

# Why shouldn't I just use Google Translate?

Chris Poole 2015

You should use Google Translate! If the benefit to you is greater than the cost you'd be a fool not to!

Google Translate, and other tools like Babelfish etc., have become very powerful and effective tools, useful for all sorts of things – to both translators and their clients. For triaging documents to find the most relevant passages; to gauge the general feelings expressed by someone, there are all sorts of ways that Google Translate can refine your decision-making process, which can only lead to a more rational allocation of resources.

With a bit of understanding of how translation works, and by learning a few tricks (and incidentally, translating something backwards is not one of them – see here for a technical explanation) anyone can produce very useful translations.

Many translators will display shock and contempt for the idea that Google Translate should be used for anything, but these sentiments are feigned and largely an expression of fear for their financial livelihood in the face of mechanization – an age old story.

It is true that Google Translate is not perfect. It will occasionally spit out some truly funny (or even worse: invisible) mistranslations, but depending on the benefits versus the costs that risk might be acceptable.

Translators need not fear so much, and the reason stems from the cost/benefit analysis I mentioned above. For every word, phrase, page or document that you need translated, you should ask yourself “what is the potential cost to me of getting this wrong?” Often it is slight, so spending money on translation is barely justified. But often it can be very great indeed. In that case you might need to buy “good” translation.

But what does “good” even mean? There are many definitions, but here's one that will serve for this article: imagine your enemies have engaged a team of translators to criticise the translation you have procured. A “good” translation is one where every choice can be defended on objective grounds. A “good” translation will withstand whatever other people can throw at it.

Google translate can't do that for you.

Like every other function in an organization, where failure to manage entails risk, ownership of the risks of mistranslation too need to be bundled up and placed with an accountable party.

This party will have the aptitude, the training, the credential, the appropriate insurance, and they will have knowingly offered to undertake this risk in response to an invitation to do so, their brief will be documented and their entire performance will be assessed according to a job description or a contract.

In other words in precisely the same way that every mature organisation manages the risks associated with every function; administration, operations, sales, marketing, graphic design, legal services, catering, cleaning and kids parties. You don't ask the dog trainer to decorate the birthday cake and you don't get someone's wife to fit new power outlets because she happens to own a screw driver.

A mature organisation ensures that there is an unbroken chain of governance where every person has agreed to accept a specific role and its responsibilities, and there are consequences if they don't.

Translation often falls through the cracks and sits outside this system of management, which would not be considered the slightest bit unorthodox for any other work performed for, or service delivered to, an organization.

Google Translate will never be able to deliver this degree of security, and that is the level of accountability that you should demand from any human translator.