



Analysing common mistakes in translations of tourist texts (Spanish, English and German)*

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Abstract

Translation in the tourist sector has received little attention in the academic context of specialized translation, despite the importance of translation mediating between local and foreign cultures and the meaningful role for the economy in some countries like Spain. In this context, this paper intends to emphasize the relevance of translation in the tourist sector and, in turn, to analyse the common features and mistakes that are frequently encountered in tourist texts involving Spanish, English and German language. Likewise, it proposes a series of possible solutions to improve the quality of this kind of specialized translations and, thus, to ensure a good relationship between source and target cultures.

Keywords: tourism; specialized translation; common mistakes; translation competence.

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1. Language of tourism: main features

Tourism is an activity which involves the direct contact between cultures and all that this concept includes, namely folklore, customs, gastronomy, dancing, rules, etc. This makes us consider the language of tourism an element of inestimable value between tourists and the place they are visiting and, above all, a joint element between the local and foreign cultures involved. Consequently, this situation requires high quality tourist texts, especially translations, so as to guarantee effective and clear communication between local people and culture and real or potential tourists. Unfortunately this quality is not always achieved as these texts frequently contain many mistakes and blurred information: spelling or conceptual mistakes, lack of information, reiteration, misadaptations, among others. One of the main reasons for this to happen is due to the underestimated value that the translation of tourist texts received from most of administrations, travel agencies and companies, which continue ordering their translations to unskilled translators or people that have no experience in translation but have some knowledge of languages (Fuentes Luque, 2005: 32). As a result, tourist translations often present a lack of professionalism and expertise. Bretthauer (2000: 147) clearly illustrates this idea through a conversation between the customer/boss and his/her “translator”: *Sie können doch Französisch, übersetzen Sie doch mal bitte*¹.

Following relevant authors (Calvi, 2000; Kelly, 1997; Dann, 1996) working on this context and carrying out studies about the language of tourism from different perspectives, we state that this language convey specific lexical, syntactic, functional and textual features and conventions which differ from other specialized languages and which justify its classification as a specialized discourse. Consequently, translation of tourist texts should be carried out by professional skilled translators, as any other specialized translation, to avoid common mistakes encountered in these kinds of texts and to guarantee successful results. As an example of these particular lexical, syntactic and textual features, we indicate below some of the most common

¹ You can speak French, can't you? Then, translate this [translated by the author].

features which characterize the language of tourism and make it a specialized language in its own:

–At a lexical level:

1. The use of positive adjectives to give beauty and distinction to the text (*outstanding, spectacular, exotic, colourful*);
2. The use of superlatives, either with adjectives or with the morphological form (*the most easternmost*), is very high. For instance, *Windsor Castle is the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world. (Windsor Castle -leaflet).*
3. The very careful lexical choices of keywords as *away, adventure, dream, imagination, pleasure, escape* to comply with the tourist's expectations about holidaying; together with a technique called *linguaging* (Potter in Dann, 1996: 183), which refers to the use of foreign and invented words in tourist texts to induce a sense of exotic feeling in the tourist;
4. The use of cultural references, called *realia* (*chiringuito, gazpacho*, etc.)², which do not have any equivalent in the target language.

–At a syntactic level:

1. Preference for nominalization (e.g. *when you arrive at the hotel > upon arrival at the hotel*);
2. Imperatives, in order to urge the tourist to avail him/herself of the opportunities which are on offer (e.g. *To taste genuine food, go to one of the local open-air street markets*);
3. The use of the present simple tense in order to make the time of the holiday still and everlasting. (e.g. *Standing alone in the vast empty tract of the Salisbury plains and with origins dating back nearly 5,000 years, Stonehenge remains a place of wonder and mystery (Bath, Windsor & Stonehenge-brochure)*);

–At a functional level:

1. The referential function is always the main function, since the objective of tourist texts is to inform and describe a country, a region, a community, etc.

² These are Spanish terms which have no equivalents in other languages, hence they need some explanation when appearing in a text to be translated. For example, “chiringuito” could be translated as “beach restaurant” but it loses part of its meaning.

2. The persuasive or vocative function is the other predominant function, as Dann (1996: 2) states, the major aim of language of tourism is “to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings, and, in so doing, convert them from potential into actual clients’ place into a tourist destination”.
3. Expressive function, conative function, and poetic function are secondary functions.

All these functions are expressed by means of the previous lexical and syntactic techniques, but also by using pictures, photos, symbols, etc., that is, non-linguistic or non-verbal elements. These non-linguistic elements play an important role in tourist texts, and also hold a persuasive function, and even a poetic function. They are essential elements for persuasion, attraction, seduction, etc. and are often considered trigger elements to tourists when they are deciding where to go, what to visit before and during the visit or what to buy. Owing to this fact, they should not be undervalued when writing the source text, or even less when translating it into the target audience.

Once we have briefly discussed the main features of the language of tourism, we will move on to focus our attention on the remaining goals of the paper. To do so, the paper is structured as follows: first, we depict the main problems of communication breakdown encountered in the tourism context; second, we provide a categorization of mistakes together with real examples taken from translated texts in Spanish, German or English; next, some possible solutions to avoid or minimize these problems of communication and, thus, enhance the quality of these texts are provided, followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Breakdown of communication in translations of tourist texts

The quality in translation depends on the translator’s ability to carry out a work with the absence of mistakes, considering “mistake” as: “[...] una ruptura de las reglas de coherencia de un TT, sean éstas de tipo gramatical, de combinabilidad léxica, congruencia semántica o de conformidad al conocimiento del mundo y de la experiencia acumulada” (Cruces Colado, 2001: 814)³.

To this definition we add the inability to transfer the function of the text required by the customer and the audience, to

³ “A breakdown of coherence rules in a target text, being these grammatical, lexical, semantic or cultural rules” [translated by the author].

write without spelling mistakes, or to produce a natural and fluent discourse in the target text without omissions and misunderstandings. It goes without saying that this is not an easy task to be carried out by unskilled translators. These translation mistakes are a sign of interference between working languages, lack of comprehension in source text and lack of extralinguistic knowledge, as well as the inability to produce proper oral or written communication in one's own native language.

These mistakes are frequently encountered in translated tourist texts, since, contrary to what happens in other specialized translations, most of translators in the tourism domain are not professional, *i.e.*, they are not skilled translators in this domain. As said before, customers usually order translations to non-professionals, sometimes with a limited knowledge of the target language and no specific training in translation or domain-specific languages, who accept low fees and produce quick translations. Therefore, they do not usually produce good quality translations neither they fulfil the requirements regarding translation competences established by the recent European Norm EN-15038 (CEN, 2006)⁴.

According to the different mistakes cited above, and following some relevant authors (Fernández Sánchez, 2005: 41; Bastin, 2000: 234; McAlester, 2000: 236, among others), we can propose this general categorization:

- Grammar and spelling,
- Lexis and semantic,
- Pragmatics and discourse,
- Omissions, repetitions and additions.

⁴ According to the recent norm, professional translators should have the following competences when translating: "translating competence", which comprises the ability to translate texts to the required level; "linguistic and textual competence in the source language and the target language", which includes the ability to understand the source language and translate it into the target language, by following its textual conventions and rules; "research competence", which refers to the ability to efficiently acquire the required linguistic and specialized knowledge to understand the source text and to produce the target text; "cultural competence", which includes the ability to develop suitable strategies for the efficient use of the information sources available; and "technical competence", which comprises the abilities and skills required for the professional preparation and production of translations.

The quality of translation depends on the presence or absence of these kinds of mistakes, and unfortunately in translations of tourist texts the number of them is usually too high (cf. Durán Muñoz, 2008).

2.1. Grammar and spelling

These mistakes are frequently encountered in tourist texts and, as they are so visible and easy to notice, they are the main reason why the quality of this kind of translation is considered so low. They are usually due to a lack of revision or even to a lack of translator's skills when translating into a foreign language⁵.

Almost in any tourist text (brochures, tourist guides, menus, etc.) we observe abundant spelling mistakes. Several examples in German, English and Spanish are found here:

- *Eine der beliebtesten Modalitäten ist das *Besteigen von steilen Felsen (Bergsteigen).*
- **Risokoliebhaber (Risikoliebhaber)*
- **Hydrospeed (Hidrospeed, in Spanish)*
- **Canyonig (Canyoning)*
- *Horse *Ridding (Horse Riding)*
- **Waterskiing (Waterskiing)*
- *At the end you will be *drived to your hotel (driven)*
- *Desde los montes más *exhuberantes del archipiélago (exuberantes).*
- The concept <Rápel> in Spanish can be seen as *rápel*, *rappel*, **rapel* and its plural forms *rápeles*, **rapels* y **rapeles*, when only *rápel* or the gallicism *rappel* are correct.
- Lack of written accent in Spanish: **Número*, **mas*, **esqui*, **Riofrío*, etc.

Also it is extremely common to find grammar mistakes, such as:

- Wrong syntactic constructions: **a part of which looking*.

⁵ In the tourism domain the inverse translation, that is, translating into a foreign language or L2, is very frequent, what provokes the high presence of spelling and grammar mistakes.

- Confusion between prepositions: *On Mondays, the visit *of [to] the Royal Palace of La Granja will be substituted by the visit *of [to] the Royal palace of *Ríofrío.*

2.2. Lexis and semantic

Mistakes regarding terminology also occupy an important position in tourist translations, and sometimes they even provoke misunderstandings due to conceptual problems. For example, the following conceptual/terminological mistakes are found in translated versions of texts in German, English and Spanish:

- **Fischerei*, instead of *Angeln* in German to translate *sport fishing* (English) or *pesca deportiva* (in Spanish). In this sense, *Fischerei* is misused in this context as it is wrongly employed to refer to a kind of sport or tourist activity. Indeed it refers to the same action of catching a fish but the context differs from *Angeln*, the correct term.
- **Freestyle-Klettern* in German to translate *free climbing* in English or *escalada libre* in Spanish. In this case, this type of rock climbing refers not to the style but to the equipment the climber uses (only hands, feet and other parts of the body to ascend). Therefore, the concept is wrongly transferred and causes misunderstanding in the target text.
- **Rohr*, instead of *Snorkel* (specific meaning in diving context). The former refers to a general concept whereas the latter specifies a tube used in this type of diving.
- **Regulator*, instead of *Atmenregler* in German (specific meaning in diving context). It happens the same as in the previous example: the term changes when it refers to the diving context.
- **Swimm* instead of *diven*. Here the idea changes and, although the latter includes the former the action is not the same and, thus, they are not interchangeable.
- **Trekking*, instead of *senderismo (Hiking)* in Spanish. The activities are different and the effort and skills required for the first one are not the same as for the second one, and this can cause misunderstanding to the audience.

Apart from translation problems caused by terminology mistakes, the tourism discourse also presents intrinsic difficulties regarding the cultures involved. As it is been said, tourist texts describe and inform about a reality (being a city, a country, a

type of food, a festivity, etc.) in a local culture which may not exist in the foreign culture, and to an audience who may have never heard of this reality. These concepts that belong to a concrete culture are the so called *realia* and are a source of pitfalls for skilled and, above all, unskilled translators. Examples of these *realia* in Spanish are concepts related to Easter procession (*nazareno, paso*), dances (*sevillanas, malagueñas*), accommodation (*parador, posada*), etc. These cultural differences require translators to search for adequate solutions according to the text function, its audience, and the media, and to put into practice different strategies, e.g. explicitation or adaptation, with the aim of transferring the original meaning to the target audience and thus, overcoming communication barriers. This is essential for the tourist sector, since the target audience must understand the text in order to do, go, buy or whatever the aim of the text be. Otherwise, the function would be broken and therefore, its aim would not be fulfilled and the communication would fail. An example of this unwilling situation is the following translation, found in a Spanish beach restaurant: *sky bacon* to literally translate *tocino de cielo* (a dessert) in Spanish.

Besides the difficulties that are intrinsic to tourist texts and that can provoke translation mistakes, we have to mention another cultural difficulty: namely, translation equivalents of proper names (people, museums, institutions, places, etc.). The translation of proper names is controversial and of high difficulty, since languages establish their own rules to translate them, which can even change over time. For example, in Spanish we currently translate proper names of kings and queens (*Elisabeth II*, in English = *Isabel II*, in Spanish) and popes only, but before we used to translate all proper names (*Karl Marx, William Shakespeare*, etc.), without distinguishing whether they were artists' names, kings, queens or alike. In German these rules are the same as in Spanish, but contrary to what the English language proposes. In English, proper names are usually kept in their original form (*the King Juan Carlos I*, for example, in Spanish) (cf. Seibel, 1994: 280). Nevertheless, these rules are never absolute and translators are always required to do some research so as find out the correct option.

Place names are also proper names, but they cause a diverse difficulty, since there is no rule to translate them. We can find some equivalents in other languages that are used nowadays (*New York*, in English = *Nueva York*, in Spanish;

Sevilla, in Spanish = *Seville*, in English), but also we can find equivalents that are not used any longer (*Neu-York*, in German). In this sense, not all place names are adaptable neither are the adapted ones always easy to recognize, what requires thorough research and consultation of reliable information sources to check possible solutions.

2.3. Pragmatics and discourse

Tourists' expectations regarding texts are related to content and style, and are mainly influenced by reader's knowledge of text conventions in their own language and culture. For example, comparing Spanish with English, more emphasis is given in Spanish texts to history, architecture, art history, and more emphasis in English to practical information (opening times, telephone numbers), etc. Also avoiding taboo elements or words could be considered part of the translator's task as an expert in intercultural mediation (Kelly, 1997: 36). Regarding style, there are some differences between languages and cultures. For instance, Spanish (and even more German) tends to be more formal and less colloquial than English, as well as Spanish texts employ more poetic structures and description than English texts. These differences between source and target cultures make translator question themselves whether to reproduce the source text conventions or adapt the text to the target text conventions. As Kelly (1997: 37), we declare ourselves "targeteers" and thus, believe that the more the target cultural conventions prevail, the more successful translation are and the more success is achieved during the communication process.

In the following fragment, taken from the official site of the Italian Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo⁶, we can observe several examples of misadaptation and lack of nativeness due to a breakdown of the required textual and stylistic conventions in the target text:

- (Italian) *Dove dormire in Italia? Esiste solo l'imbarazzo della scelta. Agli oltre trentatremila alberghi, disseminati in ogni località, si aggiungono altri trentacinquemila indirizzi di*

⁶ Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo (ENIT): <http://www.enit.it/default.asp?lang=ES> (retrieved 20/06/2011).

campeggi, alloggi agrituristici, bed & breakfast, ostelli per la gioventù, alloggi privati e così via.

- (English) Where to sleep in Italy? There is only an embarrassment of choice. In addition to more than thirty thousand hotels located in every part of the country, there are an additional thirty five thousand addresses of campsites, country farmhouses, bed and breakfasts, youth hostels, private accommodation and so forth.

The translator transferred Italian discursive and linguistic features into the target text, instead of adapting the message to the target culture. Owing to this, the translator maintains the non-personalization of the original text, i.e. lack of first and second person pronouns; they use a heavy style, with long and complex sentences, and write syntactic oddities (e.g. *There is only an embarrassment of choice*), and their lexical choices are influenced by the Italian version. In short, the example above exhibits clumsy language with signs of non-nativeness due to interference and non-adherence to the stylistic conventions established for tourist texts in English.

2.4. Omissions, repetitions and additions

This mistake category is also related to the previous one, since the omission, repetition and addition of information lead to poor discourse and breakdown of communication between the text and the audience. Apart from breaking down this communication, a loss of information during the process can also occur, what causes misunderstandings, information gaps, etc. This is observed, for example, in the next example, taken from the bilingual English/Spanish promotional web page *Hotel Rural La Morada de Juan de Vargas*⁷, due to retention of Spanish terms, i.e. lack of explicitation:

- (Spanish, TO) *Quienes caminen por sus calles podrán descubrir su rico pasado y disfrutar de la belleza singular de su **Plaza Mayor**, presidida por la imponente **Iglesia de San Andrés**, del barroco con pervivencias renacentistas de la fachada del **Hospital de Santiago**, del magnífico patio formado por gruesas columnas que se esconde en el interior de la **Alhóndiga**, actual sede de la Casa de Cultura, del*

⁷ <<http://www.lamoradadevargas.com/comodidad.htm>> (retrieved 20/06/2011).

soberbio pórtico neoclásico de la Casa del Arco, o del precioso patio con pilares de la Casa de los Estudios.

- (English, TM) (...) Undoubtedly those who strolls through its streets will discover its rich past and enjoy the unrivalled beauty of its *Plaza Mayor* (main square) dominated by the imposing *Church of San Andres*, or the baroque renaissance façade of the *Santiago Hospital*, the magnificent patio encircled by wide columns that serve to conceal the interior of the *Alhondiga*, present day seat of the *Casa de Cultura* (Culture House), the superb neoclassical doorway of the *Casa del Arco*, or the beautiful pillared *Casa de los Estudios*.

A clear case of lack of explicitation is detected in the target text. The information included to the source text reader (*Alhóndiga*) has not been properly transmitted to the target text reader, causing a possible breakdown in communication. The reader requires the information to be added to the texts as it stands: *Alhondiga* or *corn exchange building* or *Alhondiga (corn exchange building)*, so as to understand the whole paragraph and to distinguish the Spanish term *Alhóndiga* from a proper name or another kind of building.

Also, in tourist texts it is very easy to find repetitions of terms in the same line, similar concepts translated in different ways in the same text or even paragraph, and omission of some parts of the text, as we can see in the following examples taken from translated versions of adventure tourism texts:

- Different terms to describe the same concept in a short tour description: *Gehzeit* / *Fahrzeit* / *Fahrdauer*, to mean duration in all the cases.
- Inconsistency in place names: sometimes the translation of place names along the same text is included in brackets (*Cueva bonita* is translated as *Cueva Bonita (Schöne Höhle)*, but in other occasions they are left without any specification, e.g. *Río Verde* or *Camino de los Neveros*).
- Inconsistency in the terms used in titles and along the text: *Hydrospeed* is used in the title of the text in Spanish describing the activity but *hidrospeed* is then found in the text.
- Repetition of terms, for example: *caminos, senderos, cañadas y calzadas* (TO) = *Straßen, Wanderwege, Bäche und Straßen* (TM) // *roads, trails, creeks and roads* (TM).

- Omission of information: *Se recomienda ampliar o actualizar información sobre zonas de escalada, normativas, equipo, etc. a través de la Federación Canaria de Montañismo y Escalada o acompañarse de escaladores locales (TO) → Empfohlen wird das vorherige Einholen von Informationen über die verschiedenen Klettergebiete bei der Federación Canaria de Montañismo y Escalada oder die Begleitung eines örtlichen Bergsteigers (TM).*
- *Los aficionados a los deportes náuticos pueden... (TO) → Die Sportfans können... (TM).*
- *Turismo activo y rutas de senderismo (TO) → Active Tourismus (TM).*

Once we have analysed and discussed the most common mistakes encountered in translated versions of tourist texts in Spanish, German and English, we shall dedicate the remainder of the paper to illustrating the possible solutions to be adopted with the aim of improving tourist translation quality and achieving effective communication with tourists.

3. How to increase quality in tourist translations

As aforementioned the main reason for the high presence of these mistakes is basically due to the lack of skilled training and professionalism of translators. As Pierini (2007: 99) states, “The complexity of promotional tourist discourse is underestimated by clients and translators: it may appear to be deceptively easy to translate with its extensive use of general language; yet, it is a specialized discourse with specific linguistic/cultural features”. With this complexity of the language of tourism claimed by Pierini, the need for language experts in this field turns evident and essential. We require experts that could create effective promotional materials and, thus, achieve success in a field characterized by keen competition. At the same time, we need professional translators that could translate these tourist texts efficiently so as to guarantee a good communication between local and foreign cultures.

Hence, translators of tourist texts should be familiarized with all the specific features seen in the above sections (functions, syntactic and lexical features, etc.), with all the difficulties when translating (translation of cultural aspects, style, proper names,

etc.), as well as reliable resources available (*TourisTerm*, official web pages, WTO, etc.). It is essential that professional translators gain specific competences before producing translations of tourist texts. The main aim at fulfilling all these competences is intercultural communication. A translation of any tourist text must fulfill its communicative function and, to do so, translators need to meet all the competence requirements determined by the EN-15038. Otherwise, the result would be a grammatically and linguistically correct target text, but deficient in the own features of tourist language (style, natural, etc.). In this case, the audience will probably find it weird and reject it, and communication will be damaged or limited.

It is also well-known that many factors hinder the quality of this kind of texts, such as time and budget constraints, low quality of source materials, technological problems, and lack of translation instructions. Among all possibilities, the main factor behind the quality of translations is considered to be the qualification of translators. This factor is essential to any type of specialized translation, and of course to tourist translation. In the tourism domain, most of the employed translators do not have these competences and they are not familiar with the main features of the language of tourism (lexical, syntactic, and functional features). They lack training in tourism and an adequate level of cultural knowledge (either source or target culture) so as to provide an acceptable result in their translations. In short, they are not qualified to translate tourist texts.

In order to achieve favourable results in tourist translations and to ensure effective communication, it is necessary that academic institutions, that is, universities and/or postgraduate centres, training on specialized translation pay more attention to this specialized translation and cease to underestimate it. Translation of tourist texts is been studied and practiced so far as part of general translation, since there are very few universities that offer tourist translation courses as specialized courses. In Spain, for example, where tourism is the one of the main engines in its economy only some universities offer training courses in tourist translations in Translation and Interpreting degree: University of Alicante offer an annual course in translation of tourist texts (English/Spanish-Spanish/English) and University of Seville also offers a course in tourist translation within a master in specialized translation (German/Spanish). The remaining Spanish universities undervalue tourist translation

and frequently place it as part of a general translation course, dismissing its status as specialized translation and, as a result, undermining translators' training in this context.

In this context, it is clear that translators do not acquire concrete and specialized training for translating tourist texts and therefore, they lack professionalism and experience to elaborate high-quality tourist translations which fulfil all visitors' communicative necessities and expectations. In our opinion, the best way to acquire this specialized knowledge and experience and to deal with promotional tourist texts is by establishing specific training in academic institutions, that is, specific courses in tourist translation where translator students will know all main genres of tourist texts, their features, cultural difficulties, strategies to translate, etc. and learn how to appropriately translate this kind of texts. Translators' training and teaching will lead us to a more efficient and precise communication, in other words, to a high-quality translation in this field and therefore, to avoid all the mistakes cited above.

4. Conclusions

The most important conclusion to be drawn from our study is the need to professionalize translations in the tourism sector and to reduce the commission of these translations to non-professionals or unskilled translators. Similarly, we state that the importance of this sector for economies, together with the specificity of the translation problems involved and the number of mistakes encountered in translated versions, highlight the urgent need for the inclusion of this sort of specialized translation in university training programmes and, therefore, for proper skills to be gained. This qualification and expertise will lead to a real improvement in the interlingual and intercultural communication between local and foreigners, especially in promotional tourist texts, along with a steady improvement of the image of a country.

Despite recent studies and research carried out in the framework of tourism and translation, there is still too much to do. In this vein, this paper also intends to open research lines so as to encourage and promote studies on different branches, such as translators' needs regarding training or reliable and fitting information sources in this domain; linguistic contrastive

studies on the differences encountered in diverse language pairs, e.g. closer languages such as Italian-Spanish or not so close like Spanish-German, among other possible lines.

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