

[Return to our website...](#)

[e-mail us](#)



The
Lifeline Language Services
Really Helpful Friendly Guide
to
Foreign Language Telephony IVR prompts

© Lifeline Language Services Ltd 2007

We don't develop IVR apps, but work with developers to make these truly multilingual. If you have an English app, and want a foreign language telephony IVR system, or are an IVR developer looking for professional and committed support to enable a foreign language IVR solution, why not give us a call on +44 (0)1772 558858, or e-mail us on voiceover@lifelinelanguageservices.co.uk

English is one of the most compact languages on the planet. It's also one of the sloppiest – things don't have to "agree" with each other, unlike French, and word order is – to us! – "normal". It's easy to assume other languages are the same – but, this just isn't so...

If you've been tasked to develop a foreign language form of an English telephony IVR app, there's a lot to consider. We've tried to assist below – we hope you find this useful, and look forward to delivering a solution with you!

So, your IVR system's up and running in English, with a prompt script and a model that builds prompt phrases correctly. Now you need this in a foreign language...

Yep – so how hard can it be?

Depends on the language. Some work pretty much like English and you may just have to translate your script. Your model may work straight off.

Others add complexity – for example in French the noun, verb and adjective agree in gender and number (black bull, black cows... *le taureau noir, les vaches noires*) etc...

So, additional word forms, but also which one to use, and when.

Many foreign languages revise sentence structure – in German the verb is often at the end of the sentence, while in Indian languages the subject is usually at the beginning. So as well as additional word forms and agreements you may need to re-write your system's grammar model. Then there are languages like Czech or Polish, or worse ...

There are other considerations too – how are times and dates said, for example? Or numbers? How many genders are there? French has 2, but German 3...

Hmm – I’m beginning to get it. Any advice?

We’ve suggested some basics below that may help. These are just a start however – we’d **very** strongly recommend involving a professional translator Day 1. We’d be glad to help!

Please, please, **DON’T** just ask a translator to translate an existing English IVR script – you’ll probably get much less than you need, and lots of costly re-work and delay!

Lifeline Language Services employs the talents of over 3,500 qualified professional mother-tongue linguists worldwide, in over 150 languages. We’re pretty experienced in foreign language telephony IVR, so well-placed to help you.

OK, I get it’s not easy – so what’s involved?

Let’s look at some basics.

- 1. Syntax.** Is the language constructed similarly to English? If you don’t know, ask someone who does very early on – may save a lot of pain...
- 2. Time and date.** IVR uses times and dates a lot – like “e-mail received at...”. How does the language say times and dates? Even if the format is the same as English, numbers for example may take different agreements depending on the month.
- 3. Singular and plural.** He/she/it may all take different agreements, and so may “hes” and “shes”. And in some languages 2 “hes” agrees differently to 5 “hes”, or 10 ...
- 4. Prepositions.** Things like “on”, “to”, “for” are easy in English where there’s just one form, but in many languages two or more words exist and you may need more than one (and the software logic to handle them)
- 5. Agreements.** Like the French “black bull, black cows”. Will you need extra prompts for this? (*Did you know: In some languages verbs don’t agree in the present tense, but DO in the past tense! Getting why you need a professional linguist yet?*)
- 6. Numbers.** You may need extras – simple example, French has male and female forms of “one” – so for “21” you may need both “vingt-et-un” and “vingt-et-une”.
- 7. There’s more...** with some languages, things get much more complex. Here’s one of our translators describing Czech syntax: “**Flexible word order, with endings, and intonation, determining relationships within the sentence**”. There are no less than 7 cases in Polish and Czech, and word endings – including proper nouns - change depending on the noun case. Hence you’ll see Tony Blair appear as “Tonyho Blaira”, “Tonymu Blairovi” and more – these aren’t writer’s preferences but basic – and essential - grammar!

The bottom line: in English you can easily build many sentences from a few simple blocks. In many other languages it’s much more complicated! But, it can be done, and we look forward to assisting you.

[Return to our website...](#)

