

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Potential Pitfalls of Limiting Translation Services to Native Speakers

by Kelsey Chong



In the translation industry, native speakers have been widely accepted as ideal employees to hire. However, new findings have suggested that being a native speaker is no longer enough, leading to shifts in the labor market.

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As a product of a rapidly globalizing society, language use on the Internet has shifted immensely over the past two decades. According to research by the Foundation for Networks and Development, approximately 80% of online content was in English in 1996. But by 2016, English made up a mere 35% of all Internet content—a number that will

only continue to decrease in the future. Today, most Internet users prefer to create and consume content in their native language, whether that's blogging on social media or purchasing items online.

Because the Internet serves as the largest platform for global communication, this massive shift in online language use has introduced a strong demand for the translation and localization of products and services. In a 2014 survey by Common Sense Advisory on customers in 10 different non-Anglophone countries, 75% of customers reported a preference for buying products in their native language, and 60% reported rarely or never buying products from English-only websites. Hence, for any company trying to expand internationally, translating and localizing services like websites, apps, newsletters, and customer service has become absolutely essential.

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Recognizing the many benefits of translation and localization, many businesses are now hiring around the world, with job advertisements urging "native speakers" of various languages to apply. But does simply being a native speaker make an applicant a better translator than a non-native speaker?

The Native Speaker Principle

In an effort to acquire the most natural translation possible, businesses often require that translators have native proficiency in the target language. This rationale is often referred to as the "native speaker principle": a rule that states that translators should only translate into their native language, based on the belief that only a native speaker can write a perfect translation in terms of fluency and grammatical and linguistic accuracy. In other words, native speakers are thought to be the best translators, because they maintain proper

grammar and are more aware of subtle nuances and cultural and idiomatic expressions. This standard has been adopted by the translation industries of various English-speaking countries, such as the US and the UK.

However, this principle brings up an important question—what exactly is a “native speaker,” and who qualifies as one?

What is a “Native Speaker”?

According to Merriam-Webster, a native speaker is defined as, “a person who learned to speak the language of the place where he or she was born as a child rather than learning it as a foreign language”.

Although this definition may have been applicable in the past, it does not hold up well when applied under the new circumstances of today’s global society. With advancements in transportation technology making international flight more accessible and convenient, more and more people immigrate to foreign countries to not only to pursue work and educational opportunities, but also to seek out better living standards or a new environment that better suits their personal living preferences. Consequently, the children of these immigrants often leave their nation of birth at an especially young age. In the process of conforming to an entirely new school system, language, and culture, immigrant children may often lose some degree of facility over their first language, and later develop higher proficiency in their second language. And immigrant children natively born into the new country often face a similar predicament: they are “native speakers” of their parents’ language, using it informally at home, but have only been formally schooled in the language of their country of birth.

As a result, such heritage speakers (or others who grew up in a similar environment) may fall under the technical definition of “native speaker,” but fail to have full professional working proficiency in the given language. Because their exposure to the language is predominantly in the colloquial home setting, they are often extremely articulate in oral speech with near-perfect or perfect pronunciation, but especially weak in aspects like formal language, advanced-level writing, reading comprehension, spelling, and grammar.

On the other hand, a non-native speaker who has formally studied the language may be weaker in speaking and pronunciation, but have nearly flawless grammar, reading, and writing skills.

“Language Industry Trends 2017” by Alex Marsh

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Being a Native Speaker is Not Enough

Even in the case that a native speaker was completely born and raised in the country of their source language, without the proper linguistic training, they will still likely lack the qualifications to provide an accurate translation. Rather than being a native speaker, it is an individual’s specialized training in both the target and source languages, combined with a strong familiarity with the given subject, that contributes more significantly to the quality of his or her translation.

First, while the native speaker principle may hold true for more traditional types of translation, such as literary translation –where linguistic nuance and grammatical precision are crucial in conveying the aesthetic qualities of the original text – the same cannot be said about newly emerging fields of translation in sectors like business, technology, and law. In these more specialized, technical fields, the accuracy of the actual message of the text overrides any stylistic or aesthetic values. For example, when translating legal documents, the translator would not only have to be fluent in general legal terminology, but also adept at translating between two different legal systems. In order to avoid fatal misunderstandings in court or critical business transactions, it would thus be safer to hire a non-native translator who is versed in the given field, than an inexperienced native speaker who could misinterpret the meaning entirely. After the non-native translator accurately reproduces the complete meaning of the text into the target language, a native speaker can then act as an effective editor to proofread and smooth out any potential stylistic or grammatical errors.

Despite high fluency in their first language, native speakers are also not necessarily proficient in the second language they will be translating in, nor skilled in translation more generally. In order to fully retain the meaning of the original text, the translator must be fully acquainted with both the source and target languages—not only their native one. Additionally, according to Elaine Chaika, even individuals with native proficiency in two languages, “may be able to switch rapidly from one to the other, but it seems as if they draw upon each as a separate system rather than trying to find the equivalents from one to another.” Because translation is not a direct word-by-word conversion process, the translator must be educated in how to draw equivalents between two languages based on context, and accurately convey ideas from one culture to another. Unequipped with the specialized knowledge and tools to find these equivalents, even native bilinguals will end up sacrificing grammatical correctness and eloquence in vain efforts to bridge together two completely contradictory language and culture systems.

In today’s globalized and technology-centric society, demanding that applicants are “native speakers” or “fluent” in a language is simply not enough.



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