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Informational Report

Translating and Interpreting: What All Nonprofits Need To Know

By Philip B. Auerbach

To expand your mission to multicultural communities at home or abroad, here are five tips on what NOT to do and many tips on how to do these processes correctly.

Whether your nonprofit engages locally or worldwide, consider that:

- around 72% of the world does not speak English, and
- the US has around 60 million Latinos of whom 37 million speak Spanish at home ...and only around 35 million are English proficient.

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If your nonprofit can serve overseas or non-English communities at home, how much more effective will you become?

The key to expanding your mission is often by delivering your messages in other languages. But for most nonprofit executives, the process often starts with many incorrect assumptions and no knowledge of how to do the process correctly.



Here are some tips about what NOT to do:

1. Do not rely on in-house native speakers, friends, relatives, your neighbor who comes from there, or your cousin who just returned from foreign study.

Translating – conveying written communication – is time-consuming, usually requires laying out files in their design programs, and usually requires some knowledge of your specialized vocabulary. With over 30 years' experience, we have seen countless cases where well-meaning amateurs such as those above get the meanings wrong.

Some prime examples are both into Chinese:

A well-meaning amateur translated “silicon wafer” as “silicon biscuit” and translated “a house with a sunken living room” as “a house with no foundation.”

True, these examples deal with IT and real estate respectively. But your nonprofit also has subject-specific terminology that others probably don't know so well. Do you want to risk your reputation?



2. Do not rely on software programs such as Google Translate for your outbound marketing.

“Machine translation” as these programs are called are excellent to get the gist of what some foreign file says in English. But they should never be used for translating your brochures, manuals or website because they still make comical mistakes that can make you look foolish, are not good with long or complex sentences, and make grammar mistakes that can make you look cheap or unqualified.

For example, Google Translate has greatly improved from the years when the sentence, “Next Tuesday we will have a Board meeting” was rendered into Chinese as “Next Tuesday we will have a collection of planks of wood.”

But Google still translates the simple sentence “She was on the fence about whether to come” into French as literally, “She was on top of the fence about if to come.” Machine Translation is not good with many expressions. In this case, of course, “on the fence” means “to be undecided.”





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3. Do not rely on friends, co-workers or in-house speakers to interpret – conveying spoken communication such as for meetings, workshops or phone calls.

Interpreting is very mentally taxing. Unlike translators who can look up words or consult with colleagues about shades of meaning, interpreters must literally think on their feet and convey your message immediately. At conferences, qualified interpreters work in pairs so that one is on and one is off for 20- 30 minutes per period. This method prevents burnout and miscommunication.



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4. Do not rely on non-professional translators or interpreters who have been in this country for many years or who might use some rural dialect.

Friends, cousins and others who speak another language and who live here often forget words in their native languages, mix them with English, and may not know standard (or official) word usage.

And if you don't speak the language, how will you really know whether your friend, neighbor or co-worker is truly qualified?

5. Do not assume that if a person can speak another language he or she can translate or interpret.

Your friendly language speaker can probably do simple communications such as asking directions, shopping and daily conversation. But communication that becomes technical, involves governments or requires specialized terminology for your area of focus rises to a far higher level of required expertise. And that's where "amateurs" fall very short very fast.





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How to do it right the first time.

Whether for translating or interpreting, your message will be communicated accurately and quickly when you rely on a professional language agency. These agencies use only linguists who:

- have advanced (usually master's) degrees in the art of translating or interpreting;
- work only into their native language;
- speak the terminology of your field of focus (education, housing, health, etc.);
- have at least ten years' ongoing experience and are current with the nuances, expressions and slang of their native languages; and
- use language-industry software programs that capture terminology and re-call it when those terms appear in later projects. Using these "translation memories" maintains consistent word usage, speeds the process, allows professional translators to override the computer choice, and allows language agencies to provide you with discounts for repeated terms.



“These agencies also can handle multiple languages simultaneously such as translating courses into Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog [Filipino] and Vietnamese for US immigrant audiences.”

These agencies also:

1. Can handle multiple languages simultaneously such as translating courses into Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog [Filipino] and Vietnamese for US immigrant audiences;
2. Often offer 70, 80, or over 100 languages;
3. Can lay out your brochures or documentation in all languages quickly and efficiently;





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4. Understand that languages expand or contract in relation to English and therefore know how to adjust page layouts accordingly;
5. Know how to source and how to screen linguists to ensure they meet professional standards;
6. Use a three-step translation process called TEP to ensure quality:
 - Initial draft Translation by a qualified professional of the target language;
 - **E**editing, a review by a second qualified language professional to verify nuances, expressions, accuracy and local usage (such as for Peruvian Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese or Congolese French); and
 - **P**roofreading the final files for spelling, punctuation methods, grammar and formatting in each target language.



“Your agency project manager will do a final Quality Assurance review to ensure that all language versions have the same number of bullet points, have the same titles bolded and italicized...”



If your manual, brochure or course is going into multiple languages simultaneously, your agency project manager will do a final Quality Assurance review to ensure that all language versions have the same number of bullet points, have the same titles bolded and italicized, have converted measurements into metric or money into local currency correctly and uniformly, and have all the graphs or charts as in your English original.

ONLY this method guarantees accuracy and enables you to sleep well knowing that your communications have been conveyed correctly.

To continue, professional language agencies...

1. Translate, interpret and acculturate for national language versions (Angolan Portuguese or Egyptian Arabic) but also use standard speech that is widely understood;
2. Can provide interpreters in many subjects locally, nationwide or worldwide;
3. Can provide interpreter transmitters or sound booths and participant headsets for conferences;
4. Can sometimes provide interpreting by telephone so that you can speak instantly, anywhere and anytime (i.e., 365/24/7) in hundreds of languages and local dialects;
5. Can localize websites, podcasts and videos; and
6. Can provide dubbing and subtitling in your desired languages.



Some language agencies provide only two languages (such as Spanish and Portuguese), some only do translation, others only provide interpreters, and others only do multi-lingual layouts. All of this is fine as long as the agency meets professional standards.

Another tip: If you are going to a non-English country for some negotiation or critical meeting, it is important to allocate funds to hire a professional in-country interpreter. Do not rely on one provided by your host. That interpreter is loyal to the nonprofit that is paying his/her fees. Especially in East Asia, host interpreters will conveniently forget to interpret for you a provision that may be important for your side and perceived as detrimental to your host. That's why having your own interpreter guarantees that you are getting the spoken communication accurately and fully with nothing left out.

In summary.

- If you use a non-professional translator or interpreter (friend, neighbor, student, co-worker), do you know if he/she is doing the assignment correctly if you don't speak the language?
- Do you know if your person uses some rural dialect not widely understood in the larger population? (Vietnamese, for example, varies widely by village and region).
- Do you think he/she is really going to tell you?
- Do you know where to find and how to vet professional translators and interpreters?
- Do you really want to spend staff time finding and coordinating linguists?
- Can your hired translators lay out your brochures, manuals or courses in each language?
- Do you have in place a three-step process for translation and a quality assurance for interpreters, especially abroad?
- Do you have in-house resources to accurately localize your website, podcast or video?
- Do you take your ill dog to an auto mechanic or entrust your children's teeth to a plumber?





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If you have answered No to any of these questions, please rely on a professional language agency to implement these important functions for you. And reliable agencies often offer nonprofit discounts.

If you want to expand your reach to non-English communities and if you want your communications conveyed accurately in other languages, translating and interpreting are not good places to cut corners.

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About the author:

Philip B. Auerbach is president of Auerbach International Inc. (www.auerbach-intl.com), a global marketing and full-service language agency that puts any kind of spoken, written or electronic content into over 80 languages ... including those of Africa, India and Central and Southeast Asia.



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