

# MUSEUM TOOLKIT

WHAT MUSEUMS NEED TO KNOW  
ABOUT TRANSLATION

*By Josée Malenfant  
Certified Translator  
[www.transphere.net](http://www.transphere.net)*

# WHAT MUSEUMS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TRANSLATION

In June 2015, I went to the Museum of Vancouver's exhibition “c̓əsnaʔəm, the city before the city.” The exhibition shed light on the ancestral village's significance to the Musqueam Nation and to Vancouverites.

As I read through the various written materials, which were provided in English, French and hən̍qəmin̍əm' (the Musqueam language), I was deeply touched. The efforts made to make me—a Francophone from the East—feel welcome meant a great deal to me. While I could have read the English signs, I chose to read the panels in my mother tongue. And in doing so, I believe that I felt closer to the people being portrayed and that I listened to them with even greater consideration and respect. In the end, I think the whole experience left me with a deeper sense of connection.

As a professional translator, I had been advocating for years that translation allows museums to reach a broader range of people. But I was a bit taken aback by my own reaction during that visit, and I started investigating further.

## DID YOU KNOW?

“55% of international [Science Centers and Museums] offer most or all of their visitor information in more than one language.”

SOURCE: *MULTILINGUAL INTERPRETATION IN SCIENCE CENTERS AND MUSEUMS*, 2012

---

*“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.  
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”*

—Nelson Mandela

---

I realized that my feelings are far from unique: a three-year study recently conducted in the United States as part of the Bilingual Exhibit Research Initiative (BERI) found that the presence of bilingual interpretation (English-Spanish in that case) had a profound emotional impact on visitors. “Groups said they enjoyed the visit more, felt more valued by the institution, and many said having bilingual interpretation changed how they felt about the institution,” says Steve Yalowitz, Principal Investigator at Audience Viewpoints Consulting and co-author of the study.

"Our mother tongue is the language we use to think, dream and feel emotions," says Alice Mado Proverbio, professor of psychology at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan. She conducted a study among 15 Italian interpreters who were perfectly fluent in English. The study revealed a significant difference in brain activity when the subjects were shown words in their mother tongue as compared to words in other languages they knew.

So it seems that, more often than not, we experience a message more directly and emotionally in the language that has shaped our first—or most significant—memories.

---

## SO HOW CAN MUSEUMS REALLY BENEFIT FROM TRANSLATION?

Apart from connecting better with your current English-as-a-Second-Language visitors, offering your written materials in other languages may help you reach some entirely new segments of the population and build new connections with them. Did you ever ask yourself if some of your non-visitors might be members of your own community who don't feel "linguistically" welcome in your institution? Would they be more likely to visit your museum if you made the effort to address them in their native language?

Reaching out to Canadians and people from abroad in their mother tongue could make your museum more accessible to them—and as a result enhance their experience, increase their satisfaction and build their loyalty. In the end, that simple step may very well increase your traffic levels.

### LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN CANADA

- ◊ In 2011, 7.7 million Canadians, or 23.2% of the population, reported French as being their first language spoken.
- ◊ Nearly 6.6 million persons reported speaking a language other than English or French at home.
- ◊ Since 2006, eight language groups saw their numbers grow by more than 30% as the language most often spoken at home: Tagalog, Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi, Creole, Bengali, Persian and Spanish.

SOURCE: "LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CANADIANS," STATISTICS CANADA

---

## WHY NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE “QUICK-AND-DIRTY” OPTION THAT MACHINE TRANSLATION OFFERS?

Machine translation applications can accomplish amazing technological feats; they serve as valuable tools to process instantly huge amounts of technical material or get an overview of a text. But when it comes to conveying a specific emotion or taking humour or cultural references into account, machine translation isn’t up to the task and can’t compete with human brain. The web abounds with “hilarious” mistranslations produced with automatic tools—you wouldn’t want your material to be included in it, would you?

Google Translate may prove useful for factual information, but it may be a gamble for organizations relying on meaningful connections. In any event, machine translations should never be published or printed without an actual person reviewing and revising them.

---

## SOME OF OUR STAFF MEMBERS ARE BILINGUAL. WHY NOT HAVE THEM TRANSLATE OUR MATERIALS?

Your nephew might enjoy woodworking in his spare time, but you wouldn’t recommend him to your friends to build their new house. Similarly, speaking two languages isn’t necessarily enough to master all the nuances and skills needed to produce accurate and appropriate equivalents between languages—while avoiding anglicisms, false friends and unnatural sentence structures. Having handled similar projects in the past, professional translators can also help you assess the time and effort required, and the questions that need to be asked.

It is true that translators usually work remotely and can’t readily access all the background information on your museum and its exhibits. And that is where your bilingual staff can be especially useful: they can serve as valuable resources in providing the translator with the required background information and discussing your linguistic preferences. As with any other project, communication and collaboration are key to obtaining optimal results.

“Anyone who speaks more than one language can understand messages written or broadcast in those languages. However, this does not necessarily mean they can translate them properly—in writing or orally—into another language.”

*What Are the Uses of Translations?*

(Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec)

---

## HOW SHOULD WE PREPARE FOR A TRANSLATION PROJECT?

Outsourcing your translation project to a translation provider costs money, but it does save valuable time and effort.

However, your team *will* need to spend some time communicating with your translation provider.

You can ensure a smooth process by gathering the following information beforehand:

- Define the subject of the document.
- Specify the languages the document is to be translated from and into.
- Determine the length of the document.
- Find out whether it is an update of something that has already been translated.
- Locate any background information on the subject.
- Provide the name and number of a resource person.
- Set a deadline for delivery.

(THE LIST ABOVE HAS BEEN COMPILED BY THE ORDRE DES TRADUCTEURS, TERMINOLOGUES ET INTERPRÈTES AGRÉÉS DU QUÉBEC)

Here are some of the questions you could discuss with your team and your translation provider:

- ◊ Do we need to translate everything in an exhibit?
- ◊ What are the best practices for translation or for bilingual label development?
- ◊ How do you decide which languages to translate?

SOURCE: "REDEFINING MULTILINGUALISM IN MUSEUMS: A CASE FOR BROADENING OUR THINKING," MUSEUMS & SOCIAL ISSUES, APRIL 2015

---

## WHAT SOME OF YOUR PARTNERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

"Translation is more than writing the same words in another language. We work with experienced freelance translators and they go for the best, ask questions about the background of the story, come with suggestions for expressions, etc. I respect them very much because they make the site or content better."\*

*Jo Van Hove, Founder of iBeaken, a visitor engagement and activation platform*

“A good practice is to create the equivalent of a style guide for the translator. It should contain a clear description of the project’s desired tone and language, including examples of word choices (e.g. we prefer the more direct term ‘use’ over the more formal term ‘utilize’). Most professional translators who work with cultural or artistic content understand the client has a ‘voice’ and they work very hard to achieve it in their work.”\*

*Stasha Boyd, President and Creative Director at Q Media Productions*

“Always hire professional translators and then hire someone else to compare the translation to the original text. It is not a given that the translation captures what you had intended. Online translation tools are terrible—do not use Google Translate! Those who speak and read the target language are often offended by poor translation. We all know examples of ‘lost in translation.’ They can be funny. . . but not always.”

*A former Coordinator, Interpretation Projects at Department of Canadian Heritage*

\*FIRST PUBLISHED IN A LINKEDIN FORUM, THESE QUOTES ARE REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

---

## WHAT IF WE HAVE A LIMITED BUDGET?

In translation, as in many other fields, going for the cheapest solution is usually not the best option—**compromising on quality always comes at a cost**. While translation may feel pricey for institutions with limited budgets, there are still ways to make things work. For instance, you might be able to negotiate a lower cost with a professional translator if you are offering a comfortable deadline in exchange.

You could also limit your translation efforts to the bare essentials, like the home page of your site or your brochures. Another strategy to lower your translation costs is simply to reduce the need to translate by relying to a greater extend on experiences that involve sound, images and movement rather than text.

---

## HERE ARE A FEW RESOURCES TO HELP YOU LEARN MORE AND MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TRANSLATION PROJECT:

### **Museum resources**

“The Truth about Bilingual Interpretation” (Steve Yalowitz, Principal Investigator at Audience Viewpoints Consulting)

<http://museumtwo.blogspot.bg/2014/03/the-truth-about-bilingual.html>

*Translation Process Guide* (NISE Network)

[http://nisenet.org/catalog/tools\\_guides/translation\\_process\\_guide](http://nisenet.org/catalog/tools_guides/translation_process_guide)

*Redefining Multilingualism in Museums: A Case for Broadening Our Thinking* (Museums & Social Issues)

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1179/1559689314Z.00000000028>

### **General resources**

*Why Translation is Important* (Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec)

[https://ottiaq.org/app/uploads/2019/07/guide-grand-public\\_en\\_final.pdf](https://ottiaq.org/app/uploads/2019/07/guide-grand-public_en_final.pdf)

*Translation: Getting it Right* (American Translators Association)

[www.atanet.org/publications/Getting\\_it\\_right.pdf](http://www.atanet.org/publications/Getting_it_right.pdf)

“Ten Common Myths About Translation Quality” (Nathalie Kelly, VP Marketing at Smartling)

[www.huffingtonpost.com/nataly-kelly/ten-common-myths-abouttr\\_b\\_3599644.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nataly-kelly/ten-common-myths-abouttr_b_3599644.html)

“Why should you work with a certified translator?” (Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec)

<https://ottiaq.org/en/services-for-the-public-and-businesses/working-with-a-certified-translator/>

---

I hope you found this material helpful. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions!

