



White paper
December 2016

Translation or Transcreation?

...when to choose one over the other

Alpha
St Andrew's House
St Andrew's Road
Cambridge CB4 1DL
United Kingdom

[@thisisalphalive](#)

thisisalpha.com

The concept of simply translating text into another language and considering the job complete has been replaced by the idea of localisation. Truly global firms now understand that their materials must be culturally relevant and fluent as well as accurate.

But when it comes to marketing and creative materials, cultural awareness is often not enough. A slogan translated into another language frequently loses power, even where it maintains its meaning. It will rarely be as compelling voiced in a separate language as it was when conceived in its original form.

So what is the answer, and how can localisation companies provide it?

Collaboration in creation

Let's take, as an example, a global advertising campaign undertaken by Xbox. The console has the English tagline "Jump in," which is usually used in all territories. However, in France, laws constrain those advertising in English to also do so in French.

A direct translation of the phrase would be "Saute dedans," which has none of the connotations of excitement and adventure, and is clumsier to pronounce. The company rejected this, and decided instead to use "Lance-toi," which means "Launch yourself." In the French, that is much closer to the meaning of the first, despite being a different phrase. It retains both the sentiment of the original and Xbox's bold tone and branding.

The more creativity goes into an original, strong brand campaign, the more creativity it can take to make it work in other languages.

Now we're talking

Intel famously adapted their "Intel: Sponsors of tomorrow" slogan to speak to the Brazilian market in its own language. To Brazilian ears, "Sponsors of tomorrow" suggests a company that will fail to deliver or doesn't even yet exist, rather than the Anglo-American connotations of innovation and sustainability. Instead, in Brazil Intel opted for "Apaxionados pelo futuro" or "in love with the future." This suits the "passionate" tastes of the regional audience, and keeps the spirit and message of the original.

This kind of advertising copy relies on punchy rhythms, cultural sensitivity, and an ear for the spoken word. Literal translations can skirt over subtle tonal differences in language, and miss out on key emotional engagement with an audience. Moreover, a creative engagement with the cultural specifications, idioms and tastes of a target market builds trust and long-term brand credibility.

Volkswagen's classic strapline "Das Auto" instantly conjures up Volkswagen's rich automotive heritage – and the use of the native language reinforces this cultural pedigree in non-German territories. However, when this strapline was introduced to Brazil – a major manufacturing centre for the Beetle – Brazilians felt hurt and betrayed by a brand they treated as an "honorary Brazilian". The Brazilian perception of the Volkswagen brand is intimately tied to their own country. Volkswagen therefore adapted their strapline into the Portuguese "Você conhece, Você confia" or "You know, you trust". Localising the specific perception of the Volkswagen brand won back the trust and brand loyalty of the Brazilian market.



If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

– Nelson Mandela

Throw BrewDog a bone

Hopping between different spoken languages is not the only barrier to effective marketing. After releasing a controversial video that offended transgender viewers, BrewDog tried to make amends with the LGBT community and maintain the brand's punk, edgy but ethically-conscious image by releasing the world's first "transgender, non-binary beer". The product is made from hops that change sex from female to male flowers prior to harvest, and seemed an appropriate symbol – as well as an olive branch from BrewDog to reconnect with that audience.

The "No Label" beer flopped completely and sparked anger from the transgender community, who felt their struggles had been co-opted as a marketing tool. Transgender commentators protested that making a brand out of an identity – particularly a community as marginalised and oppressed as theirs – felt almost mocking. BrewDog tweeted out "a postgender beer for a postgender world" in response, but the company's optimism and mercenary seizing on the Miley Cyrus-infused, non-binary zeitgeist was received as a thinly veiled marketing attempt in poor taste, and out of sync with the brutal reality of transgender life.

Markets are sensitive and responsive, and require detailed investigation before approaching. During the transcreation process, localisation companies marry creativity and sensitivity to cultural trends with thorough research into the sensibilities of a new audience.

Credibility matters

Brand loyalty can build a captive audience of passionate advocates, or a tidal wave of outrage from betrayed fans. Clients with high-profile material which will be customer-facing in numerous locations require creativity, quality, and thorough research. A transcreator identifies the key messages of the brand, the particularities of a new audience, and reworks the creative content to ensure appropriate cultural adaptation. Transcreators understand that emotional response is as important as intellectual understanding, and rework the core material accordingly.

A well-known example of a poor translation that became a globally-recognised marketing gaffe is the Spanish translation of American Airlines' "Fly in leather" campaign. When translated into Spanish, the slogan became "Fly naked". Transcreation is an investment, but ignoring its importance can be costly in terms of time, money, and global reputation.

CAT got your tongue?

Computer assisted translation (CAT) is the industry standard, and a cost-effective way to directly translate between languages. It brings with it important benefits such as speed, consistency and accuracy, and has significantly improved quality levels across complex projects involving multiple translators.

But what about when the translator needs to use their cultural knowledge to transcreate rather than translate? The format of CAT tools is a natural barrier to thinking flexibly. Most systems operate using a two-column grid with the source text in one column, and the target text in the other. Sentences are therefore translated in isolated chunks. This is highly effective for working through large batches of material, but hinders the process when a transcreator needs to start from scratch. Capturing the essence of a brand campaign requires going back to first principles and working from there, rather than cobbling together sections of CAT content.

It's easy to be seduced by the apparent simplicity of the CAT process, and when there are budgetary implications for the number of words processed, clients can be reluctant to trust the human element from transcreation. But relying solely on CAT's 1:1 straightjacketed systems and purely literal translations can produce clunky wording and a lack of cultural awareness. These produce odd turns of phrase that are more difficult (and expensive) to address in hindsight than to reimagine creatively from the offset.

As an example, here is a typical cost breakdown of a client brief:

- ◆ Cost of translating a 100-word press ad from English into Japanese: around £25.
- ◆ Cost of transcreating a 100-word press ad from English into Japanese: up to £200.
- ◆ Ratecard for a single-page ad in a leading Japanese paper: £100,000.

Skirting over the need to address the cultural sensibilities surrounding a brief might mean distorting a brand message, or needing to withdraw an ad campaign from the public domain. Is it worth wasting £100,000 to save £175?

Staying ahead of the game

Literal translation methods also fall short of delivering the fully immersive experience required in copy for the gaming industry. The gaming market is now worth some £100 billion a year, and requires not only marketing material translations, but thorough attention when adapting dialogue sections to an international audience. When the contract with a gamer is to deliver a complete virtual reality they can lose themselves in, clunky translations disrupt the illusion and lose customers.

Imagine the street dialogue of Grand Theft Auto translated into new languages on a literal basis. Ditto the army slang of Call of Duty. A literal approach cannot produce the smoothness of language or cultural frame of reference necessary for a seamless gamer experience. A viewer is fully engaged when the commentary, dialogue, and details of a virtual universe sound authentic. The details of making the components of a quest riddle line up or a fictional character sound believable require a creative human brain, rather than a line-by-line automated system.

The taste of success

Haribo is an excellent example of how transcreation supported and propelled a now-global brand. The German confectioner has a simple marketing message: sweets are supposed to be for kids, but adults enjoy them too. In German, the slogan perfectly captures the playfulness of the brand: “Haribo makes children happy, and grown-ups too.” But a large part of the appeal is tied up with the catchy rhythm and rhyme in the original language. Broadening the market and still conveying the brand, message and tone requires thoughtful transcreation rather than literal translation.

Haribo clearly invested in its global message, and ensured that translations in every language incorporate a catchy, playground-like rhyme. “Kids and grown-ups love it so, the happy world of Haribo” is the crip, effective English solution. Haribo is so committed to the playfulness of the slogan that it’s taken it’s gleeful, childlike identity one step further: there now even exists a game where you can try to match the transcreated slogan to the language.

To translate, or transcreate?

In short, localisation companies do both. Translation offers a first-stop method of transporting the core content between languages, but transcreation provides accurate tailoring to the target audience. Whereas translation can only provide literal alternatives, transcreation allows key brand messages to be thoughtfully conveyed to different markets. Transcreation takes the viewer to the essence of a brand while respecting their particular frame of references and preferences. As such, both processes can be used in tandem for engaging, effective creative marketing.

Found that interesting?

If you’re not already signed up to our newsletter, email marketing@thisisalpha.com to receive lots more great articles that will help you on your journey to going global.