

THE LANGUAGE PROMISE

a white paper by



HERCULES
transforming communication

Marketers of the world today face a two-fold challenge: not only to create and execute great creative ideas and campaigns, but also to ensure that they will travel the globe safely and work vividly in every single local market. In a world with increasing interconnectivity, there has been a paradigm shift away from homogeneity towards unique cultural identities. As we come together, we become more different.

In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, in the distant past, all of mankind spoke the same language. But, when the Babylonians tried to build a great tower, as high as heaven itself, God punished their blasphemy by shattering not only the tower, but language itself. Where there was once a single tongue, there were now thousands of languages scattered across the earth. Ever since, humanity has been limited by language barriers.

Language is our ultimate connecting tool. Spoken, written, and visual language, and even the language of song and melody are all teased and tested across lingual and cultural borders. The creation of truly global messaging is the Holy Grail for marketers. Because language is more than a communication tool alone, it is at the very essence of human communication; it is both the journey and the destination.

So, the challenge remains: how to make messaging and campaigns authentic in all the details, across so many different cultures, local sensitivities, and language nuances? How to grasp all in-market insights and safeguard full cultural intelligence to make a message resonate to local audiences throughout the world?

At Hercules we believe that language intelligence and higher copywriting skills are the key to successful tailoring of a global campaign. Brilliant, localized language is crucial and can only be achieved by going deep into local language nuances, tricks, curiosities, and ruses, and by avoiding blunders and errors that may put a brand at risk and create costly consequences. It is this localization that creates true resonance and impact. There is truth in language and making great ideas and campaigns that ring true for an audience spells brand success.

The reverse is also true – bad language, careless, sloppy, or rudimentary localization can spell disaster.

Just ask HSBC.

The banking giant's successful "Assume Nothing" U.S. campaign was slated for global proliferation. But copywriters made the cringe-worthy faux pas of literally translating the powerful message into the less than exemplary slogan "Do Nothing". Not exactly the messaging HSBC was counting on to catch new customers. The bank learned the hard way through a multi-million-dollar mistake that language is not a simple translation algorithm.

Yet, it is hardly the first, nor the last brand to try going global only to fail locally. General Motors and Chevrolet Chevy Nova would surely sympathize and agree that simple translation is not effective communication. The auto giants crumbled under spectacularly bad translations in the Latin American markets.

These heavy weights have learned the hard way what we at Hercules believe as our core mission: where the goal is to go global, the path is to excel locally. And to excel locally, local insight and vision in language and culture are the key to authenticity. Language is more complex than just words. It reflects the human spirit.

Also, the fact is that 80% of a global brand campaign budget is usually spent on global strategy and creative development, when only 20% of that budget is allocated to localization. However, 80% of assets produced and distributed worldwide are localized assets; a thin share considering that the only area left for creativity during the localization process is the transcreation of copy. Food for thought...

While the story of the Tower of Babel speaks of a unified language being shattered across the earth, language is far more complex and complicated. Indeed, over time, language has proved that it is not a simple, static set of rules, but rather a truly living thing that morphs and grows and has its own tale to tell.

The evolution of language says more about Humankind than the differences our linguistics would indicate. It shows how, despite our apparent cultural differences, we all at least have language in common.

We often do strange things with language. Amongst the strangest must be how grown adults talk to babies. We say, “Hello there,” or “Aren’t you gorgeous?” or even “What’s your name?”, despite knowing we could not possibly get a response. And we don’t talk to them normally. We speak in a melodic way, going from a high pitch to a low one, exaggerating enunciation, and repeating ourselves a lot. This is what is usually called baby-talk, and it comes to us naturally in any given language. So naturally in fact, that we even use it when talking to our pets: “Aren’t you a cute doggie?”.

Apart from our conversations with babies, we have conversations with all sorts of things all the time. We talk to our cars, our houseplants, our computers, and even ourselves. Children can talk to their toys for hours on end, imitating, often quite embarrassingly for their parents, the conversational styles of the adults around them when doing so. But we do not ‘goo-goo-ga-ga’ in these one-sided conversations. So why do it with the smallest humans?

It definitely gets their attention, but there is much more to it. It is proven that the high pitch and swaying melodies of our short, repeated phrases are received more easily by babies and are the best way to induct them into a language. So, in a way we are all instinctive language teachers!

The last few decades have borne witness to the meteoric rise of instant messaging (also known as texting). Texting was initially often derided as a lesser form of writing (what do all those people that don’t type “y” and “o” before “u” do with their extra time?). But a generation of millennials and the firm entrenchment of smartphones in our hands have changed language forever and digital dialogue has emerged as not only a legitimate use of language, but one that can be considered – dare we say it? – literary!

Have you ever heard of cell phone novels? “Keitai Shousetsu”, as they are called in Japan, are novels whose plots are conveyed entirely through text message conversations, which the reader receives on their phone by SMS.

This language style borrows heavily from the Japanese poetry tradition, with its brevity and reliance on the reader filling in context. This format also comes with a bunch of advantages. The restricted size of the chapter means it can be both penned and read in short daily instalments.

Forcing the reader to imagine all the extraneous environmental details of the narrative allows them to immerse themselves more fully in the story, as they watch it unfold almost in the first person, but also in real-time, as they are written on a daily basis. Since its appearance in the early 2000s, this genre has exploded and spilled over into most other countries in East-Asia. In China, in 2012, *shǒujī xiǎoshuō* (literally “cell phone fiction”) had an estimated reader base of about one hundred and twenty million people, twenty-five million of which read nothing but cell phone novels.

This language evolution has obviously impacted digital copy content in its essence and its form.

Modern professional life can do strange things to language. It wraps it, twists it, and squeezes it to suit the need for efficiency.

For example, do you know what a Bell Nipple, a Ginzel, or a Hitch are? If you have never worked on an oil rig, the odds of you knowing what those mean are very low. A Bell Nipple refers to the opening of a specific kind of pipe, a Ginzel is slang for rookie, and a Hitch means “working shift”, because it is measured in days or weeks rather than hours. Academics refer to this as occupational dialect, but most people simply call it professional jargon.

Professions and professionals can differ in more than just vocabulary. As in all languages, misunderstandings and miscommunication abound. The most common seem to stem from differences in conversational styles. These are ways of describing not only the way people speak, but also how they even approach a conversation.

In the last few decades, English has imposed itself as the Lingua Franca of business. This has led many organizations not only to conduct their external relations in English, but to convert their entire infrastructure to operate in English. What is seldom discussed, however, are the pitfalls of the universalization of English in multicultural companies.

Ironically, English can be an obstacle to meaningful cross-cultural communication, which is usually the reason for introducing it in the first place. However, the challenge remains when it comes to transcreating B2B copy content in a manner which is both engaging for professionals and locally relevant in terms of message, especially since language can become very specific in some industries (engineering, pharma, bio science...). Therefore, a global language never works in advertising. Language is not a one-size-fits-all beast. To be global, language must become local.

CONCLUSION

Language has undertaken a brave and remarkable journey to reach where we are today. But what about tomorrow? What will language look, sound and feel like in the future?

In the 21st century, language evolution is now being steered by a world in which the way we communicate is overwhelmingly digital.

While we at Hercules believe language is more than just words, increasingly, our pursuit of technological advancement means that words are lost in a vast cyberspace that, while making the world closer, also makes us less personal.

The language of tomorrow will be fraught with tension between efficiency and emotion, humanity and economy, as tech companies race to be the best at constructing communication for us.

Google in 2018 rolled out the beta version of their Gmail autofill algorithm. The algorithm reads your email as you type and offers suggested conclusions to your sentences.

While such tools reduce time spent composing emails, it also to an extent reduces our humanity – the individual flair in prose taught through life experiences, culture and state of being. In the future, will all our emails be some variation of three-word, Google-generated replies?

This kind of productivity from AI language generators is astounding, and the degree to which it has already permeated our everyday lives is even more astonishing. However, technology still struggles to include “context” (and consciousness) when translating. Apple’s Siri, Amazon’s Alexa, and Google Assistant are omnipresent eavesdroppers we have willingly brought into our homes, but their limitations are hidden behind the laughs we get when the answers we get make no sense.

Despite the many facets of technology, positively received or otherwise, we see that speed and thrift do not always produce the kind of resonating messaging that makes an impact when it comes to PR and advertising campaigns. Time and time again we have seen that old-fashioned storytelling is overwhelmingly the preference of an increasingly nuanced and discerning market.

Ultimately, what makes language so important is the red-bloodedness of human connection – bringing on feelings of intimacy, thoughtfulness and emotion that could never be authentically replicated. Indeed, as we invest more and more in making our robots sound like humans, the effect is that more and more humans are sounding like robots.

While the technology of tomorrow will offer new ways to unlock language, and language itself will continue to evolve, shift and flourish, our words will always remain the heart of our identity, and language will always unfold and bring us new surprises, curiosities, and stories. It is this storytelling that Hercules' transcreation expertise helps stand out in every market, in any language, and for any brand.

To conclude this white paper on a joyful note, here are some interesting translations which demonstrate the need to master language management when transcreating copy. Because language is by its very nature a cultural product, a nation's idioms can give us unique – and often hilarious – insights. Take for example common idioms around the world.

To cast pearls before swine

French – To feed jam to pigs

Spanish – To feed honey to a donkey

Hindi – To give ginger to a monkey

Japanese – To give silk to cats

Chinese – To play music to a cow

To have ants in one's pants

French – To be excited like a louse

Spanish – To be like a motorbike

German – To have bumblebees in your bottom

Italian – To be wearing quicksilver

Chinese – To be like a cat on a steaming pot

To be as mad as a Hatter

Italian – To have crickets in your head

French – To have spiders on the ceiling

Czech – To have an extra wheel in the head

Turkish – To have eaten your own brain

German – To be missing cups in the cupboard

To be a pain in the neck

German – To walk on someone's biscuit

Spanish – To touch someone's eggs

French – To break someone's feet

Italian – To be a splinter between the ribs

Czech – To have an awn in the bottom

To have other fish to fry

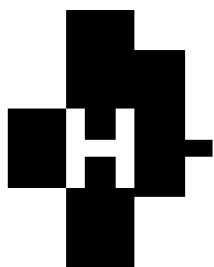
French – To have other cats to whip

Italian – To have other female cats to skin

Spanish – (we have) other things to do, butterfly

Russian – To have other potatoes to peal

Flemish – To have other tiles to set (on the roof)



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