

Translation Tips and Pitfalls

Translating Is a Special Skill. The United States is a monolingual country in which the ability to speak a foreign language is usually associated with recent immigrants and is often thought of as a disadvantage to achieving the so-called American dream of a better life. Although people have been translating and interpreting throughout history, the study of interpretation and translation as a legitimate field in this country has developed only since the mid 20th Century. As a result, most citizens are ignorant of the structures of languages and how they may or may not relate to each other. Ordinary people assume that anybody who can speak a second language can automatically translate between the two by basically arranging the words with similar meanings in the same order, and that no special skill beyond one's ability to speak and write is required.... Nothing could be further from the truth! Consider, for example, the single-word English slang response "cool" to a question such as "Would you like a piece of cake"? If we wish to translate this expression into Spanish, a quick perusal of a Spanish/English dictionary gives the following possible word translations for "cool": "frío", "fresco", "tibio", "flojo", "indiferente", and "ligero". A back-translation of these words give us "cold", "fresh", "warm", "loose", "indifferent" and "light". None of these words comes even close to expressing the idea of "yes, please", which might be an alternative for the use of "cool" in the example noted above. Translating "cool" as "Sí, por favor" might get one the cake, but would not impart the idea of *being with it* or *hipness* that comes with the slang use of "cool". Following are some additional tips and pitfalls.

An Effective Original Document. The most important thing that a researcher can do to facilitate an adequate translation of a document intended to be used by the general public is to ensure that the original be written in a clear, concise and simple manner. Avoid wordiness and jargon. If jargon must be used, make sure it is explained clearly. It is not necessary to show erudition by using sophisticated, learned and or rarely-used words. Always remember that your mission is to explain your proposed research so that potential participants will not only be truly informed, but will want to join the study.

Use Effective Reference Works. A good, and appropriate-to-the-field, dictionary is essential, but by itself is not enough. Indeed, you should have recourse to both English and Spanish dictionaries as well as an English/Spanish dictionary. Books and guides on style and grammar and the art of translation are also necessary. The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, published by the Modern Language Association of America, New York, and *Introducción a la traductología*, by Gerardo Vázquez-Ayora, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., are but two recommended examples of the many books and guides available.

Don't Confuse Formal and Informal Speech. American Spanish uses both formal (*usted*) and informal (*tú*) ways of speaking when addressing a single second person (*you*). When addressing more than one "you" (*you all* or *all of you*) the "ustedes" form is used. In translating consent forms and other research documents for adults, the formal

“usted” form should be used. Only when addressing children would the “tú” form be acceptable. It is important to take care not to mix these forms.

Avoid Non-Standard Anglicisms. Anglicisms, words borrowed from English, that are not recognized or standard in Spanish, even though they may be frequently used in some areas, should always be avoided. Local examples include such words as “troca” for *truck*, “biles” for *bills* and “files” for *fields*. Although these words will almost always be recognized, their standard translations, “camión”, “facturas” or “cuentas”, and “campos” are universal and more properly used in a formal translation.

Avoid False Cognates. False cognates are words that seem similar or the same in both languages, but have different meanings. One example is the English word “yard” (*yarda* in Spanish), which can refer to the grassy area around a house or a unit of measurement. In standard Spanish it translates exclusively as a unit of measurement. Misuse of such words will usually be understood, however, they can lead to embarrassing mix-ups. Take, for example, the Spanish word “librería” which means *bookstore*, but is often confused with *library*. If a study group is instructed to meet at the librería, rather than the *biblioteca* (standard Spanish for *library*), chances are good that at least half the group will appear at the bookstore.

Avoid Anglicisms of Frequency. Anglicisms of frequency refers to the over use of grammatical or syntactical structures that exist in both languages, but are avoided in Spanish. A specific example is the passive voice as illustrated by the following statement: *The information will be given to you by the investigator*. While this sentence can be properly translated with the passive voice in Spanish (*La información le será dado a usted por el investigador*), it seems stilted and clumsy. In such cases, switching to the active voice (“The investigator will give you the information” *El investigador le dará la información*) is always preferable. If the agent (the investigator) is not present rendering the sentence *The information will be given to you*, Spanish still has two ways to translate this without using the passive voice: the “se” construction (*Se le dará la información*) and the “impersonal they” construction (*Le darán la información*). Both are preferable. Another common English construction is the use of the present participle or gerund (verbs ending in *-ing*) in such sentences as *Studying the results will provide us with better treatments in the future*. In such cases, Spanish usage would prefer either an infinitive (*Estudiar*) or a noun (*El estudio de*).

Avoid Noun Modifiers. English frequently uses nouns in place of adjectives as modifiers. Take, for example, the CSUB building complex known as the Business Development Center. In English each of these words is a noun and their Spanish equivalents are “negocio”, “desarrollo”, and “centro”. To render the name into proper Spanish it is necessary to make the word “business” plural and to rearrange the words as follows, while adding the appropriate article and prepositions: *Center for the Development of Businesses* becomes in Spanish: *Centro para el Desarrollo de Negocios*.

Orthographic Considerations. Only proper names and the first word of an article or book title are capitalized in Spanish. The names of months, the days of the week and adjectives of nationality are never capitalized. All questions and exclamations begin with the up-side down question mark or exclamation point (¿ and ¡). Properly placed written diacritical (accent) marks is of utmost importance since their use can change the meaning of a word, for example, “continuo” (*continuous*), “continúo” (*I continue*), and “continuó” (*He, she, it or you continued*).

Checking Translations. When translating your own documents, it is best to have another native-speaker student or colleague edit and check your work. Another effective technique is to have another person back-translate your document without having seen the original and compare the two to locate problems.

The above should not be taken as a complete list of the many potential pitfalls facing translators. Indeed, they represent just a few of the more common problems that may be encountered. The IRB recognizes that the cost of professional translation can be prohibitive, and we do not wish to discourage research involving non-English speaking participants. Careful planning, however, and the assistance of professional translators whenever possible, is always recommended.