

This edition of our **Working with Languages and Cultures** newsletter takes a deeper look at our two primary services and explores the impact of culture on translation. How does something as *abstract and subjective* as culture impact something as *concrete and objective* as translation?

Linguistic Richness

Can you quickly differentiate between *accurate*, *precise*, and *exact*? Why do we have three words in English which, for all intents and purposes, convey the same meaning? This is “richness” – having the ability to express more meaning and nuance with a single word.

The richness of a language is a vague measure of the number of unique terms and phrases used to describe similar concepts, each with its own specific meaning. For translators, this richness is a root cause of the effort required to produce a quality translation.

English is generally considered to have the largest vocabulary (even though much of it is simply borrowed from other languages) and is often called the “richest” language in use today. The Latvian language, on the other hand, is spoken by roughly 2 million people and, understandably, has a much smaller vocabulary. Translating from English into Latvian, therefore, is often a job of searching for the most appropriate terms to express a very nuanced English word.



In Latvian, the word for “jewelry” [dārglietas] is merely a combination of “expensive” [dārgs] and “things” [lietas]...while “jewels” and “gems” are “expensive rocks”. What is the difference between a jewel and a gem? This is an example of how English can be considered *richer* than Latvian, for example.

English isn’t always as creatively rich as we might think, though...consider the English terms *housewife*, *bookmark*, or *doorstop*.

Languages are dynamic in that they grow (and shrink) as times change. The explosion of terminology needed to describe internet-related topics in English is a great example of a language growing and becoming richer. At the same time, there are words that we no longer use (or at least which are considered archaic): *Why dost thou rantipole such?*

In addition, some words simply don’t exist in other languages because the object or concept doesn’t exist. The term *bridal shower* is untranslatable into most Spanish dialects because they are not a common tradition. *Vārdadiena*, although literally translatable, is not conceptually translatable from Latvian into English, because we do not celebrate “Name Days” (Each day of the calendar has a collection of honorary names. Like a birthday, when your name day comes, you celebrate.)

Translating concepts from one language to another requires much more than just a dictionary. It requires the ability to understand the written word, together with all of its nuances, **and** the ability to express those concepts with an entirely different set of words, phrases, and nuances...in a different cultural context.

Language is one of the most dynamic and complex components of our lives, allowing us to communicate via simple transactional dialogues (asking for directions) and deep meaningful interactions (a debate on the value of teamwork). We can communicate bewilderment, frustration, or sorrow. We can give instructions, feedback, or support. For the eloquent speaker of English, it is rare to find oneself without the “mot juste”. (*We use the French term, meaning “most appropriate word for the situation”, because we do not have an exact equivalent in English.*) •

Wikiwords?

Wikiwords is a new collaborative project in the translation and linguist community that seeks to create a web-based “dictionary” of all terms in all languages. Like Wikipedia, it can be modified by users and will grow from the contributions of its users. • www.wikiwords.org

When does Culture matter?

While being aware of cultural differences, translators have yet to find a way to smoothly merge different cultural frameworks into a standard language understood by different audiences. Ultimately, the translator has to decide on the importance of certain cultural aspects which are explicit as well as implicit in a text and to what extent it is necessary to translate them into the target language.

Cultural Note:

In Vietnamese, there are many more unique terms for members of the family than in English. While we may say “uncle” to refer to our father’s or mother’s brother, in Vietnamese, they have a different word for a father’s older brother, a father’s younger brother, and a mother’s brother. The Vietnamese culture puts great value on family relations and this is reflected in the richness of their language.

Different translations require varying degrees of cultural awareness. With many legal documents, for example, the translation must stay as close to the original text as possible, even if it means literally translating a mistake that was introduced in the original language. Other texts that require a minimal degree of cultural awareness are technical translations, such as equipment manuals or financial documents.

On the other hand, fields such as human resources, marketing, and health care require extreme awareness of and attention to the differences between cultures, even when translating documents into a language that is spoken in multiple countries such as Spanish.

It is crucial to know the colloquial references of each culture because an ordinary word in one culture can take on embarrassing or dangerous implications in another. Furthermore, when we think in our native language, we think in that culture...but that way of thinking may not meet the requirements or follow the parameters of a different culture. •

Industry Insight:

Translation Memories (software tools which help the translator identify text segments which have been translated before) are based on the assumption that text which was translated one way before, will be translated the same way again. While this may often be true, it can also be a dangerous assumption. Even if a text string is a “100% match”, translators must always verify that the translation is still appropriate in the context of the new instance where it is used.

Globalize, Localize, or Internationalize?

As the importance of recognizing cultural differences has grown in corporate America, translation has become not only an interlingual but also an intercultural activity. New terminology has emerged around the world as a result of the need to bring cultures to life while translating a document. By the end of the 1980s, terms such as localization, internationalization and globalization had become very familiar. Today, these terms have all but replaced the word translation in most of the industry jargon.

- **Internationalization** is the process of planning and implementing products and services so that they can be easily adapted to specific local languages and cultures. An internationalized product or service is therefore easier to localize.
- **Localization** is the process of adapting a product or service to a particular language, culture, and local "look-and-feel." Ideally, a product or service is developed so that localization is relatively easy to achieve. For example, creating illustrations for manuals in which the text can easily be changed to another language allows flexibility for the manual's localization.
- **Globalization** is the tendency of businesses, technologies, or philosophies to spread throughout the world, or the process of making this happen. The process of first enabling a product to be localized and then localizing it for different national audiences is sometimes known as globalization. (source: www.en.wikipedia.org) •

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE

Translations Worthy of a Giggle

In a Belgrade hotel elevator:
"To move the cabin, push button for wishing floor. If the cabin should enter more persons, each one should press a number of wishing floor. Driving is then going alphabetically by national order."

On the menu of a Swiss restaurant:
"Our wines leave you nothing to hope for."

In a car rental brochure in Tokyo:
"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."

In a Moscow hotel:
"You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists and writers are buried daily except Thursday."

In a Rome laundromat:
"Ladies, leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time."

Source:
Anguished English, by Richard Lederer (1989)

What is Cultural Auditing?

Cultural auditing is a process that can be applied to any document or project...not only a translation. It takes a holistic view of your documents and lets you know where you may be making cultural faux-pas.

In the US, for example, companies often use letters as part of their telephone number, (e.g., 1-800-555-HELP). This technique, needless to say, is not one that a translator can literally translate. To translate the word "HELP" into the target language would [in most cases] be inaccurate. While that may seem obvious, many people don't realize that there are many countries where telephones do not even contain letters on the buttons!

Another example of cultural auditing is the adaptation of colors and symbols in brochures, web pages, and other materials. For example, in China, certain colors and symbols are associated with death, so these colors should be avoided in corporate communications targeting China. Do your documents for China use white, blue and black...or clocks, straw sandals, storks or cranes?

Imagine a webpage or brochure that was trying to promote the eco-friendly initiatives of its organization. Would you perceive it differently if the brochure were black, as opposed to green?

Do the materials you send to Africa have primarily caucasian men and women in the images? Is there a benefit to including primarily caucasian men and women in your imagery for Japan?

Cultural auditing is the essence of cross-cultural communication and is an effective method for bringing the message to the target audience in a way that a simple translation cannot; it is the ultimate strategy for ensuring the full impact of your message. •

Test Your Translation Skills! *The "objective" becomes slightly more subjective...*

A classic yet simple example of the richness (or poorness) of a language is the English word "you". In Modern English, we have only one word for this "2nd person" in the conversation. In the Spanish spoken in Spain, there are currently as many as 5 forms of the word "you". An important difference is the "respectful" form [usted], used primarily to convey formality. The English "you" has no connotation of greater or less respect. Similarly, Spanish has plural forms of the word "you", including another form if the group is entirely female.

- tú (an informal "you")
- usted (a formal "you")
- vosotros (an informal "you" for more than one person)
- vosotras (an informal "you" for more than one person, if all are female)
- ustedes (a formal "you" for more than one person)

Interestingly, we do have informal ways of expressing a plural "you" in some dialects of English, by way of the "y'all" or "you guys", but there is no form that is acceptable in professional writing...except for "you".

So, which form of "you" would you [meaning the formal singular reader of this newsletter] choose if you had to translate the following sentences?

1. **You are required to complete this on-line training by December 2006.**
2. **You have done a great job on this project and we hope to bring you together again on other global assignments.**
3. **You and your husbands are invited to attend the product launch celebration next Friday.**