

XI. Errors in Translation

Making errors is part of the human nature, forgiveness, however is divine. As such, it is quite natural and much expected that translation trainees make errors when taking their first steps in the field. The most important thing trainees must know is that they can make a useful lesson and benefit a great deal from errors made by other translators. More importantly is the fact that trainees cannot make a real progress by repeating their errors. Translation trainers, on their part, have to be forgivers and to generously tolerate some of the errors. Significantly, knowing that even great translators make errors must teach trainees to be bold enough and start practicing their profession.

Knowing how to speak two languages is not the same thing as knowing how to translate. Translation is a special skill that professionals work hard to develop. In their book ***Found in Translation***, professional translators Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche give a spirited tour of the world of translation, full of fascinating stories about everything from volunteer text message translators during the Haitian earthquake rescue effort, to the challenges of translation at the Olympics and the World Cup, to the personal friendships celebrities like Yao Ming and Marlee Matlin have with their translators.

The importance of good translation is most obvious when things go wrong. Here are six examples from the book that show just how high-stakes the job of translation can be.

1. The seventy-one-million-dollar word

In 1980, 18-year-old Willie Ramirez was admitted to a Florida hospital in a comatose state. His friends and family tried to describe his condition to the paramedics and doctors who treated him, but they only spoke Spanish. Translation was provided by a bilingual staff member who translated "intoxicado" as "intoxicated." A professional interpreter would have known that "intoxicado" is closer to "poisoned" and doesn't carry the same connotations of drug or alcohol use that "intoxicated" does. Ramirez's family believed he was suffering from food poisoning. He was actually suffering from an intracerebral hemorrhage, but the doctors proceeded as if he were suffering from an intentional drug overdose, which can lead to some of the symptoms he displayed. Because of the delay in treatment, Ramirez was left quadriplegic. He received a malpractice settlement of \$71 million.

2. Your lusts for the future

When President Carter traveled to Poland in 1977, the State Department hired a Russian interpreter who knew Polish, but was not used to interpreting professionally in that language. Through the interpreter, Carter ended up saying things in Polish like "when I abandoned the United States"

(for "when I left the United States") and "your lusts for the future" (for "your desires for the future"), mistakes that the media in both countries very much enjoyed.

3. We will bury you

At the height of the cold war, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech in which he uttered a phrase that interpreted from Russian as "we will bury you." It was taken as chilling threat to bury the U.S. with a nuclear attack and escalated the tension between the U.S. and Russia. However, the translation was a bit too literal. The sense of the Russian phrase was more that "we will live to see you buried" or "we will outlast you." Still not exactly friendly, but not quite so threatening.

4. What's that on Moses's head?

St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators, studied Hebrew so he could translate the Old Testament into Latin from the original, instead of from the third century Greek version that everyone else had used. The resulting Latin version, which became the basis for hundreds of subsequent translations, contained a famous mistake. When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai his head has "radiance" or, in Hebrew, "karan." But Hebrew is written without the vowels, and St. Jerome had read "karan" as "keren," or "horned." From this error came centuries of paintings and sculptures of Moses with horns and the odd offensive stereotype of the horned Jew.

5. Chocolates for him

In the 50s, when chocolate companies began encouraging people to celebrate Valentine's Day in Japan, a mistranslation from one company gave people the idea that it was customary for women to give chocolate to men on the holiday. And that's what they do to this day. On February 14, the women of Japan shower their men with chocolate hearts and truffles, and on March 14 the men return the favor. An all-around win for the chocolate companies!

6. You must defeat Sheng Long

In the Japanese video game **Street Fighter II** a character says, "if you cannot overcome the Rising Dragon Punch, you cannot win!" When this was translated from Japanese into English, the characters for "rising dragon" were interpreted as "Sheng Long." The same characters can have different readings in Japanese, and the translator, working on a list of phrases and unaware of the context, thought a new person was being introduced to the game. Gamers went crazy trying to figure out who this Sheng Long was and how they could defeat him. In 1992, as an April Fools Day joke, Electronic Gaming Monthly published elaborate and difficult to execute instructions for how to find Sheng Long. It wasn't revealed as a hoax until that December, after countless hours had no doubt been wasted.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/48795/9-little-translation-mistakes-caused-big-problems>. With some deletions and introductory paragraph by Kadhim Al-Ali

Reading Guidelines:

Read aloud and make errors; translate and make errors. Wise men and women learn by their errors and the errors of other people. Only idle people do not make errors.

Q.I Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: divine, progress, tolerate, bold, spirited, volunteer, admitted to, comatose, intoxicated, intracerebral hemorrhage, overdose, lusts, abandon, height, chilling, escalated, patron, horned, offensive, customary, overcome, figure out, hoax.

Q.II Derive as many words as you can from the following words: divine, benefit, lost, fascinating, describe, bilingual, intentional, settlement, enjoyed, uttered, bury, resulting, basis, encouraging, unwary, execute.

Q.III Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: natural, progress, found, professional, bilingual, closer to, proceeded,

intentional, ended up, chilling, friendly, encouraging, customary, rising, elaborate.

Q.IV Answer the following questions briefly:

1. What pieces of advice are given in paragraph 1?
2. Knowing how to speak two languages is not the same thing as knowing how to translate. Discuss with reference to translation competence.
3. Do you think the malpractice settlement the patient in item 2 received is fair or unfair?
4. With item 2 in mind, do you agree that presidential interpreters should be chosen carefully and meticulously? Can you tell of other errors made by other presidential interpreters? What about Iraqi presidential interpreters?
5. In item 4, the mistranslation almost led to a political catastrophe. Can you think of other mistranslations resulting or nearly resulting in world crises?
6. How can we as translators dispel offensive stereotypes like the horned Moses? What about wrong stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims?
7. Item 5 speaks of translation leading to a happy occasion. Can you tell your happy story with translation?
8. Electronic gaming needs due attention by the translator. Why?

Q.V Discuss paragraph 1 with colleagues and translate it into plain Arabic.

Research Activity:

1. There is a great difference between our competence and our performance. Theoretically speaking our competence is perfect while our performance is not. We, unintentionally, commit mistakes due to linguistic, cultural and non-linguistic reasons like fatigue, hastiness and temporary unconsciousness.
2. Collect a number of errors made by "great" translators of Arabic fiction and poetry into English. Classify the errors into linguistic, cultural, etc.

Quote of the Day:

Humor is the first gift to perish in a foreign language.

[Virginia Woolf](#)

