



10 Typical mistakes that we must avoid when hiring a Spanish voice professional

Extracted From the book *Living the Voice*, by Natan Fischer

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During the last decade, the growing Hispanic presence in major markets has made it impossible to ignore. The Spanish language is the second most spoken native language in the world, and knows no boundaries.

Today, it is unthinkable that a brand does not consider making enough efforts to reach out to this segment. They do this by translating their websites, hiring community managers to energize the Hispanic experience in social media, and creating all kinds of content.

Many companies that decide to produce content choose to create it in Spanish, simultaneously with the English version, so they can use the material at the same time. This is a trend that continues to expand, and that is why approximately 9 out of 10 clients that I often talk with do not speak the Spanish language.

Production companies and ad agencies often face the dilemma of having to make Spanish versions of their productions without knowing that they are getting into dangerous territory.

I took the liberty of putting together a list of the most common mistakes made when managing multi-language projects. Read this article carefully, as this can mean the difference between a great job and a totally useless effort.

1. - Ignoring which is the right Spanish accent to be used

First things first: not knowing which the right Spanish accent to use is can ruin a recording session even before the narrator opens his mouth. **The right accent is the accent of the audience.** If the recording will be heard in Costa Rica, it must be recorded in the corresponding accent, the same as the "River Plate" accent for an audience in Montevideo.

But this can get a little complicated, because in many cases, the same recording is not intended for homogenous demographic groups. An e-learning handbook can be used by all employees who speak the same language worldwide, and an ad can reach regional or national audiences, covering all territories with very different ways of speaking.

And it's not as simple as choosing an accent arbitrarily, if we base it on the idea that by being the same language, everyone will understand. This is because it is not comprehension that is at stake, but rather acceptance.

In Latin America, for example, almost all countries share the Spanish language. However, this does not mean that there may not be enmity, rivalry or substantial cultural differences. The reasons why two countries "do not get along" are usually very stupid, because at the end of the day, the majority of people have little to do with the decisions of their leaders. But this does not mean they can't reject messages with the wrong accents.

There are also stereotypes that may have little to do with the brand or the communicational intention of a narrated message. And stereotypes are also arbitrary and ridiculous, but they still exist in the collective imagination. An emblematic case is that of England and Spain. In the U.S., the stereotype assigned to a British accent has to do with coldness, refinement, education, nobility and culture. It is very common then, that when Americans must adapt materials for use in Argentina, they usually requested Castilian Spanish. For the sake of parallelism, they assume that the British stereotype is similar to Spanish, in both cases because it is the accent of "the motherland". But unfortunately, the stereotype of Spain in Argentina is diametrically opposed, related to low intelligence and poor education.

To avoid all these problems is that there are neutral accents. Many clients refer to neutral accent as "accent without any accent," and this is wrong. The neutral accent is an accent in itself. But its peculiarity is that it can't be automatically associated with a defined territory. **It's an accent that does not allow the audience to know the origin of the speaker.** It also eliminates all kinds of speech figures, expressions and specific words that can be associated with some form of regionalism.

Neutral accents are accepted in all regions that speak the same language equally, and even their cosmopolitan and international characteristic, cause it to be chosen by customers even when the public does have a homogeneous accent.

No matter whether it's England, Spain, Portugal or any other country that has had colonies, or a significant influence on other areas to the point of having left the language there, the accent of the motherland is only correct, if the material is used only in the mother country. When in doubt, always choose neutral accent.

2 - Bilingual Narrators or Speakers

Hiring the same speaker for the same script in two different languages, may result less expensive than hiring two. However, the consequences can be fatal, that may render the material to be completely unusable. That someone is able to speak or understand two languages does not mean that it has a native knowledge of the two, let alone having a narrative domain. In the vast majority of cases, the announcers who call themselves "bilingual" have a lackluster performance in one of the two languages. No matter how nice their site is, if you hear a demo in your own language and you don't detect anything unusual, then probably the problem is in the other language.

A speaker can record in multiple languages, but is unlikely to not have a marked accent in the language that is less developed. This prevents the development of the neutral form and therefore affects the quality of the speech considerably.

Thus my recommendation is to never hire the same speaker to record the same text in two different languages.

3 - Free online translators

Translations should always be done by professional translators. And still, the chances for it to be perfect are low. Translation is an extremely complicated profession and even professional translations are full of errors.

A translation made by a free online translator is simply of no use, they can't even be taken as a vague reference. I often receive scripts translated automatically, and I just throw them away without even reading them. They are simply mindless ramblings. Fixing a poorly translated script into something usable takes too much time and effort, and that must necessarily be paid.

I once heard a recognized marketing editorial "guru" that recommended the use of automatic translators to translate books and that way, to expand the markets in which books are sold. Seriously, the man just does not have the slightest idea what he's talking about. Unless readers are doctors in cryptology, no one will understand a single paragraph.

4. – Reference Voices

As voiceover professionals, our customers often show us reference voices so we can understand the aesthetic direction they are going, what they're looking for. However, in international projects, it is common to make the mistake of showing the narrators reference voices in languages other than their own.

When we receive reference voices in another language, there's actually not much we can do with them, because each language has a particular form of expression and a very distinctive musicality. We can evaluate the tone or the speed, but surely the essence of such reference suggests something much deeper.

References should always be in the language of the speaker. It is the only way to ensure proper understanding.

5. - Arbitrary Accents

It is very common to receive casting sheets asking for very specific accents that have nothing to do with each other. For example, if we talk about the Spanish language, they ask for an accent "of Guatemala or Uruguay."

This doesn't make any sense, of course. If the recording is to be used in Guatemala, you should ask for a Guatemalan accent. If the recording is to be used in Uruguay, it must be a Uruguayan accent. And if to be used in both places, they should ask for a neutral Spanish accent.

Behind such requests, customers try to justify themselves like: "a co-worker is from Guatemala, and I like his accent. On the other hand, my father in-law is from Uruguay and I would like to use his accent too. "

These are absolute arbitrariness that threatens the success of the recording session.

6. – Recording Studio

It is true that some recordings require the physical presence of the client. However, when addressing international projects, you should consider the idea that this may be impossible. I've seen casting sheets requesting things like: "I'm looking for a native speaker of Tierra del Fuego, for a recording attendance in Nebraska. The payment is \$100".

How many Tierra del Fuego speakers are there in Nebraska? Surely very few. Maybe there are some others who are willing to move, but not for that payment. When attendance recordings are required, payment has to be consistent, and the order has to be sufficiently consistent with the demographics of the place. Otherwise the answers will be very low or zero and the quality of the final work will be highly influenced by chance.

7. – Language families

I need the same text to be recorded in Spanish, Portuguese and Italian; can you do all these recordings, right? All these languages are very similar....

Absolutely not. The fact that there are languages with common roots or etymologies does not mean that they are not completely different. Speaking one of these languages does increase your chances of understanding others that may be similar. But to narrate them? Two different worlds. They are different languages, and require different speakers.

8. – Hiring by the photos

Consider a hypothetical case in which you have a large budget for a radio campaign in Spanish, and it's regional in scope, covering all countries in Latin America.

You are excited about the idea of using celebrities, and you begin an exhaustive search to choose the perfect pair of actors to convey all the values that the brand represents.

After a difficult and selective screening process, you decided to hire Jennifer Lopez and Danny Trejo. Yes, it will cost a pretty penny, but you are willing to pay for this pair of Latin icons, and it would be absolutely perfect for forward the communication objectives of the campaign.

But there is one little problem. Neither Danny Trejo nor Jennifer Lopez really speaks Spanish.

This may sound ridiculous, but it's true. Danny Trejo was born in Los Angeles and Jennifer Lopez in the Bronx.

Both barely have the knowledge of the Spanish language to even pronounce their own names.

They are incredibly talented artists, but their native language is English. If we spent millions to hire them for a **radio** campaign in Spanish, it wouldn't make sense, since the audience would believe that we have hired Mitt Romney and Barbara Bush.

It seems obvious, **but never hire by the photos for voice work. Photos don't speak.**

No matter their features, no matter their color, no matter their name or surname, no matter the origin of their parents or grandparents. None of this is an indication that the speaker in question is a native speaker of a given language.

It is absolutely necessary to hire announcers, thinking with our ears and not our eyes. And if we are not able to make a decision based on the materials that we listen, then we must consult someone who does.

9 - Believing that by hiring through agents, quality is assured

All agents say that they work only with the best of the best. When we see an interview with an agent, it is completely normal to hear him say that if you're a voiceover professional, you must have plenty of years of experience and be successful before even considering calling him.

Well, let me tell you that Santa Claus does not exist, and that an agent will say anything to promote himself.

I do not want to incur in figures that may be inaccurate, but I can probably count with my fingers the number of voiceover professionals who live exclusively from the work they get through their agents.

There are highly successful voiceover professionals with decades of experience and dozens of agents. A narrator can have 15 or 20 agents distributed throughout the world. And yet, he or she would be very lucky if they obtain 10% of their income from the amount of work obtained through ALL of their agents.

As you can see, the relationship between agent and voiceover professional is much less fluid than you thought.

The non-exclusive nature of the contracts between agents and voice talents make an agent to have absolutely nothing to lose by adding people to their roster. The agent will try to find the best voice by the sum of all the voices he or she has, and that is why the rule of absolute excellence is often not really applied. They may care more about quantity than quality.

There are really good agents, and agents who will sign anyone just for show.

If you are a native Spanish speaker, go experience it yourself. Find 50 pages of agents, go to the section of voices in Spanish and try to determine how many of them are professional native voices. If you want, I'll give you a hint: very few.

10 -Lip-Sync

When adapting previous work done in English, producers often do the translation of the script, hoping that then the voice in English can be simply replaced by the new voice in Spanish.

Then they often request that everything is in sync. That the new voice must perfectly suit the succession of images, so that it acquires the same sense as in the English version, besides respecting speed and intent.

But a translation of a text that will have a voiceover done is not any translation. It's not enough that a translation must be correct or literal, it must necessarily respect the time that a voiceover talent takes to pronounce it.

All languages are different. Phrases are put together in different ways and with different number of words. For example, a paragraph in English, saying exactly the same, it's usually 30% shorter than in Spanish. Spanish requires many more words to convey the same concept.

When translating a contract, for example, the number of words is irrelevant and the focus is placed in a way that the translated concepts must be exactly the same in both languages. But when we need to replace one audio for another, both the original script and the translated script must have the same word count.

That is why translation and dubbing is an art in itself and a very special discipline. A dubbing translator must find a defined number of words, and the way to reproduce the same concept, without the new text being shorter or longer.

When we get mistranslated scripts, the difference is noticeable. If the dubbing is off, we will see how the two narrators recite the same text at completely different speeds. One of the two must necessarily go faster, to compensate for the amount of words that have been added to the script.

When lip sync is necessary, the difference is much more evident. The character has closed the mouth, and the voice actor keeps talking.

Now you have the tools to stay out of trouble when it comes to hiring an announcer or voiceover professional in Spanish. And many colleagues will unknowingly thank me.

*This text has been extracted from the book **Living The Voice**, by Natan Fischer. You can find out all you need to know about the book by visiting <http://www.livingthevoice.com/> or via email at Info@natanfischer.com*

