

How to avoid egg on your face from affectionate chickens – a quick guide to translation and interpreting services

by Kay McBurney, Convenor of the Institute of Translation & Interpreting Scottish Network

We Brits are notoriously hopeless at languages. It's not that we can't do it, just that we can't be bothered – after all, everyone speaks English, right? With such scant exposure to languages, it's perhaps no wonder that translation is often perceived as a rather mechanistic activity where a word in a foreign language is simply substituted for an English one. Some managers seem to believe that if they sat down with a dictionary, they could translate their company's marketing literature into, say, Spanish, or that, with school French, the sales rep's wife is capable of interpreting at business meetings. This thinking is not only misguided, it's downright foolish from a sales point of view and those that subscribe to it are bound to end up with egg on their face.

Why? Because language is full of ambiguity and multiple meanings so there's rarely a one-to-one equivalence with words in other tongues. No doubt American poultry magnate Purdue gave Mexicans a chuckle when the equivalent of "It takes an aroused man to make a chicken affectionate" appeared on hundreds of billboards as the Spanish 'translation' of its slogan "It takes a strong man to make a tender chicken", but making your company a laughing-stock isn't quite what the marketing gurus had in mind by "keeping the customer happy".

Apart from a dented image and the cost of putting things right, mistakes can have potentially more serious consequences too. A complete breakdown in communications was narrowly avoided at a crucial point in negotiations in Uzbekistan when a local underling-cum-interpreter confused "making contacts" with "making contracts". On discovering the error, officials lost no time in calling in a professional interpreter.

Then there are those firms that don't bother translating their product literature at all – because johnny foreigner understands English, right? Even if that were true, in today's increasingly competitive

What's in a name?

Product names can be a minefield in foreign markets and car manufacturers in particular often come a cropper. Honda had to hastily rename its 'Fitta' model the 'Honda Jazz' for the Scandinavian market after discovering that *fitta* is a colloquial term for a woman's nether regions in 3 Nordic languages. Ford also thought the better of *Pinto* rather quickly in Brazil when it transpired that it's Brazilian slang for "small genitals". Not quite the right image for a macho South American driver!

On opening its first Canadian store, Swedish furniture giant Ikea gaffed with a banner proclaiming "Prick by the meter" ('Prick' being a polka-dot fabric – Ikea subsequently created a database of all its product names vetted by linguists).

Unsurprisingly Clairol's 'Mist Stick' curling tongs flopped on the German-speaking market, where *Mist* means manure. 'Puffs' tissues also ran into problems there as *Puff* is German slang for a brothel. Less amusingly, sports supplier Umbro recently attracted a lot of negative publicity for unwittingly naming a running shoe 'Zyklon', the name of the gas used in Nazi extermination camps.

Seemingly innocuous brand names in English can prove treacherous when pronounced as they would be in the local lingo. When Procter & Gamble introduced 'Vicks' cough drops in Germany, they overlooked the fact that Germans pronounce 'v' like the English 'f' so their brand name sounds like a well-known rude word denoting sexual intercourse. P&G were presumably also unaware that "wash" sounds like the Russian word *vosh* for louse when they launched 'Wash and Go' shampoo in Russia.

Still in Russia, phonetically the name of the alcopop 'Hooch' resembles an obscenity, while 'Blue Water' mineral water is unlikely to be popular with Ukrainians, since it sounds like their word *bluvota*, meaning 'vomit'.

Numerous foreign product names bombed in English-speaking markets too: Perrier's 'Pschitt' brand of lemonade, Portuguese 'Atum Bom' tuna, Scandinavian shaving cream 'Barberskum', 'Poo' curry powder from Argentina, and French cereal 'Crapsy Fruit', to name but a few.

international markets, who do you think is going to be more successful at marketing their products and services: company A with its literature in English, or competitor B who is selling in the customer's own language? As Gabriel Garcia Marquez' heroine in the novel "Love in the Time of Cholera" so aptly put it (while shopping in Paris without knowing any French): "You have to know languages when you go to sell something ... when you go to buy, everyone does what he must do to understand you".

So how much time and effort are you investing in communicating with your foreign customers? Are you able to respond when a prospect contacts you in a language other than English? Do you produce snappy data sheets or carefully worded brochures in your customer's language, or do you just throw together

something cheap and cheerful at the last minute before heading off to the next trade fair?

Beware of the Babelfish!

Companies with international ambitions but small budgets are often tempted to cut corners and use cheap PC translation packages or free Internet services such as Babelfish. While these may just about have their uses for getting the gist of a foreign text, they should never be used for translating sales material out of English.

What would your customers make of "Datashet Guarentor for topped customer satisfaction und The established releably solution"? Or, from a French pest control website, "Small animals nibble you the life? They give you thecockroach? XXX is with your services. But which are we?" Which are you indeed!

Computer-translated mailshots always produce such complete gobbledygook that few readers will make it past the first sentence, e.g. "This publication has dedicated the necklace of nature classical hybrid and is extensive in four tongues ... to scholastic custom, whose production, that to full rhythm will be of menstrual lilt, satisfies the Italian market, for which we retain, might fully interest you it am because the commodity is economic."

And what, pray, is this firm offering??? – "The publicity activity of X from it press this financed by the own companies that they are announced in the right, which you the possibility of consenting all the information managerial that it contains some without cost"? Zero translation costs, certainly. But at what cost to their business?

Marketing is all about communication and nothing less than a professional translator or interpreter with the requisite training and experience will allow you to get your message across as clearly and effectively in overseas markets as you do in the UK. A good translator will take both linguistic and cultural aspects into account, and turn your marketing collateral into effective communication for your target market.

How then should you set about enlisting the services of a professional translator or interpreter? The first thing to decide is whether to approach an individual or an agency. This decision will be based on factors such as whether you want translation into one language or many, and whether you require additional services such as desktop publishing or typesetting which an individual may not be able to provide. Do you need someone with translating skills or interpreting skills, or a mixture of both (a translator handles written texts, while an interpreter acts as an intermediary in oral proceedings such as business meetings)?

Working directly with an individual practitioner has the advantage that you can build up a long-term relationship so they develop a feel for your company and

become familiar with the terminology you use. Look for someone with a qualification such as a postgraduate diploma, preferably also with accreditation from a professional association such as the Institute of Translation and

Interpreting or the Institute of Linguists. It is always better to employ someone who has a good working knowledge of the subject-matter, as they will be conversant with the specialist terms used in a particular field. With very few exceptions, professional linguists only ever translate into their native language, so beware of any individual claiming to be able to translate material on any subject into half a dozen languages!

Once you've decided what you need, a good place to start looking is the website of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) at www.iti.org.uk. With some 2500+ members based in the UK and abroad, ITI is the only UK professional body dedicated entirely to the practice of translation and interpreting. It promotes high standards of professionalism through rigorous examinations, continuing professional development and a strict code of conduct. Its online directory provides details of accredited individual members and corporate members, cross-referenced by languages and subjects covered. For example, if you want to market electrical gizmos in Germany, you can search for English to German translators who specialise in electrical engineering. Also available on this website is ITI's award-winning booklet for translation buyers called *Translation - getting it right*, a must for any firm venturing into international waters for the first time.

If you prefer a local provider, the ITI Scottish Network produces a directory listing the languages and specialisms of accredited members based in Scotland. This directory also contains handy guidelines for commissioning the services of a translator or interpreter and can be downloaded from www.itiscotland.org.uk.

As we look forward to the expansion of the single European market to encompass over forty languages, it has never made better business sense to have a professional translator or interpreter working with you to oil the wheels of international commerce.

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Titter ye not

Translations provided by non-native speakers are often titter-inducing. For who has never laughed at (and been irritated by) the ropey English that tends to accompany products from the Far East in particular? Some, such as these instructions for a shaver, are positively poetic: "smuggle the razor blade (reference value around 400 g) on your muscle vertically, then drag your skin and shave back slowly". Badly worded instructions can also be open to misinterpretation, for example the Greek deodorant stick which invites users to "Push up bottom", or at worst downright dangerous. A safety(!) notice on a Russian cruise liner read "Helpsaving apparata in emergings behold many whitles! Associate the stringing apparata about the bonsomes and meet behind. Flee then to the indifferent lifesaving shippen obediencing the instructs of the vessel chef". Try figuring that one out when the ship is sinking!

The travel and tourism industry are highly visible offenders, with no shortage of menu gems such as "limpid red beet soup with cheesy dumplings in the form of a finger; roasted duck let loose; beef rashers beaten up in the country people's fashion", or hotel signs such as the one requesting guests "not to perambulate the corridors in the hours of repose in the boots of ascension". And who could resist sandwiches "put together by unique way handicrafts rigorously selected"?

On the business front, a mailshot with the likes of "This object has been created of the way the more serious possible, according several hundred of testimonies" will be entirely self-defeating. The writer closes with "Hoping for your comprehension. Staying to your disposition. My respectfull salutations". Hope on ... Very amusing, yes. But good for business? Hardly. So make sure your foreign language texts aren't equally as bizarre!