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Eight ways to make sure you  
get the best from your  
**technical translators.**

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technical translation

# 1

## Get the right fit

*A French energy company spent over £100,000 advertising in English newspapers and just £50 on the ad's translation. Predictably they ended up with œuf on their face.*

**Most translation companies seem the same on the surface; they all claim a vast network of skilled translators, they all use some kind of quality metrics, similar-sounding processes and offer the ultimate in accuracy and speed.**

All things being equal, and given the pressure to cut costs, shouldn't you just plump for the lowest price? Actually, they all seem the same because they pretty much are and they all operate within the same cost constraints. A bargain basement language service is cutting the cloth somewhere and it's you who'll feel the pinch.

The best choice is always the one with the right culture for a long-term relationship. And building a long-term relationship should be your objective. It's the translator who will communicate your message abroad. The better they understand your products and corporate values the better they will be. Of course, they'll expect you to push the price and they'll no doubt do what they can, but take care not to push the baby out with the bathwater.

**Don't rely on the right names on a client list.**

The language of science is international so some technical translations can be quite straightforward. But, and it is a big but, technical publications can be dense and complex in their native language. If the translator doesn't have a complete grasp of the subject matter the errors they create could be disastrous.

Whatever expertise your translation company claims, make sure you get samples of texts that fit your own particular field. Don't rely on a client list! Check those samples with a trusted native speaker. Also make a point of printing the translation company's name on all your publications. It will encourage their best work.

**Consider the document carefully from the reader's point of view. Does the whole shebang need translating?**

- Cut anything not strictly necessary to meet the specific reader's needs before you send the text to the translator.
- If you can, produce a special 'for translation' version.
- Brief the translator about the purpose of the text. The better they understand your objectives the better the result will be.

It may be useful to get your translation company involved at this early stage. They can help you identify exactly which parts of your document need to be translated and in what way.

# 2

## Make it a tight fit

# 3

## Cut the c\*\*p

*Ikea operates in 17 different languages. 80% of their instruction sheets use pictures alone to guide people through the assembly of their purchases.*

# 4

## Don't over engineer it

*'Smuggle the razor blade on your muscle vertically then drag your skin and shave back slowly.' No thanks!*

**Sales literature needs the highest standard of translation, but other items don't necessarily.**

Reference material for foreign staff, for instance: they may prefer spec sheets in English or maybe they can get by with machine translation for catalogues and indices. Tell your translation company the standard you need:

- **For research:** machine translation is passable for a quick 'heads-up' on content of web texts or business letters etc.
- **For reference:** an accurate rendering of the text that leaves the original sentence structure intact. This may be clunky to read but will communicate the 'gist' accurately at a lower cost.
- **For publication:** a thorough reworking of the meaning and the intention of a piece into the target language with particular emphasis on style and flow of the text.

# 5

## Loquation Loquation Loquation

*The phrase, to be a 'bon viveur', conjures an air of decadence to English speakers while in France it is completely ungrammatical and quite unknown.*

**German isn't just German, French isn't just French. There's High German, Low German, Austrian German and Swiss German, even an Italian German; there's French French and Québécois French and Cajun French and Cameroonian French, even a non-standard variety on Jersey. So stating the language alone is not enough.**

The aim of a good translation is to be 'transparent' to the reader. To achieve this quality make sure you tell your translators where the document is going to be read. This will help them deploy the right mother-tongue speaker to make the text read as native.

- **Specify target language**
- **Specify target location**

# 6

## Style it

*An employee of a French company translated their franchising slogan as "Tomorrow, we will expect on your dynamism." Needless to say, there were no takers.*

**Translating your own company's tone of voice is really important to maintaining a coherent global brand. If your English is upbeat, your German authoritarian and your Spanish laid back, then you'll send a very confused message out to the world.**

Prepare a short style guide for your translators. Describe how your own unique 'tone of voice' should come across to the reader. The translator will use this style guide as a reference point and adapt it to fit each different cultural context. Include in it any proprietary terminology or non-standard meanings you use to describe your products.

- Is your language formal or conversational?
- Do you allow technical jargon or prefer plain speaking?
- Is your language precise or more general?

What does your own proprietary terminology communicate to:

- Fellow professionals?
- Customers?

# 7

## Get it straight

*Tony Blair met some very blank faces when he used the expression 'the full monty' in an address to an audience of Japanese businessmen.*

**Aim to produce a text which is 'translatable'.**

Native text is usually full of linguistic idiosyncrasy. If you're not sure about how a text will translate, recast it into 'international English' before you submit it to the translators.

- Eliminate passive voice.
- Use standard sentence construction of subject – verb – object.
- Eliminate jargon, idioms and nouns used as verbs.
- Spell out all the acronyms.
- Use words within their primary dictionary definitions.
- Repeat nouns rather than use backwards-pointing pronouns.

# 8

## Don't fiddle

**Translators are firstly professional writers, don't second guess them.**

There's a raft of anecdotes about the office worker who corrects a mistake in a translation just before going to press. Don't join that unhappy throng. Don't let anyone near a translation including yourself.

If you do have a doubt pass it back to your translators. They keep an audit trail of every edit and change of instruction and they will know exactly why a particular word or phrase has been used. They also store all of the preferences and terms used in any previous work they have done for you. This memory bank brings a stylistic consistency to all of their work for you. But, if you're still not convinced get *them* to make the change.

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Translation House  
2 Bridewell Place  
London EC4V 6AP

tel: 020 7842 0174

fax: 020 7842 0172

email: [enquiry@metalexis.net](mailto:enquiry@metalexis.net)

website: [www.metalexis.net](http://www.metalexis.net)

## Translation checklist

- Have you listed the language combinations and the countries where the document will be used?
- What is the final deadline?
- In what format will the document be sent to the translation company?
- Do you need to make any changes to the document to make it suitable for translation (i.e. removing UK specific information)?
- Is this the final version of the document or will there be amendments in the future?
- What will the translated document be used for?
- Are there any reference materials or glossaries that the translation company should use?
- Do you have any instructions/requirements regarding the specific translators that will work on the document?
- Is this document part of a bigger series of documents, and will you need to achieve consistency between them?
- If so, what is the schedule for the other documents?
- Is there somebody available to liaise with the translation company in case of questions about content, etc.?
- Do you have someone capable of checking the translation and providing feedback or amendments?
- Are there any specific constraints/considerations that you need to pass on to your translation company (i.e. limitation of space)?
- Have you provided the full materials for typesetting (i.e. images, fonts)?

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**Metalexis is the global language partner you need to protect your reputation abroad.** For more copies of this guide please contact us at:

**London**

Translation House  
2 Bridewell Place  
London EC4V 6AP

tel: +44 (0)20 7842 0174  
fax: +44 (0)20 7842 0172  
email: [enquiry@metalexis.net](mailto:enquiry@metalexis.net)  
website: [www.metalexis.net](http://www.metalexis.net)

or:

**New York**

230 Park Avenue,  
Suite 650  
New York, NY  
10169

tel: +1 646 717 9334  
fax: +1 646 717 9335