10 Irresistible *Potholes* *Writers find* on the Road to Globalization -Part *2*

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In the first installment of this article, we described potholes that writers can avoid to make translation faster and less error-prone. These were things like leaving enough time for translation, mismatches between tools and file formats, screenshots, page layout, and "interesting" writing styles. In this, the last installment, we'll focus on more detailed issues that often make translators trip.

POTHOLE #6. NOT BEING PICKY ENOUGH WITH WORDS.

Picky is good. Picky writers choose their words very carefully, with the reader in mind. Translators are readers, too, and they have to understand what you wrote to translate it correctly. But many writers spend too much time talking to engineers and to each other, so in-house jargon, invented words, and unusual (for the rest of us) technical terms often show up in client-facing documents. You may be used to "noun stacks" like strategic application development productivity or KX Manager Device System Information Configuration Backup, but your translators and end users won't be able to digest them easily (see more discussion here).

In pothole #5 from last time, we saw how even seemingly innocent synonyms are problematic. Even so, in most documentation projects, 75% of the words are used only once or twice. For translators, this means several things. Translation memory software doesn't find as many matches, because writers vary their phrasing even though the information is the same. Translators have to translate the same information several times, simply because it was phrased with different words. Machine translation and human translators are less likely to know all of the words, because they have smaller vocabularies than a professional writer does. That means more terminology research and more mistaken translations.

POTHOLE #7. GOING SOFT ON VERBS.

Things get tense for translators with English verbs. Professional writers are often comfortable with compound verb forms like may have been being installed, but this is enough to tie anyone else's head in knots. Words ending in –ing are also a big problem. These -ing words can be nouns or verbs, and readers can understand them in multiple ways. One favorite example is a book title by Rachael Ray: Cooking Rocks. It might be about: how to cook rocks (like cooking potátoes), rocks that you can cook with (like cooking utensils), the kind of rocks that you can cook (like cóoking potatoes, not plánting potatoes), or it may be something else entirely (like cooking is cool). If your translators or readers aren't very familiar with your product, they can easily get misled by this kind of writing. Machine translation systems are forced to guess the right translation. Going soft on verbs can lead to lots of errors.

POTHOLE #8. SPEAKING TO THE WRONG AUDIENCE.

Writers are often hired to explain how to use a product that readers aren't familiar with. So, managing assumptions about what readers know about the product is an important issue. But writers are so overly familiar with the product that they often assume that readers are familiar with it, too. This shows up as abbreviations and acronyms that newbies don't know, as technical, rare, or unfamiliar words, or as sentences that can have multiple meanings. These are all perfectly clear to the writer, but

often mysterious to the reader. Even tiny things like definite articles (the) create problems: they show up when the writer assumes that the reader knows something. One example is: Once you save a record, the fields become read-only if the record's approved. This is fine if the reader knows that records have fields, but there was no mention of fields anywhere in the same chapter as this sentence.

People only understand and translate easily when there's enough information in a sentence that they don't have to use detailed topic knowledge to fill in the details.

POTHOLE #9. TALKING OVER THEIR HEADS.

Pothole #8 was about what readers know about the product. Pothole #9 is about what readers know about English. Most people don't read as well as professional writers do. In fact, the average reading level for native English speakers in the US is about 7th grade. On top of that, translators generally work from their weaker language (English) into their native language. Long, complex sentences not only take much longer for mere mortals to understand, but lead to more comprehension and translation errors. One added benefit of shorter sentences is that they are easier for writers to reuse in different contexts and are easier to match in translation memory. Translating short sentences is faster, cheaper, and more consistent. Clients prefer them in English, too.

POTHOLE #10. BEING TOO HIP FOR THE AUDIENCE.

As mentioned in Pothole #5, paraphrases, word play, slang, and metaphors work great for literature. Marketing copywriters often think of their job as coming up with quirky, catchy phrasing everywhere. All too often, though, the information that's most relevant for the reader is hidden or missing. A simple, direct statement of how the client benefits from a product is a refreshing change that's easy to translate. Most manuals focus on the geeky details of a product that the majority of readers couldn't care less about. Simple, direct information about how to actually get something useful done (open file doesn't count) is surprisingly rare. This is the issue of relevance.

Relevance is a huge issue for writers, and one that really hasn't been looked at very carefully. Some companies, like Intel and Microsoft, track readers' ratings of how useful or helpful the company's content is. The results are horrifying: only 25 – 40% of the support content that readers can find is actually helpful for them. On top of that, there's probably another 20% of the content that readers never find, and this is frequently because the author used one term but the reader used a different, less technical synonym. If similar numbers hold true for other kinds of product information, then we're writing, revising, translating, and publishing millions and millions of words that no one cares about. Simple, relevant content makes translation much faster, much cheaper, and much more accurate.

Translation speed, quality, and cost depend to an enormous extent on the quality of the original documents. Every single choice of wording, sentence structure, style, and content influences how easy or hard a document is to translate. Writers, help your readers and become a hero among your company's translators. Every improvement that you make is multiplied by the number of grateful readers whose lives you touch.

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