

Global English (Globish) and Its Impact on the Translator

By Jeana M. Clark and Esma A. Gregor



Global English, or Globish, is a universally understood form of English that is used internationally by non-native speakers of English and, to some extent, by native English speakers when they interact with non-native speakers. Global English has achieved universal language status because it strives for neutrality, using English words and phrases generally understood throughout the English-speaking world while avoiding localisms that are too culturally specific.

The term “Globish” was made a household name by Jean-Paul Nerriere, a Frenchman and former IBM executive who developed the concept after observing the verbal exchanges among businessmen at the international meetings he attended. He concluded that non-native English speakers were able to communicate with each other more

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successfully than their native English-speaking colleagues because they used a type of simplified English, foregoing idiomatic phrases, figurative meanings, and ambiguities. On the other hand, Nerriere noted that native English speakers were often misunderstood or left out of these “Globish” conversations altogether because they tended to use English in a way that was too complex and subtle for non-native speakers to understand if they only had a basic command of the language. In

his attempt to capture and codify the way in which non-native speakers were able to communicate so effectively and to enable others to acquire a basic but universally understood form of English quickly, he created Globish.¹

Globish is based on a vocabulary limited to 1,500 words, involving a modular method for combining these words, with an emphasis on short sentences, basic syntax, active verb tense, and a particular focus on the

correct usage of syllable stress.² In addition, users must avoid anything that could potentially cause cross-cultural confusion, such as metaphors, abbreviations, and even humor. The goal of Globish is to reach a common ground where everyone understands everyone else regardless of their native language.

Globish as a *Lingua Franca*

Globish is widely used today in business and academic circles, and has effectively become a *lingua franca*—a “bridge language” between speakers who do not share a common language. It is not surprising that Globish is popular within the business community, since *lingua francas* tend to emerge when speakers of various languages not only have the need to communicate and exchange messages, but the ability to realize an economic benefit by doing so.

History indicates that *lingua francas* come and go based on the needs of a particular era. The moment the economic benefit disappears, people cease to feel compelled to learn the language. As the language of diplomacy, for example, French was a *lingua franca* for several hundred years until the mid-20th century, but in this globalized, digital age, it has now been superseded by English. In fact, in their book *Globish the World Over*, Nerriere and co-author David Hon state that 96% of international English communication takes place with at least one non-native speaker.³ So what does this mean for translators?

The Translator as a Mediator

It is important to note that Globish is used mainly for verbal communication. However, it must be considered “non-standard” English, meaning it does not have standardized, prescriptive grammar. The dilemma here is that, in this particular case, we are technically translators from one stan-

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dard language into another standard language. Because English is now functioning as a *lingua franca*, we are increasingly put in a position where we are asked to translate from Globish into standard English or from Globish into yet another language.

Globish is a perfectly useful and effective means of verbal communication, but it can be an occupational hazard for translators when it spills over into written text. Translators need to be on the lookout for telltale signs that the English text they are being asked to translate or edit is in fact non-standard English. The checklist below will help you identify certain traits of Globish in your documents.

Telltale Signs Checklist for Non-Standard English, or “Globish”

1. Translation errors (mistranslation of source text meaning):

- **Original:** *Wir sind immer noch das Schlusslicht, wir müssen uns ranhalten*⁴
- **Translation:** We are still the tail light, so let’s grab hold!
- **Correct:** We still have a long way to go, so let’s dig in!

2. Typos⁵ (often caused by language interference):

- **Translation:** so called

- **Correct:** so-called
- **Translation:** in form of
- **Correct:** in the form of

3. Verb tense problems (look for passive voice or incorrect formulations):

- **Translation:** In April 2012 a SWOT analysis has been carried out.
- **Correct:** A SWOT analysis was carried out in April 2012.

4. Stylistic problems (very common if the text was written by a non-native English speaker):

- These are very often the most difficult changes to justify. Instructions from the client might even forbid you from making any “unnecessary” stylistic changes. However, as professional translators, we need to be able to recognize when style problems go beyond slightly awkward and actually detract from the meaning. In these situations, we need to be able to justify any suggestions we make. After all, our job as translators and editors is to make sure that the meaning is conveyed correctly and effectively.
- **Translation:** Product X shows a high effectiveness.
 - **Correct:** Product X is highly effective. ➡

- **Translation:** This was possible as a result of the many years of experience of Company X.
- **Correct:** Company X's many years of experience made this possible.

5. Syntactic problems (some language combinations are more problematic than others): Syntax is a considerable problem for people translating from German into English. In English, the semantic focus of the sentence is usually in the beginning or the middle, whereas in German it is in the middle or at the end. The order of adverbials and adverbial phrases is also different between the two languages. For example:

- **Translation:** Through the high resting state viscosity, pigment settling speed is greatly reduced.
- **Correct:** The high resting state viscosity greatly reduces pigment settling speed.
- **Translation:** Only then we will be able to maintain our prices, by the way, too.
- **Correct:** It is only then, by the way, that we will be able to maintain our prices as well.

6. Lexicological problems (look for those typical to your language combination): Lexicological problems between German and English are common for many reasons. For example, German and English have a number of prepositions in common, but each language uses them differently.

- **Translation:** Our putties are widely used on the whole world.

We are increasingly put in a position where we are asked to translate from Globish into standard English.

- **Correct:** Our putties are widely used all around the world.

Issues for the Translator

Using the checklist above to confirm that you are indeed dealing with non-standard English is just the first step in the process. You now have to address effectively the respective issues it brings to the table. The key is to know your source language situation and understand the client's or author's perspective. Every culture has its own "flavor" and command of English. This, in turn, influences the translator's or editor's work; namely, how easy or complicated it will be to explain certain translation or stylistic issues to the client.

Specific Situations Translators May Face

Globish is everywhere, which means translators are going to encounter it sooner or later. The goal is to be prepared for these situations when they arise. If you find yourself being asked to use very Globish-sounding glossary terms that are exceptionally confusing or misleading, it is a good idea to discuss the matter with the client or agency. Sometimes, this situation gives you the perfect opportunity to create a glossary for that client or develop a style guide. In other situations where the terminology is not really that bad, you might decide to go with the glos-

sary requested by the client and try to match the style and terminology with the linguistic environment, just as long as it is still grammatically correct and conveys the meaning effectively. You might also be asked to edit a document that has already been translated into English. If the Globish is comprehensible and you can decipher the text easily and turn it into standard English, then it is not a problem and everybody is happy. However, it gets more complicated if you have no idea what the English is supposed to be conveying or if you have been told specifically not to make any stylistic changes.

How to Break the News to the Client

We have come up with a way to respond to this issue in a gentle but professional manner. We simply suggest to the client that the English provided, although probably acceptable in a spoken environment in today's international business community, does not correspond to written standard English. We then advise them to have it edited and/or retranslated in order to protect the company's image and reputation. This same type of diplomatic and explanatory approach also works well if a client sends back a translation with revisions, but the revisions are either incorrect or contain the typical errors that users of Globish tend to make.

From Theory into Practice

Given the globalized nature of the business environment and the prevalence of Global English as a *lingua franca*, chances are that most of you have encountered Globish on one level or another. It is a phenomenon in the English language that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the large number of Global English varieties, which are chiefly influenced by the native languages of its speakers, make it a highly variable, non-standardized, and, most of all, spoken phenomenon.

As professional translators, we need to be able to identify Globish in written texts, know when advocating for the use of standard English is justified, and educate our clients accordingly. Dealing with the issues and situations surrounding Globish is not an exact science by any means and might get a little sticky at times, but using the tools suggested in this article can be a great help.

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Notes

1. Additional reading: McCrum, Robert. *Globish: How English Became the World's Language* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc., 2010).
2. Blume, Mary. "If You Can't Master English, Try Globish," *The New York Times* (April 22, 2005), <http://bit.ly/Try-Globish>.
3. Nerrière, Jean-Paul, and David Hon. *Globish the World Over* (International Globish Institute, 2009), www.globish.com.
4. The authors of this article are German-English translators; hence, all examples refer to the German-English language pair.
5. The classification of error types was a bit tricky; typos encompass a large variety of errors.

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