

# Translation

## Getting it Right



**A guide to  
buying translation**

**If you're not a linguist yourself, buying translations can be frustrating.**

**The suggestions in this guide are aimed at reducing stress and helping you get the most out of your translation budget.**

**Q: Translation, interpreting – what's the difference?**

**A: Translators write; interpreters speak.**

If you're working with written documents – a user manual for your German customers, billboards for a sales campaign in Argentina, reports filed in Chinese by your new subsidiary in Shanghai that you must read and understand – you need a *translator*.

If you want to interact with people in a foreign language on the spot – a lab tour with Mexican visitors, a board meeting in Japan, a parents' evening with a family recently arrived from Romania – you need an *interpreter*.

# Does it really need to be translated?

Rather than blindly translate documents in full – hundreds of pages – decide with whoever the text is designed for (or your sales team) what information is actually required. You can generally axe padding, including lists of all the in-house departments that have worked to make the product a success. Your foreign clients/partners won't care. Such passages can even make your company appear self-centred and arrogant.

- A company in France trimmed a 500-page manual by half with the help of an expert translator, who flagged sections that didn't apply to foreign clients before starting the job.
- A firm of patent lawyers in California regularly turns to a specialist translator for a quick oral summary of Japanese patents. Together, they then select those documents that need a full translation.



**Translate only relevant sections of existing documents, or produce shorter texts and have these translated.**

# A picture is worth a thousand words

## Take the burden off the words

Judicious use of maps, pictograms and diagrams can be far more effective with international readers than rambling explanations and hyper-technical descriptions. Your translator's job will be easier; there will be less risk of missing the precise technical term. And your translation bill will probably be lower.

- Swedish furniture giant IKEA has over 330 stores in some 40 countries where at least 25 languages are spoken. It uses largely word-free diagrams to guide customers through kit assembly. 80% of instructions are pictures only; the remaining 20% require text to communicate safety information.
- Each year, London's Heathrow Airport moves over 65 million travellers from all parts of the world through its five terminals using internationally recognised pictograms.



**Only use text when you have to or when it is the most effective means of getting your message across.**

# Think international from the start

Avoid culture-bound clichés. References to your national sport may well fall flat. Ditto literary/cultural metaphors. And tread carefully with references to the human body, viewed differently by different cultures.

For written documents, don't box yourself in by linking your pitch to visuals that may not carry the same meaning outside your native country, forcing translators to resort to awkward wordplay and cumbersome workarounds.

**A British PM told Japanese industrialists that he planned “to go the full monty” in fixing the UK economy. Blank faces: cultural gap. (In 1942, Field Marshal Montgomery had flummoxed non-British BBC listeners with a cricket metaphor: “We’ll hit them for six!” he told troops on the eve of the battle of El Alamein.)**



**By all means keep some local flavour, but check with your foreign-text team to make sure that adaptation is possible.**

# How much will it cost?

Translation prices range from 1 to 10 (or even 100), and, while high prices don't necessarily guarantee high quality, we submit that below a certain level you are unlikely to receive a text that does credit to your business or its products. If translators are netting little more than a babysitter, they are unlikely to be tracking your market with the attention it deserves.

Be realistic. How many pages can a translator produce in an hour? How much time do you expect him or her to spend crafting the text that will promote your product or service? (How much time did your team spend producing the original?)

When choosing a translation provider, calculate how much you've spent developing the product or services you want to promote outside your country. If you can't afford a professional translation, perhaps you aren't ready for the international market yet.




**The added value that a translation company offers (translator selection, project management, quality control, file conversions, standardised presentation of multilingual projects, etc.) also has a price tag but can save you hours of work.**

# How important is style?

Tehao Rechargeable shaver RCCW-320: Smuggle the razor blade (reference value around 400 g) on your muscle vertically. Then drag your skin and shave back slowly.

Often, texts like this one are produced by translation software or by non-native speakers struggling away with a grammar book in one hand and a dictionary in the other. They are good for a laugh.

Other translations are technically accurate, yet the sentences don't flow as smoothly as they might; word order or choice of vocabulary may be unduly influenced by the original language. They're not particularly effective for selling but may be good enough for readers who know the subject and can – or have time to – read between the lines.

 Many suppliers routinely provide “for-information” translation as their standard offering, as opposed to a “rewrite”, “adaptation” or “transcreation”. To avoid misunderstanding, clarify this up front. And get it in writing.


Specialists will often refer to accurate yet unpolished work as “for-information” translation. It can generally be produced more quickly and cheaply than “for-publication” work.

But if you're trying to sell or persuade, or if image is important to you, that probably won't be enough.

## Resist the temptation to do it yourself

Speaking is not writing. Oral fluency does not guarantee smooth, stylish writing. Even if you regularly negotiate successfully in French, German or Spanish, and spend lots of time in the countries where those languages are spoken, 99 times out of 100, your written command of a foreign language will be immediately recognisable as “foreign”.


This may or may not be important. It may not be important if (1) your main selling point is price (price-driven clients will put up with a lot provided they can understand the basics) or (2) you want to emphasise a certain foreignness (think Audi’s “Vorsprung durch Technik” slogan or the Perrier sales campaign for “H2Eau”).



**If you want to project an international image, you will probably be better served by a less ethnic approach. In many cultures, awkward or sloppy use of the local language – especially by a native English speaker – is not amusing. It is insulting.**

## Finalise your text *before* starting the translation

Tempting as it may be to get your translation project rolling as quickly as possible, having translators work from a draft-in-progress will almost always be more time-consuming – hence more expensive (and probably more frustrating) – than waiting for the final text to be ready. Even worse, the more versions you have, the more likely it is that errors will creep into the final version.




**Sometimes you have no choice. Sometimes deadlines are so tight that work on the translation must begin before you’ve finalised the original text. If so, be sure to clearly time- and date-stamp each version and always mark changes from one version to the next for your translators.**

## What about translation software?

If you're pressed for time and want to get the gist of something for your own use (i.e. inbound), translation software may be helpful. It is certainly fast. And you can't get much cheaper than free.

But as a general rule of thumb, don't use raw computer output for anything outbound without the express agreement of your clients. It's simply not suitable: you run the risk of looking inarticulate. Even stupid. Careful editing of machine output by skilled human translators is one option, although not all translators will accept such assignments. Many insist texts generated by computer programs are so skewed that it's faster to start from scratch.



**Some translation providers and others have developed proprietary software for specific language pairs and subjects; their gisting will be much better than any of the off-the-shelf packages. But it will not be free and it will still need human revision.**

***The limitations of computer-generated translations are nothing new: early on, The Wall Street Journal tested two free online services and concluded: "These services are passable for travellers or for those wanting to translate a letter from a distant cousin. I definitely wouldn't use them for business or anything that remotely requires accuracy."***


***Since then, algorithms have improved the quality of automatic translation, but it's still a very risky option for outbound texts.***

# Tell the translator what it's for

A speech is not a website. A sales brochure is not a catalogue entry. A graph heading is not a directional sign. An article in the *Daily Mail* is not a prospectus for an initial public offering.

Style, pronounceability, word choice, phrasing and sentence length will all vary, depending on where your text will appear and what you want it to achieve. An experienced translator will probably ask you for this information, so make sure you know yourself.

You'll get best results by developing an ongoing relationship with a translator or team of translators. The longer you work with them and the better they understand your business philosophy, strategy and products, the more effective their texts will be.




**Be sure to tell your translators what your text is for, so that they can prepare a foreign-language version with maximum impact for that particular audience and medium.**

# Teachers, academics and students: at your own risk

For many companies faced with foreign-language texts, the first stop is the language department of a local school or university. While this may – sometimes – work for inbound translation (e.g. when you want to find out what the other guys are up to), it is **extremely** risky for outbound material, especially promotional texts.

Teaching a foreign language is a demanding activity that requires a special set of skills. These are rarely the same as those needed to produce a smooth, stylish translation. The risks are even greater if you opt for student translators, which may seem like a nice, inexpensive option.



**Would you approve of medical students performing minor operations to pay their way through medical school?**  
**(Would you describe your brochure/letter/annual report/speech as “minor”?) Would you have your company’s financial statements prepared by business students to save money?**




## Professional translators work into their native language

If you want your catalogue translated into German and Russian, the work will be done by a native German speaker and a native Russian speaker. By the same token, native English speakers translate from foreign languages *into* English.

As a translation buyer, you may not be aware of this, but a translator who flouts this basic rule is likely to be ignorant of other important quality issues as well.

OK, there are exceptions. But not many. If your supplier claims to be one, ask for an example. If it's factually accurate and reads well, and if she guarantees equal quality for your text – why not? Sometimes a linguist with special subject-matter expertise may agree to work into a foreign language. Such translations must be carefully edited – not just glanced through – by a language-sensitive native speaker before use.




**Do translators living abroad lose touch with their native tongue? At the bottom end of the market, perhaps. But expert linguists keep their language skills up wherever they live.**

## What language do your readers speak?

Spanish for clients in Madrid or in Mexico City? British or American English? Contact your foreign partners to find out precisely what is needed.

Your reader profile is also important. Do you want German for doctors and other medical personnel, or for consumers? Are you selling savings products for the general public, or investment funds for financiers in Luxembourg? Remember, too, that some countries require documents to be available in two or more languages; non-compliance can result in fines or worse. And be sure to include country codes for telephone and fax numbers.




**Speak your readers' language. Put yourself in their shoes, and zero in on how your products and services can serve their needs. Be concrete. Be specific. (The same applies to your promotional materials in your source language, of course.)**

# An inquisitive translator is good news

No one reads your texts more carefully than your translator. Along the way, he or she is likely to identify fuzzy bits – sections where clarification is needed. This is good news for you, since it will allow you to improve your original.

- **A European video-games specialist notes that management did not really understand their own stock-options policy until an English translation was commissioned: the translator asked many questions and delivered a version far clearer than the original.**
- **“We try to wait for our texts to come back from the translators before going to press with the original French,” says the chief economist of a major bank in Paris. “The reason is simple: our translators track our subjects closely. Their critical eye helps us identify weak spots in the original.”**




**Good translators strip down your sentences entirely before creating new ones in the target language. And they ask questions along the way.**

# The more technical your subject, the more important it is that your translators know it inside out

Supply basic information to five native speakers of any language, ask them to write up a 100-word product description, and you'll get five different texts, some clearer and more readable than others. People familiar with the subject are likely to produce a better text. The same applies to translators.


Whenever possible, know your translators – not just the project managers, but the translators themselves, the people who actually produce your texts. And make sure they know you.



**Talk to your translators. They should be at home with the subjects they translate; if not, it's time to change suppliers.**  
**Translators should not be learning the subject at your expense unless you have expressly agreed to this.**

## The home stretch: have typeset copy proofread by your translator

**Always.** Even if you have a sound procedure in place, with reliable translation providers who know your company inside out, last-minute additions (headings, captions, word changes) by well-meaning non-linguists can sabotage an otherwise effective document. It's easy to stumble. A well-meaning German businessman axed the "s" from "headquarters", explaining "We have only one". And French typesetters regularly add an "s" to "information".


 **Be sure to have a language-sensitive native speaker on hand to vet final tweaks – ideally, this person will be your professional translator. If not, he or she must be genuinely language-sensitive. Beware self-described experts with vague legacy skills, no matter how impressive they may seem to monolingual staff. For the same reason, don't finalise changes to foreign texts by telephone. They are often misheard.**

## Typography varies from language to language

Many printers and office staff are unaware of this – or don't take it seriously – and may "adjust" foreign-language texts to bring them into line with their own standards.

French has a space between a word and the colon that follows, and uses « » for quotation marks. In German, all nouns take capital letters. In Spanish and French, neither months nor days of the week take an initial capital. Oh, and never type just an "n" when Spanish requires an "ñ"...

A bilingual banner in the US celebrated *100 anos* of municipal history. *Año* is year; *ano* is anus. (Would you leave out the squiggle from the letter "q"? What a question!)

 **Even if each typesetting glitch is minor, the cumulative effect is off-putting for foreign-language readers. Respect the typographical conventions of the language you are working into.**

# Translators and bilinguals: take a closer look

Professional translators are writers and produce texts that read well in the target language. They are usually fluent in their source language(s) as well. But above all they are effective bridges between the languages they work in; they can render the message of the original text, with appropriate style and terminology, in their native language.

Bilingualism is something else. Bilinguals speak two languages fluently, but are not necessarily good at moving information between the two, especially in writing. And many people described as bilinguals overestimate their communication skills altogether.

**Lina's, a pricey French sandwich chain, advertised for franchisees abroad with a text concocted by a self-proclaimed bilingual employee. Slogan: "Tomorrow, we will expect on your dynamism". Response: zero.**



**Bilingualism on its own is not a guarantee of written fluency or skill in translation.**

# *“Technical terms pose few translation problems”* (a widely held myth)

True, scientific nomenclature in fields like botany and zoology is both rigorous and international – when properly used. And an illustrated parts list in, say, a tank maintenance manual, will normally be fairly straightforward to translate.

Yet even specialists writing on technology in their own language can trip up.

Technical translators, like others, must ensure that their output reads at least as well as the original. In reality, it may often be better, since it benefits from the concentration and skills of a second specialist. Incorrect use of technical terms often means translators are out of their depth. One solution is to ask subject-matter specialists for input and review.



**Always arrange a final check by a professional translator for grammar, syntax, punctuation and style before going to press, especially if your subject-matter experts are not native speakers.**

# Choosing a translation provider

Glossy brochures and earnest and/or hard-hitting sales pitches are one thing, genuine skills another.

Ask potential translation suppliers for samples of their work – not just client names, but texts they've produced and sold. If a supplier is bidding to translate your website, ask to see websites they've already translated. Ditto brochures and speeches. Run samples past a trusted, language-sensitive native speaker (perhaps a foreign subsidiary or partner) for an opinion.

If translation providers have been in business for several years and can't show you any work they're pleased with, you're in trouble (so are they).

Tell suppliers that their name(s) will appear alongside photo and design credits on the document they produce.



**Printing translator credits in your document costs nothing and encourages suppliers to deliver top-quality work.**

**Note: translators may insist on signing off proofs to protect their reputations from last-minute fiddling at your end. This is in everyone's best interest. Accept immediately.**

***Plan ahead: if your company has its eye on markets abroad, start looking for translation talent now. And once you begin producing texts for translation, give your translators as much lead time as possible.***

***Take control of the controllable: consider producing an in-house glossary. (This is also an excellent way of making your original documents more consistent.) Work with translators and in-house staff to develop a bilingual or even multilingual version.***


# What do you really need?

For publication? For information only? Raw computer output? Gisting? What kind of translation (and budget) do you really need?

One approach is to calculate how many people will be reading your texts (nationwide press campaign or in-house memo for a team of 12?). How would a seriously flawed translation affect your corporate image and/or legal liability?

Now take another look at your budget.

Translation is an industry of niche markets. Even the for-publication category covers a broad spectrum of services and suppliers, commanding an equally wide range of prices. The team that did a perfect job on your software manuals is not necessarily the right one to translate your company's annual report.

 **For ads in glossy magazines and expensive directional signs, it makes sense to buy premium text. For in-house memos, or documents with limited circulation, a less polished (and less expensive) option may be fine.**

# Get involved

If you don't invest time in briefing your suppliers, you're unlikely to get what you want or need.

It may take only 10 minutes longer than telling your assistant to "get this translated", but if the right person spends those 10 minutes chatting to the translator (or even the project manager), you will probably save money and stress further down the line.

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*There are hundreds of ways a*

*translation project can go off track:*

**ridiculous deadlines, ambiguities in source text amplified by the translator not asking questions, misapplied machine translation (MT), no proofreading of typeset text by a native speaker, blissful ignorance of an overconfident translator operating in a vacuum, poor coordination of large projects, poor cheap freelance translator, poor expensive freelance translator, poor cheap translation company, poor expensive translation company, no client input – and on and on.**

***By applying even half the tips in this guide, you will improve your chances of getting a translation that works.***