



Translation Scams Reloaded

Scams are on the rise in online commerce. Learn about the three most common types of fraudulent schemes in the language industry, along with steps to protect against them.

Merriam-Webster defines “scam” as “an instance of the use of dishonest methods to acquire something of value.”¹ Below you will find a summary of some of the dishonest methods that are unfortunately on the rise in the language industry and other sectors. This is a continuation and an update of two previous articles that appeared in the October 2014 edition of *The ATA Chronicle*² and in the Spring 2017 edition of *Translorial*,³ the journal of the Northern California Translators Association (the latter co-authored with Peg Flynn).

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON SCHEMES?

The following schemes are the most common in the language sector:

- Variants of the age-old Nigerian check scam, tailored to the language industry.

- Nonpayment for services rendered, possibly ordered under a false name and/or while impersonating a reputable client.
- Impersonation of reputable translators by the scammer, also known as CV theft.

I’ll summarize each of these schemes here along with tips on how to recognize them before getting defrauded. I’ll also cover new and sophisticated variants of these old schemes and the steps you can take to protect against them.

Of course, there are many other devious schemes out there, including email phishing attempts. For more information on what to watch out for, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Consumers League maintain extensive lists of the most common fraud schemes. (See sidebar on page 14.)

FAKE CHECK SCAMS

How It Works: These check scams proceed according to the following pattern. The scammer pretends to be a client in need of language services. The unsuspecting translator/interpreter sends a quote to the ostensive client, and the client accepts the terms. So far, so good, but then the trouble begins.

The fake client sends a check in advance for an amount that is quite a bit larger than the quoted price. The fake client then contacts the translator/interpreter about the error, explaining that it would be too complicated to send another check for the correct amount and asks the person being scammed to wire the overpaid amount from the first check back to them. The unsuspecting translator/interpreter wires the extra money to the fake client and never hears from them again. Several weeks later, the check bounces. To add insult to injury, not only has the translator/interpreter lost the money he or she wired to the fake client, but they are also stuck with a bank fee for the bounced check.

This scam exploits the fact that the payment processor (the payee’s bank) doesn’t verify the authenticity of the check at the time of deposit. In fact, it takes days to weeks for a check to arrive at the payer’s bank, where the check is finally cleared or rejected.

This type of scam is most often attempted by ordering translations of random texts that are sometimes pulled off the internet. However, interpreters could be similarly defrauded if the check is sent before the alleged interpreting assignment.

How to Spot It: Most of these fake check scams are fairly easy to spot. Although the presence of any one of the following warning signs doesn’t necessarily mean that you are dealing with a scammer, a combination of these would be a strong indication that someone is trying to scam you:

- The email is sent from a free, quasi-anonymous account such as Yahoo or Gmail.
- The email is sent to you via blind carbon copy without a personal salutation or other details about the alleged project. This indicates that the

RESOURCES ON SCAMS AND IDENTITY THEFT

INFORMATION ON PAYMENT PRACTICES OF LANGUAGE SERVICES COMPANIES

Payment Practices

<http://paymentpractices.net/>
(Fee-based, discount for ATA members)

ProZ Blue Board

www.proz.com/blueboard
(Overview free, details for members only)

Zahlungspraxis, Yahoo Group

<http://bit.ly/Zahlungspraxis-info>
(Free, German-centric)

DOMAIN INFORMATION, EMAIL HEADER INFORMATION

Display Email Header

<http://bit.ly/Google-message-headers>

Email Headers “Decoded”

<http://bit.ly/headers-decoded>
(If you copy/paste the entire header here, it will reveal the entire email address chain from sender to recipient. You can plug the originating address into a whois service and an IP address location to get more information on the registrar of the domain/IP address.)

Domain Dossier

<http://bit.ly/Domain-Dossier>
(This site gives you information about the registrants of domain names and IP addresses. However, due to the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a lot of the information, including names and addresses, are now obfuscated. Nevertheless, sufficient contact information must be disclosed to report abuse.)

WHOIS Lookup

<https://whois.icann.org/en>
(This is another site to obtain information about domain registrants and owners of IP addresses. Just like Domain Dossier, the same comments regarding GDPR apply.)

IP Location

www.iplocation.net
(An IP address location service)

WHERE TO REPORT SCAMS

Federal Bureau of Investigation Internet Crime Complaint Center

www.ic3.gov

National Consumers League

<http://fraud.org>

Federal Trade Commission

www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov

Translator Scammers Directory (For translator CV theft)

www.translator-scammers.com

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ATA Business Practices Listserv

<http://bit.ly/ATA-BP-listserv>

ATA Business Practices Resource Page

www.atanet.org/business_practices/index.php

ATA Members and Internet Scams

www.atanet.org/membership/internet_scams.php

email has been sent to a large number of people simultaneously.

- The email is written in really bad English, despite the fact that the sender uses a (very generic) name indicative of a native English speaker.
- A signature and any other information that can identify the sender are missing.

Even if a potential client has no idea about the process to request language services, they usually give you a means to contact them other than their email address. Real clients also know which language they need the text translated into.

The Latest Twist: Since people are becoming increasingly aware of these types of fake check scams due to the aforementioned warning signs, some savvy scammers take extra steps to obfuscate their evil intentions. They attempt to impersonate a reputable person or entity by emulating the signature of that entity, complete with logo in the email message, and sometimes even set up a fake web domain from which they send the message. For example, I recently received a message that was allegedly from the editor of a reputable newspaper. However, upon closer inspection, it turned out that the message had been

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sent from the domain “.net” instead of the correct “.com” domain.

How to Prevent It: When dealing with new direct clients, I recommend asking for payment, or at least a portion of the payment, in advance via a payment method where the liquidity of the payer is verified at the time of the transaction. Payment processors such as Paypal or Stripe, bank transfers, money orders, or cashiers checks work well here. Language agencies or larger corporations will generally not agree to pay in advance. In these situations, due diligence using the online resources listed in the sidebar on this page is recommended.

NONPAYMENT FOR SERVICES RENDERED SCAM

How It Works: The client simply gives a fake name and contact information or impersonates a reputable person or entity. This is similar to the scheme described in the previous section on the latest twist on the fake check scam. After delivery of the translation or interpreting services, the client disappears without paying or sends a fake check. The fraudsters are usually the middlemen and sell the language service to a real end-client. In this case, the translator/interpreter doesn't lose any money, only time for services rendered.

How to Spot It: Dishonest people who order translation or interpreting services under a false name are hard to spot, especially if they impersonate reputable entities. I recommend always doing your research on new clients using the resources in the sidebar on this page.

The Latest Twist: Similar to the fake check scam, some fraudsters go the extra mile and establish a fake online presence, complete with website, logo, etc. A recently established website with

fake contact information, a nonexistent phone number, and an address that shows cows on green pastures instead of the expected office building when you enter the address into a satellite map all point to a fraudulent scheme.

How to Prevent It: Again, due diligence, possibly combined with payment in advance, as mentioned earlier in the section on fake check scams, can go a long way.

CV THEFT AND IMPERSONATION

How It Works: This scam has become increasingly prevalent in the past few years. The scammers take the CVs of reputable translators (or interpreters, although this is rare), edit the contact information to show their own, and send the CVs off to unsuspecting agencies or pose as translators on an online translation portal. Unsuspecting clients hire the alleged translators, who then pipe the text through a machine translation engine, take the payment, and disappear. When the clients discover that the text delivered was machine translated, they blame the real translator whose CV, and thus reputation, were stolen.

How to Spot It: In many instances, the translator/interpreter is unaware that their information has been stolen until after the damage is done. This is why prevention is key. The Translator Scammers Intelligence Group maintains a list of fake names along with the names of the victims whose CVs were stolen. (See sidebar on page 14.)

The Latest Twist: Lately, a lot of translation portals with large databases of linguists, where end-clients can order translations with only a few mouse clicks, have cropped up on the web. The portal providers take a small cut of the percentage of the project price to keep the portal running. This is not a fraudulent business model in and of itself. However, some portal providers scrape the contact information of reputable translators from public databases and add them to their own databases without their knowledge or consent while rerouting the projects elsewhere.

How to Prevent It: First and foremost, CVs, profiles, or résumés, and the like should never be provided in Microsoft

Word or plain text format because scammers can edit these formats too easily. A password-protected PDF file, possibly with a watermark, is best, although passwords can be cracked. For information on how to create a password-protected PDF with Adobe Acrobat or Microsoft Word, please check out a blog post I wrote on the subject.⁴

Also, never post details that are too personal online or unnecessary to conduct business, such as your date of birth or social security number. Instead, use an Employer Identification Number (EIN), also known as a Federal Tax Identification Number, which is used to identify a business entity. You can apply for an EIN online, even as a sole proprietor.⁵

Finally, to monitor your online reputation, you can create a Google Alert for your name or your business name. Google will then notify you automatically whenever a new entry is added to its database of search results for the specified keyword.⁶

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“IF IT SOUNDS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE, IT PROBABLY IS.”

This old adage holds especially true in online commerce. Since translation services and even certain interpreting services are mostly transacted entirely online, the language sector is particularly vulnerable to fraudulent schemes. Yet many of these scams can be thwarted relatively easily by implementing the measures outlined in this article:

- Verify the client's identity by checking their contact information via phone calls, satellite maps, email IP addresses, etc. (See the sidebar on page 14.)
- Examine the client's payment practices. (See the sidebar on page 14.)

- Request payment in advance via nonreversible methods.
- Never give out too much personal information that is not needed to conduct business, such as date of birth, etc. Use an EIN instead of a social security number.
- Password-protect your CV.

A LITTLE PREVENTION

Taking steps to safeguard your identity and minimize the risk from scammers is not as difficult as it sounds, but it takes diligence. While no single tool or technique can guarantee total immunity from the constantly evolving methods employed by scammers, the information presented here should help you be more aware of how these individuals work and how they take advantage of the open community we have created on the web. ○

NOTES

- ¹ Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/scam.
- ² Berger, Carola F. “Translation Scams: Tips for Avoiding Them and Protecting Your Identity,” *The ATA Chronicle* (October 2014), 10, <http://bit.ly/ATAChronicle-Berger>.
- ³ Flynn, Peg, and Carola F. Berger. “Cautionary Tales for Interpreters and Translators: An Overview of Scams Targeting the Language Industry,” *Translorial* (Northern California Translators Association, Spring 2017), 10, <http://bit.ly/Translorial-May2017>.
- ⁴ Berger, Carola F. “Password Protection for Your CV/résumé with Adobe Acrobat or Microsoft Word,” <http://bit.ly/password-CV-résumé>.
- ⁵ “Apply for an Employer Identification Number (EIN) Online,” (IRS), <http://bit.ly/IRS-application-EIN>.
- ⁶ Berger, Carola F. “Google Alerts,” <http://bit.ly/Berger-Google-Alerts>.

Carola F. Berger is an ATA-certified English>German patent translator with a PhD in physics and a master's degree in engineering physics. After being defrauded by an impersonator at the beginning of her career, she did some in-depth research on online fraud, which led to a series of blog posts and several articles in publications such as *The ATA Chronicle* and *Translorial*, the journal of the Northern California Translators Association. Contact: cberger@cfbtranslations.com.