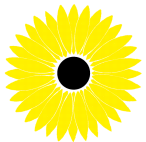


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Avoiding
culture burn
(adapting advertising copy
for foreign markets)

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What is adaptation?

Adaptation is more than just translation, and the process of adapting advertising copy is not only a linguistic transference; it's also a cultural transference.

Someone who can adapt copy well will typically be an advertising agency-trained copywriter who has sound knowledge of the source language whilst being a mother tongue speaker of the target language.

Good adapted copy will fulfil the original brief and will reflect the tone and nuance of the original, at the same time as creating refreshing copy which is culturally relevant.

Avoiding culture burn (adapting copy for foreign markets) by Guy Gilpin and James Bradley with special thanks to Ferran and Marco

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Why bother with adaptation?

Most consumers react negatively to badly written copy. If it doesn't sound quite right it will trigger a subconscious alarm bell which will ring throughout the purchasing decision-making process.

And a bad translation will end up looking like badly written copy (as the reader will probably not even consider that it's a translation). The aim of an adaptation is for it to read as though it were written (well) in the reader's language.



The Ultimate Driving Machine

The German BMW endline 'Freude am Fahren' is perfect for the German domestic market. However, when translated ('Pleasure in driving'), it sounds quite tame - an adaptation was needed for the UK.



Freude am Fahren

Before you start

Consider the markets where your communication will end up. Consider the people, the possible differences in culture, religion, humour etc. It is important to realise that products are not necessarily perceived the same way in different countries.

For example, the domestic market leader may be very much a niche player in other countries. Conversely, products that are considered mass market in their home countries may trade on their foreignness to give them the cachet of a premium brand here (e.g. imported beers).

Try to put yourself in the shoes of your overseas audience. You won't necessarily appreciate all of the cultural issues, but it's a good starting point.

Adaptation is a serious business...

...and you should treat it with the same seriousness that you treat the original copywriting. This means providing the writer with a full brief.

You can't imagine an English copywriter working without a creative brief, and if you want the foreign versions to be as good, you should invest the same time and effort in preparing the adaptation brief.

Don't let adaptation/translation be an afterthought in the advertising process. Compare the media and production budgets to the adaptation/translation budget and consider what damage might be done by a poor translation.

Using English in foreign copy

Having spent thousands developing an endline for your new campaign, the temptation is to leave it in English for foreign markets. But before you give in to this temptation, do one quick calculation. How many people in overseas markets speak good enough English to understand the line at all of the different levels it works at?

Even in quite sophisticated foreign markets, you will be lucky if 50% of readers take any meaning away from the English line at all.



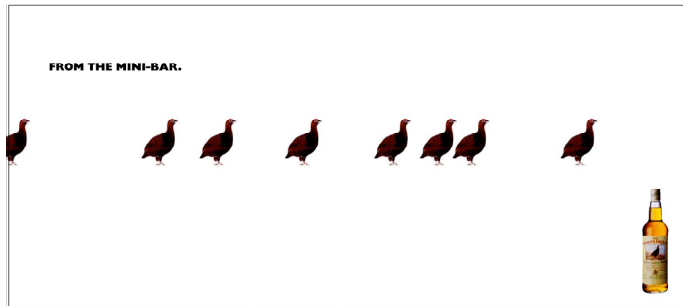
HITACHI
Inspire the Next

Of the six billion people around the world who might see this English endline, at least 70% won't understand a single word of English. Of the remaining 30% who might understand the words, only a fraction will grasp any meaning.

Test your ideas

If you think you've come up with some good creative concepts but are not sure if they will work in other markets, get them tested.

Get an informed opinion from a market-based expert by using your agency network, client's local offices or adaptation agency network to test concepts.



The Famous Grouse campaign was tested in markets such as Taiwan, Greece and Japan. While much of the campaign did work, some executions like 'A nice shot' (golf ball image) and 'A splendid drop' (parachute image) did not work due to the wordplay.

Context is key

If you are testing a concept, always provide context - don't send words/phrases in isolation, always let the writer see how they will be used.

Consider the headline 'Don't like change' and then see how context changes the meaning. Imagine how a foreign copywriter might get it wrong without any background.

Don't like change?
Vote for the British Heritage Party BHP. Old-world values, conservative attitude and a sense of pride in our country. Let's go back to the good old days, when men were men and pubs only sold beer. Vote 'no' to change.
Vote BHP

Don't like change?
Use your Deltron card for all your purchases, and never have to worry about shrapnel in your pocket again.
Deltron

Writing the copy

Essentially, you need to think about the assumptions and associations your proposed English copy rests on. If these apply equally in the other markets, your concept should work. If they do not, you are likely to encounter problems and it may need a rethink.

Generally, ads that are based around the neat encapsulation of a proposition are the ones that travel best. Ads that are based around linguistic gimmicks are the ones that get stopped at customs.

Utter brilliance.

The Economist

AMV's great line for *The Economist* in the UK. This line however could not be adapted into any other language due to the double meaning of 'Utter'. When *The Economist* advertise in France, the ads are written by a French copywriter, directly from brief, rather than being adapted from English.

Wordplays and double meanings

If your concept depends on a word having two meanings, then you should consider the probability that these two meanings may be expressed by two different words in other languages.

If your concept is based on two words sounding alike, then you should consider the probability that in other languages, the words for these two things may not sound alike.

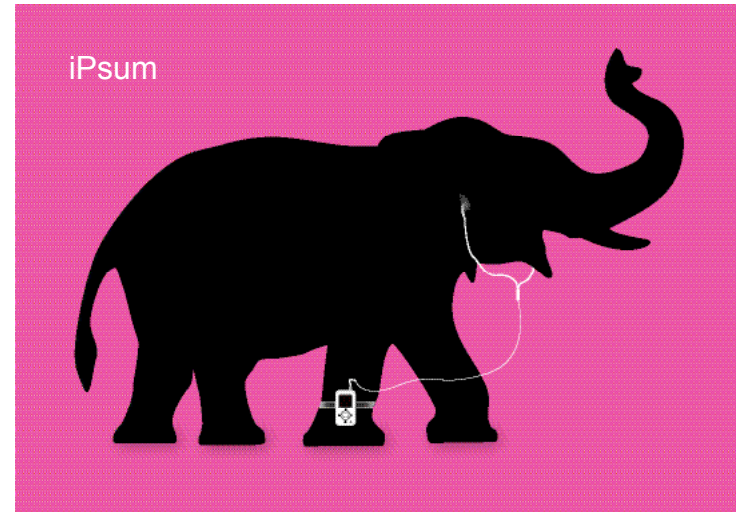
Without wishing to generalise, English lends itself to wordplays better than many other languages do (due to its lack of inflectional endings, for those who want to get technical).

Linguistic associations

The linguistic associations that underpin your ad also need to be looked at. For example, an MP3 player with an exceptionally large memory might very well be compared to an elephant, because in the English-speaking world, elephants famously 'never forget'.

If this comparison is simply made in words - 'Jumbo memory, miniscule device' - an equivalent expression or comparison can probably be found. 'Jumbo memory, miniscule device' could be paraphrased as 'Massive memory, miniscule device' without the concept suffering. In other words, it is adaptable.

However, as soon as you put the reference into a visual, there is a potential problem, because you are then tied to an expression that may not exist in translation.



If in our example the line 'Jumbo memory, miniscule device' were paired with the visual above, this would probably provoke some head-scratching in countries where there is no proverbial link between elephants and memory. It might even have a negative association.

If you want people to look at your visual and see more than just the object, you must first ask yourself whether people in other countries are likely to see what you want them to.

Cultural assumptions

The set of associations that a thing or person has in the English-speaking world also has to be considered. For example, advertising campaigns for Italian food are often based around the idea of the 'Mediterranean diet' (healthy, natural) and the 'Mediterranean lifestyle' (relaxed pace of life, strong family units, beautiful weather, sexy girls/boys with a natural sense of style).

You may well find that a similar set of associations exists in other Northern European countries. However, if you tried to market the superiority of the Italian lifestyle in Spain, it may not work as well, and if you tried to market a product on its Italian-ness in Italy itself - well, clearly that is not much of a differentiating factor there!

In markets such as Japan and China, with few or no traditional ties to the Mediterranean, you may find that the proposition has no resonance at all.

Local brand culture

Many brands have not reached the same levels of awareness, market position or advertising sophistication across different markets. The amount and nature of advertising that has been conducted historically is also something that needs to be borne in mind. For example, Carlsberg's 'Carlsberg don't do flatmates - but if they did, they'd probably be the best flatmates in the world' TV commercial relies on a knowledge of the long-running 'Probably the best lager in the world' strapline.

In markets where this line has never been used (or has been used, but without attaining the widespread recognition it enjoys in the UK), the response to the new campaign would obviously be different. Again, if your concept depends on this recognition factor, you need to check that the touchstone campaign a) existed and b) entered the popular consciousness in your foreign markets.

Don't be afraid...

...of using idiomatic expressions. While they don't always translate, they can often be replaced with something to suit the markets, and the resulting adaptation gains a vivid cultural reference.

Any good copywriter will use colloquialisms and contemporary expressions to give their copy the colour and tone that the brief demands. Problems only arise when your concept depends on a specific idiom.

Do be careful

Imagine the following press ad for a rugged mobile phone aimed at people in manual/building jobs where their phones need to stand up to a bit of rough treatment.

The headline 'Hard as nails' is a good expression as it implies the phone is extremely tough, without having to substantiate the claim. The nails in the visual reinforce this message and make the connection to manual/building jobs.

The problem arises however when the ad needs to be adapted for foreign markets, as the equivalent expression in most European languages is 'hard as stone/rock'.


While this exercise has killed the nails idea, it may well have identified a suitable route involving rocks.



Brand names in copy

Be very careful when using brand names in copy. Names that mean something to English readers are often just a jumble of letters to foreign readers, so any line that relies on the reader knowing what the brand name means almost certainly won't work in other languages.

For example, in English-speaking markets, the Ask Jeeves search engine used the line 'Ask for more. Ask Jeeves.' However, when they wanted to use this in French, Spanish and German, they had a problem - as soon as the first part of the line was translated, the connection to the brand was lost, as the Spanish, French and German words for "ask" are quite different to the English one that appears in the brand name.

Ask for more.  **Ask Jeeves**SM

Brief the adaptation team

A full creative adaptation brief will do wonders for the resulting foreign adaptations.

Creative Adaptation Brief

What is the material to be adapted?
Client creative brief attached?
Where will the adapted copy be published/printed/broadcast?
Who will read/see/hear the copy? Target audience?
Is there any specific tone/personality to be adopted?
A rationale of why the copy works in English
Think consistency. Is any of the copy (headline, endline etc.) already in use in any market? Is this part of any ongoing campaign? If so, provide previous executions
Is there any available background info which will help the writer understand the product/service?
Is there any visual reference material? If no, write a brief description of the visual.
Are there any complex terms or wordplays which the writer could misunderstand or have trouble with? If so, list them here with explanation.
Any other important details?

A picture is worth a thousand words

A visual reference along with the brief will help the copywriter understand the link between copy and image. You would never have an English press ad written without the copywriter seeing the visual, so why do this in other languages?

Always send a layout for any communication. If the layout has not yet been finalised, then a rough scamp or even a description is still much better than nothing.

Background helps

Obviously, the more background you can provide, the better. Think about what your English creatives knew when they wrote the ad. Ideally, all this information should be available to the copywriter working on the foreign version.

If the product/service has not been in the foreign market before, it would make sense to describe how consumers currently interact with the product/service and react to the English advertising which is being adapted.

It never hurts to make this information available, but it is especially important the first time a writer works on a new campaign.

It's good to have dialogue

Would you expect your original English copy to be approved without any changes? Probably not - and the same goes for adapted copy. Clients normally want some dialogue before approving anything.

If you are serious about your clients and their target audience in other countries, then you should treat their advertising with the same diligence and respect as domestic advertising.

It is also important to remember that if clients do have criticisms of the adaptations, or want amends made, this is not the end of the world - and it certainly doesn't mean the adaptation has been poorly done. After all, how often is the first draft of English copy signed off unaltered by the client?

Always provide feedback

If the client changes the adapted copy, get the copywriter to look at it afterwards.

Not only does this ensure that everyone is working with the same copy for future reference, but clients are not always natural copywriters and can sometimes unintentionally render good copy less effective.

Does experience tell you that your English clients are genius creatives or perfect spellers? Probably not - and the same is likely to apply in other markets.

Don't assume that it's OK because the client's local office has made changes.

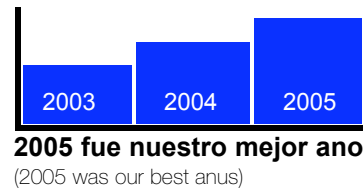
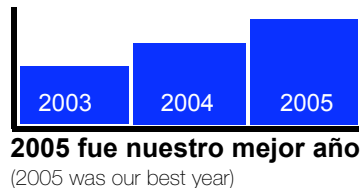
Always proofread

Always proofread foreign artwork.

Would you ever skip this stage in English? Apart from the possibility of errors being introduced by client amends, there are also the added potential problems that come from the copy being set by designers and Mac operators who do not speak the language. This can result in issues such as unusual line/word breaks, lost accents and case changes.

If the copy is not set by someone who speaks the language, it is doubly important that it be proofread by someone who does.

Spot the difference: If the tilde above the 'n' in 'año' is not present, the word takes on a new meaning.



A few words on back-translation

Your English client may ask for a back-translation of the adapted copy. It is important to realise the limitations of this approach.

At best, a back-translation is a blunt instrument designed to allow a non-speaker to check for omissions and blatant misunderstandings.

At worst, it will be used by a non-speaker to judge the quality of the adaptation.

There is no substitute for a market-based client check by someone working in their own language.

About us

Mother Tongue is the informed choice for anyone in advertising who needs to be sure that the foreign-language versions of their copy will be as good as the original in every way - and of course, delivered on time.

In 1990, Mirella, Paola and Guy left their ad agency jobs to form Mother Tongue Writers. Since then, we've grown to 16 London-based account handlers not to mention 60+ copywriters dotted around the world. We've also worked on every significant global brand. In fact, flick through any one of today's main European newspapers or browse through an international website and you'll probably see something we've worked on.

When you brief us on a project, your dedicated language-specialist account handler will liaise between you and the copywriters, and supervise the entire adaptation process. With your help, we will provide an adaptation brief to help the copywriter. This will include technical background and glossaries if available, and give detailed explanations to areas of copy likely to cause a problem.

After going through the brief, the copywriter will then adapt the copy.

Once the copywriter has made the adaptation, we will provide a creative commentary/creative rationale to explain any copy which moves significantly away from the English. We will also provide headline and endline alternatives if necessary.

The copy is then subject to an in-house/third party check for style, technical accuracy, cultural relevancy, brand consistency and creative integrity.

Now we can present the copy to you. At this point, the client is expected to check the copy and make any comments before finally approving it.

Our advertising agency-trained, market-based copywriters are all around the world and have experience in TV scripts, press ads, straplines/endlines, radio scripts, posters, websites and online copy, brochures, DM and promotional material.

