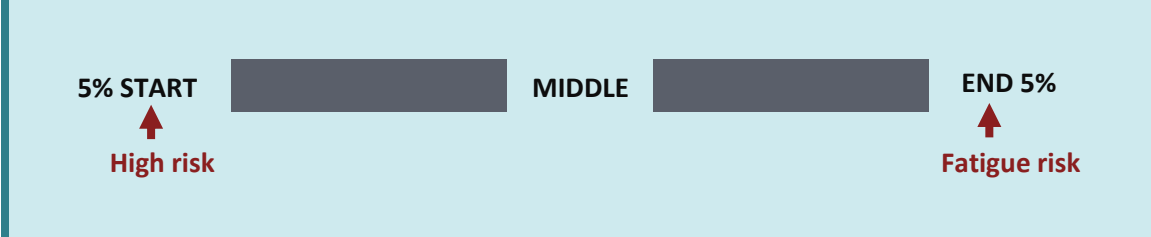
Step 6- Review Copy, Language and Presentation Review - Target Language Only

Finalize the translated text by reviewing the text for grammar errors, consistency, punctuation, and typos. Key areas to focus on:

- Logic errors, missing content, language errors and typos.
- Style and message consistency with the overall plan and approach.
- Culture-specific sensitive issues.

The 5% Rule

- **Read the first 10 pages (first 5% of the text):** AI agents and humans tend to make more mistakes at the beginning of a text due to several reasons: unfamiliarity with the text, having to pay attention to several things at the same time - such as language, formatting, and developing the glossary - and many other aspects. If the first 10 pages do not contain significant errors, then most likely the rest of the text is clean.
- **Read the last 10 pages (5%):** By the end of the text, both humans and AI agents are more familiar with the text and many of the tasks they perform become routine and simple. If the last 10 to 20 pages contain a lot of issues, you might need to go back to the draft stage or re-write stage depending on the types of error you find. On the other hand, humans might get fatigued by the end of the text, which might lead to an increase in error rate towards the end.
- **The 5%-Rule does not eliminate the need to review the entire text.**
- **The 5%-Rule is a risk-evaluation tool, not a quality guarantee.**



**Step 7- Final Review,
Risk-based Final Inspection**

The purpose is to do another check for accuracy, consistency, grammar, punctuation and typos. The below checklist is a good start. Add items to the list as you find necessary. The 5% rule applies here too.

- Final Review Checklist**
- No unexplained terminology shifts
 - No formatting anomalies
 - No tone inconsistency
 - No “AI fingerprints” (over-balanced phrasing, repetition)
 - First + last 5% validated

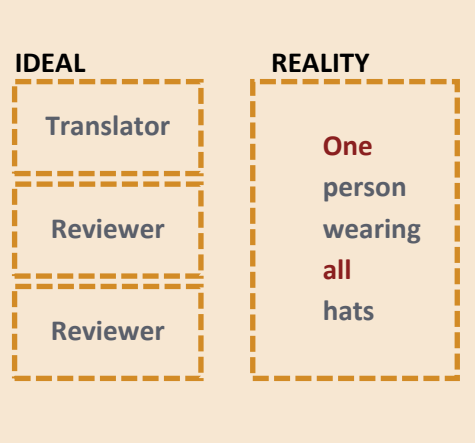
Systemic Issues

If you still find systemic issues in this phase, the project didn’t “almost fail” it already has failed earlier. This is an indicator of high quality risk.

Resources in Ideal Situations vs. Reality

In an ideal situation, there should be at least 3 persons in the translation team, or 3 groups. One person develops the first draft. Another person rewrites the draft, and a 3rd person does the final review. Review of the draft is done by the same person who makes the final review or by a different person if resources are available. The person who reviews the rewrite is preferably not the one who makes the final review.

In reality, the entire project might be performed by one person. In that case, that person needs to take breaks between steps.



Quality and Resources

Not all projects will have enough resources to cover the cost of a first draft, a review, re-write, review of the re-write and a final review. Project sponsors need to understand how having insufficient resources will affect the final deliverable. Reviews are either eliminated or their scope is reduced to minimize costs. Other methods of reducing costs include using AI and less experienced translators. When making such decisions, consider how they will affect the quality of the deliverable.

- Fewer reviews lead to more errors appearing in the final product.
- Recruiting less experienced translators leads to the need for closer supervision, and more time spent correcting errors.
- Inappropriate use of AI has a similar result to recruiting inexperienced translators.

Skillset

Translators and copywriters need to have a unique set of skills. Here are the minimal skills required for successful implementation of translation projects. The below table can help in evaluating and selecting potential team members.

Translation	Re-write	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subject Matter Expert if the text is specialized ▪ Advanced language knowledge of the source and target languages ▪ Advanced writing skills in target language ▪ In-depth knowledge of the culture of the target and source languages ▪ Translation best-practices ▪ Computing skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subject Matter Expert if the text is specialized ▪ Advanced writing skills in target language ▪ In-depth knowledge of the target culture and audience ▪ Communication skills ▪ Research skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Management skills ▪ Translation and copywriting skills ▪ Large projects require a dedicated project manager

Appendix A - Failure Modes

Here is a list of common failure scenarios with indicators and suggested corrective actions for each mode. Failure modes are not mistakes. They are signals of high risk. Detecting them early is not pessimism; it is professional risk management.

Mode 1 - Wrong approach selected	
Root cause	Approach was chosen intuitively or out of habit, not deliberately.
What goes wrong	The translation uses an approach that does not match the purpose, audience.
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The text feels either stiff or overly loose ▪ Excessive explanations or unnecessary literalness ▪ Constant second-guessing while translating
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Revisit Step 2 (Select Approach) ▪ Defend the approach in writing ▪ If you cannot justify it objectively, change it early
Mode 2 - Approach drift	
Root cause	Fatigue, unfamiliar sections, or lack of a written approach decision.
What goes wrong	The translation starts with one approach and gradually shifts to another.
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inconsistent tone across chapters ▪ Some sections sound foreign, others overly localized ▪ Repeated rework of already “finished” text
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stop translating ▪ Re-read the approach definition ▪ Re-write one representative section as a reference sample and realign the rest
Mode 3 - Late or unstable glossary	
Root cause	Glossary not seeded early or not locked at the right time.
What goes wrong	Terminology keeps changing deep into the project.
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Multiple translations for the same key term ▪ Frequent global search-and-replace late in the project ▪ Disagreements with yourself over “which version sounds better”
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lock the glossary at an agreed maturity level ▪ Require justification for any changes after that point

Mode 4 - Overreliance on AI in early stages	
Root cause	Large chunks fed to AI without tight supervision or immediate feedback.
What goes wrong	AI output shapes the translation instead of assisting it.
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over-balanced sentence structures ▪ Repetition of phrasing patterns ▪ Loss of authorial voice ▪ Subtle factual or logical drift
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reduce chunk size ▪ Switch to human-first drafting for critical sections ▪ Reassert the selected approach explicitly in prompts
Mode 5 - Delayed review	
Root cause	Attempting to separate drafting and review too cleanly in a solo workflow.
What goes wrong	Errors accumulate and become harder to fix
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “We’ll fix this later” mindset ▪ Large sections left unreviewed ▪ Fatigue during late-stage review
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overlap drafting and review ▪ Fix issues immediately before they propagate
Mode 6 - No cooling-off period	
Root cause	Continuous work without cognitive distance
What goes wrong	The translator becomes blind to obvious problems
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Text “looks fine” too quickly ▪ Resistance to making changes ▪ Difficulty spotting tone inconsistencies
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enforce a break between rewrite and copy review ▪ The longer the project, the longer the break

Mode 7 - Mechanical focus at the expense of meaning	
Root cause	Review focused on surface errors only
What goes wrong	The translation is technically correct but misses intent or nuance.
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perfect grammar with flat or awkward flow ▪ Loss of humor, irony, or emphasis ▪ Readers understand the words but not the message
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Separate mechanical review from meaning review ▪ Re-read sections without the source text to test naturalness
Mode 8 - Late discovery of systemic issues	
Root cause	Earlier steps were rushed or skipped
What goes wrong	Major issues are found during final review
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Repeated similar errors ▪ Widespread inconsistency ▪ Need for large-scale rewrites
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acknowledge that the project already failed earlier ▪ Return to the step where the issue originated ▪ Avoid patching symptoms
Mode 9 - Unrealistic resource assumptions	
Root cause	Mismatch between desired quality and available resources.
What goes wrong	Quality expectations exceed time, budget, or skill constraints.
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Constant schedule slippage ▪ Cutting reviews to “save time” ▪ Compromises justified too easily
Corrective actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explicitly renegotiate quality, scope, or resources ▪ Quality cannot be “optimized” out of thin air

Appendix B - Conceptual Influences and Further Reading

This framework draws on established translation theory, professional practice, and widely recognized industry standards. The resources listed below are provided for readers who wish to explore related models and background concepts.

Translation Theory and Professional Practice

[The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies](#)

A foundational reference covering key concepts, approaches, and debates in translation studies.

[The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies](#)

A comprehensive overview of contemporary translation theory and professional practice.

These works informed the conceptual understanding of translation approaches referenced in this framework.

Industry Overviews and Practical Resources

[POEditor Blog — Translation Quality Standards](#)

A practical overview of commonly referenced translation quality standards and models used in professional localization workflows.