Choosing a translation provider

Today, content is being created much faster than all the professional translators in the world could ever hope to handle. The translation consumer is learning that there are many different ways of getting their work done. My goal is to educate so that our clients can make informed choices.

Translation providers can be as simple as free online services and as complex as highly skilled, experienced teams of translators, revisers, proofreaders, and subject matter experts, all trained not only in the languages into which they work but also in the topics they handle.

This month I’ll write about using free online translation programs, bilingual employees and independent resources. Next month I’ll discuss full service translation agencies.

Free online translation programs

Obviously, these are the least expensive. Google is the best known, but others include Babylon.com and Worldlingo.com. Times when free online translation can be useful:

1. The translation is into your language and for your information only. Example: A foreign company sends an email that contains obvious currency figures.   
   To use one of these services, simply copy a portion of the text into the interface. Usually, you are asked to select both source and target languages, but sometimes the program will recognize the source language automatically.   
   If the translation is awkward or has obvious problems, you'll be able to tell and can then decide whether you need more information.
2. The translation is for one-time, limited use. Example: A company notice of a picnic or outing. This is also a fun way to conduct a conversation online.   
   When creating the source text, write short, clear sentences with subject-verb-object word order: “The CEO wrestled the bear.” Limit the number of clauses, and avoid idioms.   
   Do not publish text translated this way under your company name unless it is first reviewed and revised by a native speaker of the target language who also understands English very well.

Bilingual employees

The next step up from free is a bilingual employee of your company. Points to keep in mind:

1. Unless the employee was hired to act as a linguist, s/he has a job to do, and translation will be done instead of that job.
2. Translation takes time. A professional linguist can handle between 1500 and 3000 words per day, not including self-revision, and is likely to work more efficiently than someone who doesn’t translate often. Give your employee the time needed.
3. Unless the employee is a linguist, it is doubtful s/he will have access to translation management software, the programs that store previous translations for later use. This means that consistency from document to document will be uncertain.
4. Are there two native speakers in your office? Can one of them revise/edit the other's work? Professional writers always have an editor, no matter the language.
5. Where did the employee learn the language? People who grew up speaking another language at home but went to school in English may be verbally fluent but not have a solid knowledge of proper spelling, grammar, punctuation, and word usage for written texts in their home language. Remember lessons in homonyms and when to use a semicolon and what constitutes a run-on sentence – language conventions you probably learned at school, not from your parents? Your employee may not have had the equivalent in his/her home language.
6. Some bilingual people work as independent subcontracting linguists on the side, with the credentials to qualify them. In that case, you should be prepared to pay them translator rates.
7. Liability can also be an issue. Determine if your company’s professional liability insurance will cover errors in translation made by an employee whose job description doesn’t include translation.

Professional translation services: Subcontractors

Professional translation services can be obtained from the independent subcontracting linguists mentioned above.

1. An online search in any search engine will provide a list. Add the topic of the document and the language variant (French for Canada, Spanish for Europe, etc.) to your search terms.
2. Request a resume and a reference. The linguist should have at least 2-3 years of translation experience and the education needed to write well.
3. Does the linguist either work with a reviser or recommend one? Be aware that you will need to see a resume and references for that person as well and then pay for the work of two people.
4. Ask if the linguist uses translation management software, usually called CAT (computer-assisted translation) tools. Inquire if you will have access to any translation memory built.
5. Be aware of the limitations of an individual. One person can only do so much work at one time. If you need large manuals translated quickly, you may need a team.
6. A common scam in our industry involves stealing a practicing linguist's resume and selling free online translation as professional work under the scammer's name. One way to avoid this is to verify credentials and check references.
7. Ask if the linguists carry professional liability insurance and will stand behind their work. Your company attorney can tell you if this is necessary.
8. Also, linguists go on vacation or get sick or have family emergencies. There will be times when they are not available for your work.

Not all clients need the same level of service. Even if we never do business with you, Tembua is always ready to act as a resource. We'll gladly answer questions by email or by phone. Much more information is available at our website, Tembua.com.

Check back next month where I’ll discuss working with a professional translation services agency.

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