

**IRONY:** This business article became “lost in translation” when the magazine (not the author) added large, red, machine-translated graphics. These Google mistranslations do not convey the entire meaning of the phrase “lost in translation,” and the Chinese actually means “Lost Tokyo” because an online translator produced the Chinese title for the 2003 film about two people lost in Japanese culture.

## Lessons Learned

By Adam Wooten

# Lost in Translation

Preserving Brand Strength in Foreign Markets

1 Marketing managers often laughingly relate how Coca-Cola allegedly committed a huge blunder when entering the Chinese market. Reportedly, its brand name was translated to mean “bite the wax tadpole.” Imagine the implications! Did Chinese consumers wonder if the beverage tasted like wax, tadpoles or pond water? Fortunately for Coca-Cola, this gaffe is merely urban legend. The online myth debunker Snopes.com explains that before Coca-Cola’s official entry into China, some shopkeepers independently created signs with Chinese characters that sounded like “Coca-Cola” but had nonsensical meanings such as “bite the wax tadpole” and “female horse stuffed with wax.”

However, Coca-Cola understood the importance of preserving its brand value in international markets. Before entering China in 1928, the beverage icon took great pains to ensure its brand would not be proverbially

know how to effectively convey their brand messages and any preferences to their language service providers. Otherwise, the translated message could cause significant embarrassment.

### Building a Global Brand

Aribex is a Utah-based company that understands the importance of preserving its brand message in translation. Aribex’s efforts in multiple market segments are geared toward being “the worldwide leader in handheld X-ray.” The latest models in the company’s NOMAD product line are sleek, lightweight and uniquely positioned in the market. Marc Burrows, product manager, realizes that a handheld device such as the NOMAD can be a terminology challenge when localizing marketing materials.

“Some languages have words in X-ray diagnostics that mean ‘mobile,’ ‘cordless’ or ‘portable,’ but not ‘handheld,’” explains Burrows. “The fact that the NOMAD is handheld is a crucial differentiator for Aribex. All larger, traditional X-ray machines are either fixed or mobile. However, none are small, truly portable and—except the NOMAD—able to be operated safely in hand, rather than remotely. For this reason, we cannot settle for approximate translations that do not convey our branding message. If necessary, rather than dilute our brand, we will choose to invent a new hybrid word to convey the correct meaning.”

### Effective Communication

Global marketing managers need to communicate unique linguistic preferences up front to their language service providers (i.e. translation companies) just as successful managers at Coca-Cola and Aribex have done. Waiting to express such preferences until after the translation is complete is like selecting color preferences after a room has already been painted. Clear communication of linguistic preferences from the beginning will save both time and money.

When translating websites, product documentation, marketing materials or other projects, a language service provider

can consistently track and implement company preferences using the following three tools: translation glossaries, translation memories and translation style guides. Glossaries maintain preferences at the word level. Translation memories are databases of previously translated sentences that help language service providers reuse previous translations and maintain preferences at the sentence level. Style guides help to consistently preserve both language and format preferences at every level in between.

Within the company, if possible, native-language reviewers examine proposed glossaries and style guides early in the process. Marketing managers and language service providers avoid costly and time-consuming rework by maintaining preferences from the project’s commencement.

Consider answering the following questions when expressing preferences for inclusion in glossaries and style guides:

- Should product names remain untranslated?
- Do spellings already exist for name translations in other languages?
- What are the key brand messages and tone you intended to convey with the original text?
- Is background reference material available for project linguists?

### 2 How to Sink Your Global Brand

Regardless of how thoroughly a marketing manager may express company preferences, the language service provider must still meet minimum linguistic quality standards. Otherwise, the marketing message may join a long list of failed international slogans. One sure-fire way to sabotage your international marketing message is to use a linguist who is not a professional or who is not a native speaker of the target language. Wings Air, an airline in Indonesia, where the native language is Bahasa Indonesia, once used a curiously awkward English slogan. Before a professional translator and editor could check the phrase, the airline paid to print the words “Fly is Cheap” on

signs, aircraft and airsickness bags. The resulting message was not very reassuring for potential passengers, considering airline quality assurance.

Another way to impair your global marketing message is to sidestep human translation in favor of machine translation. One restaurateur in China attempted to retrieve an automated translation of his restaurant name on a day when a machine translation engine was apparently not working. With no review by a professional Chinese-to-English translator, the restaurateur posted a large sign above the storefront that read, “Translate Server Error,” a peculiar name for a restaurant.

### 4 Brand Success for Bing

In contrast to the previous two examples, Microsoft is a global company that understands the importance of preserving a strong brand in translation. When Microsoft launched the Bing search engine in 2009, some users alleged this was an international

Perdu dans la Traduction

Caillte san Aistriúchán

Perso nella Traduzione

Perdido en la Traducción

marketing blunder because Chinese characters that sounded like “bing” meant “sick” or had other negative connotations. However, Yusuf Mehdi, Microsoft senior vice president, told *The New York Times*, “It is because we were aware of this one possible interpretation that we chose to select a Chinese character to pair up with Bing to form the brand.”

Mehdi further explained in a June 8, 2009 letter to the *Times* editor, “This approach enables us to ensure appropriate pronunciation for Bing in China. Our new brand in China is pronounced ‘bee-ying,’ its meaning derived from the last two characters of a Chinese proverb meaning ‘ask and you shall find.’ The direct translation for ‘Bi-ying’ is ‘certain to respond or ready

to answer.’” Microsoft could not hope for a more ideal connotation.

These examples from Coca-Cola, Aribex and Microsoft demonstrate that brand strength can be preserved in translation. Any international company can achieve similar success by understanding its own marketing message, conveying that message effectively to professional language service providers and allowing for some adaptation if a perfect translation is not immediately evident.

*Adam Wooten is vice president at Globalization Group, Inc., an Orem-based language translation company. He also teaches a course on translation and technology at Brigham Young University. He can be reached at 801-437-7842, awooten@globalization-group.com or www.globalization-group.com.*

迷失東京

Perdido em Tradução

“lost in translation.” Ultimately, the company chose the characters pronounced “K’ò K’òu K’ò Lé,” which literally mean, “let the mouth rejoice” or “happiness in the mouth.” This more thoughtful translation definitely helps to preserve the Coca-Cola brand, especially in light of the company’s more contemporary “Open Happiness” campaign.

Successful companies work hard to differentiate and position their brands. Coca-Cola preserved its brand strength in China by understanding its brand message, working with skilled professional linguists, conveying that message effectively to the linguists and then maintaining some flexibility when a perfect brand translation was not immediately apparent.

When taking brands global, companies—and specifically marketing managers—must

## THE REAL LESSONS LEARNED

This business magazine learned these lessons the hard way even though the article itself warns about the very same issues:

1. The first example notes Coca-Cola has been blamed for [bad Chinese translations created by unauthorized individuals](#)
2. The Wings Air example illustrates that translations must be performed by [professional linguists](#) and [native speakers of the target language](#)
3. The Chinese restaurant example warns against [misusing machine translation](#)
4. The Microsoft Bing example further emphasizes [the difficulty of Chinese translation](#)
5. Bonus: A good example from Google that the magazine edited out actually illustrates [what the search engine giant does to obtain high quality human translation for its own brand](#)