Spanish Translation for the U.S. – What are the Challenges?

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The increasing number and diversity of immigrants to the U.S. in recent years have fostered tremendous growth in translation activity in order to facilitate communication with those who have limited English proficiency (LEP) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). Spanish is the most-widely spoken language among new immigrants, with 25.9 million more speakers in 2010 than in 1980. According to the 2011 census, of persons who spoke a language other than English at home, 62% spoke Spanish, and 43.7% of those said they "spoke English less than 'very well.'" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). It is quite likely, therefore, that for the foreseeable future, translation into Spanish will continue to be an important component of communication with this segment of the U.S. population. This raises three key questions:

- Who will do these translations?
- How can practitioners ensure their quality?
- Does the "plain-language" mandate for English-language communication have any implications for translated materials?

The following paragraphs analyze these issues and explain why the importance of answering them led to the creation of the Research Institute of United States Spanish (RIUSS).

The Translator – Being Bilingual is Necessary but Not Sufficient

Some branches of the federal government are keenly aware of the skill level required for the production of high-quality translations and have developed systems for vetting the professional expertise of those who translate for them (see discussion on ILR Translation Performance below).

Unfortunately, this awareness is not shared by the vast majority of stakeholders. As an unregulated profession in the United States, translation falls victim to several myths. Chief among them is the belief that any person who speaks two languages can translate between them.

Most people will agree that writing well in English takes more than just being a fluent speaker. In order to produce a quality written document, the writer must also, at the very least, have a good command of grammar, vocabulary and subject matter. Yet the person who translates such a document into another language is often expected simply to be someone who can speak that language, with little thought to how well s/he speaks

it and no thought at all to other aspects that are just as important as language skills.

Very few people are aware that the translator must share enough of the original writer's linguistic and subject-matter knowledge so as to understand the document in all its nuances. The translator must then render that information into another culture and language (with its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary) in such a way that it accomplishes the communicative purposes of the original document. This activity demands more training, skill and experience than most bilinguals have at their disposal. Studies show that native-like fluency and pronunciation in a foreign language do not automatically confer the ability to accomplish a full range of linguistic tasks (Swender *et al.* 2014). Having sufficient language proficiency to communicate in everyday life does not guarantee that one can do so in more structured and formal situations, especially when it comes to writing for the public. In addition, while someone may certainly possess native-speaker ability in each of the languages s/he speaks (a "balanced bilingual") (Psychology Dictionary) a person with high-level skills in one language may not have the same level of skill in the other language (an "unbalanced bilingual") (Psychology Dictionary). According to the Psychology Dictionary, "It's more common to be an unbalanced bilingual person than its balanced counterpart." (Psychology Dictionary).

Translation Quality

The translation process adds a layer of complexity that goes beyond how well someone is able to write in one or both languages. Recognizing the differences between language ability and translation ability, the federal government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) has developed a hierarchy of proficiency levels specifically for "Translation Performance" intended as guidelines for use in government settings (ILR Skill Level Descriptions For Translation Performance). There are eleven ILR Translation Performance levels, each one representing a range of skills and the types of translation tasks that may be assigned and successfully executed at that level.

According to the ILR document:

> "A successful translation is one that conveys the explicit and
> implicit meaning of the source language into the target language
> as fully and accurately as possible…
>
> Competence in two languages is necessary but not sufficient for
> any translation task. Though the translator must be able to (1) read
> and comprehend the source language and (2) write comprehensibly
> in the target language, the translator must also be able to (3) choose
> the equivalent expression in the target language that both fully
> conveys and best matches the meaning intended in the source
> language (referred to as *congruity judgment*).

A weakness in any of these three abilities will influence performance adversely and have a negative impact on the utility of the product. Therefore, all three abilities must be considered when assessing translation skills…

Moreover, analytical and research skills as well as adeptness in using translation tools and resources (such as monolingual dictionaries and glossaries, on-line aids, and consultation with experts) allow the individual to proceed methodically and verify the appropriateness of the equivalents chosen. Such specialized skills must be acquired through training and practice." (ILR Skill Level Descriptions For Translation Performance)

These guidelines do, indeed, point the way toward improving translation quality. They do not address, however, something that has become a key component of written communication intended for the general public: creating easily-understood documents accessible to readers with various levels of literacy skills. Since the 1990s, there has been a greater awareness that public information, health promotion and other types of communication are more successful when people can quickly and easily understand what they read.

Plain Language

The U.S. Department of Education's 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found that nearly 47 percent of the U.S. population (about 90 million people) had low literacy levels, (Kirsch et al. 1993) making it difficult to apply the reading, writing, and computational skills necessary to carry out everyday tasks. A subsequent study, carried out in 2003 (National Assessment of Adult Literacy – NAAL), found that overall literacy had gone down from that of 1992, including substantial declines among minorities and college graduates (sheppardsoftware.com). A further barrier to sustained literacy levels is that these deteriorate with non-use, so that, for example, a fourth-grade reading level can become a first- or second-grade reading level after a number of years, from lack of practice (Berger 1988). Thousands of jobs in the service economy go unfilled each year due to the number of applicants with weak reading, writing, or mathematical skills (Berger 1988).

Studies have found that people with low literacy levels make more emergency-room visits, take fewer preventive-health measures and are more likely to suffer from heart failure than those with higher literacy skills. Low literacy costs the health-care system an estimated $106 billion to $238 billion per year (Adult Literacy and Basic Education).

These alarming facts have prompted the "plain-language" movement, a concerted effort on the part of government and the private sector to create written materials that are easily accessible to low-literacy readers. Numerous websites, training programs and materials have been created to help communicators produce plain-language documents. For examples please see Bibliography. Citing the *International Plain Language Federation*, one such website carries this definition: "A communication is in

plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information."

Plain language is NOT ungrammatical, "dumbed-down," or insulting to the reader (Federal Plain Language Guidelines). The main features of plain language include writing in the active voice and using direct forms of address, such as pronouns; using words and numbers the reader will understand, instead of filling the document with jargon; keeping sentences and paragraphs short; deleting unnecessary words, sentences and paragraphs; and creating lists and tables that will allow the reader to find information with less effort (Plain Language Checklist). The abundance of training materials, workshops and conferences devoted to the topic shows that deliberate thought and effort are required for the production of plain-language texts if they are to accomplish their objectives.

Those who assume that translation is simply an automatic process of substituting words in one language for words in another language also assume that if the original is in plain language, the translation will be, too. But that is not necessarily the case. Just as the original writer needs to be aware of plain-language issues and know how to use them appropriately in order not to sabotage communication, so also must the translator. An important tenet for the plain-language writer as well as the translator is to know the audience, its needs, and whether the document as written (and translated) will serve its communicative purpose. It is also important to keep in mind that what constitutes "plain language" in English is not necessarily the same in other languages (a simple, easily-understood English word may have a cognate that is more formal and difficult to understand in the target language and vice versa).

The following statement regarding translated health-related materials can be applied to translations in other fields as well: "Poor quality non-English health materials are common and primarily the result of underdeveloped competencies among translators and requesters. Unlike other developed countries, training for translators is virtually nonexistent in the United States." (*Hablamos Juntos*, Toolkit 2). But it should be added that translation competencies acquired in other countries are not the solution to what ails translated documents in the U.S.

Translators trained outside the United States are not aware of the issues that affect translation into U.S. Spanish and differentiate it from translation into the Spanish of Spain and Latin America. In other words, while non-U.S.-based professional translators may have a good grasp of the Spanish language and the culture of their own countries, they cannot produce translations with the specific needs of the U.S. Spanish-speaker in mind as these exist within the U.S. political, cultural and social context. An analogous situation would be to expect professional translators in Britain to translate public and health information into English for the U.S. market simply because they have studied translation and are experts in the English language. It is clear, then, that in order to produce the kind of work our society needs, translators must be based in the U.S.

RIUSS and Translation for Domestic Consumption

In 2015, the Research Institute of U.S. Spanish (RIUSS) was established by a group of academics, educators, translators and researchers concerned with the poor quality of translations produced for the Spanish-speaking public in the U.S. Its goal is to promote research on written communication in Spanish in the U.S., which happens to be mostly a product of translation. RIUSS proposes research to establish new translation guidelines that stem from the following goals:

> 1. To determine the distinctive U.S. variant of written Spanish that results from
>> (a) constant contact with American culture and the English language
>> (b) a heterogeneous population of immigrants from every Spanish-speaking country in the world who need to communicate with one another and with the larger society
>
> *2.* To foster research that will help determine the U.S.-Spanish equivalent of plain language, or *lenguaje claro.*

On a practical level, below are some issues on which RIUSS provides specific research and guidance to help raise the quality of translations in the U.S. (Molinero 2015):

- standardization of Spanish terms that are unique to the U.S.

- awareness of terms that may carry special legal significance in the U.S. common-law system as opposed to the Napoleonic-law system of Spanish-speaking countries

- standardization of numerical notation that conforms to U.S. custom and usage (for example, use of the decimal point and comma for thousands instead of the decimal comma and period for thousands, as used in Spain and several Latin American countries)

- keeping certain English words unchanged in the translation if that is how the reader is likely to see them (street signs; hospital signs – such as X-Ray, MRI)

- the federal government's required "*CLAS Standards" (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services)* for all health-related information and how they affect translations

- working with college-level degree-granting translation programs in the U.S. to ensure that students receive training in translation for the bilingual society and plain language/*lenguaje claro.* The first such collaboration has been in place for the past three years with the B.A. program in English<>Spanish translation in the Dept. of Romance Languages at Hunter College of the City University of New York. This training has proved invaluable to graduates and their employers as

they deploy a set of skills not easily found among foreign-trained and -based translators.

The translation process involves certain knowledge and activities, both linguistic and extra-linguistic, that include the application of specific methodologies in a variety of skill clusters necessary to create successful translated documents. The particular circumstances of American society with its heterogeneous immigrant population and public communication needs demand that translators be aware of these needs and have the knowledge and training to respond to them appropriately. Through its research and collaboration efforts, RIUSS hopes to contribute to the improvement of translation skills in the U.S. and create awareness that well-trained U.S.-based translators are the best guarantee of quality translations for our bilingual society (Molinero 2016).

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