

Going Global? Don't Get Lost in Translation!

By Jiri Stejskal

Translation blunders have long been a source of amusement to consumer targets overseas. While these mistakes often make consumers giggle or even blush, they are anything but funny to the companies that lose credibility, respect or business as a result of an incorrect translation or cultural misstep.

The worst offenders are the companies whose slogans appear to have been translated directly from a dictionary by someone who clearly does not speak the language. Frank Perdue's famous slogan, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken" was plastered on billboards across Mexico in a translation that amounted to "It takes a hard man to make a chicken affectionate."

Even when the translation is correct, it is important to remember that certain words may have connotations in one culture that they do not have in another. In England, a Swedish vacuum cleaner company used the slogan "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux." In the United States, where "sucks" has become a trendy word for something that is bad or of poor quality, this would not go over very well.

Other companies may get the words right, but create advertisements that are not in sync with the culture they are targeting. For example, a U.S. telephone company was ignorant about cultural relevancy when airing a television advertisement in South America in which a woman asks her husband to call a friend to say they would be late for dinner. This didn't make sense to the local women, who weren't likely to ask their husbands to complete a chore, much less be concerned about arriving late for dinner.

Machine translation, in which text is translated by a software program without human involvement, has opened up the floodgates on potential translation errors. In China, a restaurateur eager to attract an international clientele decided to display the restaurant's English name on the storefront next to its Chinese name. Unfortunately, the machine translation application he chose to perform the task was not working at the moment, and his restaurant now bears the English name "Translate server error."

Using the Internet has also thwarted several Chinese restaurants' attempts to get accurate translations at a low price. Menus have featured "Stir-fried Wikipedia with pimientos" and "Barbequed congo eel with Wikipedia and fermented bean curd." Apparently, these would-be translators confused the name of the website with the name of the item they were trying to find.

Many restaurants and hotels around the world have become infamous for their feeble attempts at translation. A sign on a Paris hotel elevator read, "Please leave your values at the front desk" and a Swiss restaurant assured guests that their wines would "leave you nothing to hope for."

While these examples are not likely to produce much more than a snicker from the tourists at whom they are directed, other translation errors can result in consequences that are not funny at all. In 2007, CNN was barred from working in Iran because it incorrectly translated statements made by the president regarding the country's nuclear research. In healthcare, two out of every three mistranslations have clinical consequences, according to a 2003 study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

According to an article by Dr. Glenn Flores, M.D., published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, one hospital paid \$71 million in a malpractice suit as a result of poor translation. A Spanish-speaking 18-year-old collapsed on his girlfriend's floor after telling her he felt "intoxicado." When the girlfriend and her mother repeated the word to English-speaking paramedics, they took it to mean "intoxicated" rather than "nauseated" and treated the patient for drug overdose. Thirty-six hours later, the patient was reevaluated and it was found that he was suffering from hematomas (blood clots) around his brain. The misdiagnosis resulted in quadriplegia, a condition that could have been prevented with accurate translation.

In 2001, Indiana-based Mead Johnson Nutritionals recalled 4.6 million cans of Nutramigen Baby Formula due to misleading Spanish directions on bilingual labels. Though the problem was caught before any infants died or became ill, the cost for recalling and re-labeling the cans was exorbitant.

From the embarrassing to the deadly, translation mistakes come at a high cost. They can be avoided by using professional translators. The American Translators Association (ATA) distributes a guide online and in print aimed at helping people buy translation services. The ATA brochure, *Translation: Getting it Right* offers the following suggestions:

- Does it really need to be translated? Get rid of unnecessary information before translating.
- Use pictures instead of text whenever possible.
- Think international from the start. Avoid cultural clichés, literary references and sports metaphors that do not make sense in other countries.
- Differentiate between translation needed for information only and translation for publication. Will an accurate, unpolished translation be sufficient, or are you trying to persuade or convey an image?
- Tell the translators what it's for. Make sure they know the type of publication and the target audience.
- The more technical your subject, the more important it is to have a translator who knows it inside out.
- Typographical conventions vary from one language to the next. For example, neither months nor days of the week are capitalized in French and Spanish. Do not be tempted to "correct" translated text to follow an English convention.

Whether one is an official at the CIA, Dell Computer or even a local county government, translation and interpretation mistakes can be costly, or even disastrous. The bottom line

is, companies can't risk getting a translation wrong. It's critical to have qualified translators to get the job done right. After all, translation is not just about words; it's about what those words are about.

About the Author

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