

The precarious nature of translation



By [Linda Botha](#)

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Biblical Moses depicted with horns and Valentine's Day in Japan both have a common cause. In an industry where meaning can be warped by inaccuracy, anything can happen - and sometimes does.

Translation isn't as straightforward as it may seem. Knowledge of current societal trends, subject matter, colloquialisms and language trends all play a key role in accomplishing translation's single biggest objective: to maintain the integrity of meaning between source and destination languages. It is when meaning becomes distorted that sometimes unexpected results may occur.

St. Jerome's Vulgate - a 4th Century translation of the *Vetus Latina*, a collection of biblical texts - is an oft used example that illustrates what may happen when translations go wrong. "Karan" read as "Keren", or *radiance* (arguably) mistaken for *horned* if your Hebrew isn't up to scratch, resulted in centuries of paintings and sculptures depicting the Old Testament prophet with two bony cranial protrusions. Michelangelo's *The Moses*, created between 1513 and 1515, is perhaps one of the more well-known sculptures based on the Vulgate interpretation.

More recently, during the 1950s, when there was great appetite for Western products and culture in Japan, confectioner Mary Chocolate Company brought Valentine's Day to the Land of the Rising Sun. But an alleged translation mistake by a company executive put an odd twist to this Western celebration of love, making it customary for Japanese women to gift their male counterparts with chocolate on this day (*honmei-choko* if she loves you, or *giri-choko* as an obligatory "ta very much").

Errors in translation

Even today, headlines are made as a result of errors in translation. Tensions between the United States and Russia flared this week past at the G-20 Summit in Saint Petersburg when Russian President Vladimir Putin accused U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, of "lying" about the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons. The participle has since been attributed to an incorrect translation.

Of course none of these examples matter, or they serve only as something to chuckle at, unless it strikes close to home. I can tell you that business is the single biggest victim of its own mistranslations, which often arise due to a misunderstanding of the complexities associated with the most ordinary of translations. Bilingualism alone doth not a translator make. Poor grammar and an unwise choice in register, along with the abovementioned poor grasp of context in which the original document was created, all serve as potential mines which are easily trodden upon.

Many of the more notorious translation mistakes in modern business history have been committed to the near permanent memory of the internet. Colgate-Palmolive released Cue toothpaste in France before realising that a notorious porno read shared the same name; in Mexico, Parker became the first stationery manufacturer (that I know of) to say of its pens: "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant" ("embarazar" was thought to be a translation of *embarrass* by clever marketing types, while actually meaning to *impregnate* in Spanish).

Quality control measures

Such is the precarious nature of translation that professional translators have since adopted strategies to make meaning high impregnable by the errs of common interpretation.

Quality control measures have been widely adopted to minimise the margin of error: only use translators familiar with the subject matter; every translated document is proofread and edited - not only to ensure good grammar and usage, but to get as many eyes as possible on the translation and suss out laughable inaccuracies and controversial fallacies. The aim of course is transparency, a translation that does not sound or read like a translation, but an original - with meaning intact.

ABOUT LINDA BOTHA

Translator, content creator and editor, Linda Botha, has established herself firmly in the language services industry over the last 25 years. Her experience includes corporate and educational content development and publishing, and managing large document projects. Linda currently offers a free business writing course through Linda Botha Language Solutions at www.lbls.co.za. Reach Linda at linda@lbls.co.za, or connect with her on Facebook.

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