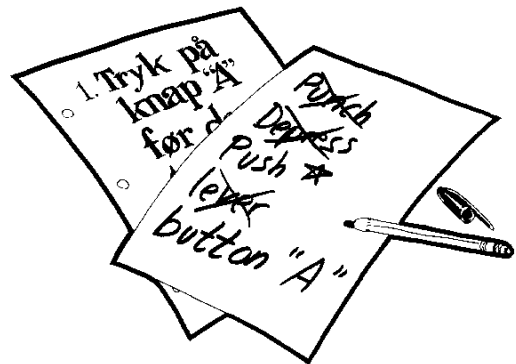


# Translation Considerations



## Definitions

---

*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."*

*"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean different things."*

*"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."*

*—Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass*

---

## Written Language

Translation, in the area of written language, refers to the production of a document in a target language that was originally written in a different source language. For example, a document is written in English and subsequently translated into German for use in Germany.

It is difficult to define what constitutes a well-translated message. Many issues come into play, such as whether the translated document retains the

words, or idea, or style of communication of the original message, or whether the target language is the focus. In the field of business communication, we take a target language-oriented approach to translation. That is to say, we are focused on producing a document that is easily understandable, flows smoothly, and is not an obvious “translation” from English. The idioms and style of the target language are used, rather than attempting to literally translate English idioms that may not make any sense in the target language.

## Oral Language

In the area of oral language, there are two different types of translation (also known as interpretation): *consecutive translation* and *simultaneous translation*. In consecutive translation, a speaker finishes an entire utterance and then the translator re-states the entire utterance in another language. In simultaneous translation, both the speaker and the translator are talking at the same time. The translation is occurring in real time, as the speaker talks. The latter is much more difficult to do, and can usually only be done for relatively short periods of time.

Americans conducting business with other countries are often able to communicate in English, since it is so widely spoken. However, oral language translation may be necessary.

## Translation Issues in Written Communication

When a document is being translated into another language, there are many issues that need to be considered. We have all seen examples of documents that have been poorly translated — and while we often may find them amusing, they can just as easily end up being confusing or offensive. Other issues, such as the cost of translating and the length of the document in a different language, need to be taken into account, also.

### Costs

**Actual Translation Costs:** The cost of translating a document from English to another language is approximately \$20 to \$25 per 100 words. This is referring to the cost for the actual physical translation of a document — hiring a translator and having him or her come in and transfer the document from one language to another. For a manual of 100 pages with 500 words per page, this portion of the cost can add up to almost \$13,000.

**Publishing Costs:** Another important cost to consider is the added publishing cost when the length of a document increases as it is translated. For example, an English to German translation results in a document that is about twice as long. This will obviously result in a much more expensive document to publish. Translation from English to another language usually results in a longer document. These added publishing costs are important to predict in advance.

---

### **Some translation rules of thumb:**

- English to Spanish or Italian expands 15-20%.
  - English to German expands 30-50%.
  - English to Indonesian expands 150-200%.
- 

### **Quality of Translation**

According to David A. Victor (1992), there are several important steps that must be completed in order to assure the quality of a translated written document:

1. Adjustment of untranslated documents
2. Careful selection of translators and interpreters
3. Personal review of translated documents
4. Back translation.

Failing to complete any of these steps can result in a poorly translated document, and potentially frustrated customers.

**1. Adjustment of untranslated documents:** The first step in the translation process is to carefully examine the original document. In “International Communications Checklist,” the issues to consider when preparing a document for translation are explained in detail. Ideally, these concepts should be kept in mind as the document is written. However, an existing document that was not originally meant for translation may need to be reviewed and edited with respect to these issues.

---

**Example: Letter** (From DeVries 1994):

**Poorly Written Version:**

Mr. Ognyan Pushkarov  
Bulgarska Academy  
430 Stamboliski Boulevard  
Lofia, Bulgaria

Dear Mr. Pushkarov:

Is my face ever red! I don't know how on earth that box of standard cassettes accidently found its way into your order for videocassettes. Please forgive us for the confusion and inconvenience.

I've instructed our Shipping Department to air express a box of videocassettes to you today. The express company will also pick up the box of standard cassettes and get them out of your hair.

I think that will take care of it, but if there's any further problem, don't hesitate to let me know. We appreciate your business and will do our utmost to satisfy your needs.

Thanks for your patience.

Regards,

John Simmons  
Manager

**A Better Version:**

Mr. Ognyan Pushkarov  
Bulgarska Academy  
430 Stamboliski Boulevard  
Sofia, Bulgaria

Dear Mr. Pushkarov:

We sincerely regret the confusion about your order of March 16, 1994.

You had asked for twelve cartons of our English-language videocassettes. Our Shipping Department accidentally included one box of standard cassettes.

The Shipping Department is sending you another carton of videocassettes by Western Air Express today. We have also asked the express company to return the standard cassettes to us.

We are sorry for the inconvenience this error has caused. Thank you for your cooperation and understanding. We appreciate your business.

Sincerely,

John Simmons  
Manager

The original version of this document is full of colloquial and idiomatic expressions. There are many opportunities for confusion or misinterpretation of the intended message. It is easy to see how such a document would be very difficult to translate — beginning with “Is my face ever red!”, which would most likely make no sense at all in another language. The adjusted version is much more clear, precise and to the point. There are no idiomatic expressions or use of slang. These are the types of adjustments that can make the difference between a document that is easy to translate and one that is a disaster.

**2. Careful Selection of Translators and Interpreters:** Possibly the most critical step in translating a document is selecting a qualified individual to perform the physical translation. Victor describes three governing characteristics to look for:

- a. *Reputability.* Choose only reputable individuals, and carefully examine their credentials. Ask for references and examples of their work. Avoid using people with limited training, for example, a staff member’s “friend” who speaks some Spanish.
- b. *Dialect familiarity.* There can be wide dialectical variations in certain languages depending on region. Make sure the person you hire is familiar with these differences and is specifically familiar with the region you are marketing to.
- c. *Business terminology expertise.* Many language experts have little or no familiarity with business or technical terms. Make sure that the person you

choose either has some previous knowledge or is briefed on terminology they are likely to encounter.

**3. Personal Review of Translated Documents:** Even if you have no knowledge of the language your document has been translated into, it is still important to review the translated work. Victor describes several items to look for:

- a. *Personal Names.* Errors in the spelling of names may be easier for you to spot than for your translator.
- b. *Company Names.* Again, your greater familiarity with company names, brands, and trademarks may make you a better proofreader.
- c. *Overall Appearance.* Different languages may change the overall appearance of a document — for example, in Hebrew and Arabic text flows from right to left and uses symbols different from standard English letters. Examine the document to see if design changes are necessary to maintain the neat and professional appearance of the document.
- d. *Absent diacritical marks.* If the language your document is being translated into contains diacritical marks — such as accent marks and *umlauts* — make sure they appear to have been inserted properly using appropriate symbols or fonts.
- e. *Obvious errors.* Look for errors in items such as dates, abbreviations for degrees, or any mathematical or scientific notation. Also check for possible calculation errors in conversion to the metric system.

**4. Back Translation:** Back translation is a two-step process. First, the original document is translated into the new language. Then, the new document is translated back into the original language. The original document can then be compared with the back-translated document to discover discrepancies or errors. Obviously, this is a time-consuming and potentially expensive process. However, when time and resources allow, and especially in the case of very sensitive communication, it can be an indispensable tool.

---

When marketing Coca-Cola in Japan, the marketing expression “Coke adds life” was translated into something like “Coke brings your ancestors back from the dead.”

---

## Dialectical Differences

Although it is obvious that documents need to be translated when dealing with customers who speak different languages, it may not be quite as obvious when we are dealing with dialect variations within the same language. How-

ever, dialectical differences in the use of language can sometimes result in confusion or miscommunication of your intended message if they are not taken into account.

**Dialects In Different Countries.** There are many differences in usage of terms between speakers of American versus British versus Australian English, or Mexican versus Columbian Spanish. If a document is to be used in a country where such differences occur, the document should be altered to reflect these differences.

For example, a “trunk call” in Great Britain is the same as a “long distance call” in America. These two terms may be completely unrecognizable to speakers in the other country. Such terms need to be edited, or “translated” to be understandable.

There are many examples of near marketing nightmares resulting from dialectical differences. One is the Electrolux vacuum cleaner slogan: “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux.” This was used without comment in Great Britain — however, it is obvious what a problem it would have caused had they not altered it for use in the United States!

**Dialects Within a Country.** There can be critical dialectical differences in a language within the same country. For example: cockney versus upper class British, or Southern versus Eastern American English. These differences can cause problems if not accounted for, especially if there are connotations of “class” associated with a particular dialect, as is the case with the different versions of British English. Pronunciation differences are most obvious in oral or spoken language, but structural or grammatical differences can show up in written language as well.

It is obvious to native speakers of standard American English, for example, that the word “ain’t” is not appropriate to use in written business communication — although in certain areas of the South it is used quite commonly and without any negative connotation. There may be similar dialectical restrictions in other languages that, if used inadvertently, could cause a breakdown in communication or change the meaning of a message.

For example, the Parker Pen Company, in some of its marketing material that was translated into Spanish, were going to use the Spanish word “bola,” meaning “ball” or “ball point pen.” In certain Spanish dialects, however, the meaning of “bola” changes to “coup” or “revolution”— or even worse, “a man’s testicles.” Use of this word in these regions obviously would have resulted in quite a different message!

## Translation Issues in Oral Communication

### Costs

The cost of hiring an interpreter varies depending on the type of translation being done. Consecutive translation costs approximately \$500 to \$550 per day in the United States, while simultaneous translation costs approximately \$550 to \$800 per day.

### Quality of Translation

Most of the issues mentioned earlier affecting the quality of written translation also apply to the area of oral translation. In addition, there are certain other issues that are specific to the use of oral interpretation. Some of these issues according to Victor are:

1. Adjustment of Untranslated Communication
2. Selection and Use of Interpreters
3. Attention to Names and Key Terms

**1. Adjustment of Untranslated Communication.** Again, as above, certain adjustments should be made when speech is being translated.

- a. *Avoid idiomatic speech, slang, and colloquialisms.* The issues already discussed with respect to written communication are also applicable to oral communication.
- b. *Speak slowly.* It is difficult for even fluent speakers to think in two languages at once. Talking slowly will improve the chances at an accurate translation of the message.
- c. *Keep vocabulary simple.* It is better to provide simple vocabulary for the interpreter to work with than to speak in complicated, perhaps less easily translated terms. This should not be confused with using simple concepts.

**2. Careful Selection of interpreters.** As discussed above, oral interpreters should be screened using the same criteria applied to written translators. This includes checking credentials, familiarity with dialects, and business terminology expertise. Another important consideration when selecting an oral interpreter is to make certain that they speak with an accent that is acceptable in the culture you are working with. Some regional accents have connotations of lower class level in certain cultures, and using an interpreter with an accent like this could be disastrous.

**3. Attention to Names and Key Terms.** When communicating in business, using a person's name properly is very important — people can be very emotional about their own names and misuse can in some cases be insulting. This applies, first of all, to the correct pronunciation of names. Also, in some cultures family names are pronounced first, instead of last as in American English. This can cause confusion. The proper pronunciation and use of company names and key product names or business terms are also critical to effective communication.

In addition, there are countries where there are very few family names — such as in Korea, where over 50% of the population is named Kim, Lee, Park, or Choi. In these cases it is important to remember not only the person's name, but their title and department as well.

## References

DeVries, Mary A. 1994. *Internationally Yours*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Victor, David A. 1992. *International Business Communication*. New York: HarperCollins.

