

When translation is not enough: Transcreation as a convention-defying practice. A practitioner's perspective

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ABSTRACT

Despite common perceptions, transcreation is not glorified translation. Nor is it a synonym for 'creative translation' – a definition based on the questionable assumption that translation is not a creative act per se. While it is true that different types of texts allow for different degrees of freedom when it comes to 'transposing' them from one language to another, transcreation should be regarded as a different practice altogether.

The typical translation evaluation grid used by professional reviewers contains several error categories. What happens when we apply this grid to transcreation? As it turns out, those errors can only apply to translation, not to transcreation, where they are not errors at all. Committing such errors, i.e. breaking the rules of grammar or spelling, is actually considered a plus in transcreation. Evidence suggests that transcreation is the only possible way to 'translate' marketing and advertising copy. In this article I draw on my professional experience as a copywriter involved in both origination and transcreation, and I will define transcreation as writing advertising or marketing copy for a specific market, starting from copy written in a source language, as if the target text had originated in the target language and culture. I also argue that creating target-language copy that can truly resonate with the target audience requires a special set of skills (language skills, copywriting skills, cultural sensitivity and local market understanding), which make the transcreation professional a fully-fledged consultant. I conclude on the specific skillset is required from transcreation professionals.

KEYWORDS

Transcreation, adaptation, copywriting, creativity.

1. Introduction

The term *transcreation* has been used in academia for almost sixty years and it has mainly been associated with literary texts. In 1957, Purushottama Lal, an Indian poet and scholar, used this word to refer to his Sanskrit to English translation of classical Indian drama, explaining that "the thing to do is to attempt to preserve not the Sanskrit language but the Hindu tradition which it enshrines" (Lal 1996: 43). The purpose of transcreation as intended by Lal was to capture the spirit of the text and recreate it in a different language to engage the reader, "trying to reflect, somehow, the cultural source" (Sales Salvador 2005: 196). Only in recent times have scholars started to include commercial translation in the scope of transcreation (Gaballo 2012; Katan 2016, among others). The marketing and advertising industry, however, exclusively applies the notion of transcreation to marketing and advertising copy, and so do I as a practitioner. In addition, most of my clients seem to use *adaptation* as a synonym for *transcreation*, which adds to the confusion. Some of them treat the former as a countable noun ("I really liked your adaptations") and the

latter as an uncountable noun defining the practice rather than the end-product (“Are you be available for transcreation?”). Since *adaptation* is primarily used in audiovisual translation to refer to the adjustment of a translated script for dubbing, I prefer to use the term *transcreation* within the field of persuasive texts. It should also be noted that English-speaking clients tend to use the term *copywriting* to include both origination (the creation of marketing and advertising copy from scratch) and transcreation (the interlinguistic adaptation of marketing and advertising copy).

Advertising and marketing copy serves two of Roman Jakobson’s functions of language (Jakobson 1960), namely, the conative function and the poetic function. Consequently, the transcreation of advertising and marketing copy aims to produce a target text that both persuades the reader and appeals in its wording. Most definitions of transcreation seem to place great emphasis on cultural relevance and fitness for purpose (Gaballo 2012; Ray and Kelly 2010; Humphrey et al. 2011) rather than on the creative element of writing, which makes transcreation a hybrid practice/service halfway between translation and copywriting. Yet creativity is not the only element defining transcreation, and distinguishing translation from transcreation on these grounds is wrong. Translation is never and has never been a word-for-word rendition of a text from one language to another: as this article will argue, it is a creative act indeed (Gaballo 2012). It follows that *creative translation* as a synonym for *transcreation* is not suitable, because it implies that translation per se is not creative. There is no doubt that different types of texts allow the translator to unleash different levels of creativity (a technical manual is very different from a billboard in this respect), but I will argue that transcreation should be regarded as a different practice altogether. To prove that translation and transcreation are not one and the same, I intend to apply a translation evaluation grid to notable transcreation examples in order to establish whether such error categorisation makes sense in transcreation. As we shall see, what constitutes an error in translation can in fact be a recommended way to proceed in transcreation.

2. Translation and transcreation: a comparison

The translation evaluation grid examined is used by one of 2016’s Top 5 Language Service Providers according to Common Sense Advisory’s 12th Annual Global Industry Report, “The Language Services Market: 2016.” (DePalma et al. 2016). Similar grids are used by professional reviewers as well as translators’ associations, such as the Italian Translators and Interpreters’ Association (AITI).

This grid contains eight error categories: wrong term, syntactic error, omission, addition, word structure/agreement error, misspelling, punctuation error, and miscellaneous error, an umbrella label that allegedly includes all errors that do not fall into the previous categories.

Category	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wrong Term (WT)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Syntactic Error (SE)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Omission (OM)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Addition (AD)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Word Structure & Agreement Error (SA)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Misspelling (SP)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Punctuation Error (PE)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Miscellaneous Error (ME)

Figure 1. Translation evaluation grid.

For the purpose of this paper, I will take all but one of the above types of error (I am leaving out punctuation) and will identify examples of them in foreign-language adaptations of advertising and marketing copy, with a view to proving that they are errors only within the realm of translation, not transcreation. In transcreation, breaking the norm is actually an added value, not something that should be sanctioned. I have ruled out punctuation error on purpose, because this category does not seem to play a role in an analysis of this kind.

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2.1. Wrong term?

First of all, a disclaimer to the reader: I believe the question mark in section titles 2.1 to 2.6 is in order. I want it to be clear from the outset that the following “errors” are not errors at all.

Below is the famous tagline for a leading automotive company in the original German.



Figure 2. Audi tagline in the original German.

“Vorsprung” refers to a competitive edge that Audi has over its competitors thanks to its “Technik” (engineering/technology). “Vorsprung” here means “step ahead;” the term is commonly used in sports to mean “head start/advantage.”

This tagline has been rendered in Italian as follows:



Figure 3. Audi tagline in Italian.

“All’avanguardia della tecnica,” which literally means “At the forefront of engineering,” sounds natural in Italian, and it conveys the idea of the original German. The word ‘avanguardia’ is being used figuratively, because it is first and foremost a military term (“vanguard” in English, “Vorhut” in German). If we were in a field where terminology is key, translating “Vorsprung” with “avanguardia” would be marked as an error. This is not the case, however, because this is advertising copy – which requires transcreation, not translation.

2.2. Syntactic error?

In 1973, the French cosmetics company L’Oréal wanted to enter the US hair colour market, so it commissioned an English tagline from the US advertising agency McCann.



Figure 4. L’Oréal tagline in the original English

Originally implemented as “Because I’m worth it”, the tagline was recently changed to “Because you’re worth it” as the company feared that the message could be perceived as being too egocentric. The Italian tagline is a 1:1 rendition of the English original: it literally says “Because you’re worth it.”

Perché voi valete.
L'ORÉAL
 PARIS

Figure 5. L'Oréal tagline in Italian.

This figure features the tagline in the second person plural ('voi'), although a version in the second person singular ("Perché tu vali") has also been used. The use of 'voi' instead of 'tu' may result in a slightly different nuance, as if the tagline were addressing women as a whole rather than a single woman reading the ad. However, what is particularly interesting here is the syntax. Although identical to the English original, it is not the kind of syntax a translator would normally use: having a causal proposition without a main clause is regarded as an infringement of grammar rules, which a professional reviewer would sanction. Within the context of advertising copy (and of transcreation), i.e. of persuasive texts that need to elicit an emotion in the target audience, it is perfectly acceptable instead.

2.3 Omission/addition?

In this paragraph I have grouped two different error categories because the following example contains both. Figure 6 features Audi again – this time its German website (consulted in 2015) – which is presumably the master copy used to create all the different language versions.

Überblick Linien & Pakete Motor Exterieur Interieur Ausstattung Zubehör

Entwickelt aus neuen Ansprüchen. Der Audi Q3.

Heute hier, morgen dort. Die Welt wird kleiner. Und Ihre Möglichkeiten vielfältiger. Mit einem Auto, das mit Ihren Ansprüchen mithält – dem neuen Audi Q3. Kraftvoll und wendig. Kompakt und voll innerer Größe. Und dazu ausdrucksstark, effizient und sportlich. Der Audi Q3. Entwickelt aus neuen Ansprüchen. Los geht's.

Figure 6. Audi web copy in German.

A literal translation into English would read:

Developed from new demands.

The Audi Q3.

Today here, tomorrow there. The world gets smaller. And your possibilities more diverse. With a car that keeps up with your demands – the new Audi Q3. Powerful and handy. Compact and spacious. And expressive, efficient and sporty. The new Q3. Developed from new demands. Let's go.

The Italian version closely resembles the German as far as the headline is concerned, whereas the rest of the copy has been rendered more freely.



Progettata su nuove aspettative. Audi Q3.

Oggi qui, domani lì: il mondo diventa sempre più piccolo. E le opportunità si moltiplicano. È essenziale quindi disporre di un'auto che segua il vostro ritmo e che stia al passo con le vostre esigenze: la nuova Audi Q3. Potente e maneggevole. Compatta e spaziosa. In più: espressiva, efficiente e sportiva.

Figure 7. Audi web copy in Italian.

The Italian literally translates as follows:

Designed on new expectations. Audi Q3.

Today here, tomorrow there: the world gets smaller and smaller. And the opportunities multiply. It is therefore essential to have at your disposal a car that follows your rhythm and keeps up with your needs: the new Audi Q3. Powerful and handy. Compact and spacious. What's more: expressive, efficient and sporty.

As we can see, the German for "With a car that keeps up with your demands" has been rendered with "It is therefore essential to have at one's disposal a car that follows your rhythm and keeps up with your needs" – quite an addition indeed. Moreover, the German for "The new Q3. Developed from new demands. Let's go." has been left out. Omitting or adding something that the source text does or does not contain respectively is considered a translation error; in transcreation, however, it is rather normal to rearrange (and sometimes recreate, as we shall see in 2.6) the original copy.

2.4 Agreement error?

Dating back to 1959, this headline for leading oil company Exxon/Esso has made history.



Figure 8. Esso print ad in the original English.

In “Put a tiger in your tank”, the alliteration of the “T” and the “R” sounds recalls the roaring of both the engine and the tiger. This strapline has a certain rhythm and musicality that are part and parcel of the advertising message. The idea is that when you choose Esso fuels, you give your car an extra boost, as if you had a tiger in your tank. The Italian version conveys the same idea.



Figure 9. Esso print ad in Italian.

A faithful rendition of “Put a tiger in your tank” would have been “Metti una tigre nel tuo serbatoio,” but “serbatoio” would have killed all the rhythm and musicality. Therefore “serbatoio” was replaced with “motore” (engine): although technically incorrect (fuel is pumped into the tank, not the engine!), as “motore” helps to retain the alliteration that creates the roar described above. This, however, is not the most striking element of the Italian transcreation of the headline. “Tigre” is a feminine noun in Italian, so it should have been “Metti una tigre nel motore.” Here we have “*un tigre*” instead, which – though grammatically incorrect – improves the rhythm. The reason for this choice could also lie in the fact that, especially in the 50’s and the ‘60s, cars were a man’s prerogative, so using a feminine noun in Italian might have posed some difficulties in terms of cultural acceptance. What is certain, however, is that “*un tigre*” hugely contributes to the headline’s memorability. I have placed this example in the “agreement error” category because such a violation of grammar rules would not be acceptable in the translation of a documentary on wild animals, for instance. In advertising, on the other hand, this poetic licence is precisely what is needed to pack a punch. No wonder that, at least in Italy, many poets work as copywriters (Coviello 2005: 140).

2.5 Misspelling?

This hilarious case has to do with the negative connotations of a brand name. Below is the English-language packaging for Vicks VapoRub, a mentholated topical cream manufactured by American multinational P&G.



Figure 10. Vicks VapoRub packaging in the original English.

It was only upon learning that the product wouldn't sell in German-speaking markets – rumour has it – that P&G decided to tweak the brand name for those countries. A change of a consonant, the deletion of the final 'S,' and sales began soaring.



Figure 11. Vicks VapoRub packaging for German-speaking countries.

The original Vicks' would have been pronounced "ficks," with "ficken" being the German equivalent for the English "F" word. Changing Vicks to Wicks would not have been enough, because it would have sounded like "wachsen" (literally: "to polish/wax"), which also has negative associations (relating to masturbation no less!). So, Vicks became Wick for reasons of cultural appropriateness, not because of a translator's sloppiness. It is hard to imagine a translation field where changing Vicks to Wick would not be regarded as a spelling error.

2.6 Miscellaneous error?

In the miscellaneous error category, I have placed three different examples with one element in common: the source texts and the target texts do not say the same thing, although the latter are fit for purpose as per *skopos* theory (Reiß and Vermeer 1984). A few fellow practitioners believe that transcreation is a buzzword simply meaning "good translation" – a translation driven by the purposes the text has to serve, where the text can be rendered freely as long as such purposes are fulfilled. While translation itself boils down to saying almost the same thing (Eco 2003), and while the *skopos* theory can hardly be questioned, the following cases are classic examples of transcreation rather than of "good translation." The interlinguistic adaptation of marketing and advertising copy is a hybrid practice that involves both copywriting and translation; its workflows and

processes are different from the ones taking place in translation, as we shall see in more detail in paragraph 3.

Below is the tagline for the German confectionary company Haribo.

HARIBO MACHT KINDER FROH UND ERWACHSENE EBENSO

Figure 12. Haribo tagline in the original German

It literally says “Haribo makes children happy and adults too,” but its rhyme and rhythm in the original German convey the joy and playfulness the brand is all about. In addition, the tagline is also meant to be sung as a jingle, which posed further constraints when it came to adapting it into foreign languages.

HARIBO È LA BONTÀ CHE SI GUSTA AD OGNI ETÀ

KIDS AND GROWN-UPS LOVE IT SO, THE HAPPY WORLD OF HARIBO

HARIBO, C'EST BEAU LA VIE, POUR LES GRANDS ET LES PETITS

Figure 13. Haribo tagline in Italian, English and French.

These foreign-language versions all convey the original idea while saying different things. The Italian, for instance, says “Haribo is the delicacy one savours at any age,” and the French “Haribo, life is beautiful for grown-ups and children.” These three taglines express the idea behind the original German, they resonate with the target audience, and they can also be sung. Yet, in my opinion, calling them a translation of “Haribo macht Kinder froh und erwachsene ebenso” would be both reductive and misleading.

What transcreation entails is even more evident in the following example, the 1999 tagline for Swiffer disposable cloths:

“When Swiffer’s the one, consider it done”

Again, this tagline has a rhyme and a rhythm that make it punchy and memorable. Such an impact had to be recreated in Italian, which says:

“La polvere non dura, perché Swiffer la cattura”

It literally means “Dust doesn’t linger, because Swiffer catches it.” The source and the target text say two completely different things, and yet the Italian transcreation is even more effective than the English master. Not only does it retain a rhyme, but it also mentions the mechanism of action (Swiffer cloths catch dust) as well as the benefit (Swiffer users can say goodbye to dust), which the original English did not (Humphrey et al. 2011: 37). Without a creative brief providing information on the intent of the

message, its tone of voice and its target audience, such sterling work would not have been possible. And the brief is precisely what copywriters work with in order to produce their copy, which is only one of the elements that copywriting and transcreation have in common.

The third example comes from my own professional experience. In 2014, I adapted Norton™ AntiVirus software's taglines (short and long versions) from English into Italian.



Figure 14. Norton taglines in the original English.

The creative brief mentioned three specific aspects I would like to focus on here. Firstly, “Boldly go” was a cultural reference: it is part of an introductory speech at the beginning of every Star Trek episode.

Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilisations. To boldly go where no man has gone before.

I had to establish whether such a reference could be retained in Italian. Secondly, the brand's tone of voice was aspirational, the taglines being meant as an exhortation to live without fear, to be the best version of oneself, to keep moving forward. As a consequence, my Italian transcreation had to reflect this tone of voice. Thirdly, the English master featured an “O” containing a tick symbol, which is something I was asked to replicate in Italian, if possible.



Figure 15. Tick symbol in the original Norton tagline.

The first issue I tackled was the cultural reference. It turned out that adapting it was not an option, because the Star Trek opening lines had not been translated literally in the Italian-dubbed series. In fact, “boldly go” had been left out altogether:

Spazio, ultima frontiera. Eccovi i viaggi dell’astronave Enterprise durante la sua missione quinquennale, diretta all’esplorazione di strani, nuovi mondi, alla ricerca di altre forme di vita e di civiltà, fino ad arrivare là dove nessun uomo è mai giunto prima.

(Space, final frontier. Here are the voyages of the starship Enterprise during its five-year mission aiming at exploring strange new worlds, in search of life forms and civilisations, as far as going where no man has ever arrived before).

I then considered whether a literal translation of the taglines was viable. It was not. Not only would it lose the effectiveness of the English master, but it would also sound unnatural in Italian. My only choice was to recreate the tagline, which I did by capturing the spirit of the original using a completely different image. “Puntare in alto” literally means “aim high/raise the bar,” which helped convey the idea of living without fear/being the best version of oneself/keeping moving forward, but “puntare” is also a gambling-related verb (the equivalent of “lay a stake”). For the long version of the tagline, I thought that creating a contrast between “laying a stake” and “gambling/risking” would prove punchy, so I came up with “Punta in alto, senza rischi” (Aim high, without risks). “Punta in alto” and “Punta in alto, senza rischi” eventually became Norton™ AntiVirus’ taglines for the Italian market.



Figure 16. Norton taglines in Italian (transcreation by the author).



Figure 17. Tick symbol in the Italian-language Norton tagline.

3. Transcreation: a practitioner's definition

As a copywriter who both creates advertising and marketing copy in Italian (origination) and adapts such copy from English and German to Italian (transcreation), I have proposed the following definition of transcreation: "Writing advertising or marketing copy for a specific market, starting from

copy written in a source language, as if the target text had originated in the target language and culture” (Benetello 2016: 259). Transcreation requires four different skills:

- Language skills. The copy is written in a foreign language and it must be decoded. In this respect the transcreation professional is ¼ translator.
- Copywriting skills. The target text must be as punchy as the original and consistent with a specific advertising strategy. This means that the transcreation professional is also ¼ copywriter. As a matter of fact, the transcreation of global advertising campaigns used to be performed by agency copywriters living in the target-language country. With the rise of the “smart centralisation” model outlined by Simon Anholt (2000), the transcreation of global campaigns is mainly assigned to centralised implementation agencies relying on freelance in-market copywriters-translators to do the actual job. Such centralisation allows global brands to have more control over the transcreation outcomes, thus ensuring their messaging is not diluted when adapted for many different countries.
- Cultural sensitivity. The target text must be appropriate for the target culture. In this respect, the transcreation professional is also a cultural anthropologist of sorts – someone who knows what is and isn’t acceptable in their own culture.
- Local market understanding. The target text must be appropriate for the target market. A transcreation professional needs to be aware of the images and wording used by a brand’s competitors so as to avoid them and produce copy that sounds as unique as possible. For this reason, a transcreation professional is also ¼ marketer.

If transcreation professionals are all of the above, they are not language service providers, but consultants for all intents and purposes. Before the actual transcreation work even takes place, they may be asked to evaluate brand names to ascertain whether they have negative associations, or to carry out research aimed at making sure a certain concept is not currently used by a brand’s competitors. After the transcreation of a television or radio commercial has been performed, they may be asked to direct the voiceover recording session in the recording studio. As a transcreation professional, I regularly perform these tasks, which I believe are part and parcel of the transcreation practice.

However, this is not the only difference between translation and transcreation. In translation, a translator usually translates, delivers their work, and possibly hears from the editor in case of terminological issues. Transcreation, on the other hand, is a far more collaborative practice. Based on the creative brief provided by the client, the transcreation professional is often asked to produce multiple versions for the target-language copy, so that the client may choose the one they prefer. If the client is not

completely satisfied, the transcreation professional can be asked to tweak the options submitted or to create new options from scratch; this is exactly what happens in copywriting too. “Back-and-forths” with the client are normal practice in transcreation, and conference calls can take place before, during, or after transcreation work is performed to make sure both the client and the professional are on the same wavelength – just as with copywriting projects. In the case of global campaigns, clients often require a back translation of the target text into the source language: this has to do with corporate levels of approvals. The transcreation must first be approved by the global client (i.e. the headquarters of the multinational company), who will base their opinion on the back translation, and secondly by the local client (i.e. the target-country office of the multinational company), who understands the target text. The transcreation professional is often asked to provide a rationale to explain in detail what approach has been taken to render the source text and to what extent the target text strays from the source texts, again for the benefit of the global client.

4. Conclusions

This paper examines the differences between translation and transcreation by applying a translation evaluation grid to authentic examples of interlinguistic adaptation of advertising and marketing copy. The results of the analysis indicate that transcreation is a different service, which requires a specific skillset that makes the transcreation professional more of a consultant than a language service provider. It has been suggested that while transcreation is different from translation, it is not an alternative service. When it comes to marketing and advertising texts, transcreation is the only way to produce copy that can truly resonate with the target audience. Although there are cases where a faithful rendition can be effective (e.g. L’Oréal’s “Because you’re worth it”), the copy must often be re-created (e.g. Norton™’s “Go boldly, not blindly”). Ira Torresi distinguishes between translation, adaptation/localisation and transcreation, and argues the latter only takes place when the whole text is rebuilt (2010: 4). I as a practitioner, on the other hand, firmly believe that transcreation expertise lies precisely in the ability to determine whether a close rendition of the source text will have an impact on the target audience, or whether a more creative approach should be taken. The transcreation professional as a translator + copywriter + “cultural anthropologist” + marketer knows exactly what works for the target market and culture and is able to use the right words to create the desired effect on the readers.

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Biography

Claudia Benetello is an Italian communications professional who has been working in copywriting-transcreation, translation-interpreting and journalism since 2005. A member of the Professional Copywriters' Network, the Italian Translators and Interpreters' Association (AITI) and the Italian Journalists' Association (Ordine dei Giornalisti), she gained professional experience in a consulting firm and a live events company before starting her own business, Dropinka (www.dropinka.com). She has been a speaker on transcreation since 2012.

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