

## Module 10: Translation Today

### Lecture 35: The Language of Commerce

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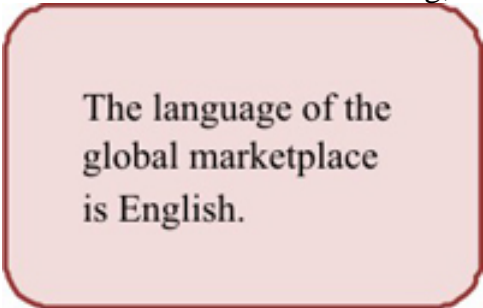
## Module 10: Translation Today

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**Introduction**

Translation is not something that is confined to the literary realm. Today it is a necessary act that is part of commercial enterprise. We live in a globalized world, which in a way seems to literalize the adage attributed to the Roman philosopher Terence: “I am a human being;

nothing human can be alien to me”. The fact that an event is happening in a culture or space that is far removed from ours does not mean that it does not concern us. Unfortunately it is



The language of the  
global marketplace  
is English.

not humanism that is bringing the world together, but the sheer necessity to do business. The world is seen as one huge marketplace that offers infinite possibilities for you to sell your wares. This of course was helped by what is today known as the information technology revolution. The cyber world transcends geographical boundaries and has made communication almost a near-instant process. Michael Cronin points out: “The network underpinned by information technology brings Anglophone messages and images from all over the globe in minutes and seconds, leading to a reticular cosmopolitanism of near-instantaneity” (Translation and Globalization, 49).

What is the language of this world market? How do you communicate to a person with a different mother-tongue, about your goods/services? The necessity to sell has invented a common language of commerce which is English in the world today. This tendency to adopt one language (monoglossia) over multiple others, has a lot of political as well as cultural implications, but here we are concerned about the various aspects of translation in this monoglossic world. What we are looking at is the language of advertisements.

Commercial advertisements through print and electronic media are the avenues that help you to inform consumers about your product. Most of the products of daily use like toothpaste and soap are manufactured by companies which are described as ‘multinational’, but are actually based in the Anglo-American world. So the language of their advertisements also happens to be English. Although English predominates, the necessity to reach out to the non-English speaking world requires the advertisements to be translated across cultures and languages, creatively and effectively.

## What is an advertisement?

Before we go into the process of translation of advertisements, let us be clear about what is meant by an advertisement in the context of translation. Mathieu Guidère maintains that it “must be understood as a generic designation including all forms of commercial communication and promotion, from a leaflet to a television campaign broadcast on an international scale, because the translator is involved at all levels as long as the advertiser is targeting a foreign market” (3). The advertisement communicates to the consumer, explaining the product in detail to persuade the consumer to buy it. Language is but one component of the advertisement, but it is an important one. This is where the translator comes into play. S/he is entrusted with the work of getting the message across to the consumer in the target culture without any distortions or misrepresentations. The concept of fidelity is obviously paramount in importance here.

Now the consequent question is: to whom or what should the translator be faithful? The linguistic component of the advertisement or the message as a whole? Literal translation of advertising slogans might not always be effective, as the translator has to be careful about conveying the message of the advertisement. Socio-cultural differences play a major role in the reception of advertisements. Like the translator of a literary text, the translator of an advertisement also has to go through a decision making process in the course of translation. She will have to consider the receptor culture and the impact of the advertising message on that culture. The translation strategy will be decided accordingly—word for word, or message-for-message, in the case of advertisements. Translation strategy becomes crucial as the success of the advertisement rests to a large extent on the successful communication of facts, and the persuasive power of language.



Guidère argues that the translation of advertisements is influenced by two groups of influencing factors – they are cultural and economic.

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## Influencing Cultural Factors

The cultural factors that come into play in the translation of advertisements will of course be those of the receptor culture. Guidère points out that they can be either “prescriptive and explicit (for instance, the legislature of the target country) or implicit and left to the judgment of the translator (like uses and customs)” (6). This obviously plays a role in all forms of translation, but more so in the case of advertisement translation because an advertisement campaign has a commercial aspect also to it. The producer cannot afford to lose the money she has invested in the product advertisement campaign, and the translator has to be cautious to avoid unseemly controversies. A slip will prove costly and the advertisement can backfire.

Even within the cultural component, there can be two types of restrictions that control and determine the nature of translation. The first is the purely cultural component like accepted norms of social behavior, popular religious beliefs etc. The other factor is the legal component where it is illegal or banned by law to advertise certain products or in a certain way. Unwritten social restrictions will advise against the advertising of beef in India. This became a problem in the sale of hamburgers that generally use beef in the US. Eating of beef is a social taboo even today in many areas of India, and there was no way in which hamburgers could be advertised by highlighting the beef component. Similarly, we do not have large scale advertisement of bikinis in India not only because a majority of women here do not wear that swimming costume, but because an advertisement for that would offend sensibilities.

Advertising certain products is illegal in some countries. For instance, it is illegal in India to advertise liquor and tobacco. So the manufacturers take recourse to roundabout ways to advertise their product. They usually have proxy ads where they promote something else that uses the same brand name. For instance, the liquor brand Bacardi has advertisements in India that promote their music CDs instead of the liquor that goes under the same name. The linguistic text that goes with it advertises the music, while the visual emphasizes the drink. The advantage is that the brand name gets fixed in public memory.

The translator has to be sensitive to such cultural and other legal parameters that might influence the translation process. Guidère points out how the legal component is important for translators, as they might land in legal trouble if such laws are ignored (6). France has passed the Evin Act to see that advertisers use only the French language in their advertisements. In Saudi Arabia it is forbidden by law for advertisements to refer to the relationship between a man and a woman. The translator has to know all these legal details.

## Cultural aspects

The translation of advertisements is most apparent in India which has numerous languages that are used daily in the various regions. It is interesting to compare advertisements that appear in various languages. Sometimes the slogan or catchword appears awkward in a particular language because it might be a literal translation of the original one. This is very true of multinational companies like Pepsi or Hindustan Unilever. Unilever, for example, is a company that has branches in most countries of the world and have common campaigns to promote their products like soap powder. The slogan of “Trust Pink, forget stains” of the Vanish advertisement is common to UK, and the various regions of India. It is difficult to recapture the impact of the English slogan in all the Indian languages because of the syntactic peculiarities of each language. But what the translator has done is to translate it word by word in India, which results in a slightly awkward advertisement in regional languages like Malayalam.

Advertisements sell global brands in local languages.

One way to overcome this is to coin mixed language slogans like the extremely popular Pepsi slogan of “Yeh dil maange more”. This was trendy and catchy as it caught the spirit of the young metropolitan crowd of India who switch between English and Hindi effortlessly. But here the problem was that it catered only to the Hindi speaking crowd, and regional variations were difficult. The Pepsi campaign had to use its Hinglish slogan throughout the country. Coca Cola’s “Thanda matlab Coca Cola” was another example. Sometimes the advertisement comes up with regional differences. The Pears advertisement where the mother is also teaching her daughter while bathing her, is an example. In the Hindi version, she sings of the order of Mughal kings while in Malayalam she is singing of the solar system. This is because both versions borrow the melody of the same popular film song. It might have been difficult to translate the Hindi version and adjust it to the cadence of Malayalam. Both versions are effective.

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**Region-specific variants**

Sometime the translation has to occur at multiple levels—at the linguistic, visual and cultural levels. The hegemony that is enjoyed by English at the global level is replicated by the hegemony of Hindi in India. Most national brands make use of cultural symbols that are popular in the Hindi speaking areas of India. So a typical bride is always Hindu and North Indian. Weddings mean the groom on a horse and noisy revelers in the baraat. Advertisements rely heavily upon rituals or beliefs like shagun, karva chauth etc which are very region-specific. We do not see any translation in these advertisements except at the language level.

The advertisement of national brands for specific regional festivals is also sometimes marked by awkwardness that arises out of unfamiliarity with the cultural milieu. Let us consider the advertisement of ‘national’ brands for products like television or kitchen equipments for a special occasion like Onam which is the festival of Kerala. They attempt to reach out to the Kerala consumer by using popular cultural symbols like the flower bed or snake boat race, but the unfamiliarity with the specific practices is apparent. This is because the translator has worked at the language level but not at the visual level.

An example of how an advertisement can be translated only at the visual level is that of the soap Lux. It is an international brand that showcases the current most popular heroine of the cinema of the region in which it advertises. So, if it makes use of a Hollywood actress in the Anglo-American world, it has a



Bollywood heroine in North India, and her regional variants in other parts of India. This is an example of visual translation. Sometimes advertisements do away with the necessity of translation at all because they only have visuals and minimal language component. The ads for Adidas or Nike are examples.

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## The Economic aspect

Why is it that sometimes ads look very awkward because of these translation issues? It is quite possible that it might not have appeared to be a economically viable process. One factor that we have to keep in mind is that advertising is primarily a commercial undertaking and so is the translation that goes with it. So the advertisers are guided by the profit motive; they assess if the money they invest will fetch adequate dividends. Sometimes it might make better economic sense to go for awkward translations than run the risk of enormous financial investments that might not give proportionate benefits.

Translation of advertisements has also to consider the economic aspects.

Guidère observes that two points have to be taken into account while considering the economic aspect of translation for advertisements: “the cost of the translation process and the linguistic added value” (5). He defines the cost of the translation process as “the financial investment necessary for transferring the message into the target language on the one hand, and the related investments, which are generally recommended by the publicity agent in order to ensure the success of the transfer, on the other hand” (5). This means the investment of a large amount of money which has to ensure adequate returns.

The linguistic added value of a translation means the benefit that a translation can bring to an advertising campaign internationally. As Guidere observes, “Translation can not only contribute to increasing the direct revenues of the multinational by acting as a leveraging effect on sales abroad but it can also be considered as a strategic asset with respect to competition, in the sense that it enables the company to stand out in a highly competitive market” (5). If a translation has this impact, it is said to have linguistic added value. But very often it becomes difficult to assess if the success of an advertisement is because of the effectiveness of its advertising slogan. So manufacturers are reluctant to invest money in translation.



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#### Modes of translation

There are various ways in which an advertisement is carried across to other languages and cultures, but two main procedures can be identified. First is when the translators are part of the company that creates the advertisement. Thus the Indian version of the Vanish advertisement can be written by an Indian translator working in the US or UK. Guidère describes this as a “centralizing” process characterized by “in-house management of the entire process” (7). The other method is “decentralized” as “translation is outsourced to organizations external to the company” (7). Here the translation may be managed by an international translation centre or a multinational agency that has branches in the receptor country.

Translation of an advertisement can be done with a translator from within the receptor culture or from outside it.

Guidère observes that the adoption of one or the other mode of translation depends on the nature of the company. The centralized approach will be adopted by a corporate organization that believes that “language belongs to those who speak it”. They will not outsource the translation to an outside agency, but will depend on translators who are native speakers, but work in another country. These translators who are not in contact with their native culture on a regular basis, “rarely faces the problems often raised about the target text and the target language. He is facing all difficulties of the source text and the culture producing it” (8). He is not very concerned about the reception of his message. The organization that entrusts the translation to a translator in the receptor country has a decentralized structure. Here the translator is concerned about the advertisement’s suitability to the receptor culture; this naturally makes him/her more target-oriented. S/he will be able to assess what will fit the target culture best. It goes without saying that, irrespective of the translation mode, all these translation activities will be subject to the guidelines of the parent organization.

Thus the challenges before the translator of advertisements are many. However, this field has not been studied in detail by translation theorists. Although this translation is very much like the interlingual one that happens between languages, it is very unlike literary translation in its commercial framework and purely utilitarian purpose. However, this area of translation is getting more critical attention today, especially from those working in the cultural studies domain.

#### Assignments

1. What are the challenges faced by a translator of an advertisement?
2. Select an advertisement from a culture / language that is alien to yours. How would you translate it



in all aspects of the term?

## Reference

Guidère, Mathieu. “Translation Practices in International Advertising”. *Translation Journal*. Volume 5, No.1. January 2001. <<http://translationjournal.net/journal//15advert.htm>>

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