by Jacques Boulanger

Translation and Localization: Managing the Language and Cross-Cultural Mix in Global Corporate Communications

U.S. exports have grown by 40 percent in the past four years and are now nearly 20 percent of gross national product (GNP). Exports accounted for only 10 percent of the GNP in 1975 and a mere 5 percent in 1960. These statistics imply and demonstrate why American corporations now associate expansion with international development.

In two decades, most Companies have turned from equating their bottom lines to domestic commerce to assimilating it to the company's gains in foreign markets. For more and more CEOs, the target is to succeed, like Microsoft, IBM, Coca Cola or Exxon, in earning more than half of their income outside of the United States.

At the same time, although there are no reliable figures to describe it with some accuracy, given the vagueness of what it means to "speak a language', it is clear that English has become the 'lingua franca' of world business. The frantic pace of international commercial growth probably lags behind that of successful international English language education abroad, aided by the success of American films, television series and CD-ROMs.

Yet, contrary to a prediction that was not uncommon only a few years ago, foreign languages are not becoming less significant in the business world. On the contrary, they are assuming a greater importance than ever. It is now a fact that practical knowledge of one or several foreign language(s) is required of any ambitious executive or manager, just as a knowledge of English is required from foreign managers whatever his or her country of origin and culture.

There are many reasons to explain why this is happening. Every day our economy and the world economy are becoming more a service economy, where human communications and personal relations play a critical role; and then, experience indicates that the best way to exchange information with another person is to use his/her native tongue.   According to psychologists this is due to the fact that the native language carries more emotional content, integrating the history of the complete individual, including his or her childhood and adolescence, etc.

Whatever the reason, it is a fact that all corporations dealing with international operations need to have the ability to operate in foreign languages.

To begin with, the need might be to obtain complete information on a new market or to access potential clients or customers. Further on in the company's development abroad, the requirement might be to manage communications with personnel, customers, government officials, etc. Although many of these activities could often be conducted in English, the results may be entirely different and considerably more satisfactory if they are handled in the native tongue of the other party.

In international or multinational companies, most high level communications are likely to take place in English. But in certain cases (ignorance of English or of the native language, legal requirement, relations with customers) when English is not appropriate, interpreters, translation agencies and bilingual corporate personnel are the obvious means through which the foreign language activities are conducted. Eventually, the company is confronted with what can be called the 'Language Mix', in other words––the need to overcome the communication gap with other languages and cultures.

Given the central role played by corporate communications in company growth and profitability, there is, beyond the sheer practicality and immediacy of language requirements, a fundamental need for the Corporate Communications Department to understand the key issues involved in managing the Language Mix.

Some key issues are:

- What criteria should determine what is preferably handled in English and what in foreign languages?

- What is implied by the notion of quality of translation? Is it simply close adherence to the original content?

- Time is of the essence––does pressure for time require increased efficiencies?

Criteria For The Language Mix

For most companies, the general rule is that communications between the corporation and local management personnel are usually conducted in English, while communications with the rank and file are conducted in the local language. It is a case by case issue.

Every day, the internal corporate language in countries outside America is integrating more and more English. The reason is simple. English has become the key reference language for all printed documents––financial, technical, marketing etc.–––used in most day-to-day operations. Management systems are written in English, sometimes integrating some notes and local language terminology when distributed to other countries. English is becoming the steak and local language the sizzle. Corporate management will of course tend to encourage this melting pot effect because it facilitates relations between headquarters and subsidiaries, meanwhile encouraging the learning of English by all personnel. Everybody is now aware of the fact that speaking English is a condition to successful career development.

Other factors also operate here, including the underestimated difficulty of learning another language sufficiently well to be able to operate with it, which prevents English from fully becoming the major language of the local company. In fact, while it presents many benefits, the use of American English is not always associated with positive attributes.

In the balance of power between mother and daughter, subsidiaries tend to assert their own specific features and this encourages their performance. Eventually, the language mix will therefore reflect the optimized balance of centralization vs. decentralization of the corporation.

In terms of languages, the key requirement is to evaluate the need for translation of corporate documents such as Annual Reports or a Corporate Newsletter to allow non-English speaking personnel to share in the information normally communicated worldwide in English to only upper level corporate personnel. This trend corresponds to two considerations that stimulate the use of the local language in corporate communications:

- Acquiring a first conversational use of a language is reasonably easy, although it is a personal skill like playing tennis, truly unrelated to a person's other skills and intelligence. By contrast, learning a language completely is a long and difficult exercise. This is of course particularly

true in countries including, but not limited to, Asian countries where the language is structurally different from English. Therefore, if management wants to communicate a message to its foreign subsidiaries, the only assurance that it will be fully understood is to use use the local language.

▪ Setting aside the issue of communication of contents, it cannot be questioned that the use of the local language will address individuals and 'connect' with them more personally than a foreign language such as English. History has demonstrated enough that different countries have (at the least) major difficulties to connect. By using the local language, the corporation makes a definite statement about its commitment to establishing communications that are truly human, its respect for its local personnel and its need for global integration.

Through the choice of its language mix, the corporation is defining the balance that it wishes to establish between its center (identified with America) and the local company. English works as a cement, allowing the information to irrigate the nerves and flesh of the corporate body but the use of native languages allows it to have a heart.

This is a key management choice when a company knows that the quality of its personnel and their adherence to the corporate philosophy or corporate objectives is, in the end, their single most important competitive advantage.

<u>Case Study</u>

An excellent example of this corporate approach was demonstrated earlier this year by Ingram Micro, the world largest wholesale distributor of technology products and services. Ingram structured a training program for its associates in the 19 countries where it operates in order to distribute products to a total of 120 countries. JBI helped Ingram Micro toward the success of its program by adapting its content into 14 languages (Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Spanish (Castilian and South American), Swedish, Bahasa Indonesian, Chinese (Mandarin with simplified script for the Mainland and traditional script for Taiwan and the 'diaspora'), Japanese, Malaysian and Thai.

The project included a guide for the facilitators of the program seminars, a brochure for the participating associates, the development

of presentation visuals and the subtitling of a video profiling the Ingram''s Vision, Mission and Shared Values.

Ingram's corporate communications management team (located in Santa Ana, CA) had wisely decided to submit all the final translations to their local management teams. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Most of the local management teams made only minor modifications to the completed content. The only exception was the French who kindly indicated that the translation was very good but that they wished to create their own version of the content for communicating with their personnel. This type of local management attitude (that many generalize as typical of the French and the Japanese) may in fact manifest itself everywhere. It emphasizes the need for high quality foreign language corporate communications.

JBI's global network of translators and management specialists helped ensure that Ingram Micro's final deliverable met the highest industry standards.

What does quality mean in terms of translation and how do you achieve it?

First, a good translation avoids the 'bloopers' that are the horror of CEOs and translators alike. Many of the more famous translation bloopers are related to political personalities. Back in the late 1970's, President Carter was giving a speech in Korea––a country who's dominant religions at the time were Buddhism and Confucianism. Making an appeal as a humanitarian, President Carter told the audience, "We must all have a Christ-like attitude." From the President's point-of-view, his statement was heartfelt and genuine. It meant, we must show compassion toward our fellow man. However, to the Korean audience, the comment about Christ was offensive! (A quick note here: A skilled interpreter/translator would have known better than to give a literal translation of the President's comment. Seasoned pros would have sensed that this comment was offensive and worked their way around it).

A German friend once told me that what made John F. Kennedy particularly famous in Berlin is a speech he gave where he uttered the phrase, "Ich bin ein Berliner," which literally translates into "I am from Berlin." What he meant to say was "I feel like I am from Berlin." What Kennedy didn't realize at the time was that his statement proclaiming to be "a berliner" was slang for an elastic device used by males in family planning!

Quality in translation is obviously defined as being error free, but in corporate communications, the notion of what is a mistake significantly differs from what constitutes a mistake in academic terms, just as good technical writing in business is different from writing for academia. Both of them must be correct, but in corporate communications, technical accuracy is paramount and it is an unfortunate fact that only some technical translators are truly competent. It is difficult for many companies to delegate their own bilingual technical personnel to complete the translation projects (they are often too busy to do this type of work). Moreover, things are not made easier by the fact that, as we have seen in the case of Ingram Micro, companies tend to have their own terminology, particularly at the marketing and corporate level.

For all of these reasons, the best translations are the result of a team effort, which include the talents of a seasoned linguist, as well as a professional content expert. If an outside agency performs the translations, it is always prudent that the translated content be reviewed by a product specialist within the company.

When recruiting an outside agency, the company must be aware that teams make the best translations. At JBI, every translation project is a team effort and never the effort of a single translator. The best translation teams are those which include a balance of translators from inside and outside of the United States, insuring both the conformity to the original text and the use of the most up-to-date, in-country terminology.

For us, the "safety net" against making mistakes is to apply abundant supervision to every project and to assemble teams with three well-educated natives who translate and/or verify every element of text in a project. Our best teams comprise two persons in the country of destination––a strong, creative translator and a technical specialist–– and one editor/supervisor in the U.S., to assure the adequacy of the foreign text with respect to the English original.

As suggested above, the confidence placed by many companies in just one transla-tor is not supported by the evidence of the end result. When translations are performed inside the company, a frequent error is to invest too much confidence in a corporate employee, native of a given country, without paying enough attention to his/her level of education, which is essential to ensure the quality of the final translation. And the final translation will reflect the level of education of the company in the eyes of the foreign audience, be they potential clients, customers or employees.

Time is of the Essence

Because of the expansion and diversification of communication facilities, of the increasing benefits resulting from the use of translations, and of the accelerating pace of business, the requirement for faster international communication services increases its pressure commensurately.

As has been discussed previously, translation and adaptation in foreign languages are complex operations which require care for the price of mistakes is high, and sometimes prohibitive.

In its "Ten Year Forecast for the Future," the Institute of the Future identified the need for a "magic genie capable of satisfying almost all logically feasible information". This 'genie' should also be able to manage information in all languages. The requirement for such services is omnipresent.

Translations Inside the Company of Outside?

In order to satisfy its requirements for foreign languages, the multinational corporation must skillfully combine:

- Internal Resources -- Bilingual executives apt at handling communications themselves, and or revising/criticizing communications prepared by others.

- Outside vendors -- Located in the U.S. or abroad

The issue of involving executives in the foreign language operations, particularly under time pressure involves the question of time available to these executives, and thus the issue of selecting a reliable multimedia-competent foreign language agency capable of handling all corporate requirements. In today's busy environment, successful foreign language agencies have evolved into efficient business partners. At JBI, it is not uncommon for a translation job to be requested one evening from California, the translation performed during the evening hours in Europe, and ready to be reviewed at dawn in California!

The challenge of translating more and more, faster and faster, yet with ever increasing quality is the litmus test for successful foreign language agencies. The end result for global companies being a more productive business operation.

About the Author of this Paper

Jacques Boulanger is Founder and President of JBI Localization located in Woodland Hills, California. Created in 1975, his firm serves the foreign language and localization needs in all media for global corporations, independent design firms, new media publishers, and outside corporate communications firms. Clients include leading firms such as Lockheed, Bank of America, Ingram Micro, T*HQ, Jack Morton Productions, Sierra Online, Caribiner Communications, Image Dynamics, The 3DO Company, Accolade and Nova Logic.