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Professional Translators--  
Vital to Success in International Business

Patricia L. Reed, Brigham Young University

INTRODUCTION

A Spanish business letter was translated into English as follows:  
Madrid, 10 de Junio de 1985

The company of "Free Theatre of Madrid" (Compania de -Teatro Libre de Madrid), founded in 1970 and whose way has always been centered on a task of spread of the Spanish theatre with particular attention towards our contemporary authors, joins, on this occasion, the Workshop of Theatre of the Ministry of Education and Science (M.E.C.) in order to perform a tour through several cultural Institutions of the United States in which we hope you are interested.

For this occasion we have considered of interest the possibility of present to you two stages: "YERMA" and "DEL LABERINTO AL TREINTA"....

...We just need from you a rapid answer, according to the number of requests to which we shall be able to attend, is, logically, restricted.

Yours sincerely,

(Example of poor translation. Prof. McMaster, in-class lecture)

This letter was sent in an attempt to advertise a road tour a Spanish stage company was planning. However, the translation was done so poorly as to be completely unintelligible. Luckily, the company sent a copy of the original along with the translation; otherwise, the company's purpose or message would have failed. One shudders to think of the damage a company's image suffers with this type of translation, obviously done by a non-professional.

Malcolm Forbes, quoting from the book, Commercial Translations: A Business-Like Approach to Obtaining Accurate Translations, writes that "'internationally traded goods represent 18% of the U.S. gross national product', but American (and foreign) businessmen are inexcusably negligent in handling their communications. When a misinterpreted word or phrase can mean millions of dollars, translations are often handled by secretaries with dictionaries or supply clerks who may remember how people talked in the old country but probably have no idea of law, finance, or global politics" (Forbes p.18). Despite the many misconceptions that exist concerning translation in international business, professional translators are needed as a vital link between the corporate message and its acceptance by the foreign audience.

## DEFINITION

Peter Newmark defines translation as "a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language." (1982 p.7) Many people think that if you know a foreign language and you know English then it is a simple thing to sit down and translate. But translation does not consist of substituting one word in English for that same word in another language. Many times the two words do not carry the same connotation (mental image). Different languages have different ways of expressing the same idea. For example, in English we say, "He's running around like a chicken with its head cut off." However, in Spanish they say, "He's walking with [his] feet in the air." To English speakers this creates an absurd mental picture and yet this type of confusion is what occurs when you translate words instead of meaning.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR GOOD TRANSLATION

According to Claudia Hardy, Head of the Department of Translation and Literature for Amway Corp., two essential requirements for quality translation are good writing skills and a sound understanding of the foreign culture.

A professional translator can aid tremendously in a company's foreign business dealings because he's been trained for that specific task. The trained translator has extended knowledge of the linguistics, culture, and grammar of both the source language and the target language. He also possesses good writing skills in the two languages. These skills enable him to transfer messages more easily from one language to another without the barrier of language structure.

Like any professional, becoming a translator takes time and effort in a planned program. At Brigham Young University the Spanish Translation program requires the following courses: Spanish grammar and advanced writing skills, Spanish linguistics, Hispanic American culture and literature, Iberian culture and literature, as well as two years of translation courses. These translation courses combine translation theory with practical training.

Another requirement for translation is a specific field of concentration, such as International Law or Travel and Tourism. Just as one person cannot be expected to know all things about all fields, neither can a translator know all subjects in two languages (the terminology used, etc.). A translator, then, is a specialist within his field of translation.

Ironically, these two requirements- good writing skills and a sound knowledge of the foreign culture -are probably least understood by American businessmen.

## REASONS UNDERLYING POOR TRANSLATION

### WORD-FOR-WORD TRANSLATION

The biggest and most common mistake made by businessmen is the assumption that translation is word-by-word conveyance (Michele Coclet, personal interview, 1986) instead of a transfer of message. The following excerpt from a travel brochure on Arequipa, Peru illustrates this idea:

"Coming from Puno by way which edge the  
Misty slops you can see Arequipa.

The emeralds of his large fields makes more  
result his white constructions. Arequipa  
was founded by Spain ers on August 15, 1540,  
by his beautiful Colonial monuments, the  
Saint Cataline convent which is a true town  
nailed on other and relic that arequipa people  
shows proud..."

This 'translation' was done by substituting each word in Spanish for its corresponding word in English in the same order as it appeared in Spanish. Although it appears that the 'translator' might have been acquainted with the English language, it is obvious that he lacked considerable knowledge of English structure and grammar. The above example seems as if it could have been done by one of Forbe's "secretaries with dictionaries".

#### INADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE

Arequipa shows that some vocabulary knowledge does not constitute fluency in a foreign language. Marian McMaster, Head of the Spanish Translation Program at Brigham Young University, asserts that Americans are very ignorant about foreign language acquisition. (personal interview, 1986) Part of this ignorance stems from the fact that Americans have had no real motivation to learn another language. Until recent years, learning a foreign language was not thought to be important since English dominated the business and political world. In Europe, however, just the opposite was true.

For Europeans, foreign language acquisition and use are a necessary part of daily life. Translation has been recognized as an important profession for many years and translation schools have existed since the 10th century A.D. With the dominance of the English language then, it was very advantageous for Europeans to learn English, but not vice versa.

Contrary to the European view of translation, Americans do not recognize the "knowledge, training, and talent for getting material correctly and effectively from one language to another". They often consider these skills as "accidental gifts", like beauty. (Rose 1981 p.160) Consequently, translation is not thought of as a profession. Many Americans believe that anyone with a little background in another language is qualified to work in that language.

#### BILINGUALISM

It is interesting to note that businesses are very meticulous in preparing their marketing campaigns, especially when the right slogan can mean a multi-million dollar profit. But when it comes to translating their campaign into a foreign language, many times they allow anyone who speaks the target language to translate. As McMaster points out (1986), one would never think of going to a doctor who had "read a couple of books" and had "sat in on a couple of classes" for medical advice. Yet, we do the same thing in translation by relying on someone with a little background in a language but no formal training to translate.

### CHANGING ATTITUDES IN BUSINESS

In recent years, there has been a changing trend in American corporations in their attitudes toward translation. Foreign countries are now requiring that negotiations be done in their own language instead of in English. All negotiations and contracts currently underway for Euro Disneyland (Disneyland's newest park opening in 1991-92 in France) are done in French. Any letters or press releases received by Disneyland in California must be translated into English. (Nadine Felite 1986, personal interview)

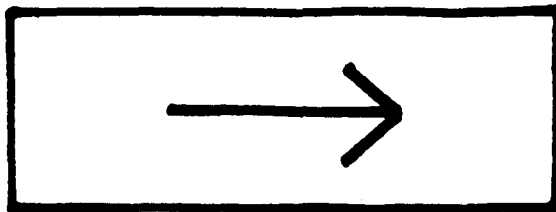
Translation's value is increasing as awareness of the need for good translation grows. American businessmen have thought that they could use just anyone to translate. Now, they are beginning to realize that there is competition in the international marketplace. Other countries won't accept poor translations. Consequently, in order for them to attract business in another country, they need good translators who have a sound knowledge and understanding of the culture of the foreign country and who can translate the corporate message acceptably into the foreign language.

### IN BUSINESS--COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

For most companies engaged in foreign trade, translation is used on a daily basis and effects almost every division of the company at one time or another. Translation's role is most important in the marketing department. Here, the company wants to communicate a message in such a way that it will be received favorably by its audience. Their product will then sell. In order to do this on the foreign market, the corporation's message must be communicated to the mind set of its audience. In other words, they have to get their message into the foreign audience's culture. Therefore, in foreign business relations, an understanding of the culture involved is imperative for success in negotiations and thus, essential to translation.

### THOUGHT PATTERNS

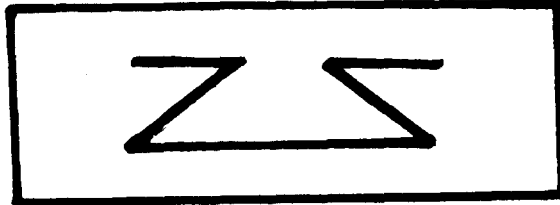
According to Lynn Tyler, culture reflects people. He writes: "Before you can truly understand other people, you must know how they think and feel and WHY!" (1979 p.7, adapted from David O. McKay) Each country has its own set of beliefs and social characteristics which make up its culture; these are the kinds of things that make them who they are and what they represent and are often reflected in their thought patterns.



Americans are straightforward in their thinking. They want to get straight to the point. Their lives are busy and they don't have time to waste.



The Chinese, on the other hand, never get to the point. Why get to the point? To them, it is offensive.



Spanish speakers don't get to the point right away. They like to 'shoot the breeze' before getting down to business. Then, when the point's been made, they like to 'shoot a little more breeze'.

#### COMMUNICATING IN THE CULTURE

When businesses translate their message into a foreign culture, they need to create these same patterns if they want their message to be received favorably and without offense. Halvor Clegg, Associate Professor of Spanish and Linguistics for Brigham Young University, accompanied a friend to Mexico on a business trip. The purpose of the trip was to get post-production contracts, as well as television commercial contracts, for Osmond Studios in Orem, Utah.

When they arrived in Mexico, Professor Clegg, who spoke fluent Spanish and was well-acquainted with their culture, told his friend to 'do things his way'. They made appointments with major advertising agencies in Mexico City who normally do their post-productions in Los Angeles. During the course of the meetings, they socialized for an hour or so. Then, in the last five minutes, they got down to business. They had dinner at other times and again, in the last five minutes, they suddenly got down to business.

The results? One company came to Utah and filmed an entire commercial at Osmond Studios. Two or three others did post-production work at the studio in Orem instead of in L.A. Why? Because they did it the Mexican way. (personal interview, 1986)

The more culturally focused a translation becomes, the better the communication. If we try to translate our thought patterns into another culture we run the risk of offending our foreign clients. For example, Americans like to repeat themselves to make sure their point is getting through. However, in Europe, to repeat yourself implies that your audience is stupid and would thus offend them.

#### REPERCUSSIONS

If American companies do not take translation seriously, they "may see their positions in the international marketplace erode and their overall financial status threatened". (Harris and Sonabend 1985, p.39) A poor translation can result in an unsophisticated image for the company as well as

a loss of sales. Pepsi Cola's slogan, "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" translated onto Taiwanese billboards as "Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead". (Harris and Sonabend 1985, p.27) Not only did Pepsi's credibility suffer, their sales suffered as well. Rolls Royce failed in a campaign to promote their Silver Mist in Germany because the word mist looks like the word for 'manure' in German. (Ray Clifford 1986, lecture at Brigham Young University) The Wall Street Journal (May 10, 1979) ran an article which read: "The Marlboro man. Jut-jawed and grizzled, he tirelessly rides the plain, or pauses contemplatively atop his steed to survey the terrain. It sells a lot of cigarettes. In the U.S., that is. In Hong Kong it bombed. It turned out that the Hong Kong Chinese, an increasingly affluent and a totally urban people, didn't see the charm of riding around in the hot sun all day." (Rose 1981, p.164)

Javier Escobar, owner of Escobar Translation Service, says that "the quality of communication can have many repercussions in business: the effectiveness of promotional copy prepared for foreign markets, the accuracy of contracts signed with foreign associates, the promptness and outcome of correspondence with foreign clients." (1984 p.134) These repercussions can even involve legal problems.

In contracts, one mis-translated word can mean a great deal. In one such case, a negative in French was translated by mistake into a positive, changing the whole meaning of the sentence. The lawyers for the corporation were hard-pressed to resolve the problem.

If the promotional copy for Rolls Royce's Silver Mist had been shown first to a German translator, they might have been forewarned of the problem with the word 'mist' in German. An expensive promotional campaign could have been saved and embarrassment to the company image avoided.

#### DAILY USES

Today, in an increasingly technically advanced society, business dealings may involve several different countries at once. For instance, a French electronics firm may assemble Japanese and Taiwanese components into finished products in Mexico. These products are then sold on the American market. The contracts made between these several countries will have to be translated. Also, the instructions for assembly will need to be translated from the Asian languages into Spanish for the workers in Mexico. (Harris and Sonabend 1985, p.36) The need for translation is growing as such multi-national business activities become more and more common.

Many American businesses such as the Amway Corporation and Disneyland use translation on a daily basis. Amway is involved in business in ten countries, translating into ten languages. Translation into the various languages is used for catalogs, promotional brochures, training material, weekly and monthly publication of magazines, cassettes, slides, videos, and more. Disneyland uses translators for their brochures, videoscripts and press releases.

### SOLUTIONS FOR BETTER TRANSLATION

It can take years to repair the damage done to a company's credibility abroad after one poor translation. When money lost through these translations can reach millions of dollars, one can only ask why many American corporations continue to produce poor translations. Although the trend has begun to change, American businessmen are still ignorant to the valuable tasks a professional translator can perform for them, as well as the skill and knowledge required to do the job well. Like any professional, translators have studied and trained for this task and businesses should seek them out for help in foreign correspondence as they would seek out a professional for advice in any of their departments.

The optimum solution for any company engaged in international business would be to have their own team of translators, as does the Amway Corporation. Amway has 12 in-house translators and is a member of the American Translators Association (ATA). When the company wishes to introduce a product they first hold a platform campaign committee meeting. Here, they meet with the translators and talk about the names of the product and its effect in the foreign culture, etc. If in-house translators are not feasible at this time, there are many translation agencies across the nation. Euramerica is one such agency.

Euramerica is a subsidiary of Ogilvy, a world-wide advertising agency. They are the language translators for Ogilvy and use a combination of in-house and steady, free-lance translators. If the subject of a translation is, say, medicine, then it is done by someone with a background in the biological sciences. The translation is then corrected by a physician before a final check at Euramerica. This process ensures a most accurate translation.

### CONCLUSION

The professional translator plays a significant role in international business by facilitating the communication process. He bridges the gaps between the two cultures to insure a proper transfer of message. With his knowledge and training in the structure of the foreign language, he is more able to avoid the pitfalls of improper vocabulary, thus preserving the image of the corporation abroad.

The effects of translation are felt in almost every division of a company, especially in marketing and public relations because here, you're dealing in communication. However, "Translation is a two-edged sword--it can do as much harm as good." (Escobar 1984, p.134) If done word-for-word out of the dictionary, by someone with no formal training in translation, or worse, by someone with a 'little' experience in a foreign language, then the translation can have the opposite effect than was first intended. Since the goal of any international business is to market their product successfully, and therefore increase their sales, professional translators are needed, for they represent the key to that success.



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