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MULTILINGUAL SUITABILITY: Q&A WITH ELISABETE MIRANDA

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Estee Lauder was set to export its **Country Mist** makeup when country managers there pointed out that “mist” is slang for “manure.” Oops. The product was re-branded **Country Moist** in Germany.

A sports utility vehicle from Mitsubishi was called the **Montero** in the U.S. and Latin America, and marketed as the **Shogun** in Europe. But named the **Pajero** in Asian countries, this SUV certainly amused Spanish-speaking travelers. “You should look it up in a Spanish dictionary,” said one. We did: *Pajero [vulg] A masturbator or wanker.*

How does a smart marketer avoid such embarrassing pratfalls with its good name? We sat down with Elisabete Miranda, president of Translation Plus, a language solution provider that works in more than 150 languages (www.TranslationPlus.com). Their clients include government agencies, marketing and ad agencies, and 500 Fortune companies in life science and manufacturing.



Elisabete's career began with nine years with a prominent Brazilian bank. She spent the next six years as regional manager for a chain of restaurants. She joined Translation Plus in 1994 and became its president in 2000. Currently, she serves as a director on the board of the Association of Language Companies. Elisabete attended business school in Brazil and holds a bachelor's degree in business administration with a double major in international business and management.

Q: Elisabete, can a marketer learn anything valuable about a new name by looking up the word in foreign language dictionaries?

What you find in a dictionary is the “official” meaning of a specific word. But language is a living entity and more often than you think, words change meaning over time. This is especially true when it comes to slang and informal language. We can find many examples in English, such as the word “Spam” for a “canned meat,” but the word now also means “unsolicited e-mail.” Or the word “buck” which is the adult male of some animals, like deer or antelope, and now it's the slang for “dollar.”

Q: Should every new name – whether it's a real English word or a coined word – be checked for appropriateness in Spanish?

Absolutely. Accordingly to the Census, the estimated Hispanic population of the United States in 2006 was 44.3 million, constituting 15% of the nation's total population and making Hispanics the nation's largest ethnic group. That means one in eight U.S. residents is speaking Spanish at home. When it comes to marketing to any target audience, what is important to remember is that the first imagery that a person will have when hearing any new name is in their “native” language.

When we look at the buying power implications, these numbers become truly impressive. According to the 2008 Multicultural Economy report published by the Selig Center for Economic Growth, in 2007 the \$951 billion Hispanic market was larger than the entire economies of all but 13 countries in the world. No marketer should want to see this audience isolated or offended.

Q: What does a linguist look for when he or she studies a potential new name? What process do they go through?

It all starts with a good description of the product or service, and the target audience. Ideally the linguists will also have access to the rationale for the name. Then we select a native linguist with marketing background and knowledge of the product/service to be analyzed. The linguist will then scrutinize the name for existing meaning, negative connotation, general suitability, etc. These linguists will also perform an extensive Internet research in the target language to support their assessment.

Q: Should a language check go beyond existing or potential meanings? What about pronunciation?

Pronunciation is extremely important. It can lead a product to a disaster. In one of our projects, the name **Ampyra** was being analyzed for a new medicine. In French, we found that this word echoes the sound of the word "empira," meaning "getting worse." This connotation would never work for a medicine.

Another example: the candy name **Payday** doesn't work in Portuguese – the way it is pronounced means "I farted," which is by no means appealing. Another one is the proposed name for a power tool with -gage in it (**DynaGage, PowerGage**), which would probably be pronounced like the Spanish word "gajes," which connotes an occupational hazard.

Q: Are certain languages particularly tricky in terms of new names? Why so?

Since the world is so globalized today, there is a lot of English influence in other cultures outside the U.S. In many countries, English names are very well received.

Still, some countries are very protective of their language, and have a lower tolerance or acceptance of English names than others. French-speaking Canadians, for example, have more resistance to the use of English.

Even Spanish for U.S. usage can be a challenge. There are over 20 countries where Spanish is the official language and they are all represented in the U.S. One word can have different meanings depending on where it is spoken. Some examples would be "bicho" which means "insect or bug" in many countries and "male genital" in Puerto Rico. Another one is the word "coger" which in Ecuador means "to catch" as in "to catch a bus." However, in other countries it is used as a vulgar term "to have sex."