

# Multilingual

COMPUTING & TECHNOLOGY

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## TRANSLATION

## FRENCH IS MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE

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**T**wo major factors have stimulated enormous growth in the number of multilingual translation projects in the United States over the last decade. One is the influx of immigrants and growing ethnic diversity of the US population; another is the adoption of policies by both corporations and government and local agencies promoting equal access to educational, social and other services.

In addition, some demographic factors such as compact residence and the proportion of elderly in a specific ethnic group have also contributed to the growing necessity and multitude of such projects. Because of equal access requirements, the production of documentation for certain ethnic target groups (and audiences) in their native languages has become a standard practice in many states and corporate environments implementing multilingual/multicultural policies.

Even though mastering English is a prerequisite to acquiring US citizenship, tens of thousands of foreign-born immigrants who have become US citizens still prefer using their mother tongues over English as a language of choice. It's become quite common in many states for voter registration, voting instructions and even ballots at polling stations

# CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

*A successful translation depends on recognizing who the audience is*

**IGOR VESLER**

to appear, in such exotic languages as Hmong, Somali and Urdu, in addition to English and Spanish.

The accompanying table lists some types of printed materials and documentation that are routinely translated into a number of languages for distribution and circulation in certain target groups. It gives a good idea of how widespread these practices are.

In various industries, the target audience of technical and legal translation, that is, the recipients of translated material and documentation,

consists of *professionals* using it for business purposes. The quality and, therefore, the usefulness of certain translated documentation can be measured to the extent that the documentation satisfies the recipients' business needs. The target audience of the multilingual documentation projects that I am referring to, however, is the *general public*, and use and interpretation of the materials translated into the recipients' native language are quite difficult to assess and quantify. So, in many cases the sole fact that a document is translated into

**Materials and Documentation Translated**

Area	Target Audience	Type of Documentation
Health care institutions (hospitals, nursing homes, medical offices, emergency rooms, HMOs)	Patients, medical insurance policy holders, elderly	Health-care brochures, informational and explanatory flyers, booklets and posters, OTC drug information and fact sheets, visitation rules
Business and industry	Foreign-born employees, seasonal workers, secondees, expatriates	Employee handbooks, employment guidance, instructions and manuals, orientation courses
Hospitality and entertainment, restaurants, amusement parks, sports events	Visitors, patrons, spectators, fans	Guest cards, menus, concert announcements, casino gambling instructions, ice hockey player cards and so on
Banking and insurance	Bank clients, borrowers, heirs and trustees, policy holders	Banking and insurance promotional materials, banking policies and instructions, trust, deeds, loan and mortgage explanatory sheets
Public transportation	Commuters, tourists, motor vehicle owners	Commuter information, warnings and signs, public and service change announcements, pedestrian safety instructions, parking rules
Federal and local government	Local communities, program participants, recipients of various grants and public assistance	Voter rights and voting procedures, public assistance documentation, eligibility requirements, notices, complaints and grievances, various applications, driver's license exams
Law enforcement agencies	INS, police, immigration court, customs and passport/border control	Court and immigration rules and procedures, Miranda rights, police and customs officers' palm cards
Education	Local and community schools, colleges, special educational institutions	School districts' documentation for parents (guides, notices, letters, announcements and so on), admission rules and documentation for foreign-born students, questionnaires
Unions, religious, nonprofit and charitable organizations, funeral homes, funeral and burial funds	Foreign-born union members, parishioners, benefactors, contributors	Charters, fact sheets, membership rules and applications, guidance and counseling documentation, religious literature and hand-outs

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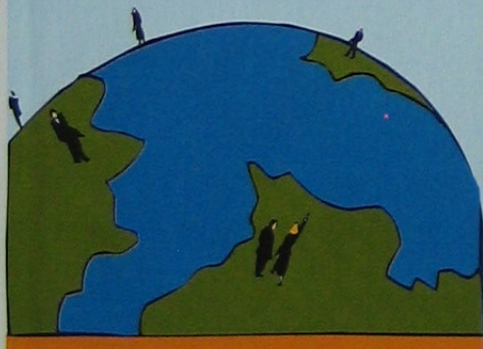
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## TRANSLATION

several languages is considered to be a success without anyone having a clue as to whether or not it was understood, correctly perceived and interpreted. The accompanying photo provides a good example of how local authorities implemented an idea of a multilingual warning sign for beachgoers.

Commonly, neither translation agencies nor their clients take into account the nature of the target audience for which the translation project is commissioned and implemented. However, a number of conceptual differences between professional users of translated documentation and the general public affect the way a multilingual translation project is to be implemented.

In other words, whenever translation for the general public is involved, it always is more than translation and, in some extreme cases, it goes far beyond translation *per se*.



How multilingual is this warning sign?

Here is an example taken from an actual translation project. A language-conscious US company building a factory in Russia commissioned translation of everything, including auxiliary and support documentation (warning signs, toilet instructions, safety stickers, door signs and so on). In order to save money, the company put together all auxiliary documentation in the form of a plain text file, ran it

### Differences Between Audiences for Translation

Professionals	General Public
<b>End Users</b>	
Individuals with limited or no English reading and comprehension ability residing abroad or occasionally visiting the United States for business: Foreign recipients of business correspondence Buyers of American goods and services Local personnel employed by US companies (engineers, foremen, workers) in host countries Local clientele of US banks, insurance companies and law firms in host countries Foreign counterparts to bilateral and multilateral international programs Foreign recipients of advertising and promotional materials and visitors to US trade shows and exhibits	Non-English speakers residing in or visiting the United States with limited or no awareness of American life realities, namely: Residents of predominantly monoethnic urban areas and environments, such as patients of local hospitals Low-wage workers in some industries (hospitality, construction) Clientele of federal, state and municipal agencies (public assistance recipients, recent immigrants) Subjects of law enforcement agencies (illegal aliens, suspects, convicted criminals) Visitors, guests, patrons
<b>Purpose of Translation</b>	
The translated documents perform a <i>communicative</i> function in their professional activities — to carry content to be used in research, decision-making and so on.	The translated documents and messages perform an <i>instructive</i> function since they request, expect or imply certain actions or behaviors.
<b>Linguistic Competence</b>	
Professional users normally master both subject matter and terms of art in their respective trades. In the case of a poor translation, they are able to mentally reconstruct — at least, to a certain extent — the intent and meaning of the original document.	The general public's linguistic competence and awareness, as well as the ability to correctly understand and interpret the translated text or message, vary from complete understanding to total misinterpretation.
<b>Target Language(s)</b>	
Normally well known.	Target language(s) quite frequently become an issue since in many cases there is no direct correspondence between the country of origin and the language spoken within the target audience.
<b>Quality Assessment and Feedback</b>	
Provided that terminological correctness, accuracy and completeness requirements are met, translation quality can normally be assessed in terms of its usefulness based on feedback from the end user.	Terminological correctness, accuracy and completeness are not the only criteria of translation quality. In addition, cultural relevance, simplicity, plainness, habitualness and other factors are of great importance. As a rule, direct feedback is not available.

through an MT system and sent it to a translation agency for verification and editing and later to the typesetter/printer.

The results were astonishing and deserve to be included in a world compendium of translation pitfalls, but for our purposes I will mention only one. The door signs commonly used in the United States read PUSH and PULL. The MT system diligently rendered the respective Russian verbs ТОЛКАТЬ and ТЯНУТЬ which successfully passed the verification and editing process and went to the typesetter. In Russia, however, the door signs read completely differently, К СЕБЕ and ОТ СЕБЯ (verbatim *towards yourself* and *off yourself*). This error may seem innocuous, but when safety instructions or warning signs are translated without regard to what is conventional and customary for the audience, the consequences may be quite grave.

If only food preferences and ethical issues were involved, translators' lives could be much easier. When source documentation reflects concepts of a social nature such as kinship or documentary evidence that are rendered inappropriately in translation, there may indeed be legal consequences. So, these concepts should not be neglected.

In the United States, numerous applications, questionnaires and forms that are generated by social services and agencies to be filled out by non-English speakers widely use Western concepts and terminology without regard to whether or not these exist in the recipient's culture or social structure.

A typical example is a mixed concept of family/household and related terms such as *provider, breadwinner, head of household, main tenant, minor, dependent children, close relative, partner, caretaker, grantee, legally responsible relative* and so on. Each of these terms can be interpreted differently in different cultures. Even when a definition is provided (which can also be misleading and hard to understand), it can be easily misunderstood.

Another challenging concept is documentary evidence and paperwork. Requesting baptismal certificates in forms translated into Yiddish or referring to service in the US Armed Forces or railroad retirement in questionnaires for recent immigrants is culturally inappropriate and legally absurd. So is addressing Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques and other non-Christian religious establishments and their leaders as "churches" and "missionaries." Other examples include asking whether an applicant is of African-American descent in a form translated into Russian and rendering concepts of titles and deeds in promotional bank leaflets

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translated for an audience whose society never even had Western-style property rights.

The above examples are not just in defense of linguistic Puritanism. As one of my contacts in a local social services office admitted, the lion's share of phone calls occurs just because people need explanations regarding what is in the letters and forms they received. Bitterly smiling, she formulated what may be called another Murphy-type law: "If anything in a form letter can be misunderstood, misinterpreted and/or misrepresented by a recipient, it will."

In general, working with texts intended for the general public, a translator faces a number of challenges and choices.

**Language preferences of the target audience.** These are determined by the degree of exposure of the target audience to the English language and its acculturation in the United States. In this respect, the translator should distinguish between translation for visitors vs. translation for residents; translation for young and middle-aged recipients vs. translation for elderly and retired people with reduced reading/comprehension abilities and a tendency to use Pidgin English words; translation for "integrated" vs. "isolated" recipients and so on. In some

cases, even the improper choice of a dialect (Western Ukrainian vs. Eastern Ukrainian) may cause perception problems.

**Source documentation.** As a rule, original or source documents have been initially drafted without regard to a language-specific target audience. Government, legal and social services documentation normally is spattered with bureaucratic slang, legalese, inconsistencies, peculiar terminology and acronyms. In almost all cases, the source document contains implied extra-linguistic information assuming that the potential reader or listener possesses relevant background knowledge. Suburban commuter instructions in Vietnamese, for example, left readers in total frustration. They understood separate words but could not make any sense out of the entire message due to their lack of understanding what *use transfer underpass* means.

**Acceptance, review and quality control.** When a translator renders an impeccable translation in terms of cultural context, situation and potential audience, there is always a chance that such translation will be rejected because it is very far from verbatim. This is quite common when a client uses reviewers, checkers or even third-party experts for acceptance control who


may not have been in touch with the modern usage of the target language for decades or who are not even native speakers. In the case of Ukrainian, for example, there is always someone who would claim that the translation is incorrect — either Russified or Polonized. Having no ready-to-use recipes to cope with this problem, I would only suggest submission, along with the translation, of similar texts actually used in the country where the target language is spoken to back up the validity of the translation.

**Legacy problem.** Experts well know that translation happens to be a perfect tool to assess source documentation quality. As a rule, a text to be translated for the general public represents both the internal lingo and the documentation system traditions of the client's corporation or agency. Usually translation of an array of related documents identifies repetitive and duplicate parts and fragments of documents, discrepancies, lack of uniformity and consistency, poor version control and so on. Because the translator is at the lowest end of

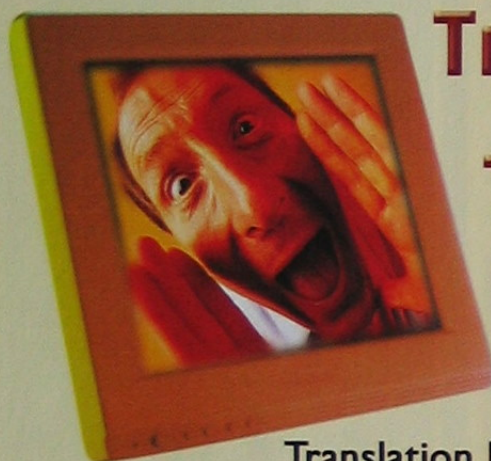
the food chain, his or her voice rarely is heard when the translation reveals intrinsic faults and shortcomings of the source document and documentation management. So, to an even lesser extent, is the person in charge of translation in a client's organization willing to undertake efforts to improve or, God forbid, to change anything in their existing documentation management environment. Therefore, in case of a major multilingual documentation translation project, both translation managers and translators face the enormous task of passing the very narrow strait between the Scylla of professional duty and the Charybdis of pleasing the client.

In dealing with these problems and challenges, experience shows two major roadmaps to follow.

The first roadmap for working with an *existing documentation system* starts with a review of the current system and individual documents in light of its target language and potential audience with special emphasis on complexity and potential perception problems such as processing requirements (filling out, office processing and so on), target language usage requirements and samples. This leads to improvement of the source documentation through identifying repetitive and duplicate parts and fragments of documents, eliminating discrepancies and achieving uniformity and consistency and a cultural and adequacy review. Major components include a general document register with cross-references; categories of terms and terminological combinations (definitions with cultural and perception notes); and a thesaurus-type terminological guide with the semantic chart and language-specific definitions.

The second roadmap is for working with a *new documentation system*. This involves translators' and project managers' participation in the document drafting and design process at the very first stages; cultural review of the source material and the ways it should be rendered for each target audience; and a feasibility study of a potential structuring of the documentation system (English/non-English components) and their respective interface(s). 

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