Lost in Translation

by Penny Jennings

Y ou've probably seen it, and laughed. The warning on the desk lamp packaging that reads, "Produit is completely as a result of 2000 volts of highhanded shocks, no leakage of electricity, and ensure safety." Or on toy instructions, "Do not touch and strip the batteries by children." There's a website (www.engrish.com) that collects the hilarious misspellings and strange meanings that can result from translation. But when you're faced with delivering exhibit descriptions, drawing notes, AV media briefs and science content in a language you don't read or write, the challenge of communicating clearly can threaten your sense of humor.

My office is currently working on an exhibition that will be part of the Ningbo Science and Cultural Plaza in Ningbo, China, about an hour from Shanghai. There was a challenging competition to select firms to participate, and the project has an ambitious schedule of deliverables. All of our work must be delivered in Chinese. This is not our first project in China, but this experience is driving home some of the previously-learned lessons regarding the complexity that translation adds to a project. I've grouped the challenges into three distinct areas: writing, scheduling, and technical logistics.

Writing
Writing for translation is not entirely different from writing label text. Descriptions must communicate effectively and concisely without using jargon or idioms and avoid unnecessary cuteness or jokiness. Metaphors, puns, and clever wordplay can lead to odd missed meanings. If I must include technical or scientific terms, I try to follow Beverly Serrell's excellent "core editing" advice: cross the terms out and see if the sentence still makes sense without them. If it still makes sense it's probably OK to leave them in, although it would be better to remove anything unnecessary.

Here are ten things to consider when writing text for translation:

1) Think of the reader. Try to put yourself in the translator's shoes, and also the eventual reader's. Be as precise as possible.
2) Create a clear logical structure. If you are writing a description of how something works, start at the beginning and break it down into steps. If you are describing how something looks, start with the overall appearance, then move to the details.
3) Be consistent. Use the same word to refer to the same part or object. Don't call something a panel in one sentence and a graphic in the next.
4) KISS: Keep it simple, stupid.
5) Use the active voice and avoid the passive voice.
6) Avoid contractions. The translators can probably handle them but you can save some work by leaving them out.
7) Avoid compound sentences. Try to say one thing at a time.
8) Avoid technical jargon, brand names or locally/culturally specific references. A cultural "native" reader can help you spot these.

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9) Maintain an even tone. Don't exaggerate in your descriptions to make something sound more exciting or fun. Don't be pompous or brag. Don't be a jerk.
10) Spell check. A misspelled word, translated literally, can cause all sorts of confusion. (E.g., "measure your hear rate" vs. "measure your heart rate").

Scheduling

Translating text can be a project-management headache. In our office, over the life of a typical project the designers and writers continually discuss incremental changes, and all are mutually responsible for ensuring that the exhibit descriptions, drawing notes, operation notes, AV program briefs, and label copy are aligned and accurate. The added turn-around time of translation (a week or more depending on the quantity of text) means that we have to structure our workflow more formally and commit to decisions earlier in the process to avoid last-minute re-translation.

When we do make changes, we have to track the new text carefully to make sure that the outdated sections are replaced in all the appropriate locations. This sounds obvious, but proofreading is far more complex and cumbersome in a foreign language; your eye doesn't gravitate to mistakes intuitively, and you must be very methodical. Additional proofreading by a bilingual editor is very helpful but adds another step and another voice to the process, so we make every effort to get it right the first time.

Our strategies include:
  • Committing to a clear numbering system for exhibits from the start. We divide the whole gallery into lettered sections and number the exhibit components within the sections. This way we can track the various components and make sure the all the parts of one exhibit end up on the correct page. If exhibit numbers change (as they inevitably do) we try to renumber a whole section at once and make the changes on all documents immediately.

  • Working in batches, so everyone is working on the same thing and the cut-off dates for changes are clear. We will send a batch of exhibit descriptions from one section out for translation at the same time as a batch of drawing notes from another section, but we try to send a whole section's worth of information together.

  • Standardizing notation. The fewer things that need translation, the better, both for time management and cost controls. Translators charge by the word; we have had some success negotiating for a smaller fee for repeated words, but it really helps if the project's designers can agree on standard notes regarding fabrication methods, materials, hardware, etc.

Technical Logistics

Computers are a blessing and a curse. It's pretty mind-boggling to imagine doing a project like this without word processors, databases, design software, email, and VoIP, but they each come with built-in expectations about speed of response, and capacity for changes and editing. From previous projects we have learned many valuable lessons regarding software capabilities and incompatibilities which have enabled us to work smarter if not faster.

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Fonts have been our biggest nightmare. We work, as do many designers, on Macs. Our clients in China mostly use PCs, and would like our work delivered both in print and in editable Word and CAD formats. Our translators are also working on PCs, in Word. The biggest, scariest problems come when we have to cut the translated text from one document and paste it into another. (We have found translators who will work in other applications, including InDesign, but they are significantly more expensive.)

The auto-correct and auto-format features in some versions of Word will change the Chinese fonts to dots or boxes, making you think the text has disappeared. But even this is better than trying to make Vectorworks handle Chinese fonts! Our past workarounds include setting up document templates with standardized headers and footers and content tables with text styled using a Chinese character font that is both Mac- and PC-compatible. For drawing pages we use numbered call-outs and put the drawing notes in a separate table. During the competition we sent complete, formatted pages to the translator and vowed not to touch them once they came back. On this project our working documents are in Pages, which handles the fonts much

better, and we have built a Filemaker database to organize all of the content so that many people can have access to the same data at the same time, and the Chinese text can live side-by-side with its English counterpart, allowing us to be clear about what we're looking at. Ideally we would deliver our files as Adobe PDF documents, allowing us to format all of the text to be uniform and legible, and leaving no chance for font or text style errors to creep in. Maybe next time!

Of course some oddities are inevitable. In the English version of the initial competition requirements the work was divided into three phases, called "concept," intermediate fruit" and "final fruit." (Fruit = Product, sort of?) Recently we had an exhibit name that seemed plain and straightforward to us—Bone Puzzle— in which visitors are invited to do a 3D puzzle to assemble a human skeleton. Then, when we received comments from the client regarding an exhibit they called "Bone Mystery," it took us a while to figure out which component they were referring to. In the end we can only do our best, hope that the client is willing to put in the effort to interpret any odd phrasing, and assume that they are laughing with us, not at us, at any mistakes. ✷

Reference:
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