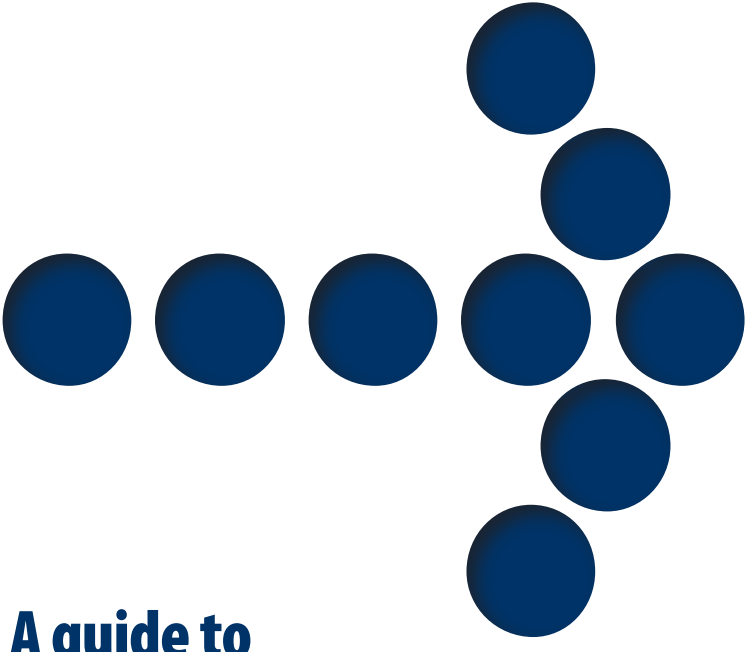
Translation
Getting it Right



A guide to buying translation

For non-linguists, buying translations can be frustrating.

The suggestions in this guide are aimed at reducing stress and helping you get the most out of your translation budget.

Q: Translation, interpreting—what's the difference? A: Translators write, interpreters speak.

If you are working with written documents—a user manual for your German customers, billboards for a sales campaign in Argentina, reports filed in Chinese by your new subsidiary in Shanghai that you must read and understand—you need a *translator*.

If you want to interact with people in a foreign language on the spot—a lab tour with Mexican visitors, a board meeting in Japan, a parent-teacher conference with a family recently arrived from Somalia—you need an *interpreter*.

Does it really need to be translated?

Rather than blindly translate documents in full—hundreds of pages—decide with your client (or sales team) which information is actually required. You can generally axe padding, including lists of all the in-house departments that have worked to make the product a success. Your foreign clients/partners don't know and don't care. Such passages can even make your company appear self-centered and arrogant.

- **A company in France trimmed a 500-page manual to 230 pages with the help of an expert translator, who flagged sections that didn't apply to foreign clients before starting the job.**
- **A firm of patent lawyers in California regularly turns to a specialist translator for a quick oral summary of Japanese patents. Together they select documents that need a full translation.**

Translate only relevant sections of existing documents, or produce shorter texts and have these translated.

A picture is worth a thousand words

Take the burden off the words

Judicious use of maps, pictograms and diagrams can be far more effective with international readers than literary ramblings and hyper-technical descriptions. Your translator's job will be easier; there will be less risk of stumbling over the precise technical term. And your translation bill will probably be lower.

- **Swedish furniture & housewares giant Ikea has 316 stores in 38 countries representing 25 different languages. It uses largely word-free diagrams to guide customers through kit assembly. 80% of instructions are pictures only; the remaining 20% require text to communicate safety information.**
- **Each year, London's Heathrow Airport moves over 65 million travelers from all parts of the world through its five terminals using internationally-recognized pictograms.**

Only use text when you have to, or when it is the most effective means of getting your message across.

Think international from the start

Avoid culture-bound clichés. References to your national sport may well fall flat. Ditto literary/cultural metaphors. Tread carefully with references to parts of the human body, viewed differently by different cultures.

For written documents, don't box yourself in by linking your pitch to visuals that may not carry the same meaning outside your native country, forcing translators to resort to awkward wordplay and cumbersome workarounds.

A British PM told Japanese industrialists that he planned "to go the full monty" in fixing the UK economy. Blank faces: cultural gap. (In 1942, Field Marshal Montgomery had flummoxed non-British BBC listeners with a cricket metaphor: "We'll hit them for six!" he told troops on the eve of the battle of El Alamein.)

Keep some local flavor if you like, but check with your foreign-text team to make sure that adaptation is possible. And be sure to include country codes for telephone and fax.

How much will it cost?

Translation prices range from 1 to 10, and while high prices do not necessarily guarantee high quality, we submit that below a certain level you are unlikely to receive a text that does credit to your company and its products. If translators are netting little more than a babysitter, they are unlikely to be tracking your market with the attention it deserves.

Be realistic. How many pages can a translator produce an hour? How much time do you expect him or her to spend crafting the text that will promote your product or service? (How much time did your team spend producing the original?)

When choosing a translation provider, calculate how much you've spent to develop the product or services you want to promote outside your country. If you cannot afford a professional translation, perhaps you are not ready for the international market yet.

The added value that a translation company offers (translator selection, project management, quality control, file conversions, standardized presentation of multilingual projects, etc.) also has a price tag, but can save you hours of work.

How important is style?

Some translations are hopeless from the start.

> **Tehao Rechargeable shaver RCCW-320: Smuggle the razor blade (reference value around 400 g) on your muscle vertically. Then drag your skin and shave back slowly.**

Often these are produced by translation software, or are the work of non-native speakers struggling away with a grammar book in one hand and a dictionary in the other. They are good for a laugh.

Other translations are technically accurate, yet the sentences do not flow as smoothly as they might; word order or choice of vocabulary may be unduly influenced by the original language. They are not particularly effective for selling, but may be good enough for readers who know the subject and can—or have time to—read between the lines.

Many suppliers routinely provide "for-information" translation as standard work, as opposed to a "rewrite" or "adaptation." To avoid misunderstanding, clarify this up front. Get it in writing.

Specialists will often refer to accurate yet unpolished work as *for-information* translation. It can generally be produced faster and more cheaply than *for-publication* work.

But if you are trying to sell or persuade, or if image is important to you, it will probably not be enough.

Resist the temptation to do it yourself

Speaking is not writing. Oral fluency does not guarantee smooth, stylish writing. Even if you regularly negotiate successfully in French, German or Spanish, and spend lots of time in the countries where those languages are spoken, 99 times out of 100 your written command of a foreign language will be immediately recognizable as "foreign."

This may or may not be important.

It may not be important if (1) your main selling point is price (price-driven clients will put up with a lot if they manage to understand the basics) or (2) you want to emphasize a certain foreignness (think Ahnuld and Zsa Zsa).

If you wish to project an international image, you will probably be better served by a less ethnic approach. In many cultures, awkward or sloppy use of the local language—especially by a native English speaker—is not amusing. It is insulting.

Finalize your text *before* starting the translation

Tempting as it may be to get your translation project rolling as quickly as possible, having translators work from a draft-in-progress will almost always be more time-consuming—hence more expensive (and probably more frustrating)—than waiting for the final text to be ready. Worse yet: the more versions you have, the more likely it is that errors will creep into the final version.

Sometimes you have no choice. Sometimes deadlines are so tight that work on the translation must begin before you've finalized the original text. If so, be sure to clearly time- and date-stamp each version and mark changes from one version to the next for your translators.

What about translation software?

If you are pressed for time and want to get the gist of something for your own use (in-bound), translation software may be helpful. It is certainly fast. And you can't get much cheaper than free.

As a general rule of thumb, do not use raw computer output for anything out-bound without the express agreement of your clients. It is simply not suitable: you run the risk of looking inarticulate. Even stupid.

Careful editing of machine output by skilled human translators is one option, although not all translators will accept such assignments. Many insist that texts generated by computer programs are so skewed it is faster to start from scratch.

Some translation providers and others have developed proprietary software for specific language pairs and subjects; their gisting will be much better than any of the $49.99 off-the-shelf packages. But it will not be free, and will still need human revision.

The Wall Street Journal gave two free online automatic translation services a test run and concluded:
"These services are passable for travelers or for those wanting to translate a letter from a distant cousin. I definitely wouldn't use them for business or anything that remotely requires accuracy."
(A Closer Look)

Tell the translator what it's for

A speech is not a web site. A sales brochure is not a catalog entry. A graph heading is not a directional sign. An article in The National Enquirer is not a prospectus for an Initial Public Offering.

Style, pronounceability, word choice, phrasing and sentence length—all will vary, depending on where your text will appear and what you want it to achieve. An experienced translator will probably ask you for this information; make sure you know yourself.

You will get best results from developing an ongoing relationship with a translator or team of translators. The longer you work with them and the better they understand your business philosophy, strategy and products, the more effective their texts will be.

Be sure to tell your translators what your text is for, so that they can prepare a foreign-language version with maximum impact for that particular audience and medium.

Teachers, academics & students: at your own risk

For many companies faced with foreign-language texts, the first stop is the language department of a local school or university. While this may—sometimes —work for inbound translation (i.e., when you want to find out what the other guys are up to), it is **extremely** risky for promotional texts.

Teaching a foreign language is a demanding activity that requires a special set of skills. These are rarely the same as those needed to produce a smooth, stylish translation. The risks are even greater if you opt for student translators, which may seem like a nice, inexpensive option.

Q: Would you approve of medical students performing minor operations to pay their way through medical school? (Would you describe your brochure/letter/annual report/speech as "minor"?) Would you have your company's financial statements prepared by business students to save money?

Professional translators work into their native language

If you want your catalog translated into German and Russian, the work will be done by a native German speaker and a native Russian speaker. Native English-speakers translate from foreign languages *into* English.

As a translation buyer, you may not be aware of this, but a translator who flouts this basic rule is likely to be ignorant of other important quality issues as well.

OK, there are exceptions. But not many. If your supplier claims to be one of them, ask to see something he or she has done. If it's factually accurate and reads well, and if the translator guarantees equal quality for your text—why not? Sometimes a linguist with special subject-matter expertise may agree to work into a foreign language. In this case, the translation must be carefully edited—and not just glanced through—by a language-sensitive native speaker before it goes to press.

Do translators living abroad lose touch with their native tongue? At the bottom end of the market, perhaps. But expert linguists keep their language skills up wherever they live.

What language do your readers speak?

Spanish for clients in Madrid or in Mexico City? British or American English? Contact your foreign partners to find out precisely what is needed.

Register is also important. German for doctors and medical personnel, or for healthcare consumers? Are you selling savings products to the general public or investment funds to financiers in Luxembourg? Remember, too, that some countries require documents to be available in two or more languages; non-compliance can result in fines and worse.

Speak your readers' language. Put yourself in their shoes, and zero in on how your products and services can serve their needs. Be concrete. Be specific. (The same applies to your source promotional materials, of course.)

An inquisitive translator is good news

No one reads your texts more carefully than your translator. Along the way, he or she is likely to identify fuzzy bits—sections where clarification is needed. This is good news for you, since it will allow you to improve your original.

- **A European video-games specialist notes that management did not really understand their own stock-options policy until an English translation was commissioned: the translator asked many questions and delivered a version far clearer than the original.**
- **"We try to wait for our texts to come back from the translators before going to press with the original French," says the chief economist of a major bank in Paris. "The reason is simple: our translators track our subjects closely. Their critical eye helps us identify weak spots in the original."**

Good translators strip down your sentences entirely before creating new ones in the target language. And they ask questions along the way.

The more technical your subject, the more important it is that your translators know it inside out

If you supply basic information to five native speakers of any language and ask them each to write up a 100-word product description, you will get five texts, some clearer and more readable than others. People familiar with the subject are likely to produce a better text. The same applies to translators.

Whenever possible, know your translators—not just the project managers, but the translators themselves, the people who actually produce your texts. And make sure they know you.

Talk to your translators. They should be at home with the subjects they translate; if not, it's time to change suppliers. Translators should not be learning the subject at your expense, unless you have expressly agreed to this.

The home stretch: have typeset copy proofread by your translator

Always. Even if you have a sound procedure in place, with reliable translation providers who know your company inside out, last-minute additions (headings, captions, word changes) by well-meaning non-linguists can sabotage an otherwise effective document.

It's easy to stumble. A well-meaning German businessman axed the "s" from "Headquarters," explaining "we have only one." French typesetters regularly add an "s" to "Information." In 2009, the "RESET" button US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave her Russian counterpart was erroneously labeled "OVERCHARGED" in his language. No proofreader in sight!

Be sure to have a language-sensitive native speaker on hand to vet final fiddling. For the same reason, do not finalize changes to foreign texts by telephone. They are often misheard.

Typography varies from language to language

Many printers and office staff are unaware of this—or don't take it seriously—and may "adjust" foreign-language texts to bring them into line with their own standards.

But French has a space between a word and the colon that follows, and writes quotation marks « ». In German, nouns take capital letters. In Spanish and French, neither months nor days of the week take an initial capital. Oh, and never type just an "n" when Spanish requires an ñ...

A bilingual banner in the US celebrated 100 anos of municipal history. Año is year; ano is anus. (Would you leave out the squiggle from the letter Q? What a ouestion!)

Even if each typesetting glitch is minor, the cumulative effect is off-putting for foreign-language readers. Respect the typographical conventions of the language you are working into.

Translators and bilinguals: look closer

Professional translators are writers, producing texts that read well in the target language. They are usually fluent in their source language(s) as well. But they are above all effective bridges between the languages they work in; they can render the message of the original text, with appropriate style and terminology, in their native language.

Bilingualism is something else. Bilinguals speak two languages fluently, but are not necessarily good at moving information between the two, especially in writing. And many people described as bilinguals overestimate their communication skills altogether.

Lina's, a pricey French sandwich chain, advertised for franchisees abroad with a text concocted by a self-proclaimed bilingual employee. Slogan: "Tomorrow, we will expect on your dynamism." Response: zero.

Bilingualism on its own is not a guarantee of written fluency or skill in translation.

"Technical terms pose few translation problems."

A widely-held myth.

True, scientific nomenclature in fields like botany, zoology, etc. is both rigorous and international—when properly used. And an illustrated parts list in, say, a tank maintenance manual, will normally be fairly straightforward to translate.

Yet even specialists writing on technology in their own language can trip up.

Tech translators, like others, must ensure that their output reads at least as well as the original, and sometimes better—hardly surprising, since it benefits from the concentration and skills of a second specialist. Incorrect use of technical terms often means a translator is in over his/her head. One solution is to ask subject-matter specialists for input and review.

Always arrange a final pass by a professional translator to double-check grammar, syntax, punctuation and style before going to press, especially if your subject-matter experts are not native speakers.

Choosing a translation provider

Glossy brochures and earnest and/or hard-hitting sales pitches are one thing, genuine skills another.

Ask potential suppliers for samples of documents they have translated—not just client names, but texts they've produced and sold. If a supplier is bidding on a foreign-language version of your web site, ask to see web sites they have already produced. Ditto brochures and speeches. Run samples past a trusted, language-sensitive native speaker (perhaps a foreign subsidiary or partner) for an opinion.

If translation providers have been in business for several years and cannot show you any work they are pleased with, you are in trouble (so are they).

Tell suppliers that their name(s) will appear alongside photo & design credits on the document they produce.

Printing translator credits in your document costs nothing and encourages suppliers to deliver top-quality work.

Note: translators may insist on signing off proofs to protect their reputations from fiddling at your end. This is in everyone's best interest. Accept immediately.

Plan ahead: **if your company has its eye on markets abroad, start looking for translation talent now. And once you begin producing texts for translation, give your translators as much lead time as possible.**

Take control of the controllable: **consider producing an in-house glossary. (This is an excellent way to make your original documents more consistent.) Work with translators and in-house staff to develop a bilingual version.**

What do you really need?

For publication, for information, raw computer output, gisting—what kind of translation (and budget) do you need?

One approach: calculate how many people will be reading your texts (nation-wide press campaign or in-house memo for a team of 12?). How would a seriously flawed translation affect your corporate image and/or legal liability?

Now take another look at your budget.

Translation is an industry of niche markets. Even the "for publication" category covers a broad spectrum of services and suppliers, commanding an equally wide range of prices. The team that did a perfect job on your software manuals is not necessarily the right one to translate your company's annual report.

For ads in glossy magazines and expensive directional signs, it makes sense to buy premium text. For in-house memos, or documents with limited circulation, a less polished (and less expensive) option may be fine.

Get involved

With translation, the fastest way to blunder is to wash your hands of the whole process. If you do not invest time to brief your suppliers, there is little chance that you will get what you want or need.

It may take only 10 minutes longer than telling your assistant to "get this translated," but if the right person spends those 10 minutes chatting to the translator (or even the project manager), you will probably save money and stress further down the line.

ata American Translators Association

225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590, Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 683-6100. www.atanet.org

Text: Chris Durban ©2011
Layout: Mark Richardson

There are hundreds of ways a translation project can go off track: **ridiculous deadlines, ambiguities in source text amplified by the translator not asking questions, misapplied MT (machine translation), no proofreading of typeset text by a native speaker, blissful unawareness of an over-confident translator operating in a vacuum, poor coordination of large projects, poor cheap freelance translator, poor expensive freelance translator, poor cheap translation company, poor expensive translation company, no client input, and on and on.**

By applying even half the tips in this guide, you will improve your chances of getting a translation that works.

ata American Translators Association

The Voice of Interpreters and Translators