

Challenges and Opportunities of Multilingual Content Creation in the Age of AI

By Hannes Ben





A conversation with ChatGPT

I recently asked ChatGPT—an AI system surely most people have heard about by now—the following:

‘When you think about foreign languages in the context of advertising, what comes to your mind as the most important requirement?’

It responded as follows:

‘In the context of advertising in a foreign language, it is important for the language to be accurately translated and culturally appropriate. When advertising to a foreign audience, it is essential to consider the cultural norms and values of the target audience, as well as the connotations of words and phrases in the local language.’

This is a rather good answer. It does put an emphasis on translation as the main requirement without much explanation about what translation actually is. However, it does a decent job in pointing out that cultural considerations are absolutely key.

What is missing here is the understanding that translation is only one piece of a much larger, highly intricate puzzle.

So, I kept asking ChatGPT...

‘What other methodologies outside of translation may an advertiser have to use?’

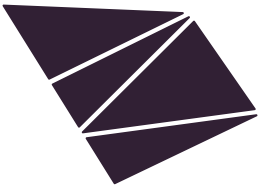
‘There are many different methodologies that advertisers can use in addition to translation when dealing with multiple languages. Some of these methodologies include:

Localization: Localization involves adapting the content and messaging of the advertising to be more suitable for the local market. This can involve adapting the language and tone to be more appropriate for the target audience, as well as incorporating local cultural references and customs.

Transcreation: Transcreation involves creating new advertising content that is culturally appropriate for the target audience, rather than simply translating existing content. This can be particularly useful when the original content does not translate well or does not appeal to the target audience.

Cultural adaptation: Cultural adaptation involves adapting the overall advertising strategy to be more suitable for the target culture. This can involve using different marketing channels or tactics that are more effective in the local market, as well as adapting the overall branding and messaging to be more appropriate for the target audience.

Overall, there are many different methodologies that advertisers can use when dealing with multiple languages, and the most appropriate approach will depend on the specific needs and goals of the campaign.’



This is actually quite similar to how most people in marketing and advertising who do not directly work with languages would respond to the same question. Many will highlight translation and localisation, with transcreation and cultural adaptation often being misunderstood or confused with localisation. However, this is not a mistake that the AI makes and it seems to do an outstanding job in defining the difference between these, particularly with the explanations for transcreation versus adaptation. It goes a bit too far on cultural adaptation describing the adaptation of the whole strategy, which is not wrong, but there is actually a methodology with respect to content creation itself called creative (or sometimes cultural) adaptation. It refers to adapting all aspects of an asset— the style, colour, parts of the image, people, voice-over, dubbing, etc. —to the target audience.



What surprised me in my communication with ChatGPT is that, even when asking it the same question in many different ways, it always left out methodologies such as copywriting, origination, machine translation, and machine translation with human-post-editing (MTHPE). So, I asked it:

'It is interesting that you have missed out the following methodologies: origination, copywriting, machine translation, machine translation with human-post-editing. Why?'

It swiftly responded to my question with the following:

'I apologize if my previous response was not comprehensive. You are correct that there are other methodologies that can be used when working with foreign languages in advertising, in addition to translation, localization, transcreation, and cultural adaptation.

Origination refers to the creation of new advertising content from scratch, rather than adapting or translating existing content.

Copywriting involves creating written content, such as advertising copy, that is intended to persuade or influence the reader.

Machine translation is a type of translation that is performed by a computer or software program, rather than a human translator.

Machine translation with human-post-editing involves using machine translation to produce an initial translation, which is then reviewed and edited by a human translator to ensure accuracy and quality.

All of these methodologies can be useful in the context of foreign language advertising, depending on the needs and goals of the campaign.'

The AI politely admitted its mistake and demonstrated knowledge by accurately explaining the differences between the additional methodologies of importance.



The Challenge

The fact that ChatGPT highlighted translation as the main requirement when working with foreign languages in advertising and then it took time to identify other key methodologies showcases exactly the **challenge** that language specialists have to confront in most industries where their skills and knowledge are required—what I mean here is that they are categorised into the ‘translation’ box. This leads to other problems that I will explain below.

Translation is just one skill and one type of requirement, arguably an incredibly important one. It describes one process of transferring an idea from one language to another in a relatively direct manner. Localisation, translation, adaptation, origination, copywriting, MT, and MTHPE are other ways to generate multilingual content. However, what about all the other requirements?

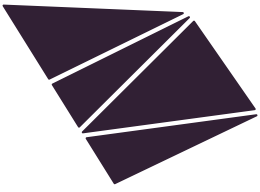
***For example:** Knowledge of translation technology such as translation memories, machine translation, QA tools, review tools, and alert systems. Then, you have vendor management involving the identification of linguists, vetting processes, and development plans. Furthermore, there are the natural language processing capabilities required to adequately generate, integrate, and merge relevant automated content with human output. In-market desk research, ethnographic research, post-campaign linguistic impact analysis, performance linguistics, creative adaptation, and production of culturally relevant assets aligned with language, the list goes on and on. Many of these skills are required to make any of the mentioned methodologies including translation a success, particularly nowadays in a fast-moving and constantly evolving environment.*

Language specialists in any industry have to be experts of applied linguistics in a specialised field, particularly in advertising and marketing where the main priority is to engage chosen audiences using the right message and in the right tone.

Applied linguistics—referring to the theory and research about how language is practically used in everyday life across different disciplines—is interwoven into all aspects of the digital media world. Translation and interpretation is one well-researched field in applied linguistics, but more in a very general manner, rather than with a deep-dive into how it changes and evolves. This is specifically true in marketing where you have tangible performance metrics which can be tied back to language production methodologies to prove often subjective decisions.

It makes perfect sense that translation is the most associated term with foreign languages in the advertising space, because it is the best understood methodology when somebody needs to get a message across in another language, often under time pressure and with limited budget.

What is interesting is the fact that in most situations, we take the knowledge of at least one language—our native tongue—for granted and assume that it is obvious for somebody who has grown up bilingually (or multilingually) to produce grammatically correct text with near-perfect pronunciation (the definition of ‘perfect’ often being rather subjective). This often results in many not fully appreciating the complexity of language and what it means to understand its structure, while modifying and reproducing it across different languages.



Language has a long and complex history, appearing in a constantly evolving shape that does not follow logical rules and regularity. It is unpredictable, driven by sudden changes, interests, discoveries, and social developments—all of which affect how we intend to use it for different purposes, e.g. a simple conversation with a friend, writing an essay for a university assignment, copywriting a piece for work, or transcreating a tagline for a new brand.

We are impressed by people mastering multiple languages and amazed by beautifully created multilingual content. Because of the element of 'assumed knowledge', however, the effort and time to achieve a brilliant output is easily underestimated.

Another factor that massively played into that assumption that translation is a rather simple and quick process is **machine translation (MT)** technology. I am not speaking about rule-based machine translation (RBMT) which has been around since the 1950s, but I am specifically referring to **statistical machine translation (SMT)**. Not so much the initial SMT models launched by IBM in the 1980s and 1990s, but more advanced systems incorporating neural machine translation (NMT). Google Translate has really changed the game in this field over the last 15 years.

We all complained about its output probably for most of the first 10 years from 2006 to 2016, but you cannot deny that post-NMT developments have improved MT accuracy to a level where it is far beyond the simple level of basic comprehension.

This implies that anybody requiring translation immediately thought or at least seriously considered 'Hey, this is great. We can save millions by cutting down translation costs.' It sent shivers through the language service industry with many linguists worrying about their future.

Thankfully, digital at that time started to grow exponentially across the world, reaching big

and small markets with ease and allowing companies of all sizes to sell around the globe. This required scaling content across many languages, lots of formats, and content on all types of media channels.

Machine translation with human post-editing (MTHPE) was born to deal with these massive volumes and ensure that NMT output, which was already great, could be further improved and optimised by human translators, editors, and proof-readers.

Now, what do you think happened to pricing during all of these development? Before we answer this, let us summarise the **key challenges**:

- Translation as a complex field of study is not yet fully understood.
- There are certain assumptions that translation is an expected skill if you are bilingual, and it is therefore simple.
- MT has made it simple, fast, and free.

Where has this left us with price? Translation is mostly priced on a per-word basis; there are hourly rates for technology, project management, and consulting, but they are more add-ons and often do not represent the bulk of the costs for straightforward translation requests.

There are many different views on what the average word rate should be and this value heavily depends on the language, specialist knowledge, turnaround time, and the number of layers of review required.

The fact is that because of the bullet points raised above, translation has become increasingly commoditised and the costs associated with it are often seen as a necessary evil which has not been accurately budgeted for.

The language industry has not responded well to this. Instead of responding to pressure for cost reduction with consistent industry-set minimum prices, many have decided to take risk after risk and offer lower rates than the competition, consecutively and continuously driving the cost further down. It has become a cost conversation, much more than the consideration of value, quality, and impact.

NMT supported this trend for a while, but everybody realised that top linguists are still required to adapt, transcreate, edit, and fine-tune. However, these costs were not fully factored into budgets.

Consequently, agencies have been negotiating hard with their linguists and have always found someone who accepted the cheaper price, even at the risk of impacting quality. Some excellent linguists have also been accepting lower-cost jobs as they simply needed the cash. Because the market is easy to enter and some people who happened to speak another language were presumed to have some level of translation skill, they simply gave it a try for very little remuneration or even for free as a favour.

Now, in 2023, we are at time where NMT-generated output is not only grammatically correct, but many times produces beautifully rendered translations. **What it still lacks is the fine-tuning for a specific audience with a specialised vocabulary and personalised tone of voice, for a particular brand and a particular moment in time**—and for this, you need absolutely top-notch language experts with years of intensive study in the relevant field and extensive translation experience using their core languages.

However, where are they? Many truly talented people with a real passion for language and huge talent have left the translation/localisation industry, at least as a full-time job due to the difficulty of maintaining financial stability. There are of course always exceptions, but these come at a high cost and they are hard to find.

There are many non-language-industry people in advertising now who fully understand the subtleties of language and culture, and appreciate that tiny irregularities can often have huge long-term ramifications on brand perception as well as KPIs. The challenge is that in marketing budgets, linguistics is still not fully factored in as a necessary strategic campaign element from start to finish. This is rather an add-on or even an afterthought for which some budget from somewhere else important has to be taken—this may be media planning/activation/optimisation, creative strategy and production, performance marketing, measurement, etc.

As an example, let us look at how pricing for media planning deals is different. Revenue for agencies in this field and salaries for people working in this industry have largely been increasing over the years.

One of the reasons for this is simply that media pricing has become more expensive. CPCs, CPMs, etc. have been increasing exponentially together with the general rise in digital media volumes, especially over the recent years and the pandemic in particular. Hence, as a media agency, you automatically make significantly more money when on a percentage of the media commission model.





The language-service industry has never had any of these benefits. More volumes of words assume more machine translation, more negotiations with linguists, finding cheaper ones in lower-cost regions with experience and quality taking a secondary role, particularly when under time and cost pressure.

Efficiencies of scale—a term often used in media pricing when volumes grow across multiple markets and scale—are also less relevant in content.

More volume across different languages does not give you any efficiencies. You need different linguists per language, and ideally not too many to avoid inconsistencies. Just because you task an agency with four million words to generate content across four languages, instead of a million words across one, it does not mean that they earn proportionally more to the work that they do. A German person cannot simply start generating Chinese content just because they have time to do a few thousand more words per day. You still need four separate teams. There is a possibility of cost reduction if volumes increase significantly within the same language, assuming that it is the same topic area and that you have excellent translation memories and a well-performing NMT.

In addition, inflation has been driving up prices, which means that clients want to cut costs further and ask for even more automation and lower rates at a time when linguists are already squeezed and can barely make ends meet. In such situations, agencies can use the latest language technology stack to adapt to these cost challenges and find as many efficiencies

as possible without sacrificing quality. This way they send only the most important and creative elements to their linguists, have them focus on high-quality work requiring the human eye, and avoid underpaying them.

Despite the many benefits, technology has its limitations even on volume work, which is why agencies need to find other solutions to lower costs. Moving to cheaper locations worldwide has many advantages: decentralisation of work, balancing work load across different time zones, 24/7 delivery throughout the year, bringing ideas from different parts of the world, creating competitive pricing models per region, working with different minds from different backgrounds and cultures, broadening your horizon, and bringing people from all continents in to support you on your journey.

However, in the case of multilingual content creation having an office in a cheaper location does not mean that you can create cheaper Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Korean, or Japanese content, in other words, content from any of the higher GDP markets.

Commoditisation and misunderstanding of the complexity of multilingual content production are definitely a challenge that we need to work and educate people on. We need to move on from talking about translation to speaking about applied linguistics in advertising. We have to recognise and appreciate the tremendous impact that a deep understanding of different languages and cultures has - theoretically and practically - on producing brilliant multilingual output with a diverse set of content creation methodologies.

The Opportunity

I started this article by using the latest technology affecting content creation and throughout the first part highlighted challenges with costs, linguists, and quality. I spoke about a range of technologies, all of which play a crucial part in successful multilingual content production.

It is an undeniable fact that technology, and more particularly automation, has had a huge influence on content generation for quite some time. However, has it ever challenged what we consider intrinsically human?

Let us go a little further in exploring the impact of some recent technological developments, specifically those heavily using advanced AI models.

It is important to understand that this part is all about **opportunity**. Technology and automation do not constitute a challenge to the industry or should be in any way scary or worrying, even though it may seem this way sometimes.

2022 has been a real game changer in terms of AI-supported systems. We have spoken a lot about how NMT has developed a near perfect translation quality for some language pairs and in some specialised fields of study.

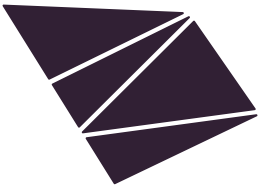
Voice assistants' capability with better voice recognition and ever more accurate responses has only improved. Self-driving car technology is improving by the day, and it is probably not a question of decades, but more so of a few years before we will see the first self-driving cars going on sale.

Over the recent years, we have been moving on from simple automation to more sophisticated AI software that manages to communicate with you, learn, evolve and consistently become smarter.

It goes even so far as to create content based on simple questions as you would ask any other human and then churn out linguistically perfect output in numerous languages. Unsurprisingly, the most recent developments have raised alarm bells, particularly among some linguists, creatives, and producers. ChatGPT—a very complex and extensive language processing AI system with approximately 175 billion parameters (more on this at www.sciencefocus.com/future-technology/gpt-3/)—has definitely been getting the most attention over the last couple of months. It manages to deal with all sorts of multilingual questions but can also handle programming languages for simple requests producing code that actually works.

Midjourney—a platform that generates images based on keywords, phrases, and descriptions you feed into it—has been able to generate some impressive examples and even offers and modifies its variations on further request, but it is still difficult to get anything looking realistic enough to accurately align with your expectations. This may be attributed to the amount of data that it has available or simply because the user has not provided the AI with the right and sufficiently detailed information on what to produce. A thorough review and much more testing is required for us to learn how to use this technology effectively.





Irrespective of how AI technology will develop further and even if it reaches human-like intelligence, it will always struggle and need time to capture sufficient data to understand what certain audiences are interested in, at a specific location, environment, and time.

Current AI systems would have to evolve into artificial general intelligence (AGI) in order to master common-sense reasoning.

They would also have to learn how to capture images, emotions, actions, and an infinite number of minute details happening in the surroundings of a speaker—all of the things that we subconsciously consider while building experiences and forming opinions.

Common-sense reasoning describes how we can navigate the basic concepts and principles of the world, including cause and effect, logic, and probability. Let us use an example to better understand what is meant here. Imagine a picture of a small office—there is a desk, a chair, some books, a laptop, a desk lamp, a printer, and a phone. We humans would understand that the chair is for somebody to sit on, the lamp is providing light to read and work, and the laptop allows online access to carry out work more efficiently. Without the light at night, the person would sit in the dark, and without electricity, they would have to use books and paper to work. As humans, we are able to adapt to a new environment by learning on the spot about what is available to use and then do the best we can to move forward. This may mean picking something up that we have never done before, but we go and try and figure it out by using our past and possibly similar experiences.

In marketing, we form ideas and create strategies and content for a very specific purpose which in many cases only remain relevant and impactful in a targeted circle of people for a limited amount of time.

Automation tools with smart AI can help you gather thoughts, summarise, re-structure, and provide a foundation of content—all of which will only be usable if a creative and experienced

human mind asks the AI the right questions, plays around with the output and then merges a variety of components into a cohesive piece adjusted for a relevant target audience.

Strategically thinking language specialists with laser-sharp minds can detect any irregularity in terms of audience suitability, language, and culture, and then take the AI-generated text and manipulate it until they feel it hits the right tone. This can be followed using a smart incrementality-testing framework to continuously understand where and when something has resonated positively, to what extent, and which KPIs were most impacted. This is all so that the machine as well as the language specialists can adapt and evolve their processes.

You see? This is not a straightforward translation process anymore and this is exactly why the 'hey aren't you a native speaker, can you quickly translate that?' approach will not cut it anymore.

It is essential to understand all the tools you need for research: quant & qual, search engines, relevant AI tools, NMT, TMs, ToV, term base, glossary, PM, QA processes, automation...

Moreover, if you are producing content in any language, make sure you maintain an exceptionally high level in your target language(s)—meaning the language(s) you create content for your clients in—be it translation, transcreation, or copywriting.

As AI evolves further, the linguists' job will be to use the majority of their time to research, smartly use the relevant technology, ensure cultural adaptation, and fine-tune the content to what is the most important, current, and relevant. Language models used in AI cannot extract emotions from gestures, facial expressions, reactions of other people around the communicator, and happenings in the surroundings—all elements that impact your perceptions and understanding of a message

are part of forming a meaning, a memory, and an experience.

Always remember that natural language constantly evolves and does so faster than you realise. Our job as humans is to observe, feel, and extrapolate these influences and incorporate them in our work to make it exceptionally current, extremely relevant, and hyper-personalised to the audience we aim to engage.

This takes a lot of time, but it is fun, exciting, and creative. Leave the creation of basic text to AI, and use any tools you have at hand to automate anything that is predictable so that you can focus on the unpredictable elements of the constantly evolving nature of language and culture.

Make AI your friend and supporter, not the thing you fear!



Advertising

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