

Translating American Business Texts: "Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing"

By Nur Reinhart

When I hear a translation agency offer me a project translating the business text of an American corporation into Turkish, I always get that dull, queasy sensation in the pit of my stomach. "Oh, it's just a corporate policy manual," the agency rep cheerfully rambles on. "Nothing technical." These words are supposed to put me at ease and show me what a breeze the job is going to be. But I know better. After translating numerous management policy handbooks, marketing brochures, and performance assessment policy documents, I know how hard it is to translate corporate American texts into something meaningful and coherent that doesn't sound "foreign," "stilted," or downright silly.

The reason is simple. Today's American business texts are overloaded with specialized terms, references, and acronyms that are the unique products of American business schools and popular and ubiquitous American business and management "gurus" such as Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, etc. Indeed, a revolution of sorts seems to have occurred in the American business and management world within the last several decades. During the early part of the century, there were no nationally known management consultants or theories utilized by large numbers of American corporations. As a matter of fact, the most significant books on the subject during that time were books by Frederick Taylor, Chester Barnard, and James Burnham in 1911, 1938, and 1941 respectively. There were also no management or MBA schools, and people rose through the ranks of their profession to become managers. It was during the business boom of the post-World War II era that companies sought theories and techniques to improve production, organization, and profits, and a new layer in administration came into being: the managerial executives. Peter Drucker's first book, *The Practice of Management*, was published in 1954 in this climate and started a trend that was to snowball. MBA degrees, which were rare in the early 1960s, became popular in the mid-1970s, commanding hefty entry-level salaries.

What followed in the 70s and 80s was a proliferation of MBA schools and management "gurus" with their hyper-marketed books. Bestseller lists were dominated by John Naisbitt's *Megatrends*, Ken Blanchard's and Spencer Johnson's *The One Minute Manager*, Tom Peters' and Robert Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*, and many books by Peter Drucker. Perhaps it was the failure of the American automotive industry to respond to the oil crisis of the 70s with energy-efficient products, or the unexpected dominance of the Japanese in the automotive and electronics fields, or the rapid advances in technology and the globalization of national economies. Whatever the reason was, the American business climate seemed full of insecurities in the face of global competition. The MBAs and the new management "gurus" spoke to these insecurities. Now the MBA degree is an

unspoken prerequisite for success up the corporate ladder, and according to the British weekly *The Economist*, management consulting is big business worldwide, generating revenues exceeding \$50 billion a year, led by large American companies like Andersen Consulting and McKinsey & Company.

To distinguish their theories in order to sell them, management "gurus" and MBA schools have generated a bumper crop of special terms and acronyms which may appear incomprehensible to outsiders: empowerment, best practices, bench-

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marking, adding value, leverage learning, paradigm shift, paradigms of interdependence, leaders as cross fertilizers, partnering, stakeholders, minimum critical specification, indifference zone, baseline cycle time, TQM (Time Quality Management), JIT (Just in Time), etc. The list goes on and on. These terms have infiltrated all levels of American business and industry, popping up in mission statements, human resource policies, business brochures, and the like. Corporate writers employ them for various reasons. For some, this is a way of showing their company's commitment to a new management theory or simply showing how progressive and knowledgeable the writer is. For others, this is simply the language of business, a kind of shorthand of references.

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However, there are several significant problems with translating this jargon. First of all, many of these terms refer to specific concepts in a particular author's work. Since most other nations do not share America's preoccupation with business and management trends, many of these concepts may be unknown in some countries. Adding to this problem are many terms which are standard fixtures in corporate texts, such as "diversity, affirmative action, and equal opportunity employment." These are unique American concepts which through the years have acquired complex meanings beyond the face value of these words. But since these concepts do not exist in many other countries due to differences in culture and law, they are a huge challenge to translate in a succinct yet meaningful manner.

Second, since American business and management trends and theories come and go with confusing frequency, business dictionaries are unable to keep up with all of the ever-changing terms. A dictionary that contained all the popular terms of the 70s and 80s would today be hopelessly outmoded, as the "gurus" of those decades and their jargon have now been outshone by Stephen Covey (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Principle-Centered Leadership*), who counts President Clinton among his clients. All of this means that translators must inquire about unknown or confusing terms and provide an explanatory translation—assuming that they recognize this need rather than providing a literal translation straight out of the dictionary. Needless to say, explanatory translations tend to be wordy and may upset word count estimates that the agency may be counting on.

Third, so many of these terms are long on style and short on substance. They are fancy words for plain common sense, and when these terms are

translated into another language, that "fancy" veneer disappears; they sound awkward, foreign or simply foolish. An excellent example of this was in the January 1998 issue of *Automotive Industries*, a professional journal, under the appropriate heading: "Cut the Gibberish." The journal reported that Renault's chief of platform engineering Patrick Pelata was asked at a press conference whether the French auto maker used "knowledge-based engineering." Pelata's reply sums up the foreign response to American business jargon: "I'm not used to that expression," Mr. Pelata said. "At Renault, we believe all engineering should be based on knowledge."

Additionally, some of these terms are simply corrupted English. The word "stakeholder" used to mean a person entrusted with the stakes of bettors, but it has been "re-engineered" to mean anyone from customers to workers who have a stake in an organization. The phrase "leaders as cross fertilizers" is a challenge to translate without producing gales of laughter from the foreign reader. The unfortunate consequence of translating such jargon is that, inevitably, the translator will be blamed for the poor quality of the text because the foreign reader would never imagine that the original text might be worse than the translation.

In the end, such jargon creates a rather leaden and clinical tone which is an impediment to communication as in this example: "Our objective is to codify the organization's benchmarking language and to embrace and empower our stakeholders internally and externally to explore new paradigms with an eye toward providing objective methods of maintaining a productive response to market-driven energies in the current environment of time-based competition." This text is bewildering and soporific for the American layman, and its translation—no matter how good—will be just as confounding for foreign audiences. Even though the problem with jargon is blindingly obvious to translators, it seems invisible to most American executives because they are immersed in it daily and oblivious to its inherent communication problems for the layman and the foreign reader.

The solution is tough. In an ideal world, the agency and the translator would gently educate the client about the problems, and the client would revise the text. But nobody wants to tell a paying client—perhaps a major U.S. corporation—how bad its text is. I remember translating a particularly jargon-saturated human resource policy handbook into Turkish a couple of years ago for an American pharmaceutical company. I struggled with the terms, requested definitions, and worked daily with the sympathetic agency representative who fully understood the problems. She and I agreed that we would never

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work for such a corporation because it appeared almost "dehumanized" in its text due to the heavy use of jargon. We both understood, however, that we could not express that candid point of view. We kept pushing for clarification for all the terms until we were both satisfied. Perhaps that is all that the agency and the translator can do in this delicate situation: prepare lists of convoluted terms, push for answers from the client, and hope that the client cooperates or—better yet—takes the hint.

Ultimately, what needs to change is American business education itself. Business educators need to shed their pretensions, stop being impressed with jargon, and stress true written and verbal communication skills along with the rigorous quantitative curriculum. They need to re-focus on the same basics of writing which I used to drill into my freshman and sophomore college students some years ago: determine your audience and purpose, and develop your tone based on those. If a business' goal is to compete globally, then its written materials should focus on concrete information such as the specific features, advantages, and strength of its products or services. If its goal is to establish good policies for its employees worldwide, then its materials should be clear, specific, and direct. After all, an American corporation's image and reception abroad depends partly upon its translated brochures, prospectuses, policy man-

uals, etc. With the help of these the corporation can enter into and compete in an international market as well as recruit employees, distributors, and agents. From that point of view, the clarity with which its documents communicate becomes critical to the company's ultimate success abroad.

In short, to do business globally, one has to think globally. That means taking time to study and understand a foreign culture and to tailor business texts to that culture, because when it comes to cultural matters, one size does not fit all. If American businesses are savvy, not only would they produce clear and meaningful texts without a lot of jargon, but they would also actively solicit input from the translator for the best cultural fit. Of course, this requires time and extra effort as well as a heightened awareness about cultural differences. But that's the price of being successful abroad.