Market-based Translation: Fine-tuning the Translation to Satisfy Market Realities

By Johannes Tan

Although not superb, initially the translation looked acceptable. The target document matched the source document, nothing was seriously distorted or omitted. Several syntactical errors and terminological inconsistencies were spotted due to the translator's inclination toward a word-for-word translation, though he seemed to have a good grasp of the subject matter. Still, the client, a Fortune 500 company, was unhappy with the translation. In several post-training surveys, the translation of training manuals for total quality control in manufacturing -- used at the client's plant in Indonesia -- was reported to be "awkward," "confusing," and "incoherent." The client's disappointment could well be understood considering they have coughed up over US$ 40,000 just to translate and print the 400-page training manuals. Bluntly speaking, how could a company promote total quality control among its employees if the translation of its training manuals is not an example of quality?

Straight from the Horse's Mouth

Thus, my mission was to improve the translation for the next training sessions. After reviewing the first ten or eleven pages of the translation, I suspected that something was wrong but still had no hard facts to support my suspicion. So I called the translation agency who assigned the job in order to get their permission -- and the client's consent as well -- to interview the manufacturing plant staff in Indonesia. At first the agency was rather reluctant, the client was not enthusiastic and I was not wild about it, either (more on this later). My proposal may have been regarded more as a nuisance than as an effort to go to the root of the problem. I had to explain that the first step to rectify the problem was to get things straight from the horse's mouth. After completing a conference call with the agency and client, I got the green light.

One week and five international midnight calls later (thanks to the 15-hour time difference between the West Coast and Jakarta and the plant work shift hours -- one reason I was not wild about my own proposal in the first place), my initial suspicion was confirmed. After interviewing two in-house trainers and four trainees who elaborated on their unfavorable feedback, my conclusion was that the previous translator had failed to distinguish the different variables in demographic and psychographic characteristics between the trainers and the trainees.

"Canned" Translation in a Generic Tone

While the in-house trainers were middle-aged engineers, status-conscious Javanese, white-collar managers and came from a higher socioeconomic background, on average the trainees were a generation younger, culturally more diversified and blue-collar mechanics. Yet the translator failed to recognize the above potential variables, much less "translate" them discreetly into the different appropriate nuances and subtleties. He had addressed the two groups indiscriminately in a "canned", generic tone as if they belonged in the same demographic and psychographic group. While the translation might have

confused the trainees, it definitely offended the trainers and insulted their intelligence. Had the translator possessed some basic knowledge in marketing principles, the awkwardness and incoherence complained about so much in the translation would have been eliminated, or at least minimized. In retrospect, two different versions could have been produced easily -- a trainer copy and a trainee copy -- without doubling the cost. It would have taken the translator only a workday or two to modify one version with global changes using any word-processing software and thereby making a custom-made version for the other. Translation is customization.

Market-based Translation

Many would argue that the translation business is a service industry -- this projects a more sophisticated image -- and translators are selling a service instead of products. However, we also have to be able to perceive translated documents as products which have to satisfy varied and diversified target audience groups. Thus, it is imperative for translators to recognize different target audience characteristics and variables in order to fine-tune the final product to satisfy market realities. The training manual case above proves that this premise even applies for "non-marketing" translations in "non-marketing" environments. Call it market-based translation, where varied and diversified characteristics of the target audience should be not only recognized and taken into account, but also inherently integrated into the translation.

For starters, not all languages are as democratic and egalitarian as American English, where almost everyone could simply be addressed with the plain-vanilla "you". Translating something as simple as a business letter calls for a quick, albeit effective, analysis of the addressee's demographic, geographic and psychographic characteristics. The headline of John Heilemann's article in The New Yorker of April 28/May 5, 1997 (Annals of Advertising) says it succinctly: "All Europeans Are Not Alike." All Americans are not alike, all Indonesians are not alike. Thus, consider all variables of the target audience's demographic, geographic and psychographic characteristics -- for example their education level, age bracket, socioeconomic status and cultural background. Will the translation of a hazardous pesticide warning label, for example, be addressed to blue-collar farm workers with limited education for practical purposes in the field? Or will it be addressed to white-collar government officials from the target country's equivalent to the Environmental Protection Agency merely to fulfill standard administrative procedures? Is it wise to compromise the message with only one generic tone and register or are two versions necessary to convey the message across effectively? A politically correct American English text or one-size-fits-all approach could sometimes be counter-productive in other countries with different cultures and social values.

A Translator's Radar Screen

The following are some considerations on the diversity of target audience groups utilized by advertising and marketing executives in their trade. It would be ideal if a translator could constantly keep these important characteristics and key variables on his or her "radar screen" during the translation process.
- Demographic Characteristics: If applicable, consider variables such as age bracket (usually broken down to 0-14; 15-20; 21-30; 31-50; 51-65; over 65),

gender, lifestyle, income bracket, occupation (white-collar or blue-collar), education level, religion and race/ethnicity.
▪ Geographic Characteristics: If applicable, consider variables such as region of country, current infrastructure and living environments, relative location to neighboring countries, target area (rural, urban or suburban), diversity level (mono-cultural or multi-cultural society) and others.
▪ Psychographic Characteristics: If applicable, consider variables such as socioeconomic status (lower; lower-middle; middle; upper-middle; upper; elite), shared values (liberal or conservative; group harmony or individualism; process-oriented or result-oriented), personality (outgoing or reclusive, formal or laid-back) and others.
▪ Behavioristic Characteristics: If applicable, consider all other variables which may affect the target audience's acceptance of the translation: association and connotation, symbolism and euphemism, perception and positioning, readiness and response toward previous or similar messages.
   By now it is clear that market-based translation can be realized only through a joined effort and mutual collaboration among clients, translation agencies and translators.

For Clients:
   It has been said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Translation: In this era of market globalization, your chain of message is only as effective as the quality of its copywriting ... and translation into the target language. It doesn't help much to hire a top-gun Madison Avenue copywriter, then scramble for just the lowest translation cost or the cheapest translator. Staying within a budget and meeting deadlines is key to survival, but it's not everything. Published translations will be disseminated for all the world to see in an instant, especially in this electronic age. Provide important key facts to the translation agency to be relayed to the translator(s). Do not only provide the focus, share also the big picture (what, how, where, when, and why). You know your market best.

For Translation Companies:
   A Translation Company is not merely a broker between the client and the translator; it's the client's international linguistic and cultural consultant and the translator's manager. Direct the client to provide a bullet-proof source document and quality reference materials -- garbage in, garbage out. Anticipate needs. Allow reasonable time for the translator(s) to accomplish the mission, do not get intimidated by an unreasonable deadline. As illustrated above, considerable time to improve the translation can be spent for non-translating chores such as conducting interviews or investigation.

For Translators:
   Research, research, and research. Do your homework, visit the client's website and familiarize yourself with the client's business and market. If it's still under construction, visit a competitor's website instead. Help yourself by extracting any useful information about the industry. The client's annual report, if available, is also a good source. Use common sense and be sensitive, constantly putting yourself in the target audience's shoes. A word of caution: fine-tune the translation to satisfy market realities, but don't go overboard by "doctoring" it. Translation is not copywriting, and your accountability as a

translator comes first. [Note: Some key facts in this article have been deliberately obscured to protect confidential and proprietary information.]

Besides working as an English <> Indonesian translator and conference interpreter, Johannes Tan is also a cross-cultural analyst and linguistic consultant for several federal agencies and many Fortune 100 companies, translation companies and research centers in the USA, Canada and Indonesia. He has been an English <> Indonesian translator since 1973, is an ATA Active Member and resides in Portland, Oregon. This article was originally published in the July 1997 issue of The ATA Chronicle. Revised and updated in 2015.