

# How to Handle Ambiguous or Unclear Source Sentences

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Translation and Voice-over  
in German and English

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# Translation Challenges

1. Spelling or punctuation errors, missing words
2. Poorly written source text (oxymorons, etc.)
3. English idiosyncrasies
4. Source text is not clear
5. Translation vs. localization

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# 1. Spelling or punctuation errors, missing words

Typos, punctuation errors or missing words you can easily correct in the translation without having to ask your client for clarification

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## 1. Spelling or punctuation errors, missing words – Examples

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How much do you agree with the following statements:

- Nike is an innovative brand
- Nike is a creative brand
- Nike is a brand me
- None of these
  
- Nike is a brand for me

Note for client: We assume “Nike is a brand me” is supposed to mean “Nike is a brand **for** me.”

## 1. Spelling or punctuation errors, missing words – Examples

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We had riots from anti-Semitic groups.  
Once there was a program in our town.

We had riots from anti-Semitic groups.  
Once there was a pogrom in our town.

Note for client: I assume it should be “pogrom” instead of  
“program”.



## 1. Spelling or punctuation errors, missing words – Examples

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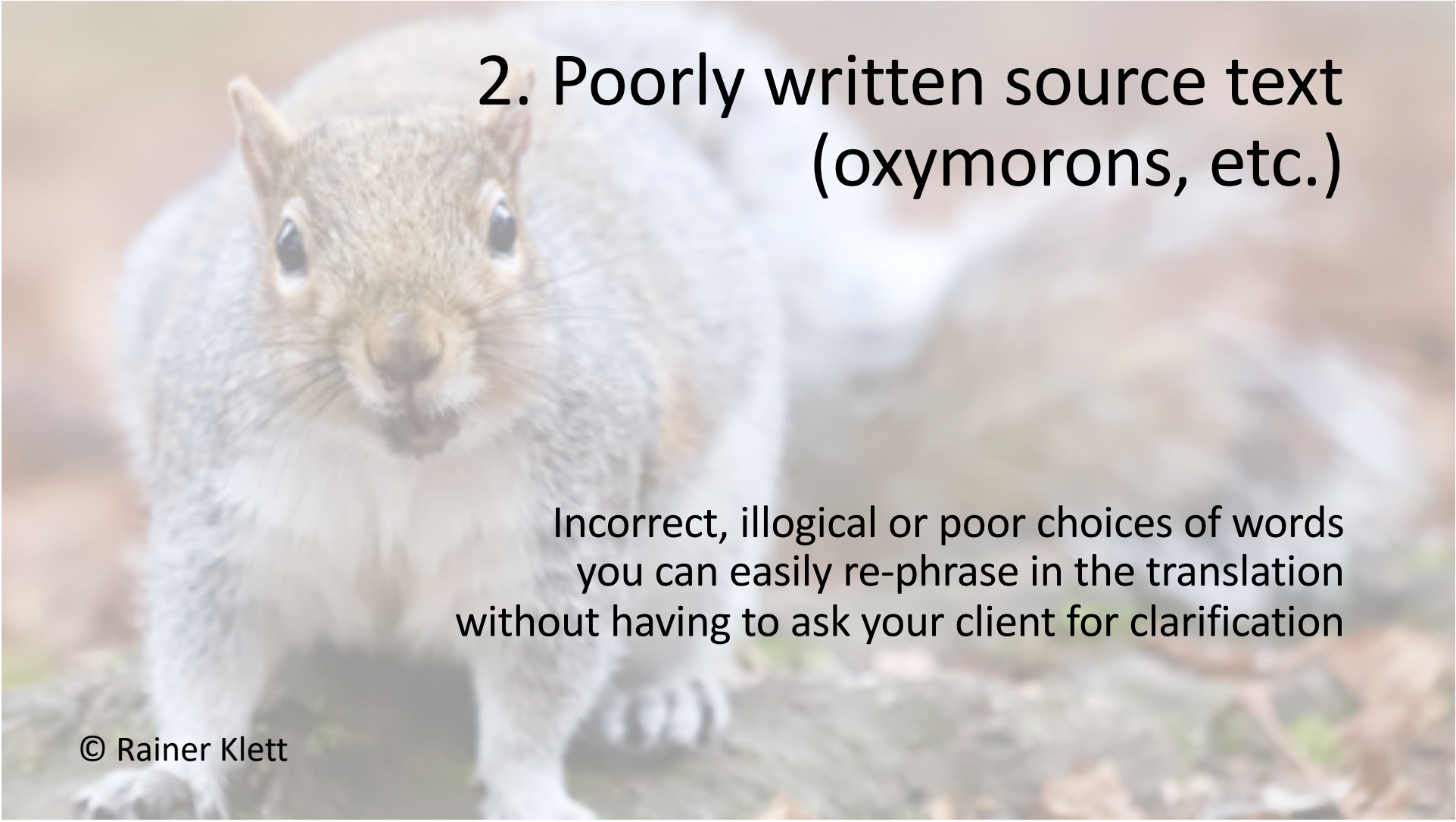
Carrier completes acquisitions of Viessmann Climate Solutions

Carrier completes acquisition of Viessmann Climate Solutions

Note for client: I'm pretty sure it should be "acquisition" (singular) and not "acquisitions" (plural). If this should be plural after all, then please replace "Übernahme" with "Übernahmen".

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A close-up photograph of a squirrel with grey and brown fur, looking directly at the camera. The squirrel is standing on a wooden log. The background is blurred, showing more of the log and some foliage.

## 2. Poorly written source text (oxymorons, etc.)

Incorrect, illogical or poor choices of words  
you can easily re-phrase in the translation  
without having to ask your client for clarification

## 2. Poorly written source text (oxymorons, etc.) – Examples

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The global pandemic has temporarily curtailed our community activities.

The COVID pandemic has temporarily curtailed our community activities.





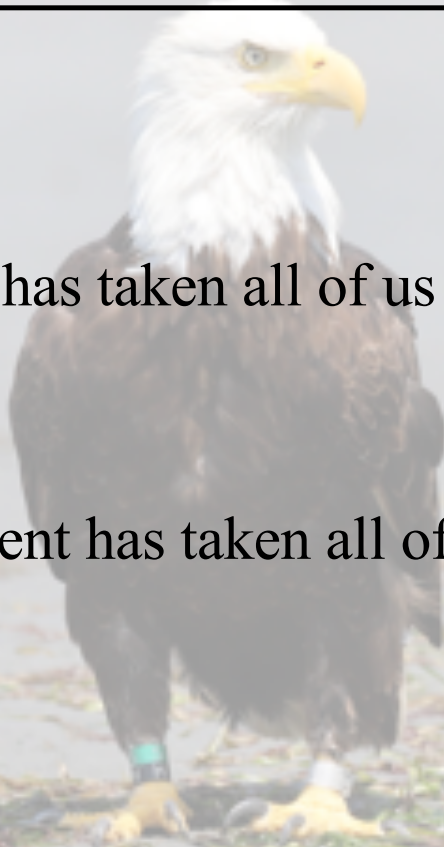
## 2. Poorly written source text (oxymorons, etc.) – Examples

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This rapid evolution has taken all of us by surprise.

This rapid development has taken all of us by surprise.

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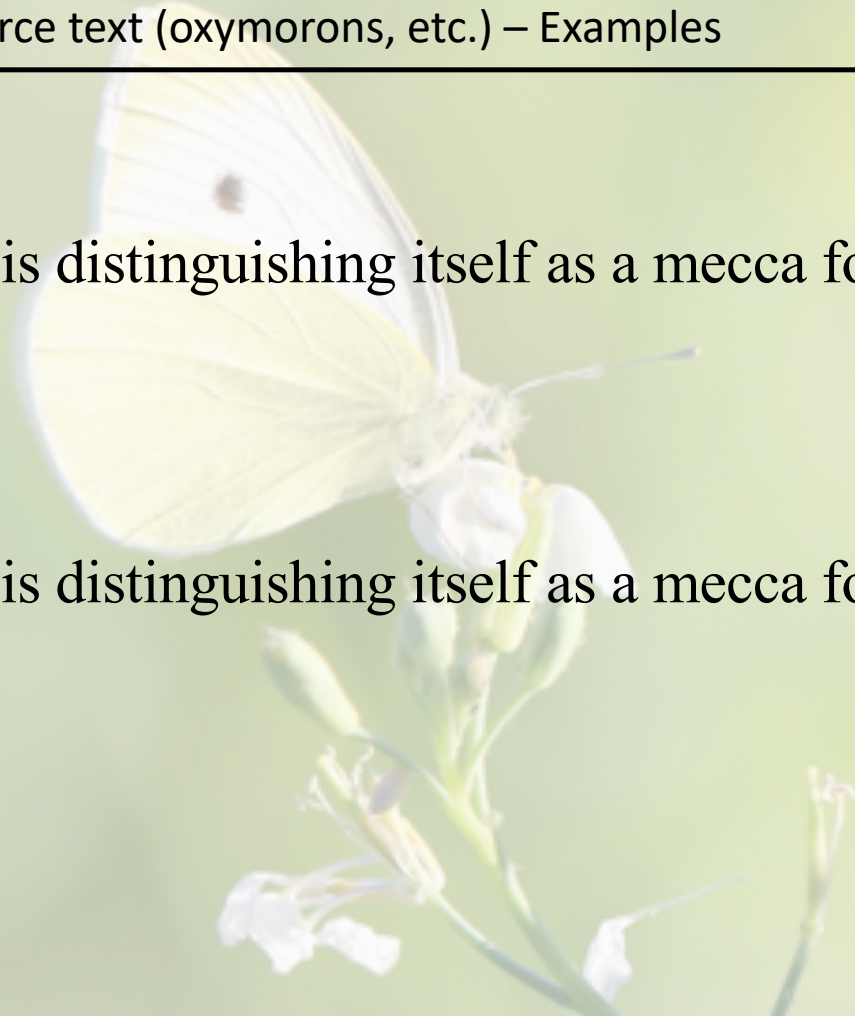


## 2. Poorly written source text (oxymorons, etc.) – Examples

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North Lawndale is distinguishing itself as a mecca for community gardeners.

North Lawndale is distinguishing itself as a mecca for community gardeners.



## 2. Poorly written source text (oxymorons, etc.) – Examples

This was a state-sponsored atheistic religion established during the French Revolution ...

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Row	English	German	Comments	
137	This was a state-sponsored atheistic religion established during the French Revolution, and led to the its statues in the cathedral being decapitated and the images of the Virgin Mary replaced by the Goddess of Liberty.	Der Kult der Vernunft war eine staatlich subventionierte atheistische Konfession aus der Zeit der Französischen Revolution, die zur Enthauptung der Statuen in der Kathedrale und dem Austausch der Jungfrau Maria gegen die Göttin der Freiheit führte.	"atheistic religion" is a paradox as atheism denies the existence of any God, while a deity is the foundation for religion to exist. I used "confession" instead which is sufficiently vague.	R1 confirmed

### 3. English idiosyncrasies

Source text could appear to be unclear  
to a non-native English speaker,  
but is not really unclear

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### 3. English idiosyncrasies – Examples

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How many pairs of shoes have you bought in the last year?

How many pairs of shoes have you bought in the last 12 months?

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### 3. English idiosyncrasies – Examples

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Please explain, why you selected that statement?

Please explain, why you selected that statement.

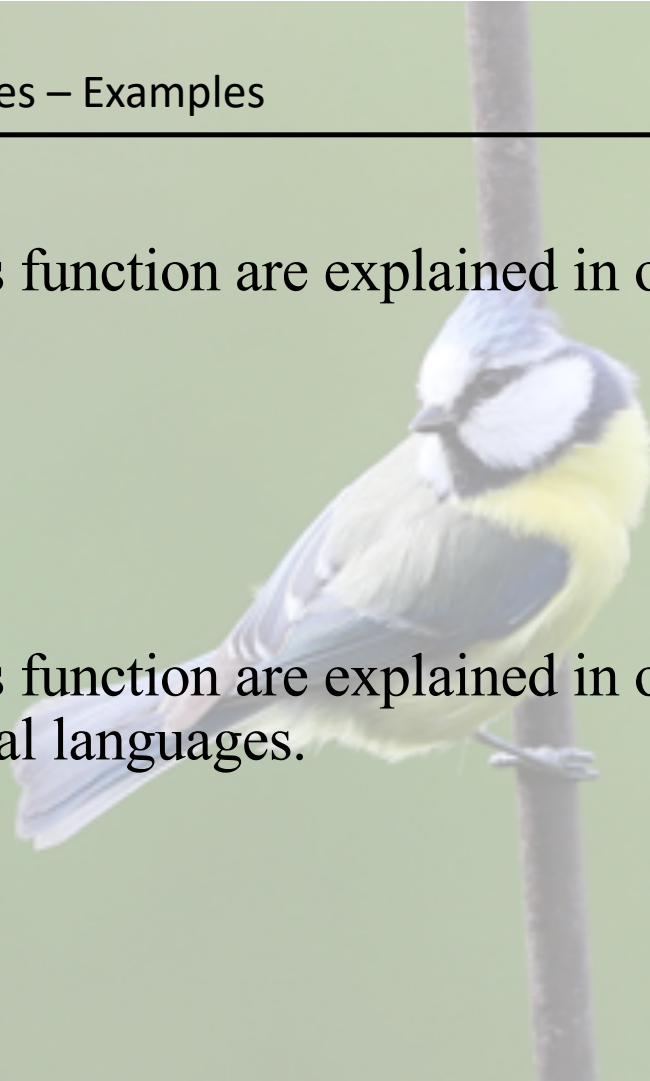


### 3. English idiosyncrasies – Examples

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The details of this function are explained in our international manual.

The details of this function are explained in our manual, which is available in several languages.



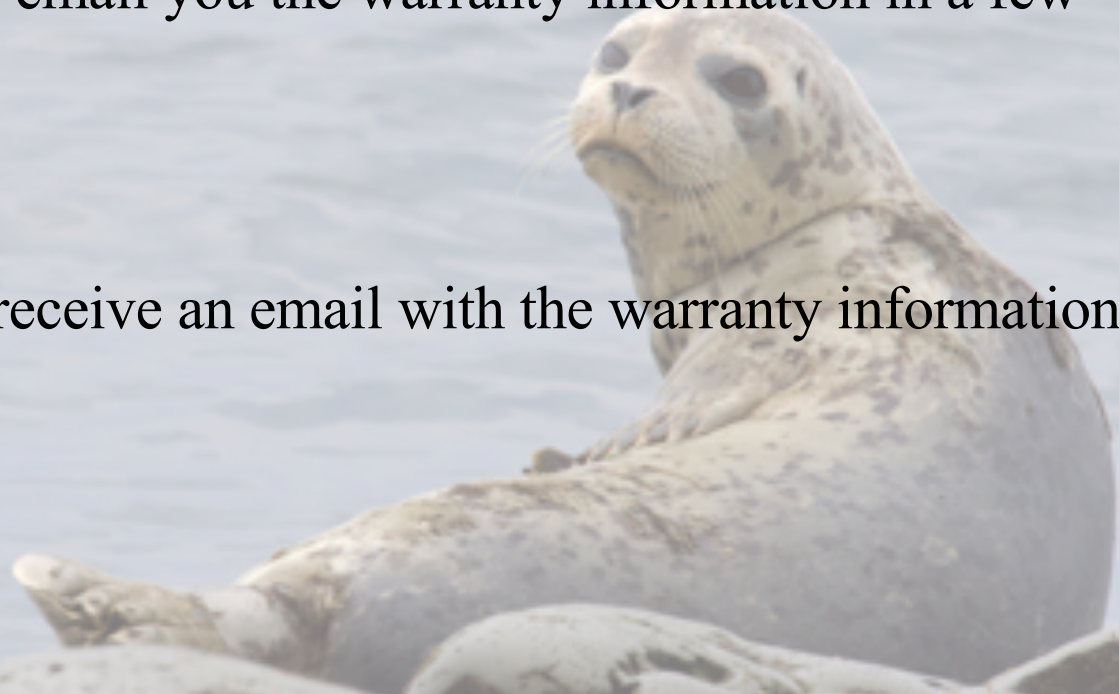
### 3. English idiosyncrasies – Examples

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They are going to email you the warranty information in a few days.

You are going to receive an email with the warranty information in a few days.

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## 4. Source text is not clear

Source sentences that are just not clear  
and cannot be corrected  
without input from your client



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#### 4. Source text is not clear – Examples

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This teacher is very popular.

Question for client: Is the teacher a he or a she?

Answer from client: Just translate it as is.

Question for client : What is that teacher's gender? In [language], a male teacher is a [...] and a female teacher is a [...].

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#### 4. Source text is not clear – Examples

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This bag also has reflective hits for increased visibility on the road, and loops to tie on additional gear.

Question for client: What are “hits” in this sentence, maybe reflective stripes ?

Answer from client: The company logo is reflective.



#### 4. Source text is not clear – Examples

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## 5. Translation vs. Localization

Words and phrases that might benefit from being localized instead of translated

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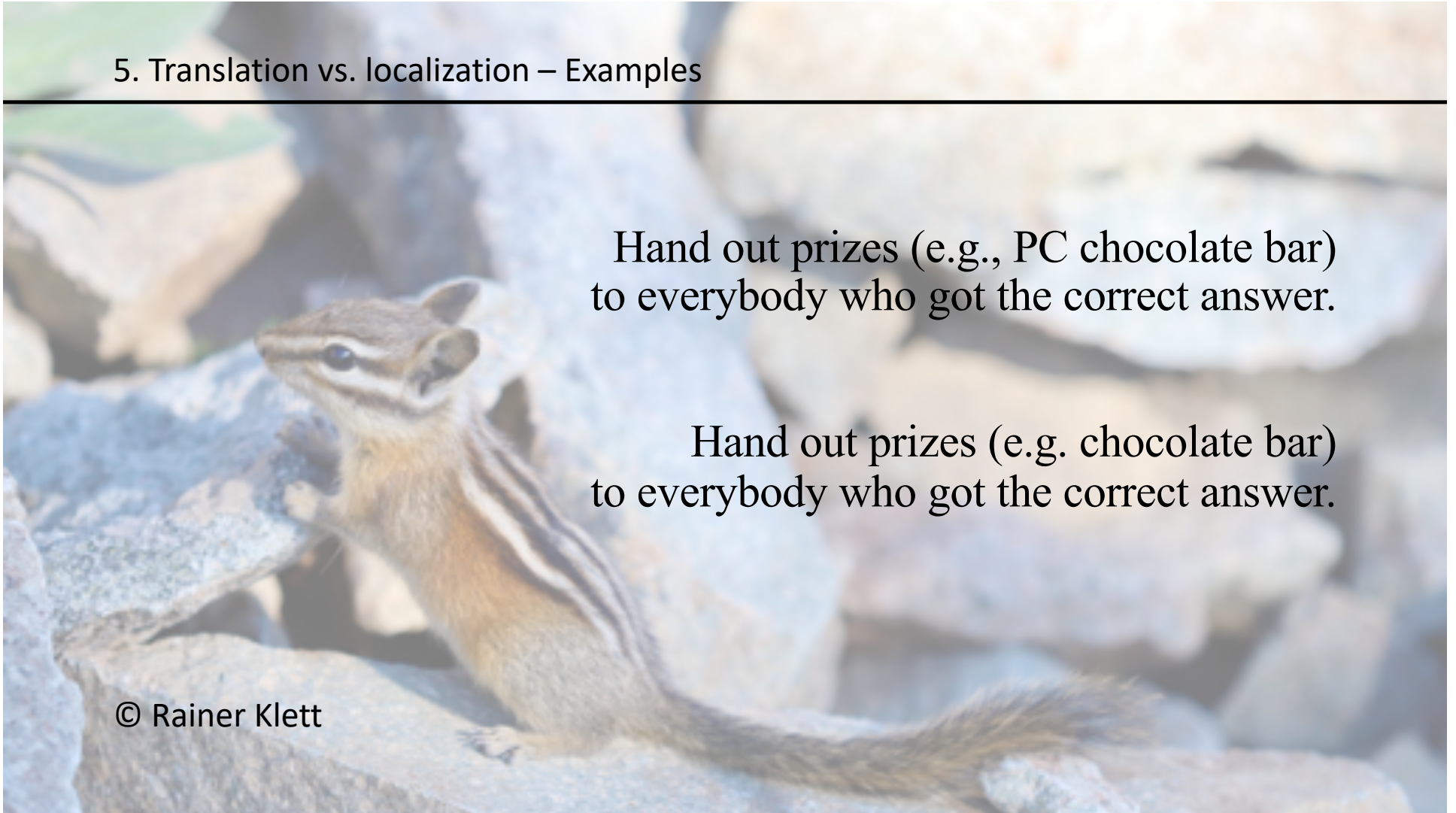
## 5. Translation vs. localization – Examples

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Hand out prizes (e.g., PC chocolate bar)  
to everybody who got the correct answer.

Hand out prizes (e.g. chocolate bar)  
to everybody who got the correct answer.

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## 5. Translation vs. localization – Examples

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You're standing at the entrance to Exhibition Hall.  
On the 40-foot screen in front of you  
is a film that shows the vastness  
of the American landscape ...  
and the variety of people  
that call the United States home.

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## 5. Translation vs. localization – Examples

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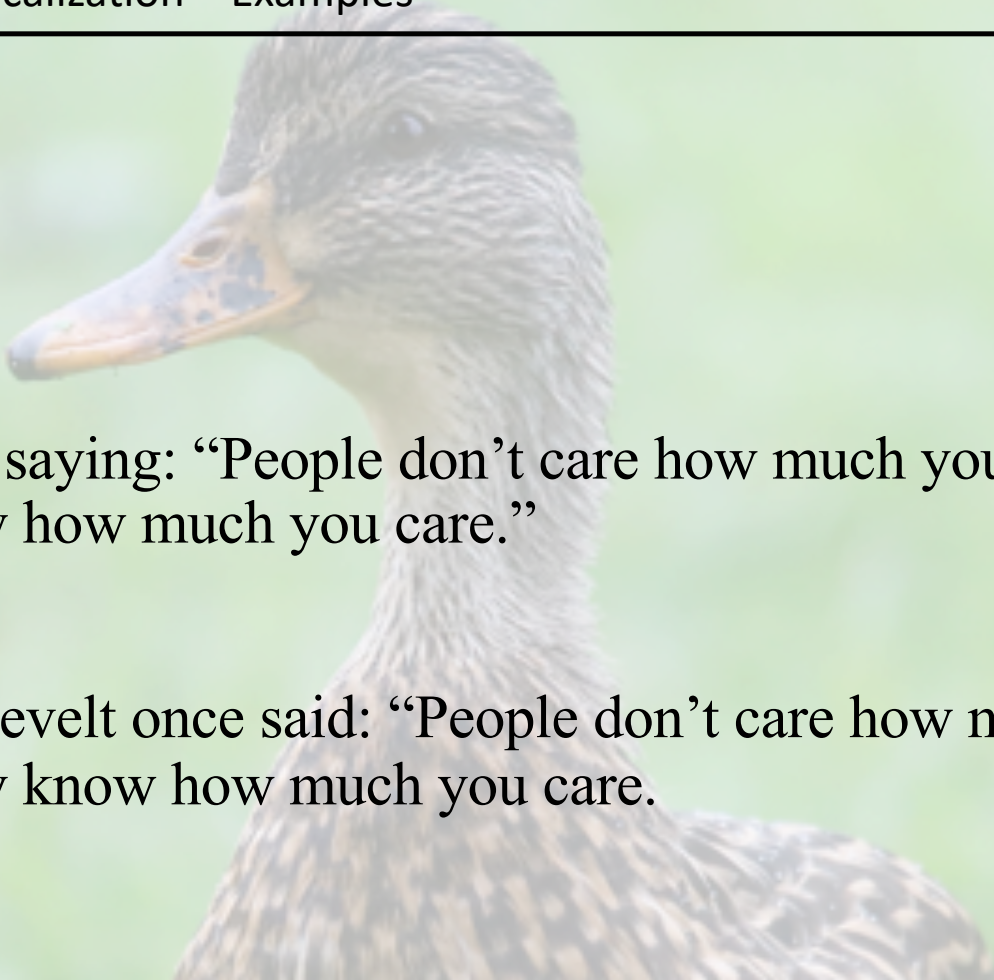


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## 5. Translation vs. localization – Examples

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There is an old saying: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Theodore Roosevelt once said: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

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# Caveat

## Legal or medical texts:

- Stay closer to the source text.
- Ask your client about any unclear sentences.
- Indicate your corrections e.g. by using [sic!], comments or footnotes.



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# Key Takeaways

- **Try to resolve the issue yourself first**

Always try to resolve the issue yourself first before asking your client for clarification. If need be, get input from others (e.g. native speakers of the source language). Sometimes the solution is right in front of our eyes, and we just don't see it - or further down in your text. Sometimes extensive googling answers your question. Remind yourself to read between the lines instead of being hung-up on words.

- **Write concise queries**

Make sure your query is clear and written for someone who does not have any advanced linguistic skills. Assume your client contact is a monolingual American.

- **Submit all queries at once**

If you have to ask your client for clarification, send all queries for one project in one email instead of several individual emails, if at all possible. Use the comment feature of your Cat tool to collect queries in one handy-dandy format (bilingual .rtf files).

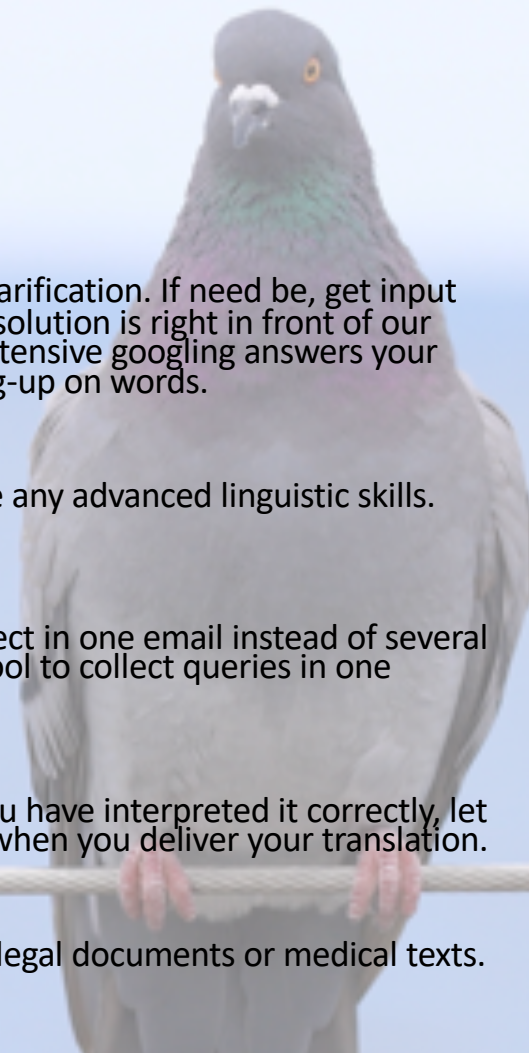
- **Let your client know of your corrections**

If you are interpreting the meaning of the source text and are 90% sure you have interpreted it correctly, let your client know about those less than clear sentences in the source text when you deliver your translation.

- **Avoid legal repercussions**

Be more careful with "corrections" when you are translating texts such as legal documents or medical texts.

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A photograph of a young goat with brown and white fur, standing in a lush green field. The goat is looking directly at the camera. The background is a soft-focus green field.

# Thank you!

## Questions?

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