

Translation: The Funny, The Not-So-Funny, And The Deadly

By Jiri Stejskal, President, CETRA

Mistranslations of marketing material have long been a source of amusement to the targets of overseas ad campaigns. Have you heard the one about the marketing bust of Chevrolet's Nova in Latin America, where "No va" means "Does not go," or the disastrous attempt to transfer the extremely successful marketing campaign of the milk industry to Latin America, where the now iconic "Got Milk?" ad was translated as "Are you lactating?" The list goes on and on. There are entire Web sites dedicated to translation bloopers.

Then there are the funny or incomprehensible instructions that come with gizmos. A Taiwanese toy maker will advise you about a frog it sells: "If it is

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thrown at full of your strength (sic), it will spit out the tongue, which is like the genuine one from the frog." It also warns: "Never throw out the other person's head." An all-time favorite are these instructions for drivers in Japan: "When passenger of foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet him melodiously at first, but if he still obstacles your passage then tootle him with vigor".

The hospitality industry seems particularly prone to putting amateur translations on display. Bucharest hotel lobby: "The lift is being fixed for the day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable." Paris hotel elevator: "Please leave your values at the front desk." German campground:

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A Lot Gets Lost In Translation

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"It is strictly (sic) forbidden on our Black Forest camping site that people of different sex, for instance, men & women, live together in one tent unless they are married for that purpose."

You have undoubtedly seen peculiar dishes on English menus when traveling abroad. For example, a restaurant in Poland offers "beef rashers beaten up in the country people's fashion," and a fine Swiss restaurant will assure you that "Our wines leave you nothing to hope for." Closer to home, even the MRA has been stung by mistranslation. One of the festivities to celebrate its 50th anniversary was a gala dinner at the June 2007 conference in San Francisco, featuring a would-be chic menu in French. The French on the menu, besides being written without the necessary accent marks, included such delights as "sein desseche de poulet" for "seared breast of chicken," unfortunately, it actually means "withered mammary gland of chicken." The menu left the French-speaking diners puzzled and the MRA red-faced.

Amusement and damaged image are not the only consequences of a poor translation. Sometimes the results are not funny at all. Earlier this year, CNN was barred from working in Iran due to its mistranslation of comments made by the president in a news conference about the country's nuclear research.


In healthcare, two of every three mistranslations have clinical consequences, according to a 2003 study published in the American Academy of Pediatrics. Indiana-based Mead Johnson Nutritionals had to recall 4.6 million cans of Nutramigen Baby Formula due to misleading Spanish instructions on bilingual labels. Company officials say that formula produced with the misleading directions could cause illness or even death.

As you can see, translation mistakes can be not only funny, but also embarrassing, expensive and potentially deadly. The American Translators Association (ATA), distributes a guide to buying translation services in print and online. In the brochure, titled *Translation: Getting it Right*, Chris Durban offers the following pointers:

- Does it really need to be translated? A picture is worth a thousand words. Think IKEA instructions.
- Think international from the start. Avoid cultural clichés, sports metaphors and other references that do not make sense in other countries.
- When choosing a translation provider, ask for samples and have them reviewed. Ask for references.
- How much will it cost? You get what you pay for. Professional translation service is not cheap.
- How important is style? Differentiate between for-information translation and for-publication work. They come with different price tags.
- Tell the translator what it's for. It is important for the translation provider to know who the target audience is and how the document will be used.
- Be specific. Is it Spanish for Mexico or Spain? French for Canada or France?
- The more technical your subject, the more important it is that your translators know it inside out.
- Get involved. Communicate with your translation provider to get it right. Provide as much information as you can, including glossaries and other reference materials if you have them.
- The home stretch: have typeset copy proofread by your translator. Strange things happen when the translated text changes hands.
- Typographical conventions vary from one language to the next. For example, French use a space before a colon. Do not "correct" it to follow the English convention.

Working with professionals is crucial. After all, translation is not just about words; it's about what the words are about. ✍

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