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Opinion

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Translation/Mistranslation in International/Global Advertising –The Dilemma Continues ...Even With AI

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Thought Piece

In this age of digital marketing and AI-generated advertising [1], it can be interesting to take a step back in time. Conventional wisdom says that the first ad was a print ad published in 1704 in the United States. Today, it is a multibillion industry (ad spending in the advertising market worldwide reached US$1,087.58bn in 2024; Statista Market Insights). Advertising is now a truly global industry, a universal, worldwide practice, extant in all countries where people buy and sell, where there are sellers and consumers. Yet, despite the rising expenditure and obvious importance of advertising in practically every society on earth, marketers have not developed a huge interest in the linguistic and semiotic features of ads, while translators and linguists may have looked down on the marketing constraints of these texts which are pragmatic and commercial by definition. In other words, advertising translation may not always be seen as noble as literary, technical or legal translation [2] Unfortunately.

The language of advertising has been the subject of multiple books and research papers, starting with Opdycke 1925 [22] (over one hundred years ago!), and other milestones such as Galliot, Barthes 1964 [21] and Leech 1966 [6]. However, advertising translation per se has generated a far smaller body of research (examples available from the authors). Certain authors [3] focused on so-called advertising translation (and branding/naming) blunders, with famous examples such as awkward product names like Cue, MR2 (both inappropriate in French), Laputa, Barf or a mistranslation from Chinese that yielded "Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back from the Grave", instead of "Come Alive with Pepsi"!). Beyond these anecdotal yet famous issues, the literature on the language/discourse of advertising highlights six main conclusions [4]:

a) advertising is indeed a specialty discourse, or an LSP/language for special purpose (5-7)

b) advertising shares several common features with both poetry and the language we speak everyday [6,8]

c) intertextuality and active participation of the targeted reader are two key factors of advertising communication [9-11]

d) the language of advertising is emotional, ambiguous, indirect and implicit [Quirk 1965, 12,13, Jouve 1991, 14]

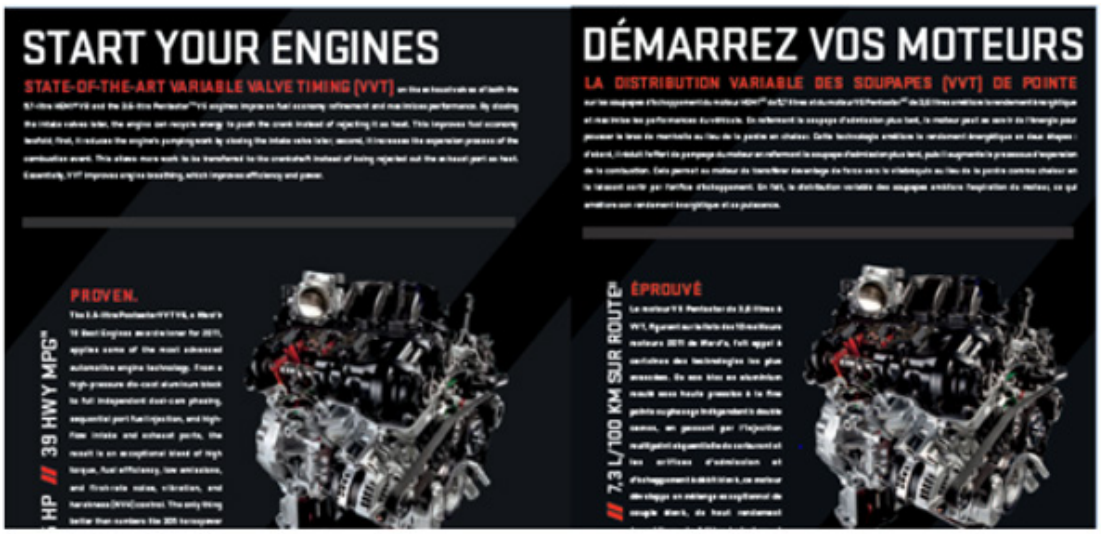
e) in a simple and playful way, advertising depicts the believable illusion of a perfect, happy, safer world in which needs can be satisfied [15-17] – often by brand adoption.

f) advertising discourse is characterized by simplicity and conventionalization, with lexical constants [7,16, Jouve 1991].

Designing an effective, creative ad for product X in a given country in a given language is not easy, and when it comes to translate ads across various languages (even languages which are relatively

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close to one another, e.g. English < > French or Italian < > Spanish), the job becomes even much more difficult, and risky. For many years, marketers have been debating whether advertising should follow standardization or adaptation/localization [18]: same ad, with the same visual and a literal, word-for-word translation or different ads with different visuals and an adapted text that reflects the linguistic and cultural specificities of each market? And for an equally long period, a never-ending debate in translation studies has been: literal translation or adaptation? The complexity of these debates has even generated hybrid, middle-of-the-road solutions such as glocalization and (in French) tradaptation (traduction+-adaptation). In fact, there is no single, failure-proof recipe for success and no succinct workable solution on the horizon. Some ads (or some advertising texts) can be translated literally (example #1 below: Start your engines/Démarrez vos moteurs), and some texts (or part of) have to be adapted (example #2). In other ads, there is a middle-of-the-road approach (example #3). Here we use English and French to illustrate the complexities involved.



Example #1



Example #2



Example #3

be lost. The unfortunate decoding of alternate meanings can result in smiles, amusement, even laughter, but of far greater concern is that

brand equity may be lost, along with significant sales losses and missed profits.

Could AI be a potential solution to these perennial problems? AI has already been used to generate ads and other promotional messages. Can advertisements be 'automatically translated via AI, and will translators consequently lose their employment? The debate is just as complex. Undoubtedly, some parts of an ad can be and probably will be translated with the help of AI tools (under human supervision). However, AI will never be able to translate 100% of advertisements so they engender the same decoding as in the original source language and target market. In translation, since [19] dynamic/pragmatic/functional equivalence is the key, translation (and mistranslation) go beyond translating words. It is about translating a text with all of its coherence and cohesion [20], as well as its full linguistic, rhetoric and phonetic strengths, so that the ad in the target language creates or has the potential to create the same objective/output/affect/impact as the ad in the source language. The effect sought is to increase brand awareness, positive brand attitudes and behaviour (via establishing rapport between consumer and advertiser), and or course to actually sell the product/service or brand and build brand loyalty and brand equity. It is, however, unlikely that AI will prove to be the Pegasus or white horse, on which the translation of ads rides off into globally-resonant communications for target markets. The same issues of translation of ads internationally and globally will not be resolved by AI. Meaning or decoding always remains in the mind of the receivers, and as yet no mechanism exists whereby full meaning can be comprehended simultaneously everywhere [21-23].

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