

How to Save Money on Translation By Editing the Source Text

Trim the Fat; Cut the Cost

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If translators had a list of FAQ's, the number one question would undoubtedly be "What can we do to cut the cost of our translations?" There are a number of answers to this question, but the simplest is to reduce the number of words in your documents before translating. Translation is usually priced by the word; therefore the fewer words for translation, the less it costs.

Careful editing reaps rewards

In technical manuals, service instructions, on-line help, training programs and all but the shortest documents, it is possible to trim the original wording and cut your translation expense. This editing takes time and must be judicious — obviously, you don't want to cut anything that will reduce the reader's level of understanding. But if done with care, editing before translation can save expense, especially if you're publishing in several different languages.

Yann Meersseman discussed this topic in the January 1997 issue of *Language International*, "Our latest release featured a brand-new 950,000-word online-help system. Before starting translations, I gave a team of five people four weeks to review every word with a single question in mind: what information does this provide to the end-user? As a result, the word volume dropped 28% while quality control showed increased readability and no loss of information. This less than \$40,000 investment not only improved the quality, it saved close to \$1,200,000 on translations! Put differently, my company had almost paid \$1.2 million to deliver useless verbiage to half of the planet. Starting to get the point?"

Your translation budget may not run into the millions and you may not write documents with anywhere near 950,000 words, but it's still an idea worth considering. Yes, it adds time and expense to pare down a document from 50,000 words to 32,000 words. But consider the savings, especially if it is translated into two or three languages. If we estimate an average cost of \$0.25 per word, that's a savings of \$9,000 in two languages, and \$27,000 in six languages. Not to mention the number of pages that are trimmed off, saving page layout time and the resultant expense. And your readers will thank you.

Suggestions for editing your document

You can start to see how this might snowball into an all-around good deal. But where to start? As translators, we see a lot of unnecessary words flow by every day. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ Take out the fluff: fight verbosity. Read each sentence and ask yourself, "Does our customer need to know this?" If not, delete it. If so, is there a simpler way to state it?
- ◆ Get straight to the point. Don't include a lot of background information if it's not important to the user.
- ◆ Cut out unnecessary adjectives. Is "fuel-efficient, hydrostatic drive system" really better than "the drive system," or worth the extra expense? If one word in ten is eliminated, you've just saved 10% of the translation cost.

- ◆ Leave out the sales pitch. Users have already bought your product, they don't need to be sold again. Tell them in simple terms how to use it, don't tell them why they'll be happy that they bought it. Hopefully they will learn that on their own.
- ◆ Try not to repeat the same text in the heading and the first sentence of the introduction, and even in the figure caption. For example, if "Cleaning the Processor" is the title, don't put this under the photo also, and then start out with, "It is important to clean the processor." You'll pay three times for the same statement.
- ◆ Take out any material not relevant to the international market. For example, it's not necessary to provide information on U.S. service centers for customers in Europe.
- ◆ In technical manuals, provide one complete table of contents. Eliminate individual tables of contents for each section. Some desktop publishing programs generate these individual tables of contents automatically. That is fine in the source document, but will cost extra to translate.

Here's an example of editing to reduce the number of words. Compare these two paragraphs:

1. It is important to remember to change the oil in your vehicle's engine every three months. This will help to increase the car's operating efficiency and result in better gas mileage both in city and highway driving. For further information on gas mileage, see Section 3, "Maximizing Your Fuel Usage," page 81. *(53 words)*
2. Important: change the engine oil every three months to increase your car's efficiency and gas mileage — see Section 3. *(20 words)*

Another consideration — the module approach

While you're editing, go a step further and consider making some of your boilerplate material into modules. Warranty information, safety instructions, even some topics such as lubrication and maintenance can be edited to create modules which do not change from manual to manual. Sometimes it's as simple as changing "the Model 1500 Laser Printer" to "the printer" wherever it appears in the section. Other times it requires deleting some specific text and creating additional pages of specifications unique to the particular model.

When a module is created, tag it with an identifier that must change when the text changes. After that, the translation can be treated as a module also. Pay for translation once and use it again and again by storing and plugging it in wherever it needs to be used. (Note: if you ask your translator to handle your modules, the cost will be reduced but it won't be free.)

The challenge of using modules is to avoid the temptation to tinker with the wording each time the module is used in a new document. Try to remember that each time you change it, you must pay to have the module revised.

Judicious editing pays off

In the process of editing your document, you may find that you've increased your reader's understanding by simplifying instructions, while saving translation expense. Mr. Meersseman states that his company translates user instructions into 18 languages. They have a sign posted in their department which reminds their writers, "Every word you write costs the company \$4.50."