

No knife cuts as deep as a wrongly placed (decimal) point

Why mistranslations in technical documentations make our life and that of the manufacturer difficult and how we can avoid it

by Frank Jankowski (short version)

Dostojewski translators abuse our trust when they let the destitute Raskolnikov drink champagne. They misconceive that "schampanskoje" in this context designates cheap sparkling wine. However, this nonsense does not have any effects on the reader's integrity or the reputation of the publisher, who keeps on publishing the repeatedly highly praised "new interpretations" with the same inconsistency. The consequences of the Star Trek dubbing mix-up between "silizium" (silicon) and "Silikon" (silicone), which was also made by the translators of the Steve Jobs biography right in the first chapter, are also of little significance.

However, in the world of technical translations, it is a completely different matter. Seemingly much less important errors can have devastating results and in any respect. A decimal point that has been misplaced by a single place can mean the agonizing death of a person or even many people, namely if it concerns, for example, the amount of an X-ray dose. In the description of a defibrillator, a small error is enough to cause an incorrect application and the death of a patient, confirms a spokeswoman at Heinz Stampfli AG. In an American study, 1,500 of 30,000 investigated medication errors resulted from unclearly translated abbreviations. This is why the sector is increasingly relying on qualified medics. However, in the medical journal another study confirms "that an appropriately trained translator is preferable to a medic with good language skills". In an international medical blog it even reads: "In nearly one in five cases that required the involvement of a medical translator, a serious error was reported."

Universitas, the Austrian translators' and interpreters' association, even awards prizes for the worst translations. The problem of sloppy work by translators has been a concern among experts for a long while. During a call for tenders by the European Union in 1998, a tender was rejected on the grounds that the documentation contained a series of translation errors. The applicant insinuated corruption: In reality, a company is being favoured which employs cheap personnel and has already been awarded an earlier contract. This was the justification for his objection. The Irish translatology expert Jody Byrne uses the consequences of this problem as a prime example in which "the sheer cost in terms of money, time and effort is enormous". Byrne also reported the following interesting case in which a German language service provider translated the word "steam" as "Rauch"(smoke) for the German operating instructions for an English bread-baking machine. Smoke emission, according to the information, is completely normal. Unfortunately, a design fault caused overheating and it actually smoked instead of just steaming. As this was not dangerous according to the manufacturer's instructions, the German bakery assistants just let it smoke – not realising that such emissions are actually poisonous...

One of the most expensive translation service provider errors of all times concerns Continental Illinois. A Japanese bank had expressed its interest to take over this ailing, at the time seventh biggest bank in the United States. When a corresponding press release was translated into Japanese, the press agency mixed up the term "rumour" with "announcement". In an instant, all investors and creditors demanded their money back. Together with the Federal Deposit Insurance and Federal Reserve Board, the Controller of Currency pumped around \$2bn into a refinancing scheme as a confidence-building measure – without success. They continued pumping in money as they were scared of domino and snowball effects until the American nation had finally paid eight billion dollars for this business. It is not seldom that export-orientated companies have to accept high additional costs for botched internationalisations of their documentation. The letter of rejection from a French regulatory authority for a locomotive that was ready for delivery cost the sixth biggest train manufacturer in the world, Transmashholding in Moscow, around 85,000 euros in fees as well as can avoid them in the future as nearly 2,000 euros intermediate storage costs per day that the revision dragged on. This was caused by inexpertly translated formalities.

Completely different, hardly less expensive neglectfulness in the linguistic localisation sector is repeatedly conjured up by worldwide market launches. The two most embarrassing cases were created, in one case, by Sweden's Electrolux vacuum cleaner with the claim "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux" (English translation), which an American would understand as "nothing is as bad as an Electrolux!". The other fauxpas, which Japan's Mitsubishi provided with its Pajero (Spanish: "wanker"), advanced to almost become a familiar trash-talk word in the sector. Although analysts had confirmed good to very good sales prospects in China for the Citroën C4, hardly a single car was sold in this gigantic market – until a localization service provider was consulted, who explained that "C4" in the ears of a Chinese person means something like "die twice". The name was changed to "C Quatre", but the image was damaged. China is a hot potato – more and more non-Chinese are having to experience this.

This calls for a remedy. To be more exact: For a confidential and independent standard process for the quality assurance of specialised text translations, for which \$45bn (direct costs invoiced by language service providers) is spent per year.

The CEO of the renowned Hamburg language service provider, Glossa Group, was certainly not the first person to identify this problem, but the first person to tackle it systematically – with myproof®, a universally useable, web-based CMS, which can be integrated in a company's own system as a plug-in or app. Users can thus define individual assessment parameters for the texts to be checked, identify translation problems in detail (and get them rectified) and track quality developments through standardised classification numbers.

Once word of this has spread, the Austrian Universitas will find it much more difficult to award its anti-prize for the "worst translation of the year" to someone, which by the way consists of a list of professional translators and interpreters. The Schlumberger winery was the last "winner". The long-established retailer had reinterpreted the slogan "Der außergewöhnliche Verführer" as "The exceptional abuser" for its export business – not only embarrassing, but in view of the intoxicating product even a contraindicated slip. "We regret that especially in the case of a renowned company, there is no awareness for the necessity of

professional translations," the general secretary of the association announced. "In this case, the company clearly saved money in the wrong place." The translation of 'Verführer' is 'seducer', but is not very convincing in an English advertising text. Linguistic experts are called for here, who translate the slogan into English so that it corresponds with the meaning of the original German text.

Translation by Michael Baker

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<http://www.uebelsetzung.eu/start.htm>