

The Art of Translation

Finding the Right Words for Commerce

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Increasingly, companies are finding it necessary to translate materials into other languages, either for their international efforts, or for a changing domestic population. Because this is relatively new for U.S. companies, the value of a good translation has been underestimated. Translation is like advertising: nobody likes to spend the money, but it is clear that there is a value to it. Attitudes are changing, but one thing that is seldom discussed is the fact that translation is an art.

If you accept that translation is an art, and not a science, you will then understand the follow-ups: There will always be someone who does not like the translation that you have had done. If you think about how often you edit your English documents before producing them, you have a feel for the effort involved in producing a document in any language. It is important not to get caught in stylistic debates, but to focus on whether the translation communicates what the English does. You never want to ask a reviewer whether he likes the translation, but whether it was clear and accurate.

There is a very real link between time and quality. If you want something done overnight, do not expect it to be as polished as something that the translator had time to review, revise, and edit.

Just because you have a native speaker does not mean that you have a good translator. This would be similar to having an engineer write ad copy. They are very different skills; just because the engineer speaks English, this does not mean that he has the necessary talent to write ad copy.

HOW DO YOU GET A GOOD TRANSLATION?

First, you need to make sure that your source text (usually English) is clear and accurate. To some degree, a bad original document will result in a bad translation. If the text is unclear, a good translator will ask you questions to clarify what you are trying to communicate. Try to avoid using industry jargon and sports or cultural expressions that are understood only in the United States. Remember to identify clearly for the translator the meanings of any acronyms and trade names that you want left in English.

Second, you need to remember that the translator cannot work in a vacuum. You need to provide background material, possibly including company information, and technical information relating to the product in question. If the translator is only working on documentation for a part of a larger piece of equipment, it helps to know how this piece fits into the whole. The advent of the Internet means that translators can now do more research on your company than ever before, and have access to more detailed information. Be sure to provide the address

of your Web site for reference. Do not forget to provide any previously translated material (both English and the foreign language) so that consistency of terminology can be maintained. At this point, you might wish to consider creation of a glossary (English–foreign language), which can be reviewed in country to make sure that the technical terminology is accurate and used throughout the document.

To help ensure the quality of the translation, be prepared to have a contact person who can answer questions that the translator might have, and be wary of a translator who does not ask questions. Either he knows everything about your industry or does not know enough to know what to ask. In addition to a contact for questions, consider finding someone in the company who can review the language when the translation is complete.

This reviewer should be a native speaker with technical product knowledge. Be very clear about expectations, and stress that you are not looking for a stylistic review, but just to see if the translation communicates clearly and accurately the information contained in the English version. Provide a copy of the English as well as the foreign language. Since this step tends to be problematic, here are some hints:

- Be clear about whether you want to have your reviewer contact the translator directly with comments. Discuss whether the reviewer should

make comments on the hard copy, or directly in the electronic file.

- Be very clear about your time frame. Since your reviewer may be doing this in addition to regular job duties, be realistic but firm. Sometimes it is helpful to point out that you have a firm deadline and that you have to proceed with or without feedback. Obviously, though, it makes sense to work with the time frame to be able to validate the translation.
- Be prepared to deal with questions regarding the quality of the translation. Again, do not get drawn into a debate of style. Keep the discussion at a communication level, and the process should go smoothly.

There are many other practical tips, but these will help get you on the right path to quality translation.

THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

There are three main topics that have changed the way the translation industry works: the Internet, translation software, and translation memory.

The Internet has caused many dramatic changes in many industries. For the translation industry, it means that we can market to clients worldwide, work with translators anywhere to get the best quality (and price), and deliver projects with lightning speed. In addition, the availability of company Web sites in any language provides great reference material for terminology. On-line dictionaries mean that you should now be getting the most technically accurate translations ever.

Translation software is still in the development stages. Translation software is the software that allows you to provide an English electronic file, and have the computer generate a rough translation using pre-defined dictionaries. Once it is done, you need to do a fair amount of editing and proofreading. An estimate is that the best translation software provides



a translation that is only 85 percent accurate. Because the human brain is so intuitive, it has been hard to create a computer program to match. In the next five to 10 years, we will see dramatic improvements in the accuracy of translation software.

Finally, the use of translation memory has again changed the way the translation industry works. Before the arrival of this software, translators created glossaries and relied on memory to make sure that terminology and style were consistent throughout a single document, and across a number of documents. There was no way to account for repeat English text, other than to re-translate it whenever it appeared.

Translation memory allows you to create a database of material that has been translated, so that each English sentence has a foreign language equivalent, and avoids the need to re-translate. The benefit to the client is that if he makes an effort to be consistent in his writing, he can save money, improve quality and consistency, and reduce turnaround times.

GETTING THE BEST TRANSLATION

Pick your translation provider carefully, and decide whether you want to work with a translation company or an individual translator.

Start with clear English text, develop glossaries, provide reference material, and have someone review the language.

Investigate the possibility of using translation memory for your projects. While it is not appropriate for every client and every project, it can often provide unanticipated benefits. ■

This piece originally appeared as the April 2000 Article of the Month on the Web site of the Federation of International Trade Associations (www.fita.org). Steven P. Iverson is president of Iverson Language Associates, Inc., in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.