

Writing Wrongs:
Losing it in the translation

Part 1 –
General issues

Short title:
Losing It: General issues

by
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The writing trades: General issues

This book
is

A resource for tips, ideas, methods, and knowledge gleaned through a generation of writing, translating, editing, proofreading, light lexicography, and transcribing.

These
selected
topics

reflect a personal and Jewish approach.

Use this
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but remember that these articles are
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About the writing trades

Introduction

Nor ought a genius
less than his that writ
attempt translation.
- John Denham

Writing Wrongs is quite different from many other books
about the writing trades.

Many articles have been written about writing and translation
skills. After all, translators are also writers, and most of those
articles dictate a “correct” way of writing or translating.

These articles, on the other hand, reflect one person’s
experiences, spanning several decades. In contrast with many
other resources, they are reflective, rather than proscriptive.

In other words...

- Do you want the bottom line? You won't find it there.
- Do you want a series of real-life options that work?
You've come to the right place.

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Keywords: [About](#), [Web design](#)



Definition

Q. Please define the expression:

"This does not bode well."

A. It means
that something is not boding
the way it should.

It could be boding better.

– Dave Barry

It's a good idea to get our terms straight - especially in a series of books about writing and translating. Let's start with translation.

Translators are assumed to know both the source language and the target language. However, nobody will want to read a demonstration of your control of both languages.

Rather, readers do expect you to write a concise document that reflects the original – in tone, register, level, and feeling.

They also expect you to be able to manipulate the language so that they will enjoy reading your final work. Can you deal with the following concepts?

- Restating
- Interpreting
- Rendering
- Transforming
- Understanding
- Expressing
- Finding equivalent words

Before continuing, you might want to confirm that you can define all of those words.

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Keywords: [Definitions](#), Translation



The title

Traduttore, Traditore
Every translator is a traitor¹
(Italian)

This book has a long title, *Writing Wrongs: Losing it in the Translation*, and a short title, *Losing It*. Both titles are important.

Critics of translated materials love to point out differences between the original material and the translated work. They can then point out that something was "lost in the translation" – although they rarely offer a better option. Perhaps the easiest criticism of any translation is in the words, expressions, or terms that were mistranslated.

The accusations would be warranted, were it not for the fact that

the job of translation is a trial and error process, very similar to what happens in an Oriental bazaar when you are buying a carpet. The merchant asks 100, you offer 10 and after an hour of bargaining you agree on 50.²

¹ Quoted by Umberto Eco, in "A Rose by Any Other Name," http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_guardian94.html

² *ibid.*

A great deal is indeed lost when translating just about any document. The forced translation of the Torah by the Septuagint³ scholars may be the most famous example.

Of course, we must accept the fact that some translators are better than others. All professions are blessed with some practitioners who are more skillful than others. As translators, we may complain that some perverse clients feel that it is acceptable – or even fun – to demand more of our skills. However, there is no doubt that other professionals have the same feelings.

The self-effacing *double entendre* in the short title was not ignored. Some translators do feel that they are losing it from time to time. This feeling may be enhanced by some work-at-home parents who have several young children.

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What is translating?

If the dream is a translation of waking life, waking life is also a translation of the dream.
- Rene Magritte

Translation is very much like copying paintings.
Boris Pasternak

... translating from one language into another... is like gazing at a Flemish tapestry with the wrong side out: even though the figures are visible, they are full of threads that obscure the view and are not bright and smooth as when seen from

³ Losing It | Forums | Community

the other side.
- Miguel de Cervantes,
*The Ingenious Gentleman
Don Quixote de la Mancha*

Clearly, translating is much more than just finding an equivalent word or term in a dictionary, or matching Hebrew words to English words.⁴ There are many cases in which a concept can be expressed easily and correctly in the source language, but there is no equivalent or even satisfactorily matching term, or word in the target language. This is frustrating to many translators, who do understand the concept, and who can even picture it in their minds, but they cannot express it in their translation.

In such cases, the translator must make some difficult decisions. He may use many words in order to translate the concept. He may use a footnote or a glossary at the end of the document. However, a good translator would often refrain from accepting those options, since he would want the target-language document to read smoothly.

The translator's introduction

Any good document, website, or series should have a philosophy or a *hashkafa*, השקפה. It should be based on a consistent internal and external logic. The author or editor should keep this document in mind while preparing the document.

⁴ Most of the translation examples in this book assume a translation from Hebrew to English, but the concepts remain the same with any pair of languages.

Serious or major translations may include an introduction that explains the philosophy behind the terminology, layout, format, and other issues.

This book is no different. This About section presents the author's שויתי - *Shiviti*.⁵

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keyword: [Vision](#)



David Grossman
Anglit B'Anglit

Fantastic writing in English
is kind of disreputable,
but fantastic writing in translation
is the summit.
- Jonathan Lethem

Do make an effort to read Hebrew articles in the original Hebrew, and English articles in the original English. Avoid the desire to read those works in translation – unless you want to make a scholarly linguistic comparison between the two documents. Read translations only if you cannot read the original.

⁵ A plaque in front of the cantor's lectern in a synagogue. It reminds the cantor what he is supposed to be doing, and to Whom he should be speaking.

Indeed, you may want to copy those who take the time and effort to learn languages so that they can read "foreign" literature in its native form.

Granted, some readers might expect this book to promote translated works, since that is ostensibly its subject. However, that is not the case.

Even superior translations that capture a great deal of the author's feeling, tone, rhythm, and mood can rarely match or replace the original. It might be as good as the original. It might even be *better* than the original. However, it is rarely identical to the original author's presentation.

The case against using local materials

A similar caveat arises with the teaching of EFL in Israeli schools.⁶

Some well-meaning educational authorities insist on using local foreign-language materials. Perhaps they want to encourage the teachers to publish documents. However, they ignore the fact that it is often better to teach English materials that were prepared by indigenous speakers of the language.

Similarly, people in English-speaking countries should read Hebrew texts that are written by Israelis, rather than by those living in an English-speaking environment.

Anglit B'Anglit. Read English texts in English. Read Hebrew texts in Hebrew.

⁶ Losing It | TESOL

That's quite straightforward, isn't it?

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: [EFL](#), [Hebrew](#), [Translation](#)



It's annoying

It is neither the best
nor the worst things
in a book
that defy translation.
- Friedrich Nietzsche

Most people think and talk in one language.

- They differ from foreign-language teachers, who often seem to enjoy talking and translating at the same time.
- They also differ from some bilinguals,⁷ who think in more than one language.

However, in every instance, this practice is annoying.

In the classroom

The antithesis of this issue occurs in some Hebrew-speaking classrooms.

⁷ *Forked Tongues*

Many scientific concepts and objects are based on the universal *lingua franca*, English. Thus, an Israeli student may listen as a lecturer explains concepts in perfect Hebrew. However, the lecturer is likely use the English name for a scientific term. His talk will be followed by an explanation of the concept – by using a nearly-equivalent term in Hebrew. The lecture will then continue in Hebrew until he uses the next scientific term in English.

This jerky, back and forth Hebrew speech with English insertions can be very annoying indeed, although Israeli students have become accustomed to it – and they accept it.

Ivris b'Ivris

A similar situation occurs when students in English-speaking schools study religious texts. They frequently recite the Hebrew text, and immediately translate it into English before proceeding.

That usually would not be a problem, were it not for the fact that the translation is often silly, or even superfluous. Basic phrases such as *Vayomer Hashem El Moshe Laymor* – ויאמר ה' אל משה לאמר – are read first in Hebrew, and then translated by rote.

Granted, beginning students may not know what the words mean. However, it is usually not justified:

- It is annoying to repeatedly translate phrases that are known
- The repetition makes the study process take longer
- It makes the lessons boring

- With longer selections, the nearly-simultaneous translation may be a good way to lose the general context

The situation may be better among children who study *Ivrit B'Ivrit*,⁸ but even in those select schools some students translate simple sentences – into Hebrew.

Students should read *Kodesh* material in Hebrew, and internalize it without translating easy words. This method would have various benefits:

- The students will retain the context
- They may begin to think in Hebrew
- The lessons will be more interesting
- The class will cover more material

However, we might be expecting too much. Our proposed method would involve a major change in the system⁹. Teachers would have to learn new methods of teaching.

Clearly, this change is not likely to occur in the very near future. Nonetheless, we can certainly begin the project, by introducing the idea now.

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⁸ Losing It | About | Anglit B'Anglit

⁹ Teacher's Fault

Comprehensive

It's important to clarify what you should *not* expect from this book.

Translation
is the paradigm,
the exemplar
of all writing....
It is translation
that demonstrates most vividly
the yearning for transformation
that underlies
every act
involving speech,
that supremely human gift.
- Harry Mathews

Translation
is entirely mysterious.
Increasingly,
I have felt that the art of writing
is itself translating,
or more like translating
than it is like anything else.
What is the other text, the original?
I have no answer.
I suppose it is the source,
the deep sea where ideas swim,
and one catches them in nets of words
and swings them shining
into the boat ...
where in this metaphor
they die
and get canned
and eaten in sandwiches.
- Ursula K. Le Guin

You will not read a comprehensive study of translation concepts, or of any aspect of linguistics. You have already been expected to do some independent research for information that is readily available elsewhere.¹⁰ The available Translation resources were written by a range of people – extending from self-styled experts to professors with advanced degrees.

This book does not fit into any of the existing categories. It is based on the author's own classroom teaching experiences, observations, and *weltanschauung*, or worldview and philosophy. These ideas have been the basis for explaining

¹⁰ Losing It | About | Definition

ten

These special or unique methods of understanding and applying translation skills and language over several decades should not be allowed to disappear. They should not be forgotten.

This book is a permanent testimonial to and resource for those issues.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keyword: [Vision](#)



Mistakes

Such is our pride,
our folly,
or our fate,
That few but such
as cannot write,
translate.
- John, Sir Denham

Why does this book have so many mistakes?

There is a good reason.

The book was originally written by using a combination of the spiral and the Grossman Translation ורגמוהו ("Throw it on the page") Method.¹¹ They also have an additional twist. Although translations are usually based on static data, new pages continue to be added to this series of books. They have to fit in with the existing material, and they also have to be Over the course of time, the new pages are expanded, footnoted, indexed, and improved.

Actually, the individual articles were not thrown onto a page. They were dictated into a recorder¹² and subsequently transcribed. Articles continue to be added on a regular basis to all of the books¹³ in the series.

Those books are then reviewed – simultaneously. The "Throw it" method demands many rounds of review for each book, despite the fact that no books are ever complete. This is a slow process under the best of circumstances.

Thus, readers should relate to *Losing It* as a work in progress. Readers may still submit material. Your recommended¹⁴ changes and corrections will be reviewed¹⁵ for possible inclusion on a regular basis, and a revised edition of this book will be prepared and posted on a regular basis.

At some point, these books will be published in the traditional (paper) format. Until that happens, you can download the latest version of the book – at no charge.

¹¹ Losing It | How To Translate | Throw It

¹² International Transcriptions | Recording

¹³ See a list of books at the end of any volume.

¹⁴ Tzafun | Contact | Moderator

¹⁵ Losing It | About | Reviewing

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keyword: [Method](#)



Reviewing

A book that is published in an electronic format continues to benefit from the input of many people all the time. It is difficult to determine when the book can be declared "complete."

Although the content of the pages should be correct¹⁶ at any stage of editing, many technical aspects may require additional work. That is where you, the reviewers, may help:

- Please confirm whether each section has been arranged in a logical order.
- Please report any editing mistakes or recommendations¹⁷.
- Please report instances in which the content of pages in any directory need to be redistributed
 - Since they have been written and edited at different times, it is all too easy to overlook these mistakes
 - There may be duplications

¹⁶ Losing It | About | Mistakes

¹⁷ Losing It | Edit | Webpage

- There may be an overlapping of similar items in a different directory
 - The How To Translate and Teaching Translation are good examples of this issue
- Some sections may require additional examples
- Hebrew-English Differences¹⁸ and My Dictionary¹⁹ indexes must be updated
 - They should follow a uniform pattern:
 - Transliteration – Hebrew – English *or*
 - English – Transliteration – Hebrew
- Questions must be prepared for the framed section near the bottom of each page
- The Assignments section requires additional exercises for all classes and levels
 - Feel free to recommend additional exercises
 - Feel free to modify existing exercises
- All footnotes must be verified

Some pages are blank, or nearly blank. Those pages serve as temporary place markers. They give the entire series of books a tentative structure

- Ignore the temporary lack of text in those pages
- Text will be added to those pages in the future
- Reviewers are welcome to recommend content for those pages

Editing a website

¹⁸ Losing It | Hebrew-English Differences

¹⁹ Losing It | My Dictionary

Follow the general guidelines for editing any document²⁰ and any website²¹.

Submitting comments, corrections, or recommendations for modifications:

Your comments can only be included in the next version of the book if it is possible to match them with the original material

- Write your corrections on a photocopy of the page
- Be sure that the page includes the name of the book, the header, and the name of the section
- Include your recommended change or correction
- Send them to the correct address²²

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: [Reviews](#), [Translation](#)


reserved

Sources

I often quote myself.
It adds spice
to my conversation.
– George Bernard Shaw

²⁰ Losing It | Edit | Tips

²¹ Losing It | Edit | Webpage

²² Tzafun | Contact | Webmaster

NOTE TO MYSELF: Merge this page with tzafun | Websites
| Sources.html

Most academic websites, articles, and books list a generous number of sources and resources. Indeed, some people regard the number of resources as an indication of the level, quality, acceptance, and authority of the material.

This book includes relatively few sources, although the author does quote other books in this series liberally. Does that mean that it is less reliable or authoritative?

Perhaps. However, it can be seen in another way as well.

The material is based on a number of resources, including personal experience. Decades of translation have resulted in a wealth of concepts, ideas, techniques, and methods. It is important to offer this body of knowledge to future generations of translators.

This material is also taken in part from postings to various online forums, including Hebrew Translating, Translation Teacher, and Jewish Translation Teacher forums. The author holds the copyright to the material. Although any single posting on the group may be based on subjective information, the combined body of knowledge does have clear legitimacy²³.

The material is also based on interactions with many students - *mikol talmidai hiskalti* - מכל תלמידי השכלתי - in courses related to Translation Skills. They and others have contributed to this series of books.

²³ Losing It | Truth

Thus, this website does indeed have an increasing number of top sources. You are welcome to comment²⁴ as well.

Were there direct, text sources as well? Definitely. For example, the Editing section is based on various sources:

- Four tightly-packed shelves of books about editing
- Googled material
- The Jewish Editing forum archives
- The author's life experiences

These sources may not reflect academic guidelines, but they cannot help but represent an accurate reflection of the translation scene today.

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Keywords: [Resources](#), [Translation](#)


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Topics: Your questions

The only way therefore to try a Piece of Wit, is to translate it into a different Language: If it bears the Test you may pronounce it true; but if it vanishes in the Experiment you may conclude it to have been a Punn.
- Joseph Addison

Common European thought is the fruit of the immense toil of translators. Without translators, Europe would not exist; translators are more important than members of the European Parliament.
- Milan Kundera

Say what we may of the inadequacy of translation, yet the work is and will always be one of the weightiest and worthiest undertakings in the general concerns of the world.
J. W. Goethe

²⁴ Tzafun | [Contact](#) | [Webmaster](#)

So you want to be a translator? This book will give you a jumpstart into this exciting field.

You probably have some initial, basic questions – such as the following:

- Who can translate?
- Who cannot translate?
- Is translating profitable?
- Do you have the time to translate?
- Can I translate at night while holding down a day job?
- What are the guidelines for good translating?
- Do I have to be an expert in both the source language and the target language?
- Can this book help me translate to or from any language?
- How do I handle different dialects?
- How do I handle subject material which is unfamiliar?
- Can I translate at home while raising small children (or big children, for that matter)?

Qualifications

- Do translators also have to be editors?
- Do translators also have to be proofreaders?
- Do translators also have to be publishers?
- Can you translate with children around?
- Can busy people translate?
- Do I need a college degree in translating?
- What educational background is required to be a good translator?
- What computer background is required to be a good translator?

- What computer equipment does a translator require?
- Does computer-based translating software work?

Techniques

- When can I make editorial changes in a translated manuscript?
- Copyright issues
- Am I allowed to translate any document?

Earning Money

- How much can I charge?
- Will I have a lot of competition?
- Do I have to make a big investment in order to learn translating?
- Where do I get my first job?
- Is it good to be friendly with other translators?
- Can I get jobs abroad?

Becoming Independent

- How can I find out more about translating?
- Is there a resource for translating jobs?
- What else do I need to know?

Resources

- What are the best dictionaries for a translator?
- Do I need to buy many specialized dictionaries?
- What other texts and documents does a translator require?

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These questions are presented here as initial food for thought.
They do not necessarily match the titles or sequence of topics
in these books.

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[Keyword: Vision](#)

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Humor

Introduction

Humor is a powerful resource for understanding and teaching the writing trades.

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Keywords: Humor, Translation

David  Grossman

Humor

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Humor is the first gift to perish in a foreign language.
- Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)
British novelist and essayist.

Why not try a positive approach, rather than intimidating students with massive writing and homework assignments? The students can be shown the humor and the pleasure in translations all around them.

Given the proper atmosphere, these student teachers will cheerfully present some of their own errors, which will be registered by the entire class as funny and undesirable.

English teachers can also benefit from translation humor, which does have a strong impact on the students' ability to recall material.

True, research does show that errors are reinforced when they are written on the board. However, the effects of humor may be stronger. Students usually do not repeat the errors presented in the way that is suggested here.

Students who write assignments in class often giggle or whisper when they realize certain mistakes. They may have been about to write something reminiscent of, or similar to, an error that was discussed in class as a joke. The humorous class experience prevented them from repeating that error.

Take the following statement that appeared in a composition in a basic adult English class:

My daughter sews betrayal for a shop.

That can only make sense after reconstructing the situation.

In Hebrew, the word for betrayal is *Bigud*. The word for clothing, coming from a similar root form, happens to be nearly identical. This student looked up the word *Bigud* in her dictionary, and selected the wrong word. "Betrayal" was the first listing.

Of course, the student also erred in her selection of the basic Hebrew term – but that's a different story.

What a lovely classroom introduction to the subject of dictionaries and reference materials!

Students in another class listened to an imaginary story about a person who went to a cafeteria and asked for a difficult egg. The Hebrew word *kasheh* means both hard and difficult. The students enjoyed the ridiculous anecdote - and they remembered the difference between the two words.

In another story, a golf club (referring to the implement carted around by the caddy with which one hits the ball, not to the community sports facility) was once translated as "moadon golf"²⁵

Similarly, the Hebrew *Kavush* could mean either pickled or conquered. A teacher might present the absurd concept of *Hashtachim Hakvushim*, the pickled territories, to the class. The students will laugh, but they will remember the difference between the two concepts.

This study of problem words based on the use of humor leads to a contrast between the students' primary and the secondary language. Of course, much of the battle is won when students can sort out the idiomatic usage in each language.

They can accomplish this goal by bringing in examples of funny English that they can find around them. In Israel, English is an official language, but errors in spelling and usage abound. Students may bring in photographs of mis-translated menus, road signs, food wrappers, and sibling compositions.

The examples abound:

²⁵ Reported by Janet Lerner

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- Jerusalem's Independence Park used to have a sign urging visitors to "Please keep on the clean" (Na Lishmor Al Hanikayon)
- An absurd street sign used to come out of Jerusalem's Sderot Eshkol. Rechov Mishmar HaGvul was spelled Haggbvul

Students who read these examples will laugh – that is why they are asked to bring in these poor translations or absurd mis-translations.

- They will also remember the expression long after the joke itself is forgotten.
- They will have a stronger control of the quirks of their native language
- They will understand the unique expressions in the target language
- They will develop skills and abilities in proofreading and locating errors
- They will improve the level of their critical reading.

Examples of humor thus present a powerful resources for instruction in the writing skills.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: Language, Method, Teaching



Finding humor

Keep an eye out for examples of funny translations. This is a very common form of humor and you can find it in many books.

Read the instructions for foreign-made products. They all have English translations, and some of them are hilarious.

These studies are not intended to poke fun at anybody or at any institution, but rather to learn from the mistakes of others. If the exercises are presented in a lighthearted manner (and not overdone), they can emphasize any point the teacher wants to make, or warn against any pitfall the teacher wants to prevent. This does require extensive preparation, and every teacher would want to individualize his style, but the result is unquestionably worth it.

A nice aspect of this is that the material grows as the teacher gets into swing. After a few years of teaching translation this way, and as the class improves noticeably, the teacher finds that the materials grow by themselves. The students then bring in examples from their own experiences. This is the best material, because it shows that they have become involved, and that they have internalized your point. Teachers can experience no greater feeling of success than having a student present better material than their own.

For example, a teacher can rail against the horrors of literal translations, and can bring endless examples from student translations, but he may realize that this technique is not working. The students forget about the potential reader. They glue themselves to their own precious words, and translate each word sequentially, as it comes. As a result, they have

lovely word-for-word translations, and the teacher can do nothing about it.

Don't be frustrated. It won't help. Don't present the students with philosophy. It won't work. Don't tell them to loosen up. They won't. Don't even try to work on it together in class. They'll do you a favor while you're standing together with them, but the next assignment will be the same as any other.

Instead, bring them examples from your child's latest toy. Bring in common household objects made abroad, showing word-for-word translations. Let them enjoy the bad English. Then explain that the goal of this class is not have a correct translation - any monkey with a dictionary could eventually produce that - but to produce a document that does not look like a translation. It should be as readable as a document that had been written in English.

One good method of accomplishing this task is to ask the student to edit each other's work - without looking at the original! They will not be hampered by correct terminology, because they won't know what is really correct (no fair asking the translator). The translations may not be literally perfect, but they will read well.

You will have accomplished one goal, and you can now combine correctness with readability.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: Curriculum, Humor, Names, Translation



Funny

Various examples of funny translations have been raised over the course of time. Some of them are listed here:

- His wife had to give birth every day. אשתו צריכה ללדת כל יום
- The French Revolution roughly corresponds to the Russian Revolution
המהפכה הצרפתית כותבת מכתבים גסים אל המהפכה הרוסית
- Joke that ends with punch line "farteiched und farbessert".
- Behirat Lebow
- "Did you take your ugly pills this morning?" Keep in mind the point of the joke – it may be difficult to understand which word "ugly" refers to?
- "I want to talk to you postcards" אני רצה לדבר אתך גלויות

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:



Dein Namen

The following story about a court translator was posted to the Jewish Humor²⁶ forum on April 5, 2005:

A New York judge is ready to go through the day's business and he under a great deal of pressure.

The first case up involves an elderly Jewish gentleman with a long beard and payes.

The judge, without asking a question, says to the clerk:
"Quick...get me a translator."

The translator shows up and the judge says: "Ask him what his name is, how old is he and where he comes from."

The translator says: "Die judge vilt vissen, vos is dein namen, vie alt bist du, and fun vie kumst du?"

The old man smiles, looks at the judge and says in perfect English with a British accent: "Your Honour, my name is Sir Chaim Ginsburg. I shall be 82 next Thursday and I've come from England where I hold the Chair of Hebrew Philosophy at Oxford University."

The translator turns to the judge and says: "Ehr zukt, ehr is Sir Chaim Ginsburg, ehr is tzwei und achtzig yuh alt, und ehr is, mit sach Yiddish philisoph, areingekummen fun Oxford."

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

²⁶ Achdut | Jewish Humor



Translating

קרױילה:
מעט וילה
הרבה קראון.
בדיוק כמו
בונבוניירה:
מעט בונבון
הרבה ניירה
- עתון השבוע בירושלים
ו' אב תשס"ה
ע' 6

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It would take a great deal of effort to translate the humor above. One would have had to experience the political context (expulsion and relocating of Jews from Gush Katif). The fact that they were given poorer conditions after the expulsion is emphasized in this humor.

There's more. "Bonbonniere" is not a Hebrew word, but the humorist parsed the word according to its intentionally incorrect Hebrew roots.

The Hebrew "improvement" added the "paper" in the box of chocolates - something that the original French term never considered.

It's difficult

The most difficult genre to translate is humor. The target language translation must be funny to readers of the target

culture. There are objective difficulties in making somebody in another culture and an unknown context laugh at a joke.

However, the translator is often granted great flexibility and leeway in his work.

As a result, many jokes are translated into other languages. However, the time and effort and consultation involved in this translation may make the job very expensive – or it may frustrate both the translator and the client.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: Humor, Translation



1999

A serious forum, Hebrew Translation, turns lighter before Purim. These selections are from the 1999 postings to that group.

A Jewish man was waiting in line to be knighted by the Queen of England. He was supposed to kneel and recite a sentence in Latin. His turn came, he kneeled, the Queen tapped him on the shoulders with the sword - and in his panic he forgot the Latin line. Thinking quickly, he recited the only other line that he knew in a foreign language: "Mah nishtana ha-lailah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-leilot." The puzzled Queen turned to her adviser and asked, "Why is this knight different from all other knights?"

- From Jane Glasman

The best menu mistranslation I ever saw in Israel was on a billboard outside a kosher restaurant in Tzfat, advertising "LIVE DUCK". Further investigation revealed the item in question to be "kaved barvaz", which became "liver duck", and then the "R" fell off the billboard.

- From David Haber

An translated Israeli cookbook on Mediterranean salads included a vegetable salad called "conquered snipers" (tsalafim kvushim), instead of "pickled capers" (tslafim kvushim).

- From Chaim Charutz.

We keep kashrut very strictly. We ate at a restaurant owned and operated by Lubavitcher Hassidim. They gave us a menu with an English translation. Two minutes later, my wife, who doesn't understand Hebrew, gave a snort of disgust and said, "This is disgusting. We're leaving!" She then showed me the English side of the menu. One course was called "horse". With my mouth agape, I looked at the Hebrew section of the menu. The Hebrew description was "hazeret".

- From Michael Greengard

One of Jerusalem's neighborhoods has a store called Mercaz Hakalatot, or, for the benefit of their tourist clients: Central of Cassettes.

- From Jonathan Levin

Crossing back to Jerusalem from Lebanon at Rosh Hanikrah is a sign: Rechev zar yigarer, which was translated as Strange vehicles will be drowned. I hope I don't have to explain why the "translator" wanted to submerge the offenders.

- From Jonathan Levin

Things have changed - Things have changed * Printed
Winter 2007

My Hebrew teacher told this one: A beginning student wrote
"ani margish knas".

- From Arnie Kuzmack

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keyword: Humor

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David Grossman

This selection of funny translations was presented during a
class in Translation Skills that was taught during the 2000-
2001 school year.

Students presented the following gems. Some of them have
become classics over the course of time:

One student mentioned a translation of Hashtachim
Hakvushim as The Pickled Territories. (Kavush means both
"pickled" and "occupied").

Another student showed an advertisement for Ha'Isha
HaTzadeket VeHaChasida as "the stork and the righteous
woman." (Chasida could mean either term).

The poor owner of a store called Beauty Free probably
borrowed the idea from Duty Free shops thought that they
sounded good - and he noticed that many people were
interested in patronizing that store. Sounds like a good idea,

right? So, he decided to use the same idea for a store that sold beauty products. Of course, if a duty-free shop is a place where you don't pay duty, then a beauty-free shop is a place where you will find no beauty!

Another store is called Home-Li - meaning My Home. Again, the store owner probably didn't check his dictionary well enough to find out what homely means in English.

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Truth

Introduction

"The President
has kept all of the promises
he intended to keep."
- Clinton aide
George Stephanopolous
speaking on Larry King Live

We have finally been able to approach genuine truth in translating:

- Absolute truth²⁷

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Footnote: [Truth](#)



Absolute truth

Ah, if there were only such
a thing as a truth ache to
alert us of truth decay.
- Rabbi Shraga Silverstein

Truth is like the sun. You
can shut it out for a time,
but it's not going to go
away.
- Elvis Presley

Humility and truth, which in
science are means, in
morality are ends.
- Rabbi Shraga Silverstein

Throughout the generations, translators have had to deal with unique issues – including the fact that any word can be translated in many different ways. As a result, their translations were often reasonably good – but not perfect. It was inevitable that inaccuracies would creep into their work.

²⁷ Losing It | Truth | Absolute

Today's technology, including e-mail and resources such as the Hebrew Translating forum²⁸, removes much of this problem.

Online forums enable translators to achieve a level of translation that was unthinkable in the past – and which is as close to perfection as is humanly possible. The more that this process is refined, the closer that the participants can come to absolute truth.

Participants in a forum can query an immense assemblage of professional translators about their difficult term or concept.

The *world* of professional translators then offers its recommendations. The result is no longer the same as neighborly advice, ideas, or suggestions. It's also different from asking a professional for a second opinion. It's even more than asking the participants in a large translator's conference for assistance.

A translator from Paris may suggest a possible translation for the problematic expression. Another translator, from Bombay, may suggest a more appropriate word after clarifying the specific context. A third professional, from Montreal, may suggest the use of a different word, since the suggested term was misunderstood when she had used it in a different translation. A translator from Singapore may indicate that the term has an unwanted and negative connotation in her country. Still another translator, from Naples, may re-arrange the sentence in order to obviate the need for the term.

²⁸ Jewish Achdut | Hebrew Translating

The procedure may continue, each time eliminating possible pitfalls or misunderstandings, until the forum (including the translator who posed the query) is satisfied.

There is no question that the selected term will be much better after receiving the approval of the world of Hebrew translators. We may never reach the ultimate goal, but the more we continue the process, the closer the participants come to Absolute Truth.

In other words, the continued discussion among experts on the group leads to a solution that may be the closest to Truth that Man can ever hope to achieve.

The use of e-mail has made this possible – for the first time in history.

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Who can be a translator?

Introduction

There are few efforts
more conducive to humility
than that of the translator
trying to communicate
an incommunicable beauty.

Yet,
unless we do try,
something unique and never surpassed
will cease to exist
except in the libraries
of a few inquisitive
book lovers.
- Edith Hamilton

Not everybody can make it as a translator.

- About being a translator²⁹
- Can I be a translator?³⁰
- Who can be a good translator?³¹
- Who can succeed as a translator?³²
- What traits does a successful translator have?³³
- Finding your niche³⁴

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: [Employment](#), [Translation](#)

²⁹ Losing It | Who | About

³⁰ Losing It | Who | CanYou

³¹ Losing It | Who | GoodTrans

³² Losing It | Who | WhoCan

³³ Losing It | Who | WhoTrans

³⁴ Losing It | Who | Niche



About being a translator

Since
we cannot know
all that there is to be known
about anything,
we ought to know
a little
about everything
- Blaise Pascal

Can you be a translator? What personality characteristics are required?

These important questions involve much more than an ability to find equivalent words from one language and to read them into another language. Certain people are cut out for the job because of their personality, skills, temperament, linguistic abilities, success when dealing with clients, and an ability to work under pressure. Others are less cut out for the job. Here are some things that you should ask yourself:

- Do you enjoy researching things in primary and secondary sources?
- Do you meet the requirements for translators listed in this book?
- Do you enjoy sitting for extended periods of time?
- Can you work under pressure for extended periods of time?
- Can you deal with periods of time in which no work is available?
- Can you work at home without somebody in charge?
- Are you an expert in the target language?

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:



Computer skills

Do you feel comfortable with a computer?

Let's face it. In the past, people were able to translate without having a serious background in computers. They could present the manuscript in handwritten form or they could pass it on to a typist.

Today's situation is different.

People justifiably expect you to prepare your translation by computer. They realize that modern technology offers numerous possibilities for improving the level of your work. Translators themselves often prefer to prepare material in digital form so that they can modify it conveniently, on their own computer.

There are other factors as well. Translators do not charge separately for typing. If you give the material to others to be typed, then you will make less money for your translation. You will also have to proofread it, and possibly return it to the typist, several times. You may even have to sit with the typist in order to work out some of the more complex layout issues.

That's not all. If your *client* gives the material to a typist, then any mistake reflects poorly on you – even though you never reviewed it. That client also has the right to deduct the value of the typing from your pay.

Clearly, it is important for you to have maximal control³⁵ over your own translations. This can only be accomplished if you have full control over your computer.

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A good translator

A good translation does not just convey the same meaning, but it gets the music of the words right.
Orhan Pamuk

True art selects and paraphrases, but seldom gives a verbatim translation.
- Thomas Bailey Aldrich

Translation is at best an echo.
- George Borrow

Poetry is what gets lost in translation.
- Robert Frost

What is lost in the good or excellent translation is precisely the best.
- Friedrich Von Schlegel

Perhaps you can indeed be a translator. Let's go on to the next stage. Can you be a *good* translator?

Many people feel that their knowledge of two languages is sufficient for the job.

³⁵ Yiddische Kop | LOC

To some degree, that is correct. A person must know both languages in order to translate. However, the converse is not necessarily true. A person who knows both languages will not necessarily be able to put words from one language into a second language in a successful manner.

In other words, it is one thing to understand a document that you read in another language. It is quite different to be able to write out a translation of that document so that others can understand and enjoy it.

Do clients appreciate your work?

A good translator may arguably be defined as one who gets repeated jobs.

How can you tell this in advance?

Knowledge of expressions

The bottom line is that it is important to separate two issues – the person's knowledge of the source language and of the target language.

Surprisingly, the ability to write well in the target language is the greater requirement. It is more important to be able to express yourself in the target language than to understand the source language.

How can you determine whether you know the source language well enough?

At the very minimum, you should be able to recognize or identify expressions. You must be able to identify when a group of words is an expression is not to be taken literally. You do not have to understand their meanings, but you must know when you require additional assistance or help.

This recognition or identification of expressions is the litmus test. A person who can understand that a particular phrase is not to be taken literally but that it is an expression can be a translator.

Culture

Some people say that you have to know the *culture* of the source language in order to translate it.

They do have a point. It is necessary to be able to put yourself in the speaker's shoes. However, it is not a test of an ability to translate.

The person who can identify expressions has already reached a level of knowledge that is sufficient for understanding the culture of the source language.

Thus, there is no contradiction between this article and those that stress the importance of culture.

This is important. It is possible to test how well a person knows expressions in another language, but it is less easy to determine whether a person knows the *culture* of a language.

Breadth of knowledge

A person may be fluent with expressions used in the army, but he might not know the related economic expressions. His knowledge of the military is based upon his limited experience.

Thus, extensive knowledge that is limited to a specific or limited field may be an indicator that that a person will be a poor translator. After all, any document, in any subject area, field, or area, is likely to extend to other fields or areas of life. As a result, any knowledge of the military without an appreciation of economics, agriculture, family life and other aspects of the target language will limit the translator's abilities.

Horizontal and vertical knowledge

We can view this issue as a horizontal or a vertical development.

Vertical knowledge is limited to a single subject area and its expressions. Horizontal knowledge expands to many related unrelated areas that may be discussed in a document.

A good translator realizes that both aspects are important.

A person with extensive vertical knowledge in a field will be better qualified to translate that field. A person with greater horizontal knowledge of issues in the target language will be better able to translate a wider variety of materials.

The quality of a person's translation is directly related to his control person over the target language. This control is the *sine qua non* for being a good translator.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:



Niche

No, it isn't a translation;
I wrote it in English.
My Japanese is fine,
but certainly
not good enough
for that!
Arthur Golden

There are many other translators out there, and you want to stand out. You don't want to be the same as the others.

It's time to ask some questions:

- Why should anybody hire *you*?
- What is special about what *you* have to offer?
- How do *you* differ from other translators?
- Do you have any value-added skills?

Some potential clients may ask you these questions when you negotiate your availability to translate their material. The client does not know you, and he wants to have good reason for hiring you instead of your competition. Be ready with the right answers!

How, indeed, do you stand out from the crowd? Some examples will be listed below, but this list is by no means

definitive or complete. You might have other qualities, equipment, talents, or background that enable you to sell your skills at a higher price. If so, do take advantage of them.

- Equipment
 - Can you prepare a document, such as a book, so that it is ready to be published?
 - This is called preparing camera-ready copy
- Knowledge
 - Do you know computer graphics?
 - Do you have layout and pagination skills?

Some advanced computer programs help in these areas. Of course, it is not sufficient to own these programs – you have to reach a stage in which you are proficient in their use.

You can translate without advanced equipment. However, you may want to do a market survey of the needs in your area, after which you may consider upgrading your equipment in order to offer more to your clients.

Slack periods

Good equipment has an additional benefit as well.

- In some cases, you may not have as many translating jobs as you like
- Translating in some locations, conditions, or subject areas can also be seasonal work – you may be flooded with work at some times, while there might be other dry periods³⁶

³⁶ Losing It | Time | Off

That's right. Although this website does describe the beauties and pleasures of translation, it would be useful for you to be prepared to take on other jobs, such as computerization, when work is slow. You can return to translating as your primary source of income when the market picks up again.

You might not be willing to broaden your offerings. That is why you should stay in touch with other translators³⁷. They may be able to offer you work during your slack periods.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: [Employment](#), [Translation](#)



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Who can succeed as a translator?

reserved The original
is unfaithful
to the translation.
- Jorge Luis Borges

Translating is not for everyone.

Is there an identifiable difference between those who succeed in translation and those who fail? Is it possible to predict who can be a good translator and who cannot be a good one?

³⁷ Losing It | Social

Of course, there is no way to answer these questions with complete certainty. There may be aptitude tests that predict success to a certain degree. However, no aptitude tests are perfectly accurate.

You must be fluent in your writing abilities in L_2 , the language to which you translate. That language is also called the *target language*. You will have to present your work as a native speaker, either in British English or American English (but not a mixture of both language dialects).

However, it is not necessarily necessary to be an expert in the *source language*.

- You should be able to write easily, without hesitating
- You should be able to know when you make mistakes
- You should be fully familiar with the resources that help you write smoothly and easily
- You should have easy access to these resources

True, some perfect bilinguals or trilinguals can translate to or from more than one language. You may be in this category. This assumes that you feel comfortable in more than one language.

Translate from your secondary language

It is not necessary to be an expert in this language. Those who have studied a second language may be able to translate.

How do you know whether you know the source language well enough to be able to translate?

It is sufficient to have a *feel* for that language. The feel can come by living in the country in which the source language is spoken for some time, or by intensive study.

It is not necessary to be skillful at the level of being able to write the source language himself.

This is a reasonable predictor of success in the translating profession. There is a margin of error in this test, but it is a reasonable rule of thumb.

You do not have to know all of the vocabulary of the source language. You may use dictionaries.

Let's look into these criteria more thoroughly. We understand the necessity to be comfortable with the basics:

- The grammar (or syntax) of the secondary language
- The expressions used in that language

How can we test ability in those basics?

Language and linguistic ability

A translator does need the following skills:

- A reasonable knowledge of the language
- An ability to *recognize* idioms and expressions, so that you don't translate them literally
- Knowledge of where to go for answers. The Hebrew Translating³⁸ or Jewish Editing³⁹ forum are good places to start.

³⁸ Achdut: Jewish Forums. Hebrew Translating

Much translation humor has been written about people who knew the vocabulary in both languages, but they were not familiar with expressions. They translated documents word for word, without taking into account the meanings of these expressions.

As a result, they produced silly mistakes. Sometimes they corrupted the meaning, sometimes they made it funny, but they inevitably made fools of themselves.

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Success and failure

Any translation
which intends to perform
a transmitting function
cannot transmit anything
but information
– hence, something inessential.
This is the hallmark
of bad translations.
- Walter Benjamin quotes

Translation
is the art
of failure.
- Umberto Eco

The usual concepts about success and failure may not be valid in the Translation field.

³⁹ Achdut: Jewish Forums. Jewish Editing

Some people may assume that a good translator would succeed, and a bad translator would fail. Of course, that leaves a great deal to other variables.

Ask five people what you mean by a "good" translator and you'll get five different answers. They might include the translator's ability to work quickly or accurately, or an ability to produce work that does not require subsequent editing.

Yes, those issues are important, but there may be more to the story.

Additional and different criteria seem to be at play, and the factors mentioned above are not accurate predictors of success.

The following three additional requirements for success as a translator may surprise you.

Punctuality

Your work must be submitted on the date promised in order to succeed as a translator. Note: This is *more important than quality*.

That's right: Translators who submit their materials on time are always in demand. They consistently receive more referrals than translators who submit higher quality work after the due date.

This has not been confirmed by a survey. It is the result of observation. However, there do not seem to be many exceptions.

Being comfortable with technology

Translators today must be intimately familiar and comfortable with computers, printers, faxes, e-mail and the Internet. This includes an ability to handle the unique computer shortcuts and features that are needed by translators, editors, or proofreaders.

A good translator should feel as comfortable with a word processor as a good driver feels when steering, stepping on the pedals, and controlling his car. However, this is certainly not a prerequisite for translating. This skill comes in time.

A good translator should also be able to touch type without looking at the keyboard, so that he can concentrate on the material.

All of these skills can be developed in time. They are not necessarily prerequisites for working in the translation field – although they are certainly helpful.

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Forums

Introduction

Stay in touch with other translators

- About⁴⁰
- General⁴¹
- The Translation Community⁴²
- Jewish Forums⁴³

Join translation-related forums

- Hebrew Translating⁴⁴
- Yiddish Forum⁴⁵
- Aramit⁴⁶
- Jewish Editing⁴⁷
- Jewish Translation Teacher⁴⁸
- Translation Teacher⁴⁹
- Word Processing⁵⁰

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

⁴⁰ Losing It | Forums | About

⁴¹ Losing It | Forums | General

⁴² Losing It | Social | Community

⁴³ Losing It | Forums | Jewish

⁴⁴ Jewish Unity Forums | Hebrew Translating

⁴⁵ Jewish Unity Forums | Yiddish Forum

⁴⁶ Jewish Unity Forums | Aramit

⁴⁷ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Editing

⁴⁸ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Translation Teacher

⁴⁹ Losing It | Forums | Translation Teacher

⁵⁰ Writing Wrongs: Transcribing | Word Processing



About the forums

You can maintain and continue your study of translation skills and related issues by making the most of these forums. The more you participate and help others in forums, the more you will be involved in the translation process.

The pages in this section offer a variety of websites that are of interest to translators. Join them — and improve your translation skills.

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Community

Ever since the tower of Babel, people have felt a need to communicate with others – despite their differences in language. Historians find records of translations going back for millennia. These translations were needed in order to support Man’s knowledge, which developed differently in different regions.

Joseph's success in Egypt was related to his knowledge of their language; Rashi, a Biblical commentator from 900 years ago, sometimes explained difficult concepts in Old French.

The controversial Septuagint translation of the Bible was a watershed event in Jewish history. Translators were placed in different rooms and ordered to translate without consulting with each other – yet the result was identical.

Give me peace and quiet

Today, translators often sit in quiet rooms. They, too, are determined to make texts comprehensible to native readers of a secondary language.

As a result, translating has traditionally been a very lonesome, laborious, and boring job. They wrote, edited, rewrote, re-edited, and again re-wrote their texts, often without companionship. Those who read the final, completed text did not always appreciate the labor and effort that was invested.

Things have changed

Today, however, with the advent of computers, the task is easier. Translators work directly on a word processor, and the first draft is – in some ways – also the final draft. Changes, modifications, editing, and proofreading are all created on the same text, all the while tracking the changes from the original draft.

This makes the work faster and reduces the number of errors that are created by copying and recopying the material.

A more recent innovation is the possibility of communicating with other translators. In the past, most good translators were in touch with a select handful of colleagues. They would only ask them questions in times of dire need. After all, there was a limit to how much a translator could bother or annoy his friends.

The new era in translating began with on line discussion forums, in which groups of like-minded professionals worked together in order to solve joint issues.

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

Keywords: [Translation](#), [Unity](#)



Join general forums

The following general forums may be of interest to translators:

- Word Processing⁵¹
- Jewish Word Fun⁵²

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

</grossmantranslation/Forums/General>

⁵¹ Writing Wrongs: Transcribing | Word Processing

⁵² Word Fun, Word Play | Jewish Word Fun



Jewish

The following Jewish forums in this series may be of interest to translators:

- Hebrew Translating⁵³
- Yiddish Forum⁵⁴
- Jewish Editing⁵⁵
- Jewish Word Fun⁵⁶
- Hebrew Computing⁵⁷
- Bilingual Hebrew⁵⁸
- Aramit⁵⁹
- Jewish Translation Teacher⁶⁰
- Hebrew Translating⁶¹. *See also* Hebrew Translating Forum and marketing⁶²

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Your exercise for this article is as follows:

[/grossmantranslation/Forums/Jewish](http://grossmantranslation/Forums/Jewish)

⁵³ Jewish Unity Forums | Hebrew Translating

⁵⁴ Jewish Unity Forums | Yiddish Forum

⁵⁵ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Editing

⁵⁶ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Word Fun

⁵⁷ Jewish Unity Forums | Hebrew Computing

⁵⁸ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Bilinguals

⁵⁹ Jewish Unity Forums | Aramit

⁶⁰ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Translation Teacher

⁶¹ Jewish Unity Forums | Hebrew Translating

⁶² Writing Wrongs | Losing It | Forums | Hebrew Translating



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Related resources

The following additional resources may be of interest as well:

- Hebrew Translating⁶³
- Jewish Editing⁶⁴
- Multiple translations of the Jewish Groups website⁶⁵
- Jewish Word Play⁶⁶
- Jewish Writing⁶⁷
- Jewish Translation Teacher⁶⁸

Other books in this series deal with related issues:

- International Transcriptions⁶⁹
- Jewish Writing⁷⁰
- Jewish Glossaries⁷¹
- Our Jewish Groups⁷²
- Jewish Translation Teacher forum⁷³
- List of Jewish forums⁷⁴

⁶³ Jewish Unity Forums | Hebrew Translating

⁶⁴ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Editing

⁶⁵ Jewish Language

⁶⁶ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Word Play

⁶⁷ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Writing

⁶⁸ Jewish Unity Forums | Jewish Translation Teacher

⁶⁹ International Transcriptions

⁷⁰ Jewish Writing

⁷¹ Jewish Glossaries

⁷² Achdut

⁷³ Achdut | Jewish Translation Teacher

⁷⁴ Achdut | The Forums | Interest

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Writing Wrongs: Losing it in the translation.

Other books in this series

We include writing, translating, editing, proofreading, lexicography, and transcribing in our definition of the writing trades.

The series is divided as follows:

Part 1: General issues

- Find out about this book
- Translation humor
- Truth
- Who can translate
- Forums

Part 2: Life as a translator

- Working at Home
- Social issues
- Translating offensive or objectionable material
- Time

Part 3: Making money as a translator

- What are the differences among the Business, Surviving, Marketing, and Rates sections?
- Business

- Surviving
- Getting jobs
- Marketing yourself
- Rates
- Directory of translators, to or from Hebrew – canceled.

Part 4: Teaching translation

- How to teach the writing trades
- Teaching Translation Skills
- How to translate
- Assignments for teaching Translation Skills
- The first day
- Back translations

Part 5: Lesson plans

- Lessons

Part 6: Distinctions

- Hebrew-English differences

Part 7: Languages, lexicography, and glossaries

- Language
- Names
- Pluritis
- Additions to my own dictionary and word finder

Part 8: Editing and proofreading

- Editing
- Proofreading

Part 9: Writing

- Writing

Part 10: Transcribing

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