Making Your Translation Sound Natural

Illustrations by Alex Mathers
Is it possible to produce a natural-sounding translation the first time?

- Yes, if you’re fluent in your foreign language and an excellent writer in your native language.
- Yes, but only if you’re a highly experienced translator.
- No, you’ll always need to edit and polish a draft translation in order to make it sound natural.

How important is it that a translator lives in the country where their native language is spoken?

- Not important at all.
- It helps but they can develop local knowledge in other ways.
- Very important — translators must live in the country where their native language is spoken.

Which of the following will have the greatest impact on the naturalness of a text?

- The translator isn’t familiar with the subject area.
- The translator mirrors the structure of the source text in their translation.
- The translator fails to use a collocation or translates an idiom literally.
Customers most frequently reject translations because they are too literal, stiff or unnatural.

We want to help you avoid this outcome by identifying common disguise flaws and offering strategies for creating translations that go unnoticed.

Applying these strategies will improve your ability to produce natural sounding texts and help your translations fly under the radar.
Mission: Translation

1. Gathering Intelligence
2. Dressing in Disguise
3. Making a Clean Getaway
1. Gathering Intelligence

Know your native language and language pair traps.
Translators must have high level writing skills in their native language — people often forget or underestimate how important this is.

Two of the biggest problems our reviewers encounter are:

1. Translators who have focused so much on the meaning of each individual word in the source text that they have thrown all their native language writing skills out the window.

2. Translators whose native language has been “contaminated” — their foreign language skills are so advanced they don’t realize that writing words in a particular way will make little sense to a monolingual native speaker.
Gathering Intelligence

In-depth knowledge of your native language and language pair traps is key to a successful undercover mission.

A skillful translagent will have a briefcase of knowledge that they actively maintain and develop over time.
The Translagent’s Briefcase

Map
Understanding the structure of your native language and how it differs from your foreign language will help you identify when it is necessary to rearrange, invent or omit words. As you translate, look for patterns; make a note of these until rephrasing becomes second nature.

Magnifying glass
Be aware of common errors specific to your language pair. We recommend TED’s OTPedia as a starting point.
Fake moustache
Incorrect collocations scream “TRANSLATION!”.
This mistake is particularly prevalent in closely related languages. For example, a French to English translator may look at “le thé est faible” and translate it as “the tea is feeble” rather than “the tea is weak”.
Avoid this trap by:

- Double-checking — when in doubt, refer to a collocations dictionary or test options using Google Search (see Lesson 2 for Search tips).
- Studying collocations — this will also help you get used to the idea of dealing with blocks of words rather than individual terms.
- Reading a wide variety of text types, often.
2. Dressing in Disguise

Blend in by researching the topic area.
The absence of industry-specific jargon or culture-specific slang is a dead giveaway.

Become a Master of Disguise by investigating the style and vocabulary of the specific topic area your text relates to.

Browsing local websites and other resources (e.g., industry publications) is your best bet. “Local” here means that the content is written by native speakers.

**Note:** Your research doesn’t need to be extensive — a short period of time is better than nothing.
Making a Clean Getaway

Fine-tune to eliminate any link to your real identity.
Remember, mission comes first
Don't be afraid to “reformulate” a sentence or paragraph — turn it around if that makes it sound better in the target language (while not leaving anything out or making additions to the original).

Cover your tracks
Check for traces of the source language’s structure, vocabulary or false friends.
Trust no one
Including yourself. When you’ve finished translating, step away from your desk for at least 2 minutes. Return with fresh eyes, reassess and tweak as necessary.

Never let your guard down
Keep rewriting and perfecting (within time limits) until you’re completely satisfied that your translation sounds natural.

Ask a friendly local to check your disguise
If time permits, ask a monolingual native speaker of your language to look over your translation.
Practice what you’ve learned

Translator, the mission is yours should you choose to accept it:

To talk about the lesson or ask questions, join our discussion in the Translator Forums.

Download Exercise