



# SQUID GAME SYNDROME

*Watch out for the hidden costs of translation*

—  
Words MÉLANIE CHEVALIER



T

here is little chance you have escaped what is set to become Netflix's best-ever performing series, K-drama *Squid Game* (pictured above) – a testimony to Netflix's brilliant global-local PR and programming strategy. The streaming platform has been investing in foreign language programming since 2015 and spent \$500m on Korean programmes alone in 2021. But with non-English language programmes comes a challenge: translation. It is no secret that part of Netflix's recipe for success has been its ability to produce, license and distribute content at the speed of light to respond to consumers' ever-growing needs for

### Inside...



- ◆ A brand's language is **not a commodity**, it adds value
- ◆ Translation goes **beyond words** into images and even feelings
- ◆ Focus on **value over cost**
- ◆ Listen to and make the most of **local team expertise**

more content, right here, right now.

Many professionals in the language industry will agree that basing your con-

tent strategy on machine-led technology and tight deadlines is convenient, cheap and time-efficient. If, however, the ambition is to convey an authentic cultural and emotional experience for the viewer, then you may want to reconsider. Korean speaker Youngmi Mayer published a video on TikTok, which attracted nine million views, illustrating how non-Korean audiences will never get to enjoy the real *Squid Game* experience if they only watch its English version. More than words, translation is about brand and user experience.

What always strikes me is how this principle is so clear and evident when referring to media production and entertainment. Yet, at a corporate →

level, it doesn't seem to register. When I started my career in global marketing in the early 2000s, a new term had emerged: transcreation. Created from the juxtaposition of 'translation' and 'creation', it was putting forward a new value proposition: the ability to localise not only words but creativity and cultural references.

But isn't that what translation was supposed to achieve in the first place?

To understand how traditional 'translation' can impact an organisation's communications, let us consider exactly what translation is and what it is not.

## FIVE COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Translation is often considered a let-down because people fail to understand, and therefore appreciate what it should achieve and how to value it.

### 1 Translation isn't a commodity

It is, or should be, much more than just a tick-box activity to localise a message. In the world of production and content, commoditisation has been the motto for over two decades. By that I mean the distribution of content across channels and markets as if it was just a mass-produced FMCG product. If you aren't clear about what the mission of your comms piece is and why it is worth investing in delivering the original, core message in an equally compelling way across any market, you've lost your audiences already (both internally and externally).

### 2 Speaking another language doesn't make you a wordsmith

Good translation (or what most people now call transcreation) is not as easy as replacing one word with another in a sentence. A feeling, an emotion, a concept or humour simply cannot always be expressed in the same way across different markets, because culture plays such an important part in how we behave and communicate. Language and culture cannot be dissociated from one another.

### 3 Machines can't transcribe emotions and cultural references

Or at least not yet. AI-powered subtitles (or live captions) are currently only 65-80% accurate at most. Try and think about how much room this leaves for error, misinterpretation and simple nonsense. With that in mind, you should

question why you'd want to go down that route in the first place, whether your content is purely informational or creative. Some machine translation tools are AI-powered and while they learn as they go, they have no way of understanding context, tone or cultural references that have taken centuries to form (and continue to do so) and which we, as humans, are unconsciously driving through our daily lives, interactions and comms.

### 4 Not everything can be translated

And SEO is the perfect illustration of that. Companies that still use their language providers to translate keywords are missing the fact that optimisation exists to mimic how we speak and think. Here again, more than transcribing words from one language to another, it is about gathering the right insights and trends to understand how to best write and shape your content to make it visible. In China, people tend to refer to Western brands using their logo instead of their name. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch is sometimes referred to as 'the deer'. So, when it comes to keywords, references to 'the deer clothing company' will get better results than the brand name itself.

### 5 Translation doesn't have to be a headache

A big part of setting yourself up for success is down to you. How much time and budget are you willing to invest in translation? Ask yourself – are you ready to challenge the current status quo and processes? Or do you just carry on with the same old sub-optimal translation methods? Without a clear idea of what it should achieve and how to get there, you are most likely losing effectiveness and efficiency in your translation, and failing to realise the real value it could bring to the whole organisation and your brand(s) alike. Start by asking yourself the right questions.

## THE HIDDEN COSTS OF TRANSLATION

Whether you've been battling for translation budgets with procurement for years, or you've been on the receiving end of poor translations, here is some ammunition for you that should help you build a solid business case.

Remind your teams and procurement that there is a case to favour value over costs. On the surface, investing in 'cheap' translation may seem like the most cost-effective approach at the



MESSAGES THAT ARE OFF-TARGET, CONFUSING OR WORSE WILL IMPACT HOW YOUR CUSTOMERS PERCEIVE THE BRAND



time, but its sub-optimal performance quickly filters through the organisation, incurring direct and indirect costs through dilution of brand equity, implementational inefficiencies and customer disengagement.

### BRAND EQUITY

As marketers, you are all aware of the intangible value of a brand, all the hard work and time it takes to build and also how quickly it can be destroyed. Today, in an age when any comms blunders go viral at the speed of light, the damage to the brand can be extremely costly: from crisis management (the immediate cost and band-aid to the problem), to months or years of reinvesting in rebuilding a brand's image or values.

In 2009, a global financial institution launched a new brand proposition for its private banking division. The tagline 'Assume nothing', a subtle Anglo-Saxon way to convey the need to always remain informed and engaged in the client relationship, ended up being translated as 'Do nothing' in various languages. The cost of developing a replacement proposition was estimated at \$10m.

Aside from the financial cost, the impact on brand equity and perception is substantial with the risk of diluting the purpose and message, and compromising consistency across markets.

### INEFFICIENCIES

While local language adaptation is a qualitative exercise, it shouldn't be synonymous with inefficiencies. We all work in highly time- and cost-pressured environments. Therefore, we need to ensure the processes we put into place can cater for multiple stakeholders to have a part to play in leading any project efficiently.

If we refer back to the value versus cost dilemma, the decision to contract 'cheap' translation will impact all resources (from people to budgets). Say you invest £10 in translation versus £30 in transcreation, the outcome will often result in copy that isn't idiomatic or fit for purpose. In turn, this will require your local contacts to rewrite the entire piece. The consequences here are multiple: not only can you question the point of the initial investment (how does £10 wasted compare to £30 well-invested?) but also, your local contact will either invest additional budget into a separate trusted translation partner, or undertake

## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE CANNOT BE DISSOCIATED FROM ONE ANOTHER



the translation themselves (as a non-professional) and spend multiple hours (on a regular basis) rewriting all the translations that come their way. Not exactly efficient.

Worst-case scenario, the local contact won't have the time to look into it and the outcome for your brand could be devastating. The intermediate result will be that the local market won't use the piece at all – putting into perspective the short-sightedness of that original under-investment of £10.

### DISENGAGEMENT

Last but not least, the disengagement syndrome is also a major consideration when it comes to translation, which affects both internal and external audiences.

Internally, frustration will build among your local teams that are constantly being asked to review and rewrite translations in their own time, despite it never being part of their job remit. As key local brand guardians, they will feel they aren't being listened to or valued and

this, potentially, could lead to another very costly consequence: staff attrition.

Externally, messages that are off-target, confusing or worse will impact how your customers perceive the brand – as failing to understand them and to communicate at the right level. Thankfully for Netflix, inaccurate captions haven't spoiled the success of *Squid Game*, but well-informed users (there are many of us out there) know they've missed out on a valuable cultural and authentic viewing experience.

There are three essential tips to successful local copy adaptation. Firstly, think twice about the right level of investment and getting your messages right across international markets. Find your wordsmiths and keep your markets involved and happy. See it as an investment in your brand in the same way as you do creative development.

Next, give it some time. Getting the message right, from tone to intent and engagement, cannot be rushed. The time spent early in the process will avoid costly mistakes and save time, hassle and stress at the end of the process.

Finally, plan, don't react. By injecting cultural insights into the ideation and conceptualisation process, you'll have built the right foundations to support more effective translation processes further down the line. ◊

**Mélanie Chevalier** is founder and CEO of Creative Culture

