Bilingual/Localization Strategies in Latin American Expansion: Four Cases

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Abstract

Across Latin America, language is not just a courtesy—it is a competitive necessity. Inadequate Spanish-language capability has derailed promising market entries, whereas high-quality localization has enabled firms to capture cross-border demand and build durable growth. This study reviews four business cases to examine how language strategy shapes corporate outcomes: a Chinese manufacturer (Golden Dragon) that struggled in Mexico due to linguistic isolation; a U.S. consumer-electronics retailer (Best Buy) that created a parity Spanish-language e-commerce platform and reaped higher engagement; a ride-hailing and delivery service (Uber Eats) whose literal category translation in Colombia confused users and depressed adoption; and a streaming media platform (Netflix) that invested heavily in Spanish-language originals and user interfaces, achieving rapid subscriber growth. The review primarily synthesizes case studies and industry reports from September 2017 to September 2025 but also includes earlier seminal examples (e.g., Best Buy's 2007 Spanish e-commerce launch) to illuminate foundational localization principles. Findings demonstrate that bilingual strategy can either undermine or enhance market success. Companies that anticipate linguistic needs, invest in professional translation and bilingual staff, offer parity user experiences and adapt to local norms achieve better operational, financial and reputational outcomes. Localization thus deserves treatment as strategic infrastructure rather than an afterthought. Findings suggest that bilingual strategy is correlated with improved operational, financial, and reputational outcomes; we therefore treat localization as strategic infrastructure rather than an afterthought.

Keywords: bilingual strategy; localization; Spanish language; Latin America; cross-border commerce; Golden Dragon; Best Buy; Uber Eats; Netflix; streaming.

1 Introduction

Language barriers remain a pervasive but often overlooked obstacle for businesses expanding into new markets. In Latin America, Spanish is the predominant language, and failure to communicate effectively can lead to misunderstandings, mistrust and lost sales (Schatan & Piloyan, 2017). Conversely, companies that invest in localization—translating interfaces, training bilingual staff and producing local-language content—can tap into a large and growing consumer base. Prior research shows that removing language barriers increases cross-border trade (Brynjolfsson, Hui & Liu, 2019). This paper examines four contemporary cases that illustrate how language strategy affects market entry and performance.

2 Materials and Methods

This review synthesizes publicly available data from corporate filings, academic reports and industry news primarily between September 2017 and September 2025. To illuminate long-standing patterns, we also include earlier seminal cases such as Best Buy's 2007 launch of its Spanish-language e-commerce platform. Cases were selected to represent both failures and successes in language strategy involving U.S. or Chinese companies operating in Latin America. Information was collated on each firm's language approach, market context, outcomes and confounding factors. All sources were cross-checked for consistency, and citations follow the APA author–date style.

2.1 Selection and Limitations

Cases were identified through targeted searches of academic databases, industry reports and news archives using keywords such as "Latin America," "localization," "Spanish language," and the names of major firms. We prioritized examples where language strategy played a clearly documented role in market performance. The review excludes cases lacking verifiable public data. As the study draws on secondary sources, measurement of outcomes (e.g., engagement metrics or sales) depends on the accuracy of reported figures. Moreover, many factors other than language—economic cycles, regulation, competition and cultural differences—also influence outcomes. We acknowledge these confounders and interpret causal claims cautiously, highlighting correlations rather than asserting monocausal explanations. Despite these limitations, triangulating multiple sources provides a reasonable basis to explore how language strategy influences market success.

3 Results

3.1 Case A — Under-Localized "Miss": Golden Dragon

3.1.1 Company, Markets and Dates

Golden Dragon Affiliates, a subsidiary of China's GD Copper Tubing Group, established a copper-tube manufacturing plant in Coahuila, Mexico in the late 2000s. By 2015, researchers documented significant labor and productivity problems (Schatan & Piloyan, 2017).

3.1.2 Language/Localization Approach

Chinese managers and engineers were dispatched without Spanish skills; Mexican workers spoke no Chinese and few spoke English. Communications depended on ad-hoc interpreters, creating delays and misunderstanding. Technical manuals were in Chinese and interpreters lacked engineering expertise. Management did not appreciate Mexican labor norms, demanding weekend work and unpaid overtime. These gaps fostered cultural isolation.

3.1.3 Outcomes

Labor tensions and protests ensued as language gaps fueled misunderstandings over pay and working hours. Knowledge transfer was slow and error-prone, and high turnover further undermined productivity. Cultural isolation contributed to low morale. These outcomes illustrate how neglecting the local language can sabotage industrial expansion (Schatan & Piloyan, 2017).

3.1.4 Other Confounders

Mexico's labor law guarantees profit-sharing and overtime pay; weak enforcement may have amplified grievances. Golden Dragon also faced market-access hurdles and security concerns unrelated to language.

3.1.5 Takeaway

Investing in Spanish-speaking supervisors, training expatriate managers in Spanish, hiring professional interpreters and respecting local labor norms could have eased tensions and improved productivity.

3.2 Case B — Localized "Hit": Best Buy

3.2.1 Company, Markets and Dates

Best Buy Co., Inc., a U.S. consumer-electronics retailer, launched a parity Spanish-language e-commerce site in September 2007 to serve U.S. Hispanic consumers and cross-border shoppers. Although this initiative precedes the primary time window, it is included because it offers a seminal example of proactive localization.

3.2.2 Language/Localization Approach

Best Buy built a Spanish site with more than 12 000 translated products, maintaining identical functionality to its English counterpart. The site accepted non-U.S. billing addresses and allowed cross-border pickup or shipping. Spanish-language call centers, click-to-call functions, community forums and bilingual staff supported customers. Marketing campaigns targeted Spanish-speaking audiences (Kuchera, 2011).

3.2.3 Outcomes

Spanish-preferring customers spent roughly twice as long on the site and their average order value was about double that of English-preferring shoppers. A welcome page for international visitors increased traffic by more than 500 %, and foreign visitors outnumbered U.S. visitors two to one. In-store customers used printouts from the Spanish site as translation aids. The success demonstrates that proactive localization can unlock demand (Kuchera, 2011).

3.2.4 Other Confounders

The 2008–2009 recession suppressed overall consumer spending, but the Spanish site's performance suggests language parity mitigated headwinds. Best Buy's established brand may have attracted Latin American shoppers irrespective of language, yet the surge following the welcome page underscores the role of Spanish access.

3.2.5 Takeaway

Providing a parity Spanish shopping experience, facilitating cross-border payment and pickup, staffing bilingual support and marketing effectively improved engagement and sales. Trust and functional equivalence mattered more than ethnic-themed content.

3.3 Case C — Under-Localized "Miss": Uber Eats

3.3.1 Company, Markets and Dates

Uber Technologies, Inc. operates ride-hailing and food-delivery services across Latin America. UXAlliance/Usaria studied its Colombian app in April–May 2020 (Usaria/UXAlliance, 2020).

3.3.2 Language/Localization Decisions

Uber Eats added a "Convenience" section to sell everyday items but translated it literally as "Conveniencia," a phrase that testers said does not sound natural in Colombian Spanish. Product descriptions and categories were inconsistently translated or left in English. The inventory lacked locally relevant products (Usaria/UXAlliance, 2020).

3.3.3 Outcomes

User-experience researchers reported confusion and a lack of variety, suggesting low adoption. A 2024 market study by Sherlock Communications found that 77 % of Latin American consumers have refrained from purchasing from international companies because of avoidable mistakes such as bad translation, and 37 % have failed to click on an online ad due to poor translation into their native language (Sherlock Communications, 2024). These statistics illustrate how poor localization can erode trust.

3.3.4 Other Confounders

Colombia's delivery market is crowded with local platforms; pricing, logistics and brand perception also affect adoption. COVID-19 lockdowns created supply disruptions. Uber suspended ride-hailing in early 2020 due to regulatory disputes, which may have weakened trust.

3.3.5 Takeaway

Literal translation can be worse than no translation. Investing in culturally appropriate labels, comprehensive translation and locally relevant inventory would likely have improved adoption and competitiveness. While the available evidence suggests a link between poor localization and reduced usage, confounding factors such as competition and regulation mean we cannot attribute outcomes solely to language strategy.

3.4 Case D — Localized “Hit”: Netflix

3.4.1 Company, Markets and Dates

Netflix, Inc., a U.S. streaming media company, accelerated its localization efforts in Latin America between 2020 and 2022. The platform’s 2Q 2022 shareholder letter emphasized local-language titles, and an Omdia/PlumResearch report analysed its strategy (TTV News, 2022).

3.4.2 Language/Localization Decisions

According to Omdia, Netflix invested about US$500 million to produce 40 original titles in Mexico in 2021 and planned 50 original series in Brazil in 2022. These local productions add a further layer of localization beyond pricing and partnerships. Netflix noted that local-language titles are a key differentiator. The service offers Spanish and Portuguese interfaces, dubbing and subtitles, and prices subscriptions in local currencies via regional partners (TTV News, 2022).

3.4.3 Outcomes

Paid memberships in Latin America reached roughly 40 million by the end of 3Q 2022. Omdia projected growth to more than 41 million by the end of 2022 and over 52 million by 2027. Mexican viewers streamed approximately 3.2 billion hours in 3Q 2022, with about 73 % spent on series. Across seven markets, total viewing reached roughly 10.8 billion hours and 129 million unique viewers. The Mexican thriller *¿Quién mató a Sara?* briefly became Netflix’s most-watched non-English series in April 2021. These outcomes underscore the payoff of culturally resonant content (TTV News, 2022).

3.4.4 Other Confounders

COVID-19 lockdowns increased screen time globally; subscriber growth also reflects general demand for streaming. Hit series such as *Stranger Things* and *Squid Game* attract viewers regardless of language. Competition from Disney+, Prime Video and regional services, along with pricing, influences membership.

3.4.5 Takeaway

Netflix’s Latin American strategy shows that heavy investment in local originals, localized interfaces and pricing can drive subscriber growth and engagement. Local storytelling can generate global breakout hits and strengthen brand loyalty.

3.5 Summary Table

Table 1 summarizes the key attributes of the four cases discussed above. It lists the market context, the firm’s primary language move, reported performance indicators, major confounders and the principal sources.

Case & Market	Language/Localization Move	Key performance indicators (KPI)	Confounders	Primary Sources
Golden Dragon (Mexico manufacturing)	No Spanish capability; Chinese manuals and ad-hoc interpreters; little awareness of local labor norms	Labor tensions, protests, low productivity, high turnover	Mexican labor law enforcement; market-access hurdles; security issues	Schatan & Piloyan (2017)
Best Buy (U.S. & cross-border e-commerce)	Parity Spanish-language site with 12 000 translated products, bilingual support and cross-border payment options	Spanish-preferring customers spend ~2× longer and order ~2× more; 500 % traffic increase after welcome page	2008–2009 recession; brand strength	Kuchera (2011)
Uber Eats (Colombian delivery)	Literal translation of “Convenience” as “Conveniencia”; inconsistent translations; English text remaining	UX researchers reported confusion and low adoption; 77 % of Latin American consumers avoid buying due to bad translation; 37 % skip ads	Competition from local apps; regulatory disputes; COVID-19 disruptions	Usaria/UXAlliance (2020); Sherlock Communications (2024)
Netflix (Latin American streaming)	Heavy investment in Spanish and Portuguese originals; localized interfaces, subtitles,	~40 million paid memberships in 3Q 2022; projected growth to >52 million by 2027;	Pandemic-driven demand; global hits; competition and pricing	TTV News (2022)

Case & Market	Language/Localization Move	Key performance indicators (KPI)	Confounders	Primary Sources
	dubbing and pricing	billions of viewing hours; breakout hits		

4 Discussion

The four cases highlight how language strategy can either undermine or unlock opportunity in Latin America. Golden Dragon's failure underscores the importance of anticipating linguistic needs and respecting local labor norms. Best Buy's success demonstrates that parity experiences and bilingual support can drive engagement and sales. Uber Eats illustrates that literal translation without cultural insight can deter users; simple mis-steps can erode trust. Netflix's achievements show that sustained investment in local content and interfaces yields measurable growth. These insights align with broader research showing that improved translation increases international trade (Brynjolfsson et al., 2019). Together, the cases suggest that localization should be considered strategic infrastructure for multinational firms.

5 Conclusion

Language is a decisive, though not monocausal, factor in Latin American expansion outcomes. Companies that invest in bilingual staff, professional translation, parity user experiences and locally resonant content can capture cross-border demand, improve engagement and build trust. Those that neglect localization risk misunderstandings, labor strife, poor adoption and lost revenue. Strategic attention to language thus offers both defensive and offensive benefits. Future research should explore how emerging technologies (e.g., AI translation) and cultural nuances further shape localization strategies.

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