

Whitepaper Series

WHAT NEVER TO SAY TO A TRANSLATOR AND WHY

The work life of a translator is atypical. It is a very specialized profession and there is no 9-5 schedule. With the goal of client education, we have taken it upon ourselves to expand on a recent list of things to never say to a translator by providing the WHY.

1. Never say “I know a relative who studied abroad for a semester. I’m going to ask him to translate this text.” This statement both belittles translators and illustrates a huge misunderstanding of what translation entails. A professional translator is not only fluent in a language or languages; they’re also familiar with fine details such as idiomatic expressions and figurative language. They have extensive knowledge of the culture(s) their language(s) is/are associated with, including history, traditions, beliefs, and current pop culture phenomena. A few months of studying abroad for a few months doesn’t automatically make you fluent in another country’s language and culture.

2. Never say “Why study to become a translator when you can just use Google translate?” This comment is common and understandable. After all, computer-based translation are free and they often give you a functional translation. But they’ll never be able to replace an actual human who can pick up on figurative language, humor, proper names, and idioms.

3. Never say “I studied *insert language here* in high school and I would like to work as a translator.” This one totally depends on who’s saying it. If you’ve just graduated high school or are realizing your calling and want to go back to school and become a translator, then this sentence is not a problem.

If, on the other hand, you’re implying that a few years of learning language basics is enough for you to be an excellent translator, you’re mistaken. In actuality, you have to go much further to truly master a language, know its culture, and be able to make it comprehensible for

others. It's not just about replacing one word or phrase with its linguistic equivalent. Translators have understand the author's contemporary references, culture, and attitudes, and put them in words that stay true to the original. They also have to choose whether to keep the language as poetic as the original or be more straightforward. This struggle is the same for all translators of historic texts and contemporary literature.

Text on a small business's website or a social media post is usually not as complicated, but they still require more than replacing words. Unless you want to end up on a list of translation faux pas, you'll also need an understanding of the culture(s) you're addressing, as well as mastery of slang and figurative language.

4. Never say “Why do you own so many dictionaries? Wasn't one enough?” Not all dictionaries are the same. Some are simple, while others go in-depth. Some might include helpful examples of how a word or phrase is used, or a list of idiomatic expressions associated with a word. Some dictionaries are unabridged. Others focus on etymology (word origins), and others cover specific vocabulary or jargon. An older dictionary can provide clues to older usage; therefore, one dictionary is not enough if a translator wants to make absolutely sure that a word they're considering is the right one for your text.

5. Never say “Does it really take so long to translate that? The text isn't long at all.” Translation isn't just about replacing a word with its equivalent in another language; you have to find the best way to express ideas, and sometimes those are blocked by cultural barriers and other obstacles. There is also the challenge of finding the right way to say something while still respecting the ideas and wording of the original text. All this can take a while.

6. Never say “You only know three languages?” When you think about how deeply a translator has to study and understand a language and culture, three is actually great. It's better to have someone with an extensive knowledge of one or two languages, than a polyglot who may really have only a basic comprehension of many.

7. Never say “Why don't (or didn't) you study *insert language name here*?” There are so many reasons why a translator chooses the language(s) they specialize in. Obviously, their choice was pretty well thought-out, since they were able to master the language(s) and get so familiar with its/their culture(s). This question is not as bothersome to translators as the other ones on the list, because it is a fairly reasonable one. There *are* some languages it could be advantageous to learn. If a translator doesn't choose to learn the latest language offered such as Mandarin, because they are not drawn to it, that is okay. The heart wants what the heart wants.

8. Never say “So you do translations from home? Is that a job?” Yes it is. *Where* you work is not nearly as important as *how much* and *how well* you work. And if someone is turning in excellent translations to you, they’ve been working hard no matter the location.

9. Never say “So you’re a translator...you do simultaneous translation, right?” There are a lot of specialized areas of translation, and for various reasons, not all translators do every one of them. Never assume a translator is going to cover every aspect of their field. That is similar to asking a lawyer if they practice environmental law. It is fine to ask, just ask politely and not be surprised if the translator says they don’t.

10. Never say “What does *insert word without context here* mean? You’re a translator, you should know it!” Language is a subtle thing that depends on so many factors. For example, if a translator asks you, “What does ‘cats’

mean?”, and you tell them that cats are a kind of animal, you would be correct. But perhaps it was important to mention that these words were part of the phrase ‘It’s raining cats and dogs.’” Now the word takes on a different nuance. This isn’t just the case with idiomatic expressions. So please don’t be upset with a translator who cannot respond to this question, or who ends up giving you “the wrong answer”.

Hopefully these explanations have helped you better understand what a professional translator really does, and what kind of work you should expect from them. The next time you’re talking to a translator, please keep this list in mind. And if you’re looking for a translator who’s probably heard all of these statements before and is still cheerful and professional, aiaTranslations has you covered. Contact us for a quote on your next project.