

# Verbing

## Your Way to a Better Translation

By Mike Collins

**Most of the** translators and interpreters I know love language the way other people love chocolate cake. We like the way it sounds and feels, and are delighted when we are in that groove and able to express things *just right*. On the flip side, who among us has not cringed at the tortured phrasing we often hear in the media and on the street? English sometimes seems to be as slippery as an eel when it comes to form and structure.

For us as translators, it is all about precise expression. The success or failure of our work is directly related to how accurately we convey the sense of any source text. Often, however, we can become so focused on the meanings of individual words that we forget to step back and look at sentences as a whole. Less experienced translators may feel uncertain about the degree to which their translation should mirror the source text at the word level.

So what does “verbing” have to do with all this? We are all familiar with verbed nouns like “to access,” “to leverage,” and “to interface.” For the purposes of this article, we will use the term “verbing” to refer to the act of changing a noun to a verbal form (gerund, infinitive, participle, etc.) of the same word as a way of improving readability. When done properly, judiciously changing nouns to their verbal forms can smooth the wrinkles out of a rough target text.

I will present a few techniques here that can be used to improve the readability of a translation. These involve identifying certain usage patterns in draft translations, typically the use of action nouns, and recognizing how to

“verb” them to achieve a smoother final product.

But is this really necessary? Is it not enough if the translation contains all the meaning of the source and is grammatically correct?

Not necessarily...

The goal of translation is to produce a text that does not read like a translation—one that conveys the sense of the source without additions or subtractions. Although it is difficult to do, practically speaking, that does not mean we should settle for the lower rungs on the ladder. Regardless of how faithful the translation is to the source at the word level, it should also strive not to distract the reader with stiff or unnatural phrasing.

In other words, it is possible to have a translation that is grammatically and semantically correct, but that still fails because it distracts the reader from the message or is so stiffly worded that the reader begins to question the text in general.

Again, why the focus on verbing? Why not “nouncing”?

In my work I have the opportunity to read a lot of technical and business text in sources other than English. My impression (completely unsupported by statistics) is that most languages tend to be much more nominal than English in their expression in these types of texts. That is, they tend to use many more nouns when presenting their ideas, where native English writers would use verbal constructions. Translations that cleave overly closely to the parts of speech from the source can result in a target text that feels a little like driving over a rumble strip.

Let us look at a few examples. These have been culled from editing work done over the past few years. In some cases the text has been modified slightly to protect confidentiality. The source languages include Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, German, and Russian.

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### Japanese

The first example comes from a text on export regulations translated from Japanese. The translator rendered a portion of the text as follows:

**Source:** “国際的な平和及び安全の維持を目的とする安全保障輸出管理を適切に実施するために、本規程を定める。”

**Draft:** “...for the purpose of the maintenance of international peace and security.”

The resulting noun phrase, while semantically and grammatically correct, is unwieldy. However, verbing one of the nouns yields a much smoother phrase with no loss of meaning.

**Final:** “...for the purpose of maintaining international peace and security.”

Not only does this one change produce a more readable sentence, but we now have the exact phrasing used for this concept in English. The reader is not distracted, so the translation succeeds.

### Portuguese

This next example comes from a text on personnel recruiting that was translated from Brazilian Portuguese into English.

**Source:** “A avaliação de um currículo consiste na anotação de seu nível de

*interesse no mesmo, segundo os seus próprios critérios.”*

**Draft:** “The evaluation of a résumé consists of the recording of your level of interest in it, according to your own criteria.”

The nouns in this example virtually cry out to be verbed. With a little wordsmithing, we obtain:

**Final:** “Evaluating a résumé consists of recording your level of interest in it, according to your own criteria.”

Notice that eliminating the clunky phrasing has also gotten rid of two “of” phrases. These repeated “of” phrases, so common in Romance languages, are much rarer in English. Leaving them in a target text almost always marks it as a translation.

Here is another example:

**Source:** “*Você não possui atualmente autorização para a geração de novas requisições de vaga.*”

**Draft:** “You do not currently have authorization for the creation of new job requests.”

The meaning is clear and correct, but the text (three noun phrases in a row) distracts.



**Final 1:** “You do not currently have authorization to create new job requests.”

Replacing the middle noun phrase with the infinitive here improves the readability. If we give it one more tweak, the result is precisely what we would expect to read on an English-language website:

**Final 2:** “You are not currently authorized to create new job requests.”

Again, no meaning is lost, but the final text now no longer distracts the reader.

### German

German is also a very noun-rich language in technical texts. One of the beauties of German word order is that it allows the reader to enjoy a great many nouns while waiting for the verb. Here is a typical example:

**Source:** “*Alternativ dazu kann der Lieferant eine E-Mail-Adresse für die Übermittlung von Fehlerberichten an den Lieferanten einrichten.*”

**Draft:** “Alternatively, the Supplier may set up an e-mail address for transmission of fault reports to the Supplier.”

As with our other examples, the eye is drawn to the “of” phrase near the end. Converting the “-ion” noun form to a verbal gerund cleans up the phrasing nicely.

**Final:** “Alternatively, the Supplier may set up an e-mail address for transmitting fault reports to the Supplier.”

### Spanish

Unlike our German example, Spanish sometimes skips right to dessert, getting the key verb out of the

way immediately so all the nouns can march by undisturbed. This example comes from a list of specifications for a computer system.

**Source:** “*Se debe contar con procedimientos de control de cambios de reglas del firewall.*”

*XXX de una concesión para la operación de una red...*”

**Draft:** “Refers to the services needed to comply with the requirements for coverage established by the ministry for the granting of a concession for the operation of a network to XXX...”

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**Draft:** “There should be included procedures for the control of changes to firewall rules.”

A number of things jump out at us in this example: the passive “there is/should be...” phrase; the attempt to hold to the Spanish word order; and the clumsy “of” phrase. The surgery required to fix it will be a tad more invasive this time.

**Final:** “Procedures must be included to control (or monitor) changes to firewall rules.”

Indeed, we could improve the sentence even more, but the key here is that the awkward passive voice has been eliminated, and what was a thoroughly distracting sentence is now far less likely to lift the eyebrow of the reader.

The next example comes from a list of definitions in a similar contract:

**Source:** “*Designa los servicios necesarios para cumplir con los requerimientos de cobertura establecidas por el ministerio para el otorgamiento a*

By now, we are getting the hang of this and have a good idea where to start.

**Final:** “Refers to the services needed to meet the coverage requirements established by the ministry for granting XXX a concession to operate a network...”

The final wording is seven words shorter than the first draft, and reads much more naturally.

### Russian

Russian offers similar opportunities:

**Source:** “Целью настоящего исследования является проверка безопасности, эффективности и переносимости [study drug] при приеме 2 раза в день по сравнению с плацебо.”

**Draft:** The goal of this study is the verification of the safety, efficacy, and tolerability of [study drug] with administration 2 times per day in comparison with placebo.”

Once again, the draft matches the