

# Translation: An Editor's Challenge

Hella Willering, fiction acquisitions editor for Kok Publishers ([www.kok.nl](http://www.kok.nl)) in Kampen, The Netherlands, provides clear guidelines and practical advice for anyone interested in publishing translations.

**P**ublishing translated books holds some unique challenges for the editor. Not every book is suitable for translation. How do you decide which are suitable and which are not? And, how far can you go in editing out cultural differences to make the book more suitable for readers?

## *Choosing books to translate*

The number of books published internationally each year is staggering. How does one find the right books to translate? The first step is to set limits, since it is simply not possible to look at every book or catalog.

Look for publishers with an affinity with your company: for example, from the same denomination, from a country whose culture resembles your own, with a similar mission. Find those that publish quality books. Build a relationship with these publishers and read their catalogs carefully.

Be practical. Some countries may produce wonderful books, but if you cannot read the language, you cannot review them. Allow yourself to rule those publishers out. It is better to concentrate on a few publishers whose books may work well with your list. Of course, it never hurts to browse around other publishers as well, but do not depend on that browsing too much. It costs a lot of time and generally produces few results. Browsing is a good method only when searching for a book on a specific topic.

Next comes the process of reviewing books for translation. There are three important criteria in this process, each of which can be a reason to decide against translating.

1. Is this book worth publishing? Is it well written, does it have the right tone, does the author know the subject and can he or she explain it to the readers? Is the book convincing, interesting, fascinating? Is there a demand for a book on this topic? If you would not publish the book were it submitted in your own language, you should not translate it either. Do not assume a book has quality just because it was published in the United States.

2. In most cases, translating a book means placing it into a different culture. How important are the cultural differences? Do they affect the entire work, making it laughable or unbelievable or irreverent or irrelevant? Or are there only minor differences? Can the text be sufficiently adapted to fit your culture?

3. Weigh the costs and profits. The book might be interesting, but translation costs money. A larger print run may be necessary to make the project cost effective. Are you convinced that enough copies of this book can be sold to cover the translation costs?

Keep in mind that it does not help that the author is a foreigner. An author who is a famous Christian leader elsewhere may not necessarily be known in your country. It is often harder to sell a book by an unknown author. If a national author can write about the same topic with the same authority, ask him or her to write that book. On the other hand, a foreign author may become an authority as a result of your efforts. Publicity can help greatly in this process.

Another aspect of cost is the royalty rate. When you license a book for transla-

tion, you pay annual royalties to the original publisher and an advance royalty payment when you sign the contract. The advance is the tricky part. Make sure this advance payment is reasonable. Calculate how many copies will have to be sold to equal the advance. Are you indeed going to sell that amount? If not, do not sign the contract.

## *Cultural adaptation*

There are no general rules about which books are translatable and which are not. Much depends on the differences in culture between your country and the country of origin of the book. Below are some examples of cultural differences. These are mostly drawn from American fiction, but similar situations can be found in non-fiction.

1. It is perfectly acceptable for American Christians to use expressions such as "Good heavens" or "Mercy me." Many Dutch Christians find the Dutch equivalent inappropriate.

2. American Christians often have lunch at a restaurant after church. Dutch Calvinist churches stress the importance of Sunday rest, so going to a restaurant on Sunday is not an option for many Christians.

3. The main characters in American novels watch many football and baseball games. These sports are not common in The Netherlands.

4. Many American churches have Sunday school meetings and special youth and singles' groups. Dutch churches are generally not organized this way, so these concepts are foreign to Dutch readers.

The first example deals with choice of words. A literal translation would mean that



*Jack Cavanaugh's award-winning American Family Portrait series, describing a Christian family's journey through American history, has interested Kok's Dutch readers. Kok has also published other Cook fiction, including Elizabeth Musser's Two Testaments and David Horton's A Legion of Honor.*

our readers would not approve and a considerable number will not buy the book. Hence, in translation we will use an expression like "Oh dear"—a small adaptation that does not affect the message of the book, but does directly affect our sales figures.

The other three examples touch the contents of the book. Of these three, the Sunday lunch creates the biggest problems for Dutch Christian readers. The text can be edited: the meeting in the restaurant can be moved to Monday or the characters can simply eat at home. In some cases, however, the Sunday lunch at the restaurant is essential to the plot and cannot be edited out. That could be a reason to decide not to publish this book.

Football and baseball games are foreign to Dutch readers. We prefer soccer. But since most of the movies and TV shows we see are American, we have grown familiar with these sports and know they belong to the American culture. So even though these elements remain strange to our culture, they do not provide any difficulty for our readers and do not need editing. (The same can be said about the American legal system: since John Grisham's novels and the subsequent movies, we know all about jury trials.)

For the last example—Sunday school meetings, youth groups and singles' groups—it is not so easy to decide if mentioning these activities is a problem. If they are mentioned in passing and are not critical to the storyline, our readers will not be hindered in their understanding of the novel. But if the novel is specifically about a singles' group, Dutch readers will not be able to relate to what is happening in the story. Yet if it is a non-fiction book about setting up youth and singles' groups in a church, then of course the theme is not a barrier.

Most publishers will not object to cultural adaptation of their books as long as

they are informed about the changes you intend to make. However, some differences are simply too large to adapt without changing the message of the book—and that is something no publisher will agree to. For example, you cannot change the theological system that is the foundation of a book without doing the author injustice. In publishing the Left Behind series, you cannot change its theology from premillennialist to postmillennialist. Such changes are unacceptable.

Where do you draw the line? What do you do with a book on parenting that states it is beneficial to spank children, when the general opinion in your country is against

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**Most books require some cultural adaptation. How far can you go in making changes? Where do you draw the line?**

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# Don't Get

physical punishment? If a book needs more adapting than is acceptable, then you probably should not publish it.

## *Clear parameters for translators*

An important question to answer is: Who is responsible for making the necessary adaptations to your culture? Does the translator have free rein to change whatever is deemed necessary, or will the changes be made in the editing process? My general rule is that translators should adapt the text only at word level (like the "Good heavens" example above). It is the editor's responsibility to decide on changes that go beyond word level, such as adaptations to the story line.

It is important that all parties concerned know what is expected of them to avoid problems later on. For example, we published a book in which the main character spoke with a Southern drawl. The translator used a Dutch dialect for this character, but we as publishers found it unconvincing to hear an American speak with a dialect that every Dutch reader recognizes as rural Dutch. The entire translation had to be thoroughly edited, and a lot of time, effort and money was wasted. The process was frustrating for both the translator and the editor. This would not have happened if we had made clear decisions in advance. Make sure your translators know exactly what they can and cannot do.

**P**ublishing translations has many advantages. An important one is that somebody else has already done extensive editing on your behalf. That, however, is no guarantee of success. The main thing to keep in mind is: a book that works in one country does not automatically work in another. You will have to make it work. That requires careful selection, serious calculation, creative translation, attentive editing, and smart marketing. In the meantime, do enjoy the cultural differences—they can be very entertaining! ▽

**I**'m very pregnant, and it's all the pastor's fault!" Now there's a sentence not often heard in church. Nevertheless, according to legend, these words were uttered by a well-meaning yet novice Spanish speaker in church. She wanted to say she was very embarrassed to share her testimony, and it was all the pastor's fault for encouraging her to go through with it. The word she thought she was using for "embarrassed" (*embarazada*) turned out to be the word for "pregnant" in Spanish!

To say that something got lost in translation in the church service would have been the understatement of the year. Sadly, this occurs not only in churches but in written translation as well. The most loving, well-intentioned speakers, interpreters or writers often try their best to get the message across, but some little detail or cultural nuance somehow just does not get through. Hence the phrase, "lost in translation."

## *To Translate or Not to Translate . . .*

To avoid this phenomenon of losing meaning or nuances in translation, some publishers go to the extremes of never translating anything, relying only on material written in the language of the target audience. Though this may be a noble aspiration, it can be impractical and too restrictive. If quality material written in the original language can always be found, then translation will seldom be needed. If

not, by refusing to provide informational or inspirational material through translation, such publishers—and their readers—can miss receiving a blessing. After all, unless one's first language is Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, the very Word of God we read every day is itself a translation.

Translations are not only necessary but often the best option available. The question becomes, what is the best way to publish translations?

## *Sure, but can he write?*

The first question every editor should ask is: Who is a native speaker who could write about this topic with authority? In other words, do we know anyone from our target people group who knows the subject matter? The second question, which is almost as important as the first is: Does this person know how to write? Just because one is an expert does not necessarily mean that he or she will be a natural-born writer.

If no one emerges as an authority on the subject who also knows how to write, another possibility is to find someone with writing skills who can interview the expert. This person must also know how to interview, ask the right questions and follow up. This is sometimes a hard combination to find.

Until quality evangelical writers can be developed in your target culture, translations of quality foreign books may be the best solution available. In such cases, before an article or