Chapter 6

Untranslatability

There is a grain of truth to the proverb "Traduttore, traditore". No matter how good the translation, something always seems to be lost. It is that "untranslatable" residue of meaning that cannot be brought out in the target language which leads some linguists to proclaim that in a theoretical sense translation is "impossible". However, it will help the translator or interpreter to recall that "untranslatability" is chiefly due to the inherent features of cultures and languages, not to the individual abilities of the translator or the limitations of the craft.

The problem of "untranslatability" arises from the fact that different cultures divide up the universe in different ways, and that their languages therefore contain ideas, words, and expressions to describe those different concepts and culture-specific features. To cite some familiar examples, the languages of desert peoples have many words for different aspects of a feature of the physical world that English speakers simply call "sand", the Inuit language has many words for "ice", French has many words to describe the qualities of wine (e.g. "gouleyant" and "charpenté"), which cannot be very satisfactorily translated into English, etc.

However, linguists have shown (e.g. with experiments on color perception) that the vocabulary of our native language only determines what we can *say* about the world, not whether we can *perceive* it. If the word "Ouch!" did not exist, an English speaker would still feel pain when hitting a thumb with a hammer, but the English translator would have one less English word available to translate "Zut!" Consequently, specific realities singled out by the source language should not be treated as if they were hopelessly unrecognizable to speakers of the target language simply because speakers of the target language "don't have a word for it". Rather, the interpreter should try to devise some way of getting the idea across.

In some cases, the problem of "untranslatability" really is insurmountable, and the translator, after scouring through all the dictionaries on the

shelf, is finally reduced to leaving the word in the original language and inserting an explanatory footnote or paraphrase, while the interpreter is reduced to paraphrasing, describing, keeping the untranslatable world in the original, or skipping the word.

But one must not confuse difficulty with untranslatability. There are many ways to translate words and expressions that do not travel well from one language to another, and quite often "untranslatability" is a misnomer, because an exact or complete translation is not necessary, and an approximate equivalent may be all that is needed in a given context.

Dealing with the problem of "untranslatable" utterances requires one to bear in mind that the same idea may find expression in different ways from one culture to another. It involves asking questions like the following: What am I translating? A word? An idea? The name of a concrete object or of an abstraction? The title of a person? The name of a cultural institution or artifact? A technical term? A specialized use of an ordinary word? An archaic word? An idiomatic expression? The expression of an emotion? An image? A figure of speech? A newly-coined term? Should I look for a different part of speech (e.g. a noun rather than an adjective)? Is there anything in my culture which occupies roughly the same place or which plays roughly the same role? Is there anything in my culture that is thought of or talked about in a comparable way? Is the target audience expecting a complete translation? Does the context or the sub-text make clear the untranslatable implications?

Sometimes an apparent case of "untranslatability" can be solved by finding the equivalent register, or level of language. For example, the speeches of Winston Churchill might provide a good model to help you translate a speech by Charles de Gaulle; or, at the other end of the spectrum, American urban "rap" or old Chicago gangster-slang might provide an equivalent register with which to translate a French screenplay containing Marseilles "argot du milieu".

Because meaning is largely contextual, the context in which a word appears may at first make the word seem "untranslatable". But this is often a problem of "not seeing the forest for the trees". The French word **corde** may variously mean "cord" or "string" or "rope", but if you are translating the French expression "Il pleut des cordes", you need not wonder which to choose, because what you are actually translating is a French colloquial idiom conveying the idea of very heavy rainfall, and the best translation would be the English or Spanish idiom commonly used in that situation: "It's raining cats and dogs" / "Llueve a cántaros". In the Spanish expression **régimen carcelario** the adjective may at first seem untranslatable because English does not have a special adjectival

form corresponding to the noun "prison" or "jail", but if you focus on the sense of the whole phrase rather than the word, you can immediately see that the best English equivalent is "police state".

Similarly, equivalents can often be found for seemingly "untranslatable" recent coinages or neologisms if one pauses to consider the social context in which they are used. If a French speaker tried to translate the contemporary American coinage "yuppie" by searching for a one-word equivalent in French, he probably would never find one. But if one asks, "What kind of person is a 'yuppie' in America, and what do we call people like that in France when we want to poke fun at them?", one will probably hit upon the ironic expressions "jeune cadre dynamique" or possibly "BCBG", both of which are close enough to the meaning of "yuppie": a young, ambitious, stylish social-climber.

If we look in dictionaries and thesauruses for a one-word English equivalent of the contemporary Japanese word karoshi ("death from overwork"), we will probably not find one. But if we ask ourselves, "What's the phrase we most often use in talking about overworked executives running themselves into the ground?", we will probably hit upon the term "executive stress", which is weaker than karoshi but would probably be an adequate translation in most contexts.

In tackling an "untranslatable" word or expression, consider using other parts of speech, or figures of speech. In an entertaining book about "untranslatable" words, *They Have a Word for It* (Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc., Los Angeles, 1988), Howard Rheingold includes the French word dirigiste. True, the word itself is not easily translatable by any single English word. Its meaning is so specific that even English-speaking economists make no attempt to translate it and have in fact adopted it as if it were an English word. Thus, a recent World Bank study on Latin America by an American economist includes the following sentence: "A particularly important issue is . . . whether the reforms are likely to be durable or whether, on the contrary, they are likely to be reversed, plunging Latin America back into *dirigisme*, populism, and inequality." Here, the French word dirigisme is apparently being used, by an English-speaking specialist, because there is no English word that conveys all of the same nuances. We might therefore be tempted to conclude that the word dirigisme is "untranslatable". But a translation or interpretation does not have to use the same parts of speech as the original. If we ask ourselves what English words are usually used in the context of discussions about government regulation of business, we find at least one possible equivalent noun phrase: "command economy", as well as two adjectives, "prescriptive" or "directive", which are fairly close in meaning. So a

phrase like "une économie dirigiste" could be translated as "a command economy" (and "une réglementation écologique trop dirigiste" could be translated as "an overly prescriptive set of environmental regulations"). In some cases, "dirigiste" can probably be translated as "regulatory" if an intensifier is added, e.g. "un code de conduite dirigiste" = "an aggressively regulatory code of conduct". Thus, the word itself may seem "untranslatable," but the idea is not. To help create the necessary associations in your mind to enable you to find such solutions, an exercise that the author has found helpful is to form the habit of writing out "strings" of related words and ideas. An interpreter should try always to have more than one way to express any given idea.

Exercises

1 (a) How many different ways can you think of to translate the following French expressions?

> esprit de l'escalier / idée force / bricoleur / faire valoir / dérapage / dépassement / bavure / la dérive / fuite en avant / le rayonnement de la France / des remous dans les relations internationales / faire du forcing / respecter l'alternance / peser les enjeux / chez l'habitant / être solidaire de / la prégnance / amalgame / avec rigueur / cheville ouvrière / chantier / levée de boucliers / fin de non-recevoir / acheminement / faire le bilan de / lucide / sursaut / médiatique / retenir / éventuel

(b) How many different ways can you think of to translate the following Spanish expressions?

> cacique / cacicazgo / la convivencia / confianza / garbozo / vocación pacifica / la concertación / estar acosado por / estrepitosamente / armamentismo / fuero / foral / figura jurídica

(c) Form a sentence with each expression above and then try to translate it by using different parts of speech, or figures of speech. For example, the French noun "amalgame" is generally used to mean a deliberate mixing of unlike things, so that the expression "faire l'amalgame" means to create deliberate confusion by mixing up things that should be treated differently. If a corresponding noun in common use in English does not come to mind, could one use the English verb "to commingle", which means to mix together unlike things? Could one use the expression "to mix apples and oranges"? Could "patchwork" or "hodgepodge" be used if the speaker's register is colloquial enough?