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TRANSLATION AT WORK

Editors

David Katan
University of Salento and Trieste

Elena Manca
University of Salento

Cinzia Spinzi
University of Napoli Federico II and Taranto

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Company Websites, Genre Conventions and the Role of the Translator

David Limon

Abstract

These days, all companies that are concerned with their image have a website that is likely to include, among other things, a company presentation, vision and mission statement. The form and content of these sites is heavily influenced by Anglo-American models, and yet the relevant genre conventions have still not become globally standardised, due to cultural differences ranging from general text conventions to the differing histories of the societies in which these companies function. A particularly interesting example is that of countries in Central and Eastern Europe that made the transition to a free-market economy less than two decades ago and are now striving to 'catch up' with their longer-established West European competitors. In the country on which I shall focus, Slovenia, it has become standard for these websites to be translated into English to meet the needs of the wider non-Slovene audience – including speakers of German, Italian, French and the Slavic languages spoken in the region. The way the texts are written and translated raises interesting questions about both cultural transfer and the role of the translator in the globalised, online age. These include: the problems involved in identifying the target audience and target culture in web-based communication; the growing role of English as a lingua franca within Europe, in spite of the European Union's policy of multilingualism; and the apparent cultural hegemony of Anglo-American models of business communication. There is also the issue of whether, in the situation discussed, the translator is functioning as an expert in text formation and an intercultural mediator, or rather as a language specialist involved in a more constrained linguistic transfer.

1. Introduction

Company websites are a valuable business tool that helps companies enhance their profile, reach more customers and potential partners, make decisions about

products, personnel and performance, and increase sales of products or services. Companies from outside the Anglo-American cultural sphere, especially those from more 'peripheral' cultures, who wish to compete on international markets on equal terms, have to rely on translation into English to help them get their message across to the widest possible public, so translators clearly have a crucial role to play in this context. The practical translation question I want to consider in this article is the most appropriate strategy for translating company websites into English and the broader issue I would also like to raise is whether the Internet is a culturally neutral medium or whether it bears, by default, Anglo-American cultural values.

As I am a translator and teacher of translation based in Slovenia and translating from that language into English (my native language), the specific situation I consider will be the translation of the websites of Slovene companies into English.¹ Like many other countries in Central and Eastern European, since gaining its independence less than two decades ago, Slovenia has had to contend with not only constructing a new political, legal and economic system, but also with an explosion of new textual genres which have to be both written and translated. Perhaps the most obvious instance, because of the sheer volume of material involved, was the translation of the documents making up the EU legal order, but regular communication with EU institutions requires a constant flow of correspondence, reports, responses to questionnaires, proposals, project documentation and so on, which the writers at the Slovene end have largely had to learn to produce through experience rather than training.

The issue of EU translation and its effects on translation in general has been discussed at length elsewhere (Limon 2004; see also Koskinen 2000), but it of course represents only part of the picture. Many other kinds of functional texts have appeared in the Slovene cultural sphere over the last decade or so, either as completely new genres or as transformations of existing ones.

In this process, it is common for no cultural filter to be employed, but rather rhetorical patterns and register values are imported directly into Slovene, influencing the development of that language (see, for example, Schlamberger Brezar (2005), who highlights this problem in relation to political texts).

¹ The great majority of translators translating from Slovene into English are native speakers of Slovene. Such translation, away from one's first language into a foreign language, is widely seen as undesirable from a theoretical point of view, but is a practical necessity for many languages: not just 'smaller' ones such as Slovene and Danish, but also more 'exotic' languages – from a European standpoint – such as Japanese. For further discussion see Campbell (1998).

Turning our attention to the business world, we can see a burgeoning of marketing and promotional activities involving the production of different kinds of texts for which established Slovene models may not exist. It has thus now become the norm for any self-respecting business organisation, however small (and this is, of course, also the case with organisations and bodies in the public sector, in education and the arts, in sports and leisure – indeed, in almost every sphere of life) to have a website in both Slovene and English. The purpose of such sites is primarily one of image building, i.e. showing that the organisation in question is 'in touch' and 'up-to-date', and of establishing a relationship with (potential) clients – in other words, it is often rather intangible. Similarly, especially when the organisation or company involved is a small one that is not active outside Slovenia's borders and unlikely to attract foreign clients, it may not be immediately apparent who the target audience (and thus the target reader from the translator's point of view) actually is; frequently, the most one can say about the reader one is translating for is that he or she is not a speaker of Slovene.² However, there seems to be a greater tendency for Anglo-American websites to be aimed at potential clients or customers (i.e. the general public or segments thereof, within the country or internationally), while Slovene sites target suppliers, investors or 'partners' in the broadest sense, many of which will be based outside Slovenia (i.e. a more specialised business public).

2. What is the target culture?

Functionalist models of translation place an emphasis on achieving the communicative purpose of the text within the target culture, and Nord (1997) underlines that the translator owes "loyalty" as much to the reader as to the author or commissioner of the text. Similarly, Toury (1995) emphasises that acceptability within the target culture should not take second place to adequacy in relation to the source text.

² Slovenia's main trading partners are Germany, Italy, Austria, France, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107971.html>) but most companies, including those discussed below, do not offer German, Italian or French versions of their websites, obviously under the assumption that English will suffice for all these target audiences. Moreover, of the five Slovene companies highlighted in this article, only two (Krka and Mercator) offer information online in the languages of the former Yugoslavia.

However, in the specific case we are discussing – company websites – difficulties arise with regard to these widely accepted principles. To begin with, the target culture: if you are translating website texts from Slovene to English, what is your target culture? In most cases, it is clearly not Anglo-American, in the sense that websites are aimed at the wider, international, non-Slovene market, the language of which just happens to be English (whether this should be regarded as 'International English', 'English as a Lingua Franca' or even 'McEnglish' is a broader question that I shall not pursue further here; see discussions in Snell-Hornby 2000, Schäffner (ed.) 2000, Phillipson 2003 and Limon 2007). Similarly, the target reader: British, American or other English-speaking readers are likely to represent only a small percentage of those accessing Slovene websites; taking Slovenia's geographical position, history and economic ties into account, they are more likely to be speakers of German, Italian, Hungarian or of one of the Slavic languages spoken in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, or Slovenia's main trading partners in Central/Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Slovakia and Russia (in spite of Slovene being a Slavic language, most business and other communication with other Slavic countries takes place in English, which also frequently functions as a relay language in the translation process). Moreover, partly in the light of these uncertainties, questions also arise regarding how the communicative purpose can be defined in order to aid the translation process: the purpose of such translations is largely to introduce the company to a non-specified public and to enhance the company's image, but it is important, where possible, to identify more specific and tangible goals, such as: to publicise a (new) product or service; to attract new customers, distributors, suppliers or investors; to convince potential clients of the quality of the company and of its products/services; or to publicise a new business venture or partnership.

With regard to text and genre conventions, we are also dealing with a somewhat unusual situation in which a textual model has been taken from the cultural environment that is at the same time the target culture when the text is translated (i.e. the text model is English, while the text is written in Slovene and then translated into English). In formal terms, the model usually seems to be transferred without any cultural adaptation, but is localised by the different content and language: Anglo-American and Slovene company websites have the same basic structure, offering sections that introduce the company and its main activity(ies), provide an overview of the company structure or profile, provide a short company history, and present the company's strategy, vision, mission statement and values; they may also cite examples of corporate responsibility (including sponsorship, donations and community involvement),

talk up their green credentials, mention key partners and provide basic information on employment opportunities. However, although the overall structure may be the same, differences do emerge due to the differing text conventions and preferences that the Slovene writer tends to follow.

There are, for example, differences between cultures as to whether responsibility for effective communicative is seen to lie primarily with the writer or the reader. In English there is a tendency towards the former – if communication fails we do not blame the reader for not making enough effort, but assume that what was said was insufficiently clear or well-organized. In other cultures it is seen as the reader's responsibility to understand what the writer intended to say and writers may prefer to offer hints and nuances rather than make direct statements: Japanese is the example discussed by Hinds (1987) but the same tendency may be seen in Central European cultures, including Slovene. There are clear parallels here with the contrast drawn by Katan (2004: 267) between author and addressee orientation, the former being characterized, among other things, by a high information load and writer authority (characteristic of Slovene), while the latter is more factual, has a low information load, is reader friendly, simple and designed for easy comprehension (characteristic of English).

3. Analysis of some Slovene and English Language websites

I have analysed a broad range of company websites from Slovenia and the English-speaking world, and noticed considerable differences in terms of both content and discourse conventions. For the purposes of this article, let me cite the following five pairs of sites (full addresses listed under sources) from different industries: airlines (Adria Airways and British Airways), telecommunications (SiOL and AOL), pharmaceuticals (Krka and Johnson & Johnson), brewing (Pivovarna Laško and Caledonian Brewery) and retail (Mercator and Sainsbury's). Although generalisations are always risky and the fact that the Internet is a volatile environment where change can be rapid, a number of broad differences can be observed that currently seem to apply to most websites.

Slovene companies present themselves primarily from a business point of view and their websites are written more for industry 'insiders' with a knowledge of both general and business specific terminology; English language (hereafter EL) sites are aimed more at the general public, at 'outsiders' with no specialised knowledge. A possible reason for this is that Slovene companies, who cannot depend on the small domestic market and thus have to be export-

oriented, are constantly on the look out for possible partners, such as suppliers, distributors, investors or 'strategic' partners; Anglo-American companies, by contrast, seem more concerned with promoting their products and services, and giving details of how these have developed. Certainly EL sites are more often an integral part of companies' overall marketing strategy and give the impression of having been written mainly by marketing specialists (e.g. AOL), whereas Slovene sites seem to have been written by managers from different company sectors, such as finance. Another result of this is that Slovene sites are much less likely to mention customers or focus on their needs, drawing attention instead to their own achievement of strategic and other business goals (e.g. Adria Airways). Slovene sites are thus centred upon the company, referring to it in the third person singular or using the first person plural pronoun, whereas EL sites make much greater use of the second person pronoun to address the reader directly. An extension of this is the emphasis on EL sites on social responsibility, good corporate citizenship, sponsorship, donations, care for the environment and other facets of company activity that one might label the 'human face' of capitalism (e.g. AOL, Johnson & Johnson, Sainsbury's). Interestingly, Slovene companies have placed less emphasis on such values until relatively recently (Krka and Mercator have noticeably moved in this direction), for which there a number of likely explanations: in the early days of the free market economy they were more concerned with proving their business credentials than their sense of social commitment; most Slovene companies had previously functioned within the socialist system and were, in effect, state owned, so were presumed to have the community's best interests at heart, not the interests of capital; moreover, they were largely unaccustomed to the kind of media scrutiny and criticism from environmental, development and other civil society groups that led British and American companies to try and improve their image in this way.

The conscious striving to give companies a human face may also explain the greater tendency on the EL sites to provide information about employees and even to include individual photographs (e.g. Caledonian). Where companies began as family enterprises (e.g. Johnson & Johnson), then much emphasis is placed on these family origins – something that, for historical reasons, few Slovene companies can point to. Similarly, many EL sites place great emphasis on the company history and of the role played in it by individuals, so there is consequently much greater use of narrative elements in the texts (e.g. Caledonian, Johnson & Johnson). In order to generate a sense of tradition, Slovene sites may have to resort to references to precursors of the company in the same location (e.g. Laško Brewery).

Slovene companies may strive harder to reassure the reader about their modernity, quality, reliability, safety and so on: either by emphasising their reliance on the latest technology (e.g. Krka, SiOL) or by associating themselves with larger foreign companies (e.g. Adria Airways' mention of Lufthansa; by contrast British Airways emphasises its own quality of service and high standards). One of the most frequently repeated terms on Slovene sites is *partnerstvo* (partnership), which involves, among other things, companies' efforts to forge links with (larger) foreign companies, facilitating their expansion outside the small Slovene market. At the same time, it is striking how Slovene companies are more 'modest' about their achievements: it is almost as if they are reluctant to claim too much, whereas the Anglo-American tradition does not value such taciturnity about one's own worth and virtues.

With regard to register, there are clear differences between the Slovene and EL sites: the former make greater use of both business and technical vocabulary (in particular noun phrases and verbs relating to business activities), while the latter seem to avoid drawing upon more specialised lexical fields, usually demanding no more of the reader than would the business content of a newspaper, but do strive to include as many positive adjectives and general, often abstract nouns with positive connotations as possible (e.g. "community, environment, care, respect, integrity, support, trust, values" on the Sainsbury's site) – as one might expect from a typical marketing text. As far as tenor is concerned, the Slovene sites tend towards a more formal, impersonal and distant relationship between writer and reader, with the writer adopting the role of business or management expert, whereas in the EL texts there are clearer attempts to strive for a more equal status between the participants in the communicative process. The EL sites contain more features of spoken language, such as direct address, use of personal pronouns (including second person), question-response sequences, rhetorical questions, colloquialisms and idioms. The Slovene sites, in line with the tendency towards reader responsibility mentioned earlier, usually demand more effort on the reader's part: information is offered in more manageable doses on the EL sites, while a common feature of the Slovene sites is lengthy lists of bullet points describing in detail aspects of business activities – relating especially to investment and export activities – which make the texts reminiscent of an annual report (such information is often provided by British and American companies on separate 'corporate' pages, e.g. the Sainsbury's site); the Slovene sites are also more likely to feature complex sentences and noun phrase sequences. Overall, the tendency on EL sites is to aim for a non-demanding, reasonably colloquial style of writing with some idiomatic features – the language of marketing, rather than the language of business reports.

One example from the texts under consideration will suffice here to give a taste of some of the stylistic contrasts we have mentioned. The following is a translation of SiOL's mission statement:³

SiOL is an Internet service provider that guarantees high quality Internet solutions. SiOL's mission is to connect people through the Internet and to overcome once unbridgeable distances. We strive towards continuous improvement and development to the satisfaction of our users and in order to raise the quality of their lives. Our highly trained staff guarantees the quality of the services with which we bring the latest multimedia services closer to our users. We enrich everyday life with information and through new technologies offer attractive opportunities for distance working and learning.

By contrast, AOL's mission statement, perhaps reflecting its confidence as a major world company and its claim that it had achieved its previous mission in 2006, has been reduced to the following simple goal: "To Serve the World's Largest and Most Engaged Community". This is supported by a statement of company values, or the "attributes and aspirations" that the company sees as providing the foundation for further success:

Creativity

We thrive on innovation and originality, encouraging risk-taking and divergent voices.

Customer Focus

We show that we value our customers by serving them well, putting their needs and interests at the center of everything we do.

Agility

We move quickly, embracing change and seizing new opportunities.

Teamwork

We treat one another with respect—creating value by working together within and across our businesses and giving credit where it is due.

Integrity

We earn the trust of our users by protecting their privacy, helping them stay safe while online, and by adhering to rigorous standards of business conduct in all our dealings.

³ Recent organisational changes have led this particular text to be replaced by the mission statement of the parent company Telekom Slovenije.

Diversity

We attract and develop the world's best talent, seeking to include the broadest range of people and perspectives.

Responsibility

We work to improve our communities, taking pride in serving the public interest as well as the interests of all stakeholders.

There is currently no similar list of values available on the SiOL website, nor that of its parent company Telekom Slovenije, but we can compare it with the values listed by the pharmaceutical company Krka:

Speed and flexibility

Our knowledge, our abilities, our capability to innovate, our productivity and our ingenuity enable us to be fast. We want to be first. Not just in sales, but in discovering the markets' new needs. We can do this by successfully shortening the development process, swift acquisition of registration documentation and our harmonised production and distribution. With our responsiveness and the ability to adapt we overcome the obstacles in our path, be they of a marketing or legislative nature. We can cope with any and all challenges - regardless of the size and the site of the project. Using flexible solutions, we make sure our partners can rely on us.

Partnership and trust

Krka helps create good relationships. We strive for trust-based relationships with our partners: our customers, our suppliers, our owners and everyone else who surrounds us. Only good and open relationships can help us achieve both business success and our primary mission.

Creativity and efficiency

The only real way to achieve first-class results is by creating an atmosphere that motivates our employees to be innovative and creative. Therefore, we encourage our employees to speak freely of their ideas and if these ideas prove to be good for the company, we encourage them realise them. Together, we seek new paths to make our customers satisfied. We perform our tasks as well as we can. We strive to do what we do in the best, most efficient and most time conserving way.

The two companies have some values in common (creativity and agility/flexibility), but there is an overall difference of emphasis, with AOL leaning towards more individualist and community-oriented qualities (e.g. "diversity" and "responsibility") and customer focus, while Krka leans more towards values that are seen as guaranteeing business success. What is most striking, however, is the different ways these values are articulated, especially the relative simplicity and informality of AOL's message.

4. Translator strategy

The translations of the SiOL and Krka texts are straightforward reflections of the Slovene originals, with no translation shifts made at the generic level to bring the text nearer to the conventions preferred in the English-speaking world and no real account taken of target reader expectations (which we can assume have been shaped primarily by the reading of websites in English – some of them translations, but many not). In earlier research (Limon 2004) I showed how much translating in Slovenia was influenced by the translation of EU legal texts into Slovene. The degree of mediation (Hatim and Mason 1997), i.e. the extent to which translators intervene in the transfer process, is very low with regard to EU texts, many of which are legal or high status texts, and this seems to be carried over to other texts, such as those written for presentational or promotional purposes. But even a hasty summary of the kind of discourse involved suggests that translator strategy should not remain constant when moving between such different kinds of texts. Legal texts have a very explicit purpose and are clearly structured, with a linear, listing profile (cf. Chesterman 1998:170ff) and strong metatextual coherence; in terms of the text type they are largely instruction (Hatim and Mason 1997); they have limited grammatical cohesion and high tolerance of repetition; they have consistent angle (3rd person); they avoid figurative uses of language and metaphor, and rely on denotation; they are consistent in terms of register and stylistically neutral; they lack interpersonal appeal; and they make frequent use of easy-to-learn formulaic routines. By contrast, promotional texts have both an explicit and an implicit agenda; they have different profiles (e.g. spiral, lacking sequential cohesion, or scatter, where points remain ambivalent, or digressive; cf. Chesterman *op.cit.*) and are of hybrid text type (perhaps involving narrative, conceptual exposition, description or argumentation); they achieve cohesion and coherence in a variety of ways and their structure is less predictable than legal texts; they are likely to switch angle (from third, to first, to second person); they are likely to feature stylistically marked features, including figurative language and metaphor, while relying heavily on connotation; their register may vary and they are likely to contain strong interpersonal appeals, e.g. rhetorical questions; and finally, they lack the obvious formulaic routines that one can identify in legal texts.

To be a genuine mediator between languages and cultures rather than engage in a more mechanistic linguistic transfer the translator needs to be aware of such differences and to take account of them through his or her translation strategies. Moreover, student or trainee translators need specific training in

genre and text conventions (Limon 2005), for mastering new genres and styles of discourse in a target language is not part of the translator's general language competence – indeed we usually lack such competence in our own language if a genre is new to us. The kind of training provided for Slovene translators of EU texts, which focuses on terminological issues and lexical standardisation through the use of translation software, is not of much help in this regard. To support such training, contrastive rhetorical research is needed into pairs of languages, looking at broad textual preferences, preferred rhetorical styles, genre conventions, expectation norms, differences with regard to information load, reader friendliness, simplicity and clarity, tolerance for digression, recapitulation and repetition and so on, which enables us to put in place a cultural filter.

However, the question as to how translators should handle the translation of Slovene web sites into English is not an easy one to answer. This is primarily because of the difficulty of identifying the target culture: should it, by default, be seen as the Anglo-American culture, as the target language is English, or is there a sense in which the Internet, as a medium, is culturally neutral or 'universal', and that within it English plays the role of the international support language (or at least in Europe)? If the former is the case, how far should the translator go in adapting the translated text to the target culture – in other words, should the English version of the Slovene site try to emulate as far as possible similar English sites within the field (airlines, pharmaceuticals, brewing, or whatever), including their rhetorical patterns and register values, or should they try to retain the generic and textual features of the original in order to try and convey the text's 'Sloveneness'? The age-old 'free vs. faithful' debate referred above all to translation of artistic or 'sacred' words; in considering this dilemma in relation to promotional websites we are more concerned with questions of cultural hegemony and whether differing cultural preferences can easily be maintained within the global environment represented by the Internet.

A different perspective on this issue is gained if we ask, rather than what the target culture is, who the target reader is. As noted earlier, it is unlikely that a Slovene website will be aimed only at native speakers of English (who are likely to represent only a small percentage of those accessing the site) – the target audience is probably everyone who does not read Slovene, many of them from countries that share the same Central European cultural space with Slovenia. In this case, perhaps adaptation via a cultural filter is not required, but merely linguistic transfer: although this still does not tell us how far the translator should go in 'de-Slovenicising' the text in order to make it accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Nor does it indicate how the translator can distinguish

between textual preferences in Slovene (such as the tendency to favour lexical cohesion over grammatical cohesion) and broader rhetorical tendencies such as reader responsibility – in other words, where do 'language' differences shade over into 'cultural' ones? There is also the question of where one draws the line of reader acceptability. Many texts are translated from Slovene into English for a non-English-speaking audience: is it sufficient for these to be, rather than the instrumental or functional translation one would expect, nearer to the pole of documentary translation (cf. Nord 1997), where only second-level functional equivalence is achieved?⁴

5. Concluding remarks

On a practical level, of course, the translator's options when translating a website may be limited and the brief may allow little scope for cultural adaptation. Ideally, the translator, as an expert in text formation with a knowledge of marketing and business outside the source language environment would be involved from the start, so that he or she could have an input to the text. Generally, however, translators in Slovenia are not seen as experts in this way, but as language specialists who are brought in to produce a target language text that closely replicates the original. There are some slight signs of this changing, as new graduates of Translation Studies, who perhaps have a more assertive approach, come onto the job market and join company teams that are more geared to international marketing and communication (also as more Slovene companies become part of larger, international concerns, or themselves function internationally). Whether this will simply lead, as with many other genres and in many other fields, to Slovene companies adopting Anglo-American genre conventions – as well as whether this is necessarily a good thing from the Slovene point of view – is another issue.

⁴ For many companies in Slovenia, English is used as the language of communication with subsidiaries, suppliers and customers in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe; texts are sometimes written in English, but most are still translated from Slovene. One supervisor of a translation section at a Slovene pharmaceuticals company (personal communication) put forward the interesting view that it is better for the target audience (i.e. easier for them to understand and to translate into their own language) if the English 'relay' translations are close to the Slovene originals in a way that would not be acceptable to a native speaker reader. This raises some intriguing questions for those of us who teach translators – not only about translation strategy, but about the kind of English we teach and the standards we expect.

The likelihood is that Slovene text production in this context will start to mimic the non-Slovene model, in particular because translators probably encounter more such online texts in English than they do in their own language.

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BRITISH AIRWAYS

http://www.britishairways.com/travel/baalliance/public/en_gb

SIOL

<http://podjetje.sirol.net/o-podjetju/> (replaced by mission statement of Telekom Slovenije at

http://www.telekom.si/en/company/company_profile/mission_and_vision/)

AOL

<http://www.corp.aol.com/whoware/mission.shtml>

KRKA

<http://www.krka.si/en/krka/predstavitev/?v=poslanstvo>

JOHNSON & JOHNSON

http://www.jnj.com/our_company/index.htm

PIVOVARNA LAŠKO

<http://www.pivo-lasko.si/index.asp>

CALEDONIAN BREWERY

<http://www.caledonian-brewery.co.uk/home.php>

MERCATOR

http://www.mercator.si/o_mercatorju

SAINSBURY'S

<http://www.sainsburys.co.uk/aboutsainsburys>