Chapter 13: Language & style - translation

In the previous three chapters on Language & Style we look at structures, words and grammar. In this, the final chapter in this section, we look at these issues in the context of reporting and writing across different languages, some of the challenges of translation and some of the main dangers to look out for.

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If you are a journalist working in a multilingual society, you may have to work in more than one language. Whether you gather the information in one language and write the story in another, or whether you write a story first in one language and then rewrite in another language, you face the task of translation. However, if you have a good command of both languages and follow a few simple rules, translation should not be difficult.

The previous three chapters on language and style have looked at structure, words and grammar. In this, the final chapter in this section, we provide some general guidance when working in more than one language. This is written only in English, but the processes we describe always involves two or more languages. It is possible that English will not be one of the languages you work in when translating. To avoid confusion, we will call the language which you are translating from (or conducting interviews in) the source language; and we will call the language you are translating into (or writing the final story in) the target language.

The principles of translation

The first thing to remember is that translation is the transfer of meaning from one language to another. It is not the transfer of words from language to language. You must translate the meaning of what is being said, rather than do it word-for-word. This is because languages are not just different words. Different languages also have different grammar, different word orders, sometimes even words for which other languages do not have any equivalents. The English spoken by a scientist may have words which a simple farmer cannot even start to imagine. And the farmer is likely to have words for things the technologist never dreamed of.

Simple steps in translation

We will start by talking about the simplest form of translation - the one where you already have a story written down in one language (the source) and you want to translate it into another language (the target). The steps to follow are:

1. Read the whole of the original source story through from beginning to end, to make sure that you can understand it. If you cannot understand everything that is said, you cannot translate it. If there are any words or phrases that you do not understand, you must clarify these first. You may decide that the ideas they express are too difficult to translate or not worth translating, but you need to know what they are before you can judge.

2. Do a first draft translation, trying to translate all the source material. But do not translate word-for-word. Remember that you are translating the meaning. When you have finished the first translation, you will now have a draft story in the target language.

3. Go back over the whole of your draft translation and polish it without looking at the source original. (You might even like to turn the source story face down on your desk so you cannot cheat.) Make sure that your translation reads well in the target language.

4. Compare the final version of your translation with the source original to make sure that you have translated it accurately. This is when you can make any detailed adjustments in individual words or phrases.

False friends

Beware of words or phrases we call "false friends". These are words in the original source language which you retain in your translation, often because you cannot think of the correct translation. If you cannot think of the right word, how can you expect your reader or listener to? Of course, languages borrow from each other all the time. If a society comes across a new idea, it may simply use the foreign word without inventing a word of its own. Remember, however, that you are translating meaning, not words. If you come across a word in your original language which has no equivalent in the target language, perhaps you can use a phrase (i.e. several words) instead. For example, many languages do not have a word for "computer". Instead of retaining the English word "computer", can you translate it as "a machine which does brain work" or something similar? Be careful, though, that you do not try to re-invent the community's language to suit your own way of thinking. If you have problems with translating words, consult experts or ask your colleagues to see if you can reach agreement on the correct translation. If you are a journalist working in a small language community, the words you decide upon could become the standard usage.

Of course, some foreign words will inevitably creep into other languages. Words like "computer" are becoming widely accepted by speakers of non-English languages and may eventually be understood by everyone. The problem arises in the time between the foreign word being first introduced and it being understood by everyone. During such transition periods, use the word untranslated, but follow it immediately with a translation or explanation. For example, you might write in your target language the equivalent of:

Dictionaries

You cannot translate words in isolation. Words get their meaning from how they are used in each situation - what we call their context. You must do a contextual translation. You should use a bilingual dictionary where one is available, but be careful when looking up translations for individual words. Dictionaries are useful, but there is very often more than one translation for individual words. The best dictionary is one which defines the word in its various contexts. For example, a simple English word like "skip" has several quite different meanings. It can mean any of the following, depending on the context: to move lightly, especially by jumping from one foot to another; to omit or leave something out; to deal with something quickly and without much thought; a large container for transporting building materials, especially waste. It can even be short for "skipper", the captain of a ship or sports team. You can see that using the wrong translation of "skip" could have some unfortunate results.

Listen to the little voice in your head if it tells you that a translation seems strange. It is better to ask advice than to write something silly. You may not know all the uses for each word, especially slang words which you cannot find in dictionaries. For example, mechanics often refer to an adjustable spanner as a "monkey wrench", when it has nothing to do with monkeys.

Writing style

You do not have to be an expert in linguistics to make good translations. If you know your target language well, you can usually hear in your head whether the sentence sounds correct in your translation.

Your translation should not try to duplicate the word order or grammatical construction used in the source language unless it is also correct in your target language. For example, some languages put the verb (the "doing word") at the beginning of a sentence, some in the middle and some at the very end.

You do not have to use all the words from your source material for translation if your target language can cope without them. For example, we may say in English "The ship sank lower in the water", whereas in another language the words "in the water" may be unnecessary because the words for "sink" in relation to "ship" already includes the idea of "water".

Also, do not be afraid of using more words in your translation than in the original. Although in journalism you should aim to keep your sentences short and crisp, this must not be allowed to interfere with the clarity of the ideas you are trying to communicate.

Some other problem areas

Translation is a very big and complicated field which we cannot discuss in great detail here. However, the following are some other problem areas you might want to keep in mind:

Understatements and euphemisms

Be aware of the cultural differences in languages. Some languages like to hide unpleasant facts beneath understatements or euphemism. Euphemisms are mild or inoffensive words which are used in the place of harsh or hurtful words.

Some speakers might use humour in one situation which another language would not permit. Again, you must understand the meaning in context.

Linking words

Words such as "although", "but", "from", "even" and a host of others are usually very important in English, as they are used to show the relationships between the words in your sentences. Getting these small words wrong can alter entirely the sense of the sentence.

Verbs

These can sometimes cause problems in their different forms. There are, for example, quite distinct meanings for the words "can", "may", "must" and "should". If you are not sure, it is best to avoid the construction altogether and say it a different way.

Accuracy

Some languages are more accurate than others in certain areas. For example, many language groups in Papua New Guinea have more than 10 different words for varieties of sweet potato. The Inuit Indians of Canada have different words for 20 separate things which in English we just call "snow".

English is not a precise language in many areas. Be aware that a vagueness in English may not be acceptable in another language. For example, we can say "Doctor Smith" in English, whereas in Chinese we have to know the gender of the doctor to translate the word "doctor".

Ambiguity

Sometimes the exact meaning in the source language is left unclear (ambiguous) on purpose, in which case you should try to keep it that way. This is especially so when reporting claims, accusations and hearsay evidence in such things as police stories. For example, a person might be charged in English with "unlawful carnal knowledge", which usually means a sexual offence against a person under the age of consent. You should not translate that as "rape of a child" or "sodomy of a little boy" or any other specific sexual act unless that is part of the charge. It is better in this case to use a phrase similar to "a sexual offence against a young person".

Names and titles

There is still a debate about the need or otherwise of translating names from one language into another. For example, would you retain the English title "Education Department" or translate it into something like "office for schools"? Of course, a lot depends on how the rest of your community use the term, especially those people who are most closely involved, such as the Education Department itself. Your newspaper, radio or television station may have a policy on this. If not, perhaps you should get together to decide on a policy, taking into account how the community in general deals with names and titles. Get a large, hard-bound exercise book for the newsdesk, thumb-indexed A to Z down the side. You can call this your Translation Style Guide. Once you have agreed on the correct translation for any problem word, enter the word with its translation on to the correct page in the book. Revise the book every so often to make sure that all the entries are still relevant. If your newsroom computers are networked, create a common file which everyone can access.

There are two ways people use names (or titles). The first is to identify the place or person, the second is to describe their function. It is usual to leave untranslated names which act as signposts for people, but translate those names which describe a function. For example, you would not translate the word "Baker" in the name "Baker Street", because it acts as a signpost, but you would probably translate the name "Police Station".

If a language used by your community is also used elsewhere in the world, you should remain aware of how it is spoken in other countries. For example, French may be commonly used in your society, so you need to keep up-to-date with how French is used in other French-speaking countries. Remember that all languages change, especially in their motherland. Constantly refresh your understanding of the way the language is developing both in your own society and elsewhere.

Translation during news gathering

So far, we have talked mainly about rewriting a story in one language into a story in another language. But your work may involve interviewing in one language and writing the story itself in another language. For example, your newspaper may be printed in English, but you have to interview a villager in his mother tongue which is not English.

The best way of doing this is to conduct the interview in the villager's language and make your notes in that language too. You can then translate your quotes into English as you write your story. This method means that, while you are conducting the interview, you can ask questions in the villager's language to clarify any doubtful points. You can also check your story back with him in his language to make sure you have the facts correct.

However, some languages may have been written down only recently and so may not have a clear and easy written form in which to make your notes. If this is so, and if you are fluent in both languages, you may be able to listen in the villager's language while making your notes in English. You are translating as you listen and write. This may work perfectly well, but a word of warning: Trying to translate while also concentrating on what the villager is saying may introduce errors into your notes. Ask the villager to slow down a little so that you can make your notes, then check your notes at the end of the interview by translating them back into the villager's language for him. Radio and television journalists can overcome this problem by using their tape recorders, but newspaper reporters might also find a tape recorder useful in such situations. You should still make notes, but have a tape recorder running at the same time so that you can check later to make sure that you made the correct translation during the interview. (See Chapter 16: Interviewing basics.)

There is one final complication of which you must be aware. This comes when you are interviewing in a source language, writing your story in a target language and then having to translate the same story back into the source language. This might occur if you have to produce a special language bulletin or an edition of your newspaper in the source language. The danger is that you might not get an exact translation back into the source language, and so you might misquote someone. When writing a story which has to be translated twice, always refer back to your original notes when writing your second story, so that you can get the quotes exactly right.

TO SUMMARISE:

As this is the last of the four chapters on Language & Style, lets look back at the main lessons we've learned in this section:

• You must keep your language clear and simple so that your readers or listeners can understand.

• Sentences should be short - no longer than 20 words or three concepts (ideas). Sentence structure should be simple; it is best to write in the active voice.

• Explain any new words whenever you use them.

• Avoid jargon, unnecessary words and clichés.

• Check all your work to make sure that everything you write obeys the rules of grammar and punctuation.

• When translating, translate the meaning of sentences, not the individual words.

• Always keep your readers or listeners in mind whatever you write.