

CORPORATE WEBSITE TRANSLATION AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The costs of language deficiencies

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Abstract – The growth of the Web has brought about a staggering increase in the volume of transactions and a widening of markets, given the possibility of crossing national borders and erasing the concept of space in terms of geographical areas. It has also fostered the spread of a language designed for international communication, namely English as a Lingua Franca. In recent decades, however, other languages have proved their presence on the Web, even if their use is well below that of English. This has led to considerable translation activity. A large number of multilingual sites crowd the Web, offering products and services. To be competitive, these sites need to be adapted to the needs of their target markets, because every business enterprise has the opportunity to operate globally through the development of the Web. To this end, multilingual communication is of strategic importance and the professionals in charge of these tasks play a key role. Yet, many small and medium-sized enterprises in Italy still struggle to understand the importance of these developments. The article is completed by a brief presentation of a project proposed to the students of a Master's degree course in Linguistic Sciences, which consisted in the presentation of a questionnaire to be administered to small and medium-sized companies operating in the wine sector. The questionnaire aimed to investigate the various options that companies use to manage multilingual communication. The aim of the project was to make students aware of the importance of multilingual communication and to draw a realistic picture of the sector in which they would be professionally employed.

Keywords: website translation; translator training; technical translation; website localization; multilingual websites.

1. Web's impact on communication and the emergence of new genres

The spread of web communication has given rise to new genres, the so-called web genres, which have been described by Garzone et al. as early as 2007 (Garzone *et al.* 2007: 27; see also Cambria *et al.* 2012; Campagna 2012; Poppi 2011; and more recently Vettorel 2014; Pérez-Llantada 2021). Web communication is characterised by an innovative and constantly evolving character and has had significant effects on the promotional activities of

companies. Among the specific characteristics of the new genres intertextuality, multimodality and hypermedia should be mentioned (Garzone *et al.* 2007: 20-22, Norris and Maier 2014). The element that most strongly defines communication on the Web is hypertextuality, understood as:

a text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms *link*, *node*, *network*, *web* and *path* (Landow 1992: 3)

The second distinctive feature of the web genre is multimodality, i.e. its ability to combine different semiotic resources within a single communicative act. The combination of hypertextuality and multimodality gives rise to hypermediality (Catenaccio 2012: 30; Petroni 2011; Norris and Maier. 2014), whereby the semiotic resources involved in Web communication are considered as interacting elements.

Moreover, the Web has introduced the opportunity for global cooperation, and every user can potentially interact with the text. This leads to a degree of uncertainty regarding the role of the original author of texts published on the Web: indeed, the anonymity of the author is often a feature of the Web genre. Clear boundaries between the author and the recipient are blurred, and this threatens to undermine overall textual coherence. In addition, we are increasingly confronted with hybrid texts, i.e. texts composed of different text types (Campagna 2012: 13).

The development of the Web has thus led to a redefinition of the concept of textual genre itself. Indeed, the interaction between different genres that characterises the Web shifts the focus from the analysis of individual genres to the study of the relations between different genres in the communicative activity that takes place on the Web (Catenaccio 2012). Indeed, the term website itself can be regarded as a kind of all-encompassing word for the medium through which a wide variety of genres are realised.

These developments concern translation both as a product and a process, and also as a linguistic and semiotic practice (Grego 2010: 110; Boria *et al.* 2020). Web genre challenges the traditional notion of translation, i.e. an activity primarily concerned with textual aspects, and forces us to embrace a new perspective that goes beyond the written word and includes all the multimodal components and the way they relate with each other.

Translation in the internet age also raises the issue of quality. Indeed, the website requires immediate accessibility by everyone and therefore there is a tendency to translate content roughly and quickly, devoting little attention to the translation process (Jimenez-Crespo 2015: 39-40). Moreover, the loss of clear-cut boundaries between author and recipient increases the risk of text manipulation by multiple individuals. In the redefinition of the

concept of quality that the Web has brought, we are witnessing a marked shift in focus to meet user needs. Users often assess the quality of a text on the Web simply on the basis of the speed, accuracy and usefulness of the information provided (Nielsen 2000: 161).

As more and more companies consider the whole world to be their market, consumers expect every company to have at least a bilingual website. As a result, the demand for translation work in this area has grown dramatically. Business websites are an effective means of both promoting products and services worldwide and building and maintaining business relationships with customers (Sissel 2013: 68). Today, a business website is a public relations tool promoting corporate identity. On the one hand, companies can exploit all multimodal components to foster dialogue with their stakeholders. On the other, the language of business communication via the web needs to be adapted to an international scenario.

In this paper we will focus on the hypertextual structure and multimodal nature of web genres, a hybrid combination not only of written text and images, but also of other elements such as audio, music or animation, all instrumental in engaging the reader's attention (Grego 2010: 101; see also Mehler *et al.* 2010; Petroni 2014). The written text is thus no longer seen as a dominant component, but merely as one of the many ways through which meanings are conveyed (Sissel 2013: 69).

Unlike other electronic genres such as chats or e-mails, the website displays a more regulated and refined language, as it fulfils a specific promotional and marketing function (Giltrow and Stein 2009). Furthermore, the interaction between the website publisher and the end user is asynchronous, and thus the publisher can devote more attention to the content (Crystal 2004: 9). The language used must include specific but accessible terms that allow users to quickly find the information they are looking for: indeed, conciseness is a very important feature of web pages, also because people do not normally read them word for word, but tend to scan texts quickly (Nielsen 2000: 106). These apparently obvious features have a strong impact on the translation process, which is not limited to the transfer of the verbal component from one language to another, but is part of a wider process, conventionally defined as localisation.

2. Websites localisation

As brands become globalised and yet users are more likely to identify with them when they are adapted to local linguistic and cultural specificities, localisation has taken on a strategic importance, especially in the business and IT sectors. The creation of a localised version of a product is perceived as necessary to enable companies to enter new markets, as immediate access to

information about a given product in a local language boosts demand for it (House 2014: 102).

From a business perspective, localisation offers advantages that go far beyond the initial costs: several studies have shown that web users spend up to twice as much time on websites that have been localised into their language of use, with such a positive attitude that they are almost three times more likely to decide to purchase a product (Baack and Singh, 2007; Singh and Pereira, 2005; Olvera-Lobo and Castillo-Rodríguez 2019: 35).

A website must therefore undergo a series of adaptations summarised in the acronym GILT: Globalisation, Internationalisation, Localisation and Translation (Munday 2008: 191). The terms internationalisation and globalisation are often used as synonyms to indicate the technical process required to introduce a product into the international market (Monti 2007: 176). In the field of information technology, this term refers to the process used to generalise a product, removing any culturally marked references so that it can easily reach users in different languages, without the descriptions having to be readjusted each time. However, not all commercial products lend themselves to internationalisation, as they risk losing their distinctive features, and this is where localisation comes in, which is known to be the adaptation of the product to the language and culture of a specific target market (Gouadec 2007: 37; Monti 2007: 176).

Some scholars have identified what is new about localisation compared to translation in terms of the media involved: information content is increasingly visualised rather than printed, and consequently the translation process uses multimodal tools to create a website (Di Sabato 2007: 251). Localisation includes, but is not limited to, translation, although this assumption has been debated (Pym 2004; Jimenez-Crespo 2013). Localisation in fact implies the adaptation of the content to new users and their needs from a technical point of view, which includes changes in terms of colours, fonts, box sizes, icons, etc. Changes also concern commercial and promotional aspects because the product description has to be adapted to the tastes and attitudes of the target market. Obviously, a strong adaptation from a cultural point of view is also required, with adjustments concerning geographical references, tourism and even legal aspects. In short, the website has to be made usable and user-friendly for the new target audience - although it could be argued that most translation activities also serve similar purposes.

According to Pierini (2007: 89-90) there are four strategies to be used in translating for the Web. The first consists in the full translation of the verbal component, while the non-verbal component remains unchanged. The second involves the adaptation of small sections (verbal and non-verbal) of the Web page; the third involves the localisation of the verbal content only,

while the fourth and final one also localises the non-verbal components. In fact, website translation should be seen as a process of localisation of the verbal and non-verbal components, i.e. an overall cross-cultural transfer.

The translation of a website should best adapt it to the needs of the target audience and the search engine used. Therefore, the first component that needs to be adapted is the accessibility of the website itself, which concerns the structure of the whole site, from how to access the version in another language to the specific position of the various icons (O'Hagan and Ashworth 2003: 72). In fact, even a well-translated website, associated with culturally specific symbols, icons and images left unchanged, may cause comprehension problems for recipients belonging to a different culture from the website's origin. Localisation must therefore cover every single aspect of the website, even those that may seem insignificant: from the structure of the home page to the layout of individual screens, from fonts to colours, from audio files to animations, right down to icons and the position of links. For instance, some fonts may not be supported by all versions of search browsers and may make a difference in terms of formality and reliability of content. Colour coding also expresses values that vary from one culture to another, or can make reading easier or more difficult. Acoustic effects are also culturally specific and may evoke positive feelings or irritate the reader.

The localisation activity of many websites proves to be extremely creative, and has led some scholars to speak of adaptation or even transcreation (Katan 2014 and 2018; Author 2018) thanks to the great flexibility of the media compared to traditional two-dimensional texts on paper. On digital media it is indeed easy to modify not only portions of verbal text, but also all the other graphic and acoustic elements (O'Hagan and Asworth 2003: 67-68).

However, despite all these considerations, many websites still offer translations of verbal texts but leave the other semiotic elements intact, such as visual and audio. One must always keep in mind that the overall meaning of a text derives from the interplay of the different semiotic codes involved, both verbal and non-verbal, and this cannot be ignored during the translation process.

3. The impact of language management strategies on business activity

It has already been pointed out that a localised version of a product can open up new business opportunities for a company in foreign markets. In a world where information flows at light speed, consumers are increasingly aware of new products available on world markets. Therefore, if a given product is not

available in the local language at the time it is placed on the market, the economic losses in terms of lost sales can be significant (Cronin 2003). In particular, in a society where most companies rely on the Internet to reach new markets, the quality of a website translation can make the difference in terms of sales success or failure.

Failure to adapt the content, linguistic, visual or cultural aspects can lead to a breakdown in communication or to difficulties in using the information or products offered (Gouadec 2007: 38). In the Italian context in particular, there is often a tendency to use impersonal and formal language, which makes the translation difficult to understand for a wide audience that tends to be heterogeneous in terms of skills and cultural background. Poor quality translations can have serious consequences, especially when it comes to specialised texts: for example, an error in the translation of a contract or a commercial text can cause a loss of sales or even a legal dispute.

For all these reasons, the importance of a solid language management strategy to ensure the quality of information flow abroad should not be underestimated. This means offering quality translations of all business documents and appropriate interpretations for each individual business relationship, as well as adapting the website and advertising material in as many languages as possible (see “The Language Guide for Business”, European Commission 2011¹). With regard to the latter, the widespread use of the web has already helped many small and medium-sized enterprises to overcome some of the obstacles to their internationalisation. In fact, as early as in 2010, the IES report² showed that 60% of small and medium-sized enterprises had created their own website, which often appeared in both the local language and English. A positive relationship also emerged between e-commerce and increased productivity in export and import markets.

It is therefore clear that business websites play a key role for companies and that their multilingual versions can be strategic for expanding into new markets. Moreover, the quality of a website's translation has a significant influence on the image of the company itself. Indeed, the linguistic quality of a website is often iconically associated with the quality of the services and products offered (Cappelli 2007: 98). The accuracy and sensitivity with which product advertising is transposed from a cultural point

¹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8a7af623-4ec8-4cf6-8632-99fad992187c>, last accessed September 2021.

² The IES report (Internationalisation of European SMEs) consisted of a survey conducted back in 2015 by the European Commission on a sample of 9480 small and medium-sized industries in 33 European countries. The aim of the study was to identify the main barriers to internationalisation and to propose improvement strategies. The survey looked at all activities of small and medium-sized companies that involved significant foreign contact and concluded that 25% of the companies surveyed exported abroad at least once in the previous three years. www.ec.europa.eu/enterprise/e_i/index_en.htm, last accessed September 2021.

of view is often the most lasting impression a company can leave on its customers. In this sense, cultural differences should not be seen as an obstacle, but rather as an asset: understanding the mentality and culture of negotiation is an essential condition in international trade, because it demonstrates a company's flexibility and sensitivity (Jimenez-Crespo 2013).

However, cultural differences are probably one of the most neglected aspects in international business. Indeed, it often happens that a formally correct translation is matched by an incorrect understanding of the culture, image and objectives to be conveyed in the target language (Cosimato 2014). The translator must therefore bear in mind a number of crucial factors from the point of view of cultural transfer, such as the naming of brands, products and the formulation of slogans that may not be present in the client's language. Finally, humour in advertising is a sensitive issue, as it can be very effective in some cultures but unpleasant or even offensive in others (Chiaro 2010).

In the context of global trade, the correct command of the English Lingua Franca is essential to bring international business transactions to a successful conclusion. According to the Language Guide for Business published by the European Commission back in 2011³, the majority of European small and medium-sized enterprises mentioned English as the main language used in business communications in major export markets, but other languages such as German, Russian and French were also noted. While English seems to be sufficient for establishing initial contacts with foreign customers, when deepening relationships and making medium-term investments, it became necessary to know the language and local customs of other cultures. In fact, even though English is spoken as a Lingua Franca, many cultures still associate this language with a strong Anglo-American cultural component, which is not always well accepted by customers from other cultures. Communicating in the language of the customer is therefore of fundamental importance to establish a relationship of trust that can turn into a solid business relationship.

Regarding the negative consequences of language deficiencies in business communication, a European Commission's report⁴ was published as early as 2006 showing significant data. 11% of the companies surveyed had lost business contracts due to language and/or intercultural deficiencies worth between 8 and 25 million euros. Thus, back in 2006, this study recognised the

³ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8a7af623-4ec8-4cf6-8632-99fad992187c>, last accessed September 2021.

⁴ The ELAN study (effects on the European economy of lack of foreign language skills in business) was a survey conducted by the European Commission on a sample of about 2000 European exporting companies. This study aimed to estimate the lost revenue caused by the failure of some contracts with foreign companies and partners, whose main cause seemed to be the lack of language skills (Monge 2013: 94-95).

fundamental role of the multilingual corporate website and that of a good language management strategy on the part of companies. In fact, companies that invested in language management techniques were able to achieve higher levels of exports than those that did not.

Another European Commission research in 2011, the PLIMICO⁵ study, looked at 40 European small and medium-sized enterprises and showed that in three out of four of them, turnover had increased by at least 16% as a result of actions taken in the area of languages, and that in several cases this increase in sales was due to the localisation of the website in different languages. In fact, some companies interviewed for this survey stated that if the website was available in the consumer's local language, sales and brand recognition improved. However, with regard to the websites of small and medium-sized Italian companies, it should be noted that a large proportion of them still only use English as their language of communication with foreign countries (Cosimato 2014).

The quality of translation is of paramount importance for a company wishing to expand into new markets through its website, and company headquarters must be aware of the importance of language management for business success. Accurate and timely translation of all commercial and technical information can give a big advantage over competitors, and good quality communication with foreign customers increases customer loyalty. It follows that the quality of the translation influences not only the credibility and reputation of the company, but also and above all the results in terms of turnover. Consequently, a company should choose its translation services carefully.

4. The role of the business/corporate translator

In small and medium-sized Italian companies there is often a tendency to consider translations as an extra expense, an activity to be carried out in a short time and as cheaply as possible: the main thing is to make the content of the message understandable in the foreign language, with little importance attached to the quality of the translation. However, we have pointed out that the quality of language communication can have important consequences in

⁵ The PLIMICO study (Promoting, Implementing, Mapping Language and Intercultural Communication Strategies) was a survey conducted by the European Commission in 2011 on a sample of 40 European small and medium-sized exporting companies "selected for their significant commercial growth due to the formulation and use of language management strategies" (see "Report on Language Management Strategies and Best Practices in European SMEs: The Pimlico Project": https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/pimlico-full-report_en.pdf, last accessed September 2021).

terms of image and sales, and therefore the choice of a corporate translator is of strategic importance.

In this respect, companies can turn to internal or external agents. Larger companies usually entrust translations to in-house employees, who may be more or less specialised in translation. In fact, the profession of translator is not always considered a highly qualified activity, requiring not only good or even excellent linguistic competence, but also specific translation skills.

The main advantage of having in-house translators working on company translations is that they are familiar with the company, its products and the images they have to convey to the outside world. Moreover, these people have immediate access to all information about the company and can keep in touch directly with the source texts' authors (Gouadec 2007: 93). They are therefore in a privileged position compared to external collaborators.

The second option, one of the most frequently used, is to turn to a translation agency, relying on trained professionals who, however, are not always able to handle detailed information on specific products right away. In several cases, they may need time to do some research work before they can make an accurate translation. Furthermore, it is very common for companies to divide the workload into several blocks and entrust them to different professionals, who may be translation agencies or in-house employees. This strategy risks producing a final product that is not homogeneous and coherent from a stylistic but also a communicative point of view.

However, the use of specialised translation agencies has advantages in the long term, when a lasting collaboration can be established. In these cases, translation agencies are able to acquire in-depth knowledge of the corporate culture and create a terminology database or translation memories that facilitate commissions from regular corporate clients.

Another option that many small and medium-sized companies often consider is of course to turn to independent freelance translators (Gouadec 2007: 99). The advantage of using such figures is the greater flexibility of the work and lower costs for companies: a freelance translator has lower costs than a translation agency.

5. The role of the business translator in wine firms in the province of Brescia

Having illustrated the various options that small and medium-sized firms use to manage interlingual communication, it is worth observing in practice which professional figures actually deal with translation of commercial

websites, in some small and medium-sized businesses in a well-defined territory, such as the province of Brescia, an area particularly oriented towards activities in the wine sector, in which this territory represents an important slice of the national market.

In 2018, as part of an English/Italian translation course at Master's level in a Degree Course in Linguistic Sciences in Brescia, a project was proposed to the students, which consisted in drawing up a simple questionnaire to be administered to small and medium-sized companies operating in the wine sector. The aim was to map students' awareness of the importance of interlingual communication in their surroundings. Three specific areas were identified: Franciacorta, Garda bresciano and the Colli Longobardi area. The wineries were selected following research on the web and the students chose 31 wine businesses.

The questionnaire included a series of questions concerning the size of the wineries, their turnover, their foreign relations and, above all, the way in which they managed interlingual communication. In particular, five questions concerned the latter aspect and were formulated in Italian as follows:

1. In which languages is your company brochure available?
2. Does your firm rely more on the printed brochure or on the business website to convey information abroad?
3. Which professionals does your firm employ to translate business information material?
4. Does your firm hire specialized translators to handle communication abroad?
5. If foreign relations, and in particular the translation of online or printed information material, are carried out by in-house staff, what kind of language skills are required of these staff?

The questionnaire was sent to all 31 companies and we received 17 answers, which corresponded to about 55% of the respondents. The collaborating firms were located respectively in Franciacorta (7), Garda bresciano (7) and Colli Longobardi (3). The data that emerged from the survey were extremely interesting and became the focus of classroom discussion. They are briefly reported below.

Fourteen out of seventeen wineries stated that they relied equally on the website and the printed brochure to convey information to potential foreign customers. Two firms stated that the website was more important than the brochure, while only one firm felt that the website was less useful for interlingual communication.

All the wineries had their printed information material translated at least into English, but eight of them (3 located in Franciacorta and 4 in the Garda Bresciano area) also relied on other foreign languages, mainly

German. With regard to websites, however, all the businesses had localised their sites in English. These two data indicated the importance recognised by all the firms to translation in their communication with foreign countries, even though none of them had a proper multilingual website.

With regard to the professional figures in charge of communication with foreign countries, the students were surprised to note that none of the wineries surveyed had considered it strategic to hire a specialised translator to translate information and promotional material. Instead, companies tended to turn equally to external translation agencies or to in-house employees, who stated that they had language skills (in many cases only in English) but not translation skills. In addition, about 30% of the respondents said they used a native speaker, although it was not specified whether this person was a staff member or an external collaborator.

These data were then matched with the geographical areas in which the firms involved in the survey were located. The data showed that businesses in the Franciacorta area tended to use translation agencies. None of these firms entrusted translations to in-house staff and only in two cases did they use native speakers of English.

By contrast, in the Garda bresciano area most of the interviewed businesses tended to entrust translations to in-house staff with some knowledge of foreign languages, and only rarely to native speakers, mainly German. The data revealed only one case of a firm located in this geographical area using a translation agency. This choice of Garda businesses is surprising, given that this area is known for having the highest number of foreign relations, both in terms of exports and tourism.

Finally, the Colli Longobardi area seemed to represent an emerging reality in the sector, with a predominantly local market, which had only recently started to open up to foreign markets. However, the businesses interviewed in this area stated that they turned with equal frequency to native speakers (of German), translation agencies and in-house employees with some language skills.

6. Conclusion

In the era of globalisation, translation is an essential component for the success of companies wishing to establish or consolidate their relations with foreign countries. The first business card of these companies is the website, which is indeed the first contact that potential consumers have with the company. There is therefore a tendency to associate the linguistic quality of business websites with the quality of the products or services offered. A high-quality translation of a company's website is therefore of strategic

importance, not only in its verbal components, but also in its visual, iconic and acoustic aspects, as well as in other minor graphic components.

The spread of the web has led to the emergence of new text genres and to a redefinition of the very concept of translation and translator's skills. But is corporate culture today ready to grasp the importance of effectively managing interlingual communication? The case study conducted by a class of university students in a rather confined economic sector cannot be considered exhaustive, but it seems to indicate that the professional competence of qualified translators is not yet fully recognised in some areas in Italy.

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