



Handling Typical Translation Problems

How to handle problems typically occurring while translating



The background features a complex arrangement of overlapping arrows in various shades of red and orange, pointing in different directions. In the center, there is a graphic consisting of two overlapping circles, one red and one orange, with a white crescent shape between them. The text "Gaps in the target language" is centered over this graphic.

Gaps in the target language

Problem

It is possible that some terms or phrases of the source text do not exist in the target language. Those terms or phrases are mostly culture-specific terms or country-specific institutions or organizations.

Solution

In these cases a direct translation is often not possible.
It is your task as a translator to fill these gaps and provide the reader with additional information.

Three possible strategies:

1 You replace the culture- or country-specific term with an explanation,

e.g.: *“Gestern beschloss das **Oberlandesgericht Karlsruhe**...”* → *“Yesterday, the **higher regional court of the city of Karlsruhe** decided...”*

2 You keep the culture- or country-specific term in your translation and add an explanation (e.g. via parenthesis or footnote),

e.g.: *“Gestern beschloss das **Oberlandesgericht Karlsruhe**...”* → *“Yesterday, the **Oberlandesgericht – the higher regional court – of the city of Karlsruhe** decided...”*

3 You find a translation for the culture- or country-specific term that has the same meaning or represents the same concept.

e.g. *“Er aß eine Currywurst”* → *“He ate a hot dog”* (the concept to be represented is that of a snack you can buy on the streets/fast food)

Attention: This is only possible if it is not the exact term but rather its idea or concept that is of importance.

The background features a white horizontal band across the middle, with a yellow gradient above and below it. Scattered throughout are numerous plus signs in various colors including green, yellow, pink, blue, and orange, some of which are semi-transparent and overlap each other.

Collocations

A collocation represents the possibility of contentually combining language units (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.). It indicates which words of a language can be combined.

Example:

“take a quick shower” collocates
but: *“take a fast shower”* does not collocate

Problem

Some words collocate in the source language
but not in the target language.

Example:

German

“Kaffee aufsetzen”

English

“set up coffee” → does not collocate!
(make or brew coffee)

Solution

You can already find many collocations easily in (online) dictionaries. In addition, you can look up ways of finding out if words collocate in “Handling New Terms”. In that section we show you several ways to research collocations.

STRIKE WHILE THE IRON

Metaphors, sayings, puns and word plays, jokes, etc.

STRIKE WHILE

THE IRON

Problem

Many metaphors or sayings cannot be translated into the target language word by word. If you translate word plays or puns literally, they do not make any sense. Same with jokes or humorous texts in general. If you translate them too literally, the humorous aspects of a text or the punchline of a joke will not work.

Solution

When translating **metaphors** or **sayings** it is most important to transport the original message. For many sayings you can find an equivalent in the target language. Extensive research is very important!

Example:

The German saying *“um den heißen Brei herumreden”* cannot be translated literally into English (e.g. *“talk around the hot pulp”*). It is important that you find a translation that transports the original meaning of the saying. In this case *„beat around the bush“* could serve as a possible translation.

Solution

The translation of **word plays, puns, jokes, and humorous texts** is usually even more difficult as they play with language-specific meanings (e.g. ambiguous meanings of the same word) or the sound of words. In these cases you should not translate literally either. Try to transfer the humorous aspects into the target language.

→ **It can be very difficult to produce a working joke, pun, or word play in the target language yourself. Use your creativity!**

Example from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

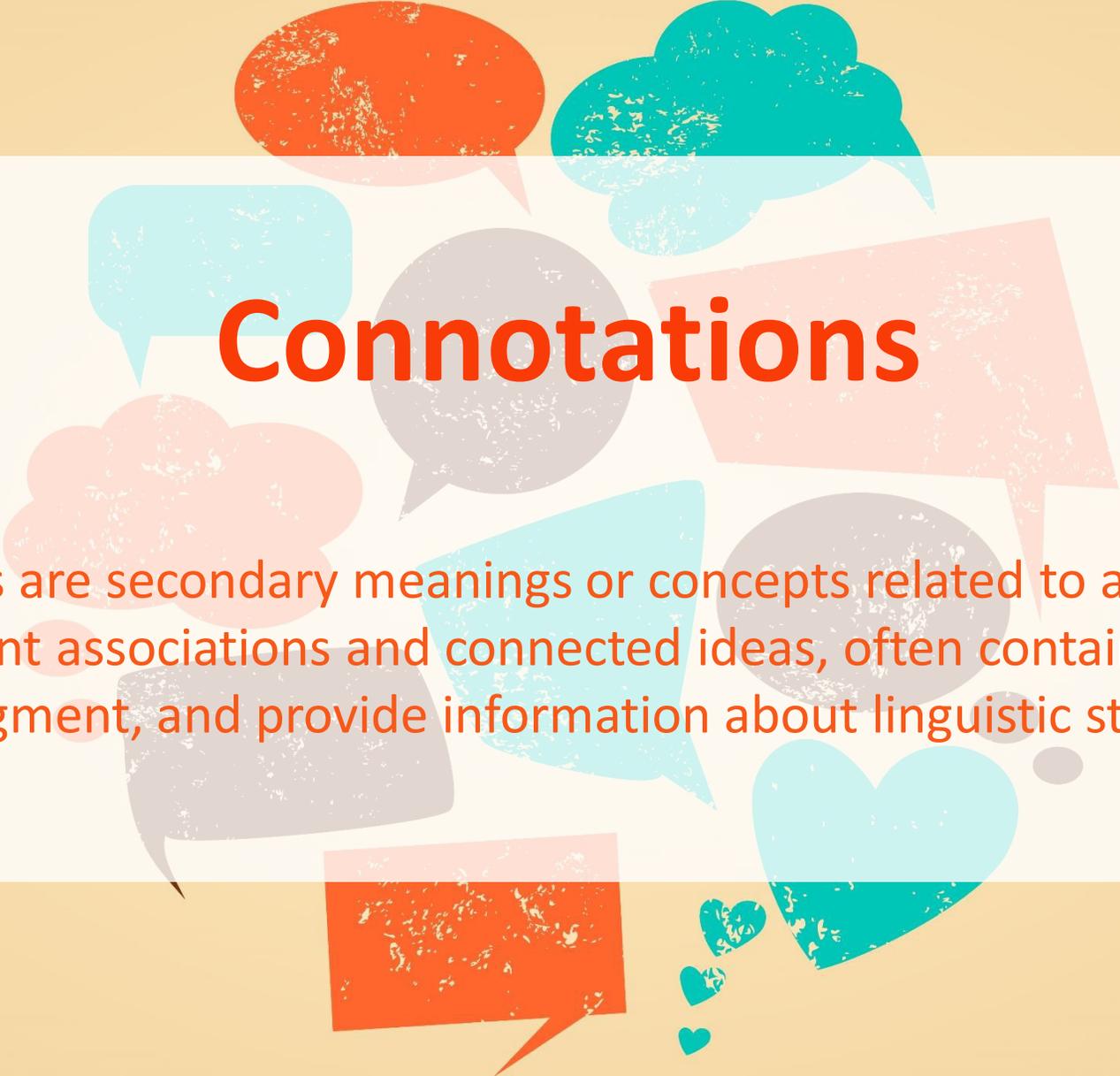
"*I had NOT!*" cried the Mouse sharply and very angrily.

„*Mit NICHTEN!*“ sagte die Maus entschieden und sehr ärgerlich.

"A *KNOT!*" said Alice, *always ready to make herself useful*, and looking anxiously about her. "*Oh, let me help to undo it!*"

„*NICHTEN!*“ rief Alice, *die gern neue Bekanntschaften machte*, und sah sich neugierig überall um. „*O, wo sind sie, deine Nichten? Lass mich gehen und sie her holen!*“

You can find the whole text [here](#).



Connotations

Connotations are secondary meanings or concepts related to a certain term. They represent associations and connected ideas, often contain emotions or judgment, and provide information about linguistic styles.

Problem

The connotation of a translation should always match the connotation of the source term the best way possible. It can be difficult to find a translation with the exact same connotation.

Attention: Sometimes connotations vary between different cultures and languages. Always check the connotation of the terms you use.

Solution

To make sure the translations you choose have the same connotation as the respective terms of the source text, you sometimes have to do extensive research. The best way to find the term with the right connotation is to compare the possible translations in monolingual dictionaries and to look for definitions of the different terms.

Example:

„Er ist gestern gestorben“
“He died yesterday“

→ normal language style
– neutral

„Er ist gestern entschlafen“
„He passed away yesterday“

→ elevated language style
– euphemized



We hope that the solutions we provided in this lesson will help you to handle problems that might occur in your next translation!



Handling Typical Translation Problems

Exercises: Repeat what you just learned!

Imagine the situations described below and explain how you would react in them.

On the following page, you can compare your answers to the reaction we would like to see from you. Moreover, we will give you some advice for the different situations.

That way you can find out if you are ready to handle typical translation problems.

Situation 1

During a translation, you find a term you cannot translate, as there is no equivalent in the target language. What are the possible ways of handling this term in the target text?

Situation 2

You translate a humorous text with lots of funny text passages. How do you handle humor in your translation?

Situation 3

During a translation, you find a term with a very negative connotation in the source text. What do you have to keep in mind when translating this term?

Handling Typical Translation Problems

Exercises: Repeat what you just learned!

Situation 1

During a translation, you find a term you cannot translate, as there is no equivalent in the target language. What are the possible ways of handling this term in the target text?

In these cases you have to explain the term to the reader so that he knows what it means. In doing so, you can keep the original term of the source text and add an explanation or leave the term out and only keep the explanation in the target text. Which possibility you chose depends on the individual case, the context, and the target audience.

Sometimes it is possible to use a term in the target text that transports the same meaning as the term of the source text but is no direct translation. This is only possible if the idea or the concept of a term should be represented and if the exact word chosen is not that important.

Situation 2

You translate a humorous text with lots of funny text passages. How do you handle humor in your translation?

It is particularly important that you transfer the humorous mood of the source text into the target text. You cannot simply translate humorous text passages literally but rather have to use your own creativity and humor to maintain the humorous aspects of the text.

What is funny about a particular text passage and why is it funny? With these questions in mind, try to produce a text passage in the target language that is equally funny for a similar reason. Just ignore the expressions of the source text and imagine you are telling a joke or a funny story to a friend. That is a possible way to transfer humor into your translation.

Situation 3

During a translation, you find a term with a very negative connotation in the source text. What do you have to keep in mind when translating this term?

If a term has a negative connotation in the source text, you have to choose a term with an equally negative connotation for your translation. It is important that you find the right translation in such cases, as you can change the whole meaning of a sentence, passage, or even of the whole text by choosing a term with a wrong connotation.