

Smashed, not crushed: Seven pitfalls to watch out for when hiring a translator



By [Adriana de Kock](#)

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It was a Saturday afternoon and I was in need of serious entertainment. I decided to recruit the always-humorous Google Translate and translate my favourite bands' names from English into my mother tongue, Afrikaans. To my amusement, Smashing Pumpkins translated to 'Verbryselde Pampoene'.

Surely this would then translate back to Crushed Pumpkins? Evidence, once again, of how a subtle difference could result in a completely different meaning from what was originally intended. This brought me to the conclusion: Translation is about much more than just accuracy or linguistic knowledge, and Google Translate just doesn't 'get it' yet.

In a business context, translators have to do much more than simply change words from one language into another. They have to deal with aspects such as industry jargon, language trends and the intended audience of a document. An expert translator should, furthermore, be sensitive to the client's time and budget needs. In short, a good translation comes in a complex package.

But how exactly do you know if your translator is a pro when you don't speak the language of the translated document yourself? Your target language may be anything from Portuguese to French, German or Chinese - or what about Zulu, Xhosa or Sepedi, or even all of South Africa's official languages in one go? Luckily, there are several things you can look out for during the hiring process to guarantee a high-quality translation.

1. Qualifications

Your translator should have at least one degree, followed by some or other translation qualification if the initial degree was not translation-related. A Bachelor's degree (BA) in translation, or a general BA with a post-graduate translation qualification is a good starting point; add to that at least a few years' translation experience, preferably with initial mentoring by an experienced translator.

Another good indicator is when the service provider is a sworn translator. This means the translator was thoroughly tested and examined by someone who has been a sworn translator for a minimum of seven years, or by the South African Translators' Institute (SATI).

Thereafter, the translator is sworn in at the nearest High Court. Finally, check whether the translator belongs to a reputable translation institute such as SATI.

2. Mother tongue speaker

This is a no-brainer, as only a mother tongue speaker could convey into the target language all the fine nuances of what you are trying to say in your source document (the original document) - in such a way that the target document reads like an original. Sloppy mistakes or a translation that sounds like... well, a translation! can cost you customers, sales and, worse, your reputation.

It is vital to note, too, that a translator is not necessarily more skilled, the more languages they claim to be able to translate. It is very rare to find translators who are fully lingual in more than two or three languages, and then they should still only translate into their mother tongue.

3. Industry experience

Translators should only take on translation work in their field of expertise and experience. They should have a thorough understanding of the subject matter and an intimate knowledge of the terminology used in the relevant industry.

For instance, a translator with a legal background coupled with a translation qualification would be best suited to translating legal documents. (It should be noted that certain legal documents require certified translations, i.e. the translation must be carried out and certified by a sworn translator.)

Before appointing a translator, check their CV for qualifications, previous clients and projects relating to the subject matter of the source document. If you are new to the translation game or feel a bit unsure of yourself, use a reputable translation agency - that way you'd be sure to get the right translator for the job.

4. Agency experience

Translation agencies normally have a strict process for screening translators before allowing them onto the agency's panel. Ask about the agency's hiring procedure to make sure it meets your own standards. As mentioned above, translators should be matched to a project based on their subject expertise and experience.

A good agency will keep this in mind when allocating jobs to service providers. It would also have a process in place whereby translators are able to consult with one another on terminology and other queries.

5. Quality

A good translation should not only read like an original document; it should also be free of all grammar and syntax errors, even though the source text is sometimes not! As such, the translator needs to have good writing skills and reading comprehension.

If you understand the target language and spot any language errors in a translation, that should set the red lights flashing: If the language is bad, the translation is sure to be no better! One way of ensuring that you will receive a good translation is to ask the translator for a sample of previous work done.

If you don't understand the target language, that is another reason for using a good translation agency. When working through a translation agency, check that they have a review process in place whereby each translation is quality-checked by a different translator.

And finally, to ensure a quality end product, give the translator enough time to do a proper job: a translator can translate more or less 3,000 words per day on average.

6. Professionalism

Depending on the size of your project, you need to be familiar with the translator's project management skills. Many business documents require same-day services; is the translator or agency geared to meet this requirement? Also make sure you check the company's privacy policy.

A translation agency is aware of potential lawsuits, whereas individuals are usually not. One way of checking a translator's professionalism is by visiting their website - and if they don't have one, proceed at your own peril!

7. Price

There is a good reason why price is mentioned last - it should be a minor factor when selecting a translator. There are many individuals and agencies out there offering cut-throat prices, but as the saying goes, a bad bargain is dear at a farthing. A translator without the proper skills or industry experience can produce an inaccurate translation unsuitable for your needs.

When this happens, you may have to use a second translator, costing you more time and money. Expert translators produce more accurate work at a faster rate, saving you money in the long run. Note that the price may be determined by the target document rather than the source document, and that the size and subject of the document will also play a role. Large documents will usually attract a bulk discount rate.

In the field of translation we can still say with confidence that humans far outstrip machines - provided you pick the right human! The success of your translation project will ultimately depend on finding a well qualified translator with sound experience and a professional approach. Someone who wouldn't 'mutilate the meanings' - as the Smashing Pumpkins would say.

ABOUT ADRIANA DE KOCK

Adriana is a project manager at translation and language services agency, Linda Botha Language Solutions (Pty) Ltd (lbls). With studies in journalism, drama, French and English, Adriana has a passion for language and aims to be one of the youngest editors ever to head up a South African national magazine. In her spare time, Adriana enjoys dancing and writing about herself in the third person. For more info, visit www.lbls.co.za or email adriana@lbls.co.za.
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