

NOTHING CAN CRUSH THE LIFE OUT OF A good turn of phrase more predictably than translating it word for word into another language. Google Translate correctly renders the Spanish “levantar la liebre,” as “to lift the hare”; but that mechanical translation offers the native English speaker no hint of sense. A more skilled translator will recognize the phrase and the meaning behind it, and find the appropriate corollary in English: to let the cat out of the bag.

Addressing stakeholders in multiple languages is a fact of business life today. Yet translating key materials – around the launch of a website, a new

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product or a shift in strategy – is often treated as an afterthought. Sometimes that can result in severe consequences for a company’s reputation and revenue.

Beyond just getting the words right, any message needs to resonate with its target audience. That only comes through fluency and an understanding of the local culture. The last thing a company wants to demonstrate is a lack of commitment to stakeholders in a given region – a sloppy translation practically guarantees that negative message.

In China, this problem is as difficult as it is pressing. The activity of the nation’s businesses in overseas markets and their exposure to stakeholders in other languages grows each year. Meanwhile, more countries are doing business in China and finding the challenges of Chinese daunting.

A quick internet search on “bad translations” reveals some impressive fails: Chinese audiences read the slogan “Come alive with Pepsi!” as “Pepsi bring your ancestors back from the dead!” KFC’s hugely successful motto, “Finger-lickin’ good” became the unfortunate, “We’ll eat your fingers off” – not the best way to get native Chinese customers in the door.

Traditionally, English sentences tend to be longer and more descriptive, while Chinese sentences are more focused on the overall meaning of the sentence and tend to be shorter. But

Brunswick’s
ST. JOHN MOORE
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say translation
isn’t about words;
it’s about ideas



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the complications go deeper than grammatical mechanics or the difficulty of interpreting Chinese characters as English words. Companies must also ensure the right Chinese is being used to avoid embarrassment and reputational damage locally.

Chinese companies often take a formal approach, using Communist Party-inspired language. While that makes sense for a domestic audience, it can alienate stakeholders abroad.

On the other hand, foreign companies operating in China must adopt a tone and choice of words (or characters) that connect with local audiences naturally and authentically. In both cases, it’s all about understanding and meeting stakeholder expectations.

Many organizations prepare materials in their headquarter’s home language and then translate those materials for a local market. This process may help with internal alignment and approval, but it typically results in language that lacks authenticity in the native language and reduces resonance and

impact. In its worst case it can alienate.

Testing content with your local stakeholders is key. It’s also important to remember that languages evolve, and trends can give the most innocent expression a sinister twist. This makes the need for local,

on-the-ground feedback and expertise even more important.

Outsourcing translation can help. However, people familiar with the company’s tone and style, as well as industry related jargon, can add far more value, and help capture the right message in authentic language.

Asking employees for their input and ideas on language invites them to be part of the process. This type of engagement builds internal awareness and pride, and ensures tag lines and product names work for the local audience.

A more robust approach to translation can help businesses avoid embarrassing situations and misunderstandings. But even more, it can allow companies to transform words into the appropriate tools that they can use to connect with their local audiences.

RISE of the MACHINE

THE US STATE DEPARTMENT ESTIMATES IT takes 2,220 class hours to reach full professional proficiency in Mandarin – that’s five hours a day, five days a week, for 88 weeks straight. For similar levels of proficiency in Spanish or Italian, it estimates 600 hours, or 24 weeks, are needed.

Languages difficult for people to learn tend to be difficult for computers to translate. For decades, computers substituted words in one language for words in another, producing predictably bad results.

But that’s changing. Computers are employing a more human-like approach to translation, and the results are drastically improving. Microsoft recently announced its translation software can now “match human performance in translating news from Chinese to English.”

The implications of this improvement are difficult to overstate: It could help remove the language barrier from business.

Machine translations of Chinese are important for two reasons. First, Mandarin is the most widely spoken language in the world. Second, translations between Mandarin and English are perhaps the most difficult for a machine to make; if AI can solve that problem, the thinking goes, it will be able to do so for other languages as well.

Word-for-word systems are woefully ill-equipped to even loosely translate Mandarin into English. A Chinese character can take on different meanings when combined with others, and a comprehensive Chinese dictionary has about 20,000 characters. The Chinese character 钱 (qian) means money, 钟 (zhong) means clock, 书 (shu) means book. However, when used together, 钱钟书 (Qian Zhongshu) is the name of a well-known Chinese author. Unless an algorithm reads all three together, it will produce babble.

Recent progress in computer translation has been largely driven by Google’s Neural Machine Translation (NMT) system, developed in late 2016. NMT uses an artificial neural network, which mirrors how our brains solve problems: classifying, organizing and weighting information, and then adjusting based on feedback.



Mandarin has long been near-impossible for computers to translate. That is changing, say Brunswick’s RACHAEL LAYFIELD and AMY WANG

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China’s tech sector has also entered the field in the last few years, particularly in travel-related translation. Any international visitor to Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, knows that some information is available in English, but a guide still comes in handy. However, for the more than 130 million Chinese tourists who traveled overseas in 2017 – a number that is expected to grow to 200 million by 2020, according to the China Tourism Academy – language remains a major barrier. Vital information in major Western cities isn’t always displayed in Mandarin, making a guide a necessity.

Products like the Sogou Travel

Translator are making independent travel more feasible: The device uses the company’s expertise in natural language processing derived from big data – Sogou receives over 200 million voice requests per day, amounting to approximately 240,000 hours of data – to translate between Chinese and 24 languages, and uses Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to read menus and street signs. Another, iFlytek, is a pocket-sized real-time speech translator. Company Chairman Liu Qingfeng tested the device in front of media at the National People’s Congress of China. Chinese search giant Baidu has released its own pocket translator, and Microsoft is applying the technology to translating news coverage.

If some professional translators scorn AI, others are learning to work with machines, even helping to train their potential replacements. Neural network technology allows computers to learn from and adapt to human feedback in real time. Translators are the ideal tutors for these data-hungry machines and could accelerate their development.

For all the tantalizing possibilities in machine translation, real limitations remain. Unstructured conversations – the nature of many, if not most, discussions – remain problematic. So do idioms and slang. At China’s prestigious Boao Forum, where President Xi Jinping delivered the keynote speech this year, Tencent, the Chinese tech giant, debuted a system powered by AI that was supposed to translate the event in real time. The results were described by the media as illegible. Luckily, the Forum had a staff of human translators on hand.