Transcreation as the Creation of a New Original

A Norton™ Case Study

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1. Transcreation: Buzzword or the Real Thing?

While transcreation has been a buzzword in the language industry for fifteen years now, academics have been using this term for almost six decades. However, it seems like its scope and meaning are far from unanimous in either realm. As a practitioner, I exclusively use this word to refer to the interlinguistic adaptation of marketing and advertising texts, whereas scholars only recently started including commercial texts within the area of transcreation (Gaballo 2012; Katan 2015, among others), which was originally limited to literary texts. Some heated discussions on transcreation have taken place online among language service providers, where a few of them stated that transcreation is a synonym for a good, natural-sounding translation. They claimed that clients began asking for “transcreation services” after receiving sub-par translations that were not fit for purpose. Furthermore, many of them said they used “transcreation” as a synonym for “creative translation”, and a few of them went as far as to say that “every good translation is an act of transcreation”¹. In my opinion, both positions are unfounded. The former seems to imply that only certain translations are worth being labelled “creative”, whereas in actual fact any translation is a creative act in itself, not a mere word-for-word rendition of a text from a source language to a target language (Gaballo 2012). “Creative”, however, could refer to the...

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subject matter, and not to translation as an act in itself. If so, who is to say what is and is not creative? The average translator would probably regard fashion as a “creative” subject matter, whereas he/she would not say the same of chemistry. But what about advertising copy for a chemical company? Would he/she consider it “creative”? This shows that “creative translation” as a definition only leads to confusion. As concerns the latter standpoint (the idea that “every good translation is an act of transcreation”), it starts from the correct assumption that translation is a creative act, but it jumps to the wrong conclusion that translation and transcreation are one and the same thing.

Indeed transcreation is something different from translation, and I intend to prove it with this paper, which presents a transcreation case study. Advertising is basically the contemporary application of rhetorical techniques aimed at persuasion; through a combination of textual and visual elements, advertising is able to condense a large amount of information and emotions in a limited space and time (Testa 2014). From a functionalist perspective, advertising and marketing copy serves Jakobson’s conative function and poetic function of language (Jakobson 1960): whereas the former engages the receiver, the latter focuses on the message in itself. This means that advertisements have to both persuade and appeal to the audience in their wording. If we look at advertising and marketing copy as specialized discourse, we will see that while its features are not unknown also in general language, they appear more frequently in specialized discourse and therefore become typical of the latter (Gotti 2006). In particular,

[... ] one of the interesting aspects of advertising language is its delicate compromise between the opposed tendencies of conformity and unorthodoxy: between following a prescribed path of advertising clichés and exercising the freedom to deviate from it and, even, on occasion, to deviate from the rules of the English language itself. (Leech 1966, 4)

Advertising language features a simple syntax which, like spoken language, includes parataxis, disjunction and a frequent use of the imperative form (Leech 1966). At the same time, advertising language makes the most of many different devices to increase its persuasive power, including means or devices that belong to other arts (Pennarola 1998). As a matter of fact, the intertextual character of advertising translates into the use of allusions and twists on quotations from films, novels and popular culture in general. What happens when a text that is so rooted in the cultural context of a given
country is to be used in a different country? It is in situations such as these that transcreation comes into play, providing « the freedom to address cultural gaps » (Ray, Kelly 2010, 3). In fact « the finished text should read as if it were originally written in the reader’s own mother tongue, and give them the exact same experience as the source text gave to readers in the original language » (Humphrey, Bradley, Somers, Gilpin 2011, 6). In other words, « the point is to re–enact the function, not reproduce the form » (Anholt 2000, 10). The target text must be fit for purpose, as per skopos theory (Reiß & Vermeer 1984), and it must also be appropriate to the target culture. However, the creative element of writing at the heart of transcreation seems to be overlooked in the current literature, and this is precisely what I intend to focus on here.

As a copywriter involved in both the creation ex nihilo of advertising and marketing copy (origination) and the adaptation of marketing and advertising copy from a foreign language (namely English and German) to my mother tongue (transcreation), I find that the latter often results in the creation of a new original, rather than in the mere adaptation of figures of speech or cultural references. A case in point is Norton™ AntiVirus software’s taglines “Boldly Go” and “Go Boldly, Not Blindly”, both of which I adapted into Italian in 2014.

![Norton™ AntiVirus taglines in the original English](image)

**Figure 1.** Norton™ AntiVirus taglines in the original English

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2. Transcreation of a tagline: “Boldly Go”/“Go Boldly, Not Blindly”

Founded in 1982, Symantec is an American software company that produces software for security, storage, backup and availability, and offers professional services to support its software. Norton™ AntiVirus is an anti–malware software developed and distributed by Symantec since 1991 as part of its Norton family of computer security products. My task was to adapt the taglines “Boldly Go” and “Go Boldly, Not Blindly” in a way that would resonate with the Italian market. After all,

[... ] the ultimate aim of any marketing process is to create maximum impact, maximum efficiency, maximum effectiveness, and maximum loyalty in each individual market. These aims are often in direct conflict with the struggle for consistency: almost by definition, the most effective approach for any given market cannot be the most effective in all other markets. (Anholt 2000, 126)

Contrary to popular belief, the degree of creativity I could unleash to achieve this end was not unlimited. In fact, transcreation is not just about being creative per se, but rather about adapting one’s creativity to suit a brand’s intended message and tone of voice, and at the same time pack a punch among the target audience. The creative brief I received mentioned three specific elements I should take into account, which turned out to be three transcreation challenges: a cultural reference, an inspirational tone of voice and a very peculiar visual layout.

2.1. Challenge No. 1: Cultural Reference

“Boldly Go”, a phrase any native speaker of English is familiar with, is first and foremost a cultural reference. It was part of an introductory speech at the beginning of every Star Trek episode³: « 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 civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before ». The first question I asked myself was whether I should retain the cultural reference and, if so, how. Since Star Trek was also very popular in Italy,

I decided that the quotation was worth keeping. So I searched for the opening speech in the Italian–dubbed series with a view to using it. This is how the opening speech was rendered in the Italian language:

« Spazio, ultima frontiera. Ecco 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 ». It literally says: « Space, the last frontier. Here are the voyages of the starship Enterprise during its five–year mission, aimed at exploring strange new worlds, searching for new forms of life and civilizations, and reaching places that no man has ever reached before ».

The adverb “boldly” had essentially been left out altogether, meaning that I could not use the Italian quote. For this reason, I decided I had to drop the cultural reference. While the Star Trek association clearly played a role, it was not the defining element of the tagline.

2.2. Challenge No. 2: Tone of Voice

The tagline was also meant as a mantra that would encourage the target audience to live without fear, to become the best version of themselves, to keep moving forward. This highly aspirational tone of voice imbues the voiceover of Norton AntiVirus’ TV commercial:

If courage is contagious, get bitten
Your boldest days are still ahead.
For the boldest future is still unwritten
The boldest story is still unread.
The boldest gift has yet to be given
To the most naïve of hearts.
The boldest answer to a mistake,
Is the one that shows your smarts.
The boldest email has yet to be open.
The boldest app has yet to be bought.
The boldest file has yet to be downloaded
Without a second thought.

Yes, the boldest life is out there,
And as you chase it, remember this,
If you go blindly you’ll find trouble,
But go boldly and you’ll find bliss.

This provided valuable insight into the profound meaning of the tagline and helped to guide my creative efforts. Taken out of context, “Boldly go” could have been a rather sweeping statement, but the information concerning the intended tone of voice encouraged me to focus on a more specific path to follow.

2.3. Challenge No. 3: Layout

Last but not least, the layout itself also posed a constraint for the Italian transcreation of the tagline. The tagline “Boldly Go”, to be used with many different visuals, would feature a tick symbol inside the letter O. The client asked me to retain it, if possible.
3. The Creative Approach

After realizing that adapting the Star Trek reference was not an option, I tried to establish whether a literal translation was viable. In my experience, if a close rendition sounds good in the target language, the client is likely to prefer it over options that stray from the source copy. As a matter of fact, the “smart centralization” model outlined by Simon Anholt (2000) allows global brands to have more control over the transcreation outcomes, which ensures their messaging is not diluted when adapted for many different countries. In other words, the closer the adaptation (provided that it sounds natural and is as punchy as the original), the better. Unfortunately, in this case a literal rendition would have resulted in a weak, dull, unnatural-sounding Italian tagline. I had no other choice but to recreate the tagline.

I read through the brief over and over again, hoping to find a hint that could spark my imagination. I brainstormed, produced several options, and then narrowed my choices down to two. One creative approach was to stay close to the English and convey the original idea by using Italian collocations with the equivalent of “go”. The other — my personal favourite — was much bolder (pun intended!), in that it captured the spirit of the original using a completely different image. “Puntare in alto” literally means “aim high/raise the bar”, which helped to convey the idea of living without fear, being the best version of oneself, and continuing to move forward. “Puntare”, however, is also a gamble-related verb (the equivalent of “to lay a stake”). For the long version of the tagline, I thought that creating a contrast between “laying a stake” and “without risks” would prove punchy, and therefore came up with “Punta in alto, senza rischi”. Furthermore, by containing the letter O, the Italian taglines also retained the tick symbol that was featured in the English originals. Ultimately “Punta in alto” and “Punta in alto, senza rischi” became the Norton™ AntiVirus taglines for the Italian market.
It should be noted that the inversion of the verb and the adverb in the long form of the English tagline did not affect the Italian transcreation: “Punta in alto” renders both “Boldly Go” and “Go Boldly”. Moreover, it may be argued that this transcreation loses something: the alliteration in the English original is not retained in Italian. However, this was not an issue. As far as I can see, English
advertising and marketing copy make considerable use of alliteration and rhyme, whereas Italian advertising does not seem to rely as much on this particular rhetorical device. Unless, of course, the products are children’s toys or fast–moving consumer goods — just to provide two examples where rhyme often plays a role in Italian advertising as well — or when the advertising copy is to be sung. As a matter of fact, in the case of jingles or songs, retaining (or actually, recreating) rhymes and sticking to the rhythm is paramount.

4. 4. Transcreation: A Practitioner’s Perspective

Based on my personal experience, I would 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 been originated in the target language and culture » (Benetello 2016, 259). I rewrote the Norton™ taglines in Italian to such an extent that they no longer bear any resemblance to the English master — they are, indeed, new originals. This seems to tie in with Ira Torresi’s idea of transcreation as the rebuilding of the whole copy:

> Whereas translation might be considered as mainly connected to the written word and to the transfer of concepts from one language to another, adaptation and localization (a more specific term, which is mainly used for advertisements, websites and software) may be seen to stress the cross-cultural aspect of the process and the need to adjust the promotional text to the target market in order to preserve its persuasive function. This, in turn, might entail trans-creation, i.e. rebuilding the entire promotional text so that it sounds and reads both natural and creative in the target language and culture. (Torresi 2010, 4)

However, if the aim of transcreation is to produce target-language copy that has an impact on the target audience, transcreation professionals can also opt for a faithful rendition of the English original, as long as they have established that it will resonate with the target audience. This does not make their work less of a transcreation; they are hired precisely because they have the expertise to determine for each and every project whether a faithful transposition will have the desired effect, or whether the source copy should be rewritten.

Since transcreation is a service halfway between copywriting and translation, possessing copywriting skills is essential to being able to
perform it. Just like in copywriting, the transcreation professional is often required to provide multiple options the client can choose from, and just like a copywriter during a client presentation, he/she is expected to explain the rationale behind his/her creative approaches. This shouldn’t come as a surprise. Before the rise of Anholt’s “smart centralization” model, it was agency copywriters in the target–language country — not in–market translators — who carried out transcreation assignments. The three other skills I believe a transcreation professional must have are — needless to say — source language comprehension (the copy is written in a foreign language and must be decoded), cultural sensitivity (the target text must be appropriate for the target culture), and local market understanding (the target text must be appropriate for the target market, meaning that the target copy should sound as unique as possible and avoid images and wording used by a brand’s competitors). Because of this very particular skill set, it follows that the transcreation professional is more than a language service provider. In helping companies implement their marketing and advertising strategies in his/her own country, the transcreation professional may have to establish whether a certain brand name has negative connotations in the target language and culture (before the actual transcreation work takes place) as well as direct a voiceover recording session of a TV commercial (after transcreation has been performed), just to provide a few examples from my own professional experience. Although such services (cultural consultation and voiceover direction, respectively) are not transcreation in the strictest sense, they are part and parcel of the transcreation practice and contribute to turning the transcreation professional into a full–fledged consultant.

To conclude, transcreation is a balancing act between the source text, visual and brief. Although this makes it a more complex process than “plain” translation, it is not an alternative service to translation. When it comes to advertising and marketing copy, the only way to “translate” it is in fact to “transcreate” it, as Anholt states: « The reality is that advertising copy can never and should never be translated. This is surely one of the most important facts to learn when planning an international campaign: advertising copy can only be written » (Anholt 2000, 8). Straplines that can be rendered literally without compromising punchiness and memorability do exist, and L’Oréal’s “Because You’re Worth It” tagline is an excellent case in point. Its Italian, French and German versions are 1:1 translations: “Perché voi valete”, “Parce que vous le valez bien” and “Weil Sie es sich wert sind”. However, in
my experience this is not the norm: more often than not (and the Norton™ AntiVirus case is a striking example) one simply has to draw inspiration from the source text and create a new original.

References


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