Common Errors in Translation

Syntax/Grammar Errors
Vocabulary Errors
Spelling/Punctuation errors

For the last year, a team specializing in Hispanic linguistics at the Hablamos Juntos National Program Office has been reviewing translated materials submitted by the HJ grantees. Though thoughtfully translated, these materials exemplify some of the greatest challenges in English-to-Spanish translation. On this page, we will discuss each of these common errors in turn, and provide a sample translated document with comments made by one of our linguists.

Syntax / Grammar Errors

These errors are produced when the translator is faithful to the syntax of the source language. The following is an example of inappropriate translation from English to Spanish in which the incorrect translation is motivated by faithfulness to the syntax of English. The error in the following example stems from the fact that, in English, a noun in the subject position ("charges") is not preceded by an article ("the"). In Spanish, nouns in the subject position have to be preceded by an article ("Los costos").

Source Text	Translated Text	Suggested Translation
"Charges for persons meeting medical indigence criteria may be waived or reduced."	"Costos a personas que califican como indigentes pueden ser reducidos o anulados."	"A las personas que califican como indigentes, se les puede reducir o anular los costos."

Vocabulary errors

Some words sound similarly from language to language. For example, "sensible" in English and "sensible" in Spanish. However, they have totally different meanings: "intelligent" in English and "sensitive" in Spanish. These words are considered false cognates of these languages. If we use Spanish "sensible" to translate English "sensible", we are making a translation error at the vocabulary level. In the following example, the word "pariente", which means "relative" in Spanish, is incorrectly used to translate "parent" in English.

Source Text	Translated Text	Suggested Translation
Relationship (parent, legal guardian, personal representative, etc.)	Relación (pariente, representante legal, guardián legal, etc.)	Relación (padre o madre, representante legal, guardián legal, etc.)

Spelling / punctuation errors

These are not necessarily translation errors. They happen when the translator or the text creator does not follow the spelling / punctuation rules of the target language. These errors may result in loss of credibility in the information provided or the source of the material. In the following example, the Spanish word "proteja" is incorrectly spelled as "protega". This error can have a very negative impact in the reader (in this case, the patient).

Source Text	Translated Text	Suggested Translation
"Safeguard Your Baby"	"Protega a Su Bebé"	"Proteja a Su Bebé"

These types of errors can be viewed in context in the following document, which was translated from English to Spanish and then reviewed and commented on by one of the HJ linguists.

To see the translated document with highlighted comments, please click here.
To see the original English source document, please click here.