design tips for multilingual documents

Are you designing an English publication that will also be produced in other languages?

It is a common enough undertaking. So you design an English master, carefully choosing your fonts and fine-tuning your layouts. When the text and design of your publication are approved, you or your translation provider can flow in the translated text.

That may sound straightforward, but it is often not the best way to proceed. Why? Because languages differ not only in what they say, but in how they look. As a designer, you already understand that visual communication is as important as linguistic. But if your visual thinking is "monolingual", the look of your carefully planned original may not "translate" very well.

But a little forward thinking about your target languages will help to ensure that each version looks good and communicates effectively. You can avoid some common pitfalls, and the smoother workflows will save both time and money. You don't need to know the languages themselves, but there are a few issues you should take into consideration – before you begin designing.

We are happy to advise on this process but here, in plain English, are some basic facts and tips to get started.

volume

Most languages occupy more space than English: they use more words, and those words may be longer. A few – such as Chinese – take up substantially less space. Arabic usually occupies a similar volume to English, but requires more leading.

There are several ways of dealing with this. First, you can use variable white space in your design template so that the different languages have room to expand. Second, you can allow for adjustment in the type size, leading and tracking to fit the space available. Or you could vary the total pagination. You can of course use a combination, and we are happy to advise.

fonts

Standard fonts used for English include all characters used in Western European, Scandinavian and some other languages (such as Somali). They do not necessarily include all the accents needed for other languages based on the Roman alphabet, such as Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and Turkish. Other languages use a different script altogether. Versions of common fonts like Helvetica, Garamond and Futura may be available for these or we might need to use the nearest match.

We can advise you on character sets and font matching, and our font sheets are available as PDFs on request. Please advise us of any relevant pre-existing multilingual branding or font requirements prior to typesetting.

paragraph alignment

Many languages have longer words than English, so uneven spacing becomes more noticeable if you use narrow columns. Be aware, too, that text setting in Chinese, Japanese and Arabic is frequently justified, even when the English original is ranged left.

reversed layouts

English reads from left to right. Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Urdu and Sorani read from right to left. That means that a printed book will open from the left, with the spine on the right. All your design spreads will have to be flipped. But will it work? Extra care is required with graphics. Should the images themselves flip, or just their position? If the images are to be flipped, thought must be given to bleeds, text in images, and recognisable faces. If you want us to flip the position only, be careful when considering the overall layout – which will no longer be a simple mirror image of the English.

If you require one of these right to left languages, do contact us first for advice or send us the document for us to look at. We can point out potential problems before your design is finalised, and carry out the actual flipping once it is.

typographic features

punctuation
The usage of punctuation varies between languages as do the punctuation characters themselves. Question or quote marks used as graphical features might need careful thought. For instance, Greek uses the ; symbol as a question mark.

drop caps
Not every language uses discrete letters. For instance, single letter drop caps will not work in Arabic as most letters of any given word are joined to one another. They also won't work in Indic languages, where letters are always combined into syllables.

emphasis
It's common in English to use capitals or italics for emphasis. But many non-Roman scripts do not use upper and lower cases, and will have to be emphasised in a different way. Italics do not look elegant in Chinese and Japanese, although they are sometimes used. And underlines can interfere with accents and diacritical marks in, for example, Arabic and Indic languages.

If you do emphasise certain words typographically or with colour, remember that those words may not appear in the same place when translated. If your design relies on not only the style but on the position of certain words, it's likely to end up looking different when translated.

end paragraphs with a return

Soft returns (shift-return) should only be used to shape text (eg mid-sentence to take a word over for aesthetic reasons). They will usually be stripped out during the translation process, as each language will flow differently. Soft returns should not be used at the end of paragraphs or as spacers between paragraphs. A hard return (return), column or page break should always be used at the end of a paragraph where a line break will be required in the translated version. This includes at the end of subheads.

use style sheets

Style sheets save time and help to preserve consistency, especially in long documents. Cascading style sheets (where one style sheet definition is based on another) are preferable as they help to convey your design principles.

space between paragraphs

Use ''Space Before'' or ''Space After'' paragraph settings to add space between paragraphs. Do not use a different leading for the first line (or character) of the paragraph to add space before it. The word order may be different in translation.

multiple spaces

Avoid multiple spaces to insert a gap between text elements, as these may be stripped out during translation. Use en or em spaces or a tab or flush space as appropriate.

overmatter

Unwanted text that overflows a frame or sits on the pasteboard may be included in a translation. To avoid confusion, please delete any text that should not be included in the translated version. Don't forget you can check for any overmatter using the Preflight Panel.

use separate text and graphic layers

It's often a good idea to keep all text on a separate layer from graphics. This separation allows for easier updating later.

don't put text within graphics

It makes sense to separate text from graphics as far as possible. Say you have a Illustrator chart which needs text labels. Consider placing the chart in your DTP application and putting the labels in the text layer instead of in the Illustrator file. The labels are now grouped together with all the other text to be translated, producing a saving in file handling.

but if you must use text within graphics…

Sometimes you have to use text in your graphics application – you may need a particular Photoshop effect, for example. If so, make sure you keep the unflattened Photoshop file with the text on its own layer, or Illustrator file with live text. That way the translation can be inserted easily.

do's and don'ts if we are supplying outlined text in InDesign

When a special font or composer is required for the target language, some clients find it convenient to receive a final ouput of outlined text within an InDesign layout. Following these guidelines when setting up your job will make this process run more smoothly, ensuring you get you final files as quickly as possible.

paragraph rules

Do not use paragraph rules as they disappear when text is outlined. It is better to place a rule as an embedded object in your text flow, or draw a separate line.

master items

Before sending us your file, detach objects in your layout from the master page, and remove the orginals from the master page.

text boxes with background colour

Do not apply colour backgrounds to text boxes. The background will disappear when the text box is outlined. Instead use a separate object. Blocks of colour should always be created using ''Content: unassigned'' or ''Content: graphic'' objects rather than text boxes.

advice

With over 25 years of experience, WorldAccent's in-house studio design team can provide advice on these or any other issues on publishing in different languages.

Contact us to discuss your design's requirements.

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