

Onionskin revisited

Villas, peanuts and monkeys

Sun-splattered villas [*villas éclaboussées par le soleil*] were the tip of the iceberg in a painfully awkward French mailshot from Marriott Vacation Club International. The infelicitous text, touting time-share apartments in Marbella (Spain), turned up in the Paris-based Onionskin's own mailbox in May, and is a textbook example of how laborious, word-for-word translation can sabotage a promotional offering. No doubt most French-language households chucked the mailing in the bin midway through the first paragraph. But the prestigious Marriott name piqued our professional interest, so we set out to discover how this commendable effort to reach out to potential clients in their own language had gone off track.

Our first stop was London, where Andrea Bravo, Marriott's Senior Production Coordinator, Creative Services Europe & Middle East, assured us that the hotel group is well aware of basic rules of best practice for buying in translation. Her unit purchases documents in Arabic, French, German and Spanish.

"We insist that our suppliers use translators who are native speakers of the target language," she told us. Bravo and her team also make a point of running translations past at least one in-house native speaker of the foreign language before going to press, an option that would not be possible in a smaller company. In this particular case, MVCII business analyst David Le Bail, a native Parisian, had seen the initial translation, which was supplied by Transworld of Barcelona.

So what went wrong?

A mismatch of skills, for a start. While both Bravo and Le Bail have only praise for the legal translations Marriott buys in from Transworld, the Spanish agency's English-to-French language resources clearly do not make the grade for promotional materials, where style is essential. Transworld chairman Angela Vaughan assured us her company refuses jobs that are beyond its capacity, yet the incriminated text (mis)speaks for itself. Blind spots are blind spots, and language brokerage without a safety net (i.e., skilled in-house revisers/editors) is a risky business. In this instance, the provider was manifestly unable to judge how awkward its text for Marriott was.

But shouldn't Marriott's in-house French-speaker David Le Bail have blown the whistle? Ideally, yes. Yet this is not the first case we have seen of a harried foreign executive being asked for an opinion on a text outside his field, and to some extent we sympathize. There are only so many hours in a day. Le Bail confirmed as much when we phoned: "On closer examination," he told us, "the French text was not very good at all. Yes, it needed a rewrite. But while I am willing to revise and correct legal texts, I can't start from scratch with something like this. We can't buy in work only to do a total rewrite!"

According to Ms. Bravo, Marriott began by commissioning samples from a London agency as well as Transworld. The UK bidder's work was judged less satisfactory, and the Barcelona supplier's unbeatable price (30% lower than London, according to a Marriott representative) clinched the deal. Unfortunately, inexpensive unsuitable work is still, well, unsuitable, and all the more regrettable in that language services represent a minute percentage of the total cost of a mailshot.

The experience highlights once again just how difficult it is to buy in quality translations, especially when a variety of different text types are involved. Quality depends on a host of factors, starting with the skills of the individual translator; the lower the price, the more essential it is to ensure that texts are carefully revised and edited. Checking may be done in-house or by an outside supplier, but somebody has got to do it.

To its credit, Marriott acknowledges the problem and is seeking a better solution. Meanwhile, the Onionskin shares the hotel group's frustration, even as it muses on the adage about getting what you pay for.

Improper display

"Straco is in a position to find a translator able to render both meaning and style in his/her mother tongue" says this Geneva-based agency's website [www.straco.ch]. In these post-Monica days, is the Onionskin alone in wondering exactly what is going on over there in Switzerland? The company compounds its stumble with a reassuring "All translations subjected to peer review before delivery to ensure quality." It claims to work in all major languages.

Yet Straco is by no means alone. In recent months, readers have sent us a steady stream of bloopers from translation web sites. Offenders range from one-person businesses to seriously big players, and their missteps from atrocious howlers to "mere" plodding, with liberal sprinklings of spelling errors and grammar glitches. Thus, until a massive overhaul of its website in June this year, US provider eTranslate displayed chunks of

French-language odes to its expertise in text many native speakers agreed was little better than raw machine output. Rewrites including a final pass by marketing professionals in each target language have now improved the site enormously, a company rep told us.

Again: anyone can make a mistake. But to omit crucial proofreading or display awkward promotional texts on a site -- one's own web site, for heaven's sake -- is a bit much. In most cases, problems appear to reflect a communications breakdown between the text commissioner and supplier. Yet this is surely a warning sign for potential clients: these sites present the service offering of language specialists. It is not as if the brief was unclear (or was it?).

Looking on the bright side, a web site in potential customers' language gives users an idea of what they are likely to get. Buying in translation for their own needs is also an opportunity for translation providers to put themselves in their clients' shoes -- and experience the frustration first-hand. Yet as one top-end translator notes: "In this business, you are as good as the last job delivered." For clients in the know, actual samples of work or hotlinks to successful translations online are more convincing than self-promotional prose.

Amateur hour: home brew & blades in China

Some of the most appealing skewed translations are those that allow readers a peek into unknown cultural territory.

"Made the first in China, it's both good as cold / Drinks and hot. best beverage for the middle, the old and / mental workers." One imagines the furrowed brow, the ruffling of dictionary pages, the blanket application of grammar rules pulled from well-worn schoolbooks, half-learned, three-quarters forgotten.

For the Onionskin, most of these bizarrely worded texts are good fun (not to mention consciousness-raising tools for the client-educationally inclined).

They are obviously produced by suppliers for whom basic accuracy poses a major challenge — style never comes into the picture. Who knows, from a marketing point of view, manifestly foreign texts may even reinforce the perceived authenticity of the product, on condition the confusion factor remains under control. China's LeLing Shi Hua Jian Zaolu Cang Zhi Zao sells the tea mentioned above in packets amply inscribed with Chinese characters, rounded out by an English plug: "Chinese style coffee make your body strong / Present friends suitable for old and young." Happily the nature of the beverage is clarified on another flap: "This Kind of tea has a rich sweet scent of date."

Despite better phrasing and typesetting, the English-language text accompanying the Tehao Rechargeable Shaver (ref. RCCW-320) stood at least one Onionskin reader's hair on end: "Smuggle the razor blade (reference value around 400 g) on your muscle vertically. Then drag your skin and shave back slowly. Too much strength on muscle (reference value 800 g) may cause quick wear and tear, poor shaving feeling and outer razor blade's tear." Gulp.

Yet with translation standards set so low, will potential consumers be offended? Buyers of the Tehao shaver are clearly price-driven, making even basic instructions an "extra". And to its credit, the company does throw in some helpful safety information: "To the difficult points like jaw, you should shave by dragging the skin upward. When shaving near the throat, lift the face." That should ward off a few lawsuits.

These items first appeared in "The Onionskin", a regular feature of ITI Bulletin. ITI is a UK association of professional translators and interpreters, and can be reached at 377 City Road, London EC1V 1NA, UK, tel. (+44) 171 713 7600, fax (+44) 171 713 7650; email iti@compuserve.com; www.iti.org.uk.

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