



Black diamonds are a girl's best friend

Stephanie Martinez-Hill explores the range of topics and skills involved in ski translation, after a season in the French Alps snowballed into a translation specialism

Almost two decades ago I set off on an adventure to spend the winter in the French Alps as a *seasonaire*, working in a hotel in the small ski resort of Vars les Claux. We nicknamed it the Fawly Franou for its lack of basic tableware (water jugs with saucers on top masqueraded as teapots) and for losing a staff member roughly once a week to a combination of incidents and accidents. Spurred on by an impressionable enthusiasm after having spent a grand total of one session on a dry slope in my life, I was somehow confident that I would be at home on the slopes.

Surrounded by peers who were ski instructors and seasoned practitioners, I was somewhat out of my depth as the only newcomer. But they took me under their wing and led me forth from blues to reds to blacks, to off-

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piste and even further afield into freeriding territory. Snowplough to red jumps in four months, with just one trip to hospital!

Little did I know that my season, followed by subsequent trips to various European resorts, was all laying the groundwork for what would become one of my major specialisms today. Over the last few years I've worked on a whole range of ski texts, ranging from the highly technical to marketing materials. One minute I'm researching the anatomy of a ski pole or the cross-section of a ski; the next I'm conveying how manufacturers are seeking to lower their environmental impact or I'm playing my part in building excitement for the next winter season. What has struck me most is how ski translation is not as linear an exploit as those neatly groomed pistes, but meanders into other areas of translation. It varies greatly in terms of the topics, tone and skills that are required, all within just one specialism.

Traversing several disciplines and skill sets

There is a lot of technical content dealing with detailed specifications for skis such as the radius and the various materials used in the construction. Texts might discuss a variety of ski shapes, including the camber (the upward arc formed by the ski in the middle), and the rocker (where the tip or tail, or both, turn upwards – it takes its name from the rails of a rocking chair). There are recommendations on different binding options for particular sets of skis: for instance, lighter; more forgiving; closer to the ski; and so on. Elements such as flex, ability level and terrain all matter.

Even more factors come into play with types of skiing involving an uphill element, such as ski touring or cross-country skiing, because buyers need to consider the ascent as well as the descent. They are searching for the right compromise between lightweight on their trek up the mountain, and peak performance on the way down, to make the most of the powder they've worked so hard to enjoy. Skis in these kinds of territories have been optimised for long journeys uphill, with skins attached for grip.

Alongside this type of translation, the specialism can involve transcreation – for instance, in materials aimed at selling equipment and skiwear to prospective customers in different countries. And there are all kinds of social media communications, from website content to newsletters and Instagram. Given the kind of topic this is, it's not surprising that there is a distinct trend towards using video across various social media platforms, and this requires subtitling.

Great powder: great responsibility

Sustainability is also a key issue in this sector, given that skiing requires snow – and the industry depends on reliable climatic conditions. Skiers want to protect their playground, so any eco-friendly practices are important to this audience.

In skiwear, companies are aiming for a minimal waste design to ensure that there are fewer offcuts of materials and less waste. Brands are also keen to communicate how they use specific dyeing techniques that consume less water, and how they incorporate recycled polyester into their products. They also promote quality capsule wardrobe products to discourage fast fashion. And sustainability practices also extend to equipment, with items being

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Who knew a Brazil nut could save your life?

One of the more fascinating aspects of ski translation is the exposure to cutting-edge technology and innovative design. We've all heard of car airbags, but what about avalanche airbags? This formerly exclusive piece of kit is fast becoming more affordable for the adventurous skier. They are based on a principle known as the 'Brazil nut effect', whereby large, irregular-shaped particles end up on the surface when shaken. If you shake a container of nuts, the largest ones (usually the Brazil nut) end up on the surface. In an avalanche, skiers want to be that Brazil nut. Cue the airbag backpack, strapped to the skier with a harness, which triggers when a cord is pulled, inflating an enormous airbag cushion around the head or either side of the backpack. A far cry from my ski season days when helmets weren't even mainstream!

advertised as repairable and/or with spare parts: for instance, customers can order replacement heels for ski boots and new lenses for their goggles.

On the other hand, while skiing is celebrated as a fun, recreational sport, it is also not without its risks. This – combined with the fact that it has been known to attract the odd thrill seeker – can create the perfect recipe for a call to Mountain Rescue. So companies offering products specifically for the more remote ski realms, such as freeriding territory and the backcountry, feel a certain duty of care to keep skiers safe on the mountain; and health and safety topics such as what to pack for a day in the backcountry, avalanche safety tips and advice on how to ski safely need to be translated.


Brands offer advice on how to check the snow and weather conditions, including the avalanche danger level and what the scale means in terms of the stability of the snowpack. French ski texts frequently refer to *le triptyque*, which refers to the three essential avalanche safety items to pack when skiing far off-piste: a beacon, a probe and a shovel. The beacon transmits a local signal for search and rescue teams; the probe is a long foldable wand like a tent pole used to pinpoint a person buried under snow; and the shovel is used to dig them out.

The stark reality of this demonstrates how there is an interesting juxtaposition between riding the wave of excitement, celebrating new releases, addressing the audience informally...and the seriousness of raising awareness of the dangers, and urging skiers to follow advice to keep themselves from harm.

Hands-on knowledge and practice

Whereas with spectator sports it's perfectly possible to have brilliant terminology knowledge without the slightest interest in playing, I would never have been able to understand my ski texts and audience fully if I had never been skiing. Personal experience means I know what skiers rave about and what sounds appealing in newsletters, ads and other communications. I understand the kit, how it works and the advantages of certain elements over others. All this lays the groundwork for a more convincing translation.

First-hand knowledge means knowing what skiers want to feel like on different types of snow and what a good experience looks like. It's empathising with the dreaded thigh burn, being aware of the possible dangers, and understanding the pros and cons of equipment. All these things help a translator express the meaning naturally in English.

So far skiing has proved itself to be a multifaceted gem of diverse and ever-evolving translation requirements. Perhaps skiing isn't alone, and this is true of many specialisms, but I've certainly found the one that works for me. Variety is the spice of life, but who knew you could find it all in one place? 



Stephanie Martinez-Hill is a French and Spanish to English freelance translator based in Bath. Her specialisms and interests go hand in hand. Whether it's skiing, patisserie, wine or travel, her world revolves around these industries, in the office and out. When she's not at her desk, she's usually whipping up a new bake, practising yoga or out walking her spaniel. She is also events officer for the ITI WRG Network.