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Translation Stumbling Blocks

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Some grammatical structures in English can pose problems for translators, particularly if those structures can be interpreted in more than one way. Murphy's Law says that your reader will often use the wrong interpretation, resulting in mangled translations.

Spoken language allows supplemental methods – like voice intonation, facial expressions, and physical movements – to convey meaning. However, print communication lacks the support of those nonverbal clues. To ensure clear meaning, writers must avoid expressions that require supplemental, nonverbal clues. They must depend on good structure and correct grammar to communicate their meaning.

In this article, we'll take a look at some grammatical structures in English that are potentially misleading and see how we can remove these stumbling blocks for our translators and end-users.

Unsafe Structures

To appreciate some of the pitfalls of English grammar, consider the following paragraph. Eight or more grammatical problems in this example can pose problems for readers and translators.

Gardening requires planning and care taken with selection of plants based on their hardiness. Without using prescribed, time-tested guidelines, recommendations, and advice from local greenhouse experts, gardeners might err, since interpretation of data obtained might get misconstrued. While hardiness determines suitability of planting locale, it also better ensures a longer-lasting landscape. You should avoid and reconsider selection of plants based on color coordination suitability.

This text is difficult to read. It's even more difficult to translate. Let us see why, issue by issue.

Gerunds

In the first sentence of the paragraph, “gardening” is a gerund. Gerunds pose problems – they are nouns that look like verbs. Because nouns and verbs don't perform the same grammatical function, it is best to use this construction only when you can surround it with other words (for example, “By gardening”), or avoid it altogether (for example, “How to garden” or “A garden is...”). The gerund requires interpreting, first to identify whether it is a noun or a verb, and then to convert it to an approximate meaning. Gerunds are a common convention in English headings, but I'm not aware of this noun form in other languages. So avoid gerunds like “gardening” and instead use a noun (“a garden”) or a verb form like an infinitive (as in “how to garden”).

Relative Pronouns

“Care taken...with” and “interpretation deduced” appear without the relative pronoun “that,” which normally alerts the reader that a subordinate clause follows that describes the preceding noun. “That” as a relative pronoun is commonly dropped in spoken English. Clearly written

English includes it, because the pronoun is a clue that following the noun is a modifying clause. A better structure here is “care that was taken with” and “interpretation that was deduced,” respectively. Use relative pronouns (“that” and “which”) to introduce subordinate clauses, as appropriate.

Modifiers

A string of modified nouns appears in our example (“Without using prescribed, time-tested guidelines, recommendations, and advice from local greenhouse experts.”) These constructs are tolerated in English, because we generally assume that a string of modifiers applies to all the nouns in the string. In other languages, modifiers may follow the noun or nouns they modify, or they may describe only one item in a string of nouns. In our example, the modifiers “prescribed, time-tested” precede “guidelines,” but do they also apply to “recommendations, and advice”? Are the three items, namely guidelines, recommendations, and advice, all obtained from the local greenhouse experts? A translator cannot make assumptions. A better approach in this instance is to modify each noun (“prescribed guidelines”, “time-tested recommendations,” and “reliable advice”) or reword it in such a way that modifiers act on all nouns (“without using guidelines, recommendations, and advice that are all prescribed and time-tested”).

“Helping” Verbs

Helping verbs such as “might” can cause problems for translators. Helping verbs – including “can,” “could,” “should,” “might,” “may,” “would,” and their various verb forms (“could have,” “might have been”) – are often used to convey ability, possibility, and obligation. They are also used to signal advice and to show politeness. However, when the meaning is intended to convey a requirement, “must” or “need to” is better. Where it is called for, it is important to clearly state requirements. Otherwise, use a recommendation or a suggestion (“Company X recommends...”). Think about every use of these helping verbs, and restructure sentences to minimize their use.

Adverbs

Adverbs such as “since,” “while,” “where,” and “when” have meanings beyond time and place; they can also mean “whereas,” “although,” “after,” or “because”. Consider these examples of misuse: “Since it’s dark, it’s time to go” (because); “While you can say it, you can’t do it” (although). Every word has its most appropriate use, and professional communicators need to choose the word that best conveys the desired meaning. Rethink how you use all these adverbs to ensure their appropriate application; prefer using “although,” “after,” or “because” when these words are the meaning you intend to convey.

Articles

We often drop the articles “a,” “an,” and “the” in English and form “telegraphic sentences”. Examples from our paragraph include “selection of...” and “suitability of planting locale.” When we drop articles, we omit a written clue indicating that the word that follows is a noun. This custom is a problem in translation, especially with words that function as both nouns and verbs (“display”, “record”, “time”, “document”, “address”, “use”). For some of these expressions, differences in pronunciation alert the listener to meaning; in script, they require additional clues, such as articles. My recommendation is to use these constructs consistently in one way, either as nouns or as verbs (“display” as a noun, “show” as a verb), and to use articles whenever appropriate (“the suitability of the planting locale”).

Colloquial Expressions

Some verbs are used often in colloquial expressions: “Get“ is one legendary example. Consider these expressions: “I get it“ (understand); “I get it“ (receive); “I’ve got to do it“ (must, need to). These informal uses are not appropriate for technical writing. I avoid using “get, got, gotten, have gotten“ and prefer using “understand“, “receive“, or “must“.

Noun “strings“

Noun strings are my favorites. “Color coordination suitability“ is just too dense an expression for the mind to grasp easily. Other expressions – such as “the failure reason“ (the reason for failure), “the battery conditions“ (the conditions of the battery), or “the battery recovery“ (to recover the battery) – may also be problematic, because they combine words in a concatenated form. The record for noun strings may be Dick Crum's 10-item string, “The Commission was impressed by the Test Project command module reaction control system engine oxidizer vapor inhalation damage recovery results“, which appears in International Technical Communication by Nancy L. Hoft. I see a growing preference today for nouns that avoid all verb forms (“the installation of“ and not “install“, “the recovery of“ and not “recover“, “the development of“ and not “develop“). Make your selection between nouns or verbs depending on the type of material you are writing. Nouns have their place in some types of writing, but I prefer using verbs for task-based procedures.

Rewriting

Let's now look at a revision of our paragraph that clarifies its meaning and eliminates structures that require interpretation. Compare this paragraph with the original, with particular attention to the improved grammar.

A successful garden requires planning and care that is taken with selecting plants on the basis of their hardiness. If gardeners don't use prescribed, timetested guidelines or recommendations and advice from local greenhouse experts, they will make mistakes, because the interpretation of the data that was obtained can be wrong. A plant's hardiness determines whether it will grow in a particular locale; hardiness also ensures a longer-lasting landscape. We recommend that you avoid selecting plants primarily on the basis of color and shape, and pay attention to their ability to adapt to local weather conditions.

Acceptable sentence structure for translation requires using grammatical clues that help clarify meaning.

Ambiguous terms, problematic expressions, and complex grammatical structures degrade communication. Poorly written text requires more time to read, and its meaning is less easily understood.

Documentation that is difficult to understand can reduce the quality of the product and result in more translation time and higher costs. It also ultimately compromises client relationships. Writers must avoid sentences that require interpretation and must rewrite any structures that, although acceptable in speech, are potentially misleading in print.

Remembering Gerunds

A gerund is a noun based on the root of a verb; for example, “skating“ and “editing“. You can identify these constructs by adding “the“ before the word in consideration. (“The writing is clear“.) However, gerunds also look like present participles, which are verbs. (For example, “I am writing“.) To understand which form is used in a sentence, look at the grammatical clues around the word in question.