



Multilingual

COMPUTING & TECHNOLOGY

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How far have we evolved in translating cultures? At the same time that the personal computer and the internet have allowed great advances in translation, these powerful tools also have caused the world to shrink, bringing diverse cultures face to face with each other in a way we never could have imagined. One important outcome of connectivity is that Americans who once thought translation meant “typing a document into another language” now are coming to realize that documents written for an American audience require not just a translation of language, but also of culture.

Around the same time that the internet brought us just keystrokes away from any location in the world, US corporations began to recognize that their customers, as well as their employees, were becoming more and more diverse. In the late 20th century, America developed a growing consciousness that people within the United States are different, and that those differences deserve respect.

It quickly became apparent that understanding and then meeting the needs of these diverse groups was not only the right thing to do but also wise in terms of the financial bottom line. Different perspectives could bring new ideas and solutions and keep a corporation ahead of the curve in a highly competitive and shrinking world. Managers suddenly needed to know how to manage diverse groups effectively and find ways to inspire their previously underappreciated employees to excel. Corporations finally understood the need to train their employees to move away from intolerance toward appreciation of differences. And although the learning curve has been very bumpy, valuing diversity has become a *bona fide* American business imperative.

This internal awareness was joined by two parallel realizations: that the United States is a unique country, different from any other country in many ways; and at the same time, every other

TRANSLATING CULTURE

A good translation includes “cultural due diligence”

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country is different and unique as well. Multinational US corporations began offering culture-specific and country-specific training to those who would represent them around the world. These individuals got crash courses on business practices, etiquette, ethics and negotiation techniques that better equipped them to navigate the foreign business arena.

INDICTING THE TRANSLATOR

Even with all these realizations of difference under our belt, we have yet to find a way to fully function within a common cultural framework. And although cultural diversity is a natural component of translation, translating culture is still more a goal than a reality.

Swedish translator Ian Hinchliffe recently chastised the translation community in “Translating Feelings: Why Good Ads Make Bad Translations” (*The ATA Chronicle*, January 2005), declaring that “. . . not only have we failed to explain to our clients what translation really involves: worse still, we have also allowed them to believe that translation is something much simpler than it really is.” He goes on, “We have allowed our clients to think that translation revolves around the replacement of words and phrases in one language

with words and phrases in another language, when in fact, it is about deconstructing messages, analyzing their content, and recreating it in a form that triggers equivalent ideas and arouses analogous emotions in cultures with a different mindset.”

Hinchliffe’s indictment rings true when we consider that perhaps the biggest challenge for a translator in the United States is that most Americans still write with little regard for the rest of the world. Notwithstanding the internet, the physical distance between countries still limits understanding of foreign cultures and ways of life. Unless one has lived abroad, it is very natural when writing to express a cultural myopia. And why not? The original audience of a piece of writing is usually the local or, at most, a national audience, and our compatriots understand the colloquial references.

Yet when uniquely American texts need to be translated, it can be quite challenging. Sometimes, with legal documents for instance, the translation should stay as close to the original as possible, varying only when necessary to ensure the recipient’s understanding. One important tool for this type of translation is the use of *sic*, the word that signifies that a mistake that was introduced in the original language is being translated literally. In some

instances, the identification of such an error can make the difference in winning or losing a case.

Technical translations such as equipment manuals, patents and so on usually require a minimal degree of cultural awareness. Yet it is when you least expect it that the ubiquitous American football reference rears its ugly head in an innocuous financial document. How many times has a translator attempted to translate *the whole nine yards* or *touchdown* into a language that has only a vague idea of the sport? If the key is communicating information effectively between cultures, you drop the reference and convey the intent.

But marketing, health care, human resources and other similar materials require extreme awareness of and attention to the differences between cultures, even when translating documents into a language that is spoken in multiple countries, such as Spanish (spoken in 21 countries) or Portuguese (11 countries). It is crucial to know the colloquial references of each culture because an ordinary word in one culture can take on unintended and even sexual connotations in another. For instance, in most South American countries, *coger* means *to grab something*. But in Argentina, *coger* means *to have sex*. While *papaya* in most places refers to a fruit, in Puerto Rico it refers to female genitalia. In Portugal, *bicha* means *line*, while in Brazil it refers to a male homosexual.

A TRANSLATION BY ANY OTHER NAME

As the recognition of cultural differences began to dawn on corporate America, a whole new terminology for discussing it developed. By the end of the 1980s, the marketing term *localization* had become familiar to the translation world. Today, the term has all but replaced the word *translation*. My quick Google search netted 4,820,000 hits. Not too shabby when compared to 25,100,000 hits for *translation*. What is *localization*? Alis Technologies has distilled it this way: "Localization means adapting all aspects of a product to the specific needs and cultural preferences of a target market, including content and design as well as language." An example of localization is translating 3:00 PM as 15:00 (military time), since most countries do not have the concept of AM and PM.

Additional terms such as *transadaptation* and *transcreation* have been coined as a way to reinforce the reality that if you want someone who speaks another language to read and understand your message, you not only have to change the document's language but also translate the world view inherent in the document into the world view of the receiving audience.

Most multinational corporations have at least one story of what can happen when one translates literally without considering the cultural context, but we'll save them the embarrassment of repeating any of those well-known examples here. No matter what you call the process, the bottom line is that translation must transform not only the words but also the cultural meaning so deeply that the receiving audience feels the same impact in their language as does the American audience when they hear the original English message.

FLUENCY UNDER PRESSURE

While it has not always been the case, bilingual fluency is a distinct advantage today in the United States. Science has recently confirmed what many adult Americans have learned the hard way: it's much easier to learn a second language as a child. Being bilingual produces changes in the anatomy of the brain, adding gray matter in the language region of the brain. The earlier it's learned, the larger the gray area, and the larger the gray area, the greater the proficiency. Learning a language as a child also provides greater opportunity to learn and fully digest the culture that the language supports.

Yet even for someone completely fluent in a language and fully aware of its accompanying cultural nuances, the task of having to translate 100 or more pages within a very tight deadline can easily impair the translator's capacity to incorporate all the cultural aspects of that language. Usually, the translator's primary focus is on understanding the linguistic aspects of the original text — the grammar and syntax — to ensure technical accuracy. So, even diligent language service providers must take additional steps to guarantee that the end product, even though accurately and well translated, also reflects the culture of the receiving audience.

BRINGING CULTURAL TRANSLATION FULL CYCLE

A client for whom my company is translating a brochure in several languages is fully

appreciative of the cultural diversity of each receiving market. And so we are guiding the client representatives through a full translation cycle to ensure that the end product will clearly communicate their message in each and every culture.

First, a focus group representative of each culture they are targeting was created to allow them to learn more about each unique world view and how they can best communicate the topic of the brochure. After studying the results of the focus group, they created in English a different brochure (different colors, graphics and text) for each different audience. Only then did we translate the brochures into the appropriate languages. The last step of the translation cycle is to ask the focus groups to review the brochures to ensure that they hit the mark.

Although this approach is revolutionary in the corporate world, you would think that it sounds perfectly natural to a skilled translator. This kind of cultural due diligence is, however, still rare in the world of translation.

For clients unable to go through the time and expense of focus groups, translation services can develop their own internal focus group mentality that consists of three main steps. First, distill the originating message into the emotions it sends and the actions it hopes to create. Then identify the feelings and actions that are most similar but also culturally appropriate in the receiving culture. Last, identify the linguistic forms that can create the desired feelings and motivate the desired actions in the receiving language.

Often in this process, the translation will actually serve to introduce some of the originating culture's sensibilities to the receiving culture. But it doesn't stop there. True translation of culture actually negotiates the area between cultures, introducing each to the other and sometimes creating places for them to merge together into new ways of understanding the world. 🌐

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"Connecting People and Business in Any Language"



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