

Chapter 7

Figures of Speech

Words are often used to form units of meaning in ways that convey more than what the rules of grammar dictate. Such combinations or clusters of words are used deliberately because they are “more than the sum of their parts” and thus serve as a kind of shorthand, which makes them especially useful to interpreters. Translators and interpreters must be alert to figurative language and remember that a figure of speech in one language can often be rendered by a different figure of speech in another language, e.g. a metaphor by a proverb, or by non-figurative language.

The most common pitfall to be avoided is not recognizing figurative or idiomatic language and translating it literally. For example, an English interpreter unfamiliar with the French idiom “jouer les empêcheurs de danser en rond” (to be a spoilsport) translated it as “going around in circles”. Failure to recognize the meaning of a figure of speech, or failure to accept and convey the meaning thereby intended by the speaker, can result in embarrassment for an interpreter. For example, in the following situation, a Russian interpreter apparently failed, or refused, to understand and render the meaning of the common English proverb “Don’t throw out the baby with the bath water”:

Rudenko was accompanied by his deputy, Colonel Yuri Pokrovsky, . . . and a young lady interpreter, who introduced herself as Miss Dmitrieva. . . . Miss Dmitrieva’s interpreting was beginning to improve somewhat, but her lapses were often comical and there was a good deal of mirth, which she took with great good humor. However, she was the soul of propriety, and when someone at the table used the expression “to throw the baby out with the bath water”, she blushed to the roots of her hair and declared severely, “I weel not translate that; it eez not *nice*.” Hazard explained the figure of speech in Russian to Colonel Pokrovsky’s satisfaction, but the lady still

seemed troubled by this vision of a naked baby tumbling out of a tub. (Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials*, Little, Brown & Co., New York, 1992, pp. 100–102)

Exercises

1 If Miss Dmitrieva did recognize the proverb (which also exists in Russian), was she entitled to censor the speakers for whom she was working because she found the expression distasteful? If the English speaker had conveyed his meaning by means of the expression “Do not cut off your nose to spite your face”, would Miss Dmitrieva still have refused to interpret him because it was “not nice”? Is a too-fastidious interpreter behaving rather like a dictionary that omits “rude” words? If Miss Dmitrieva could not overcome her aversion to what she thought was impolite language, could she not have simply rendered the meaning of the proverb literally, i.e. “don’t go so far that your action is self-defeating”, or “don’t overdo it”? If she could not bring herself to utter the words “throw out the baby” even when the objectionable expression was purely figurative, how do you suppose she would have coped, as an interpreter, with a speech in which the image was not figurative at all, as in the following remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton?

The voices of this conference and of the women at Hairou must be heard loud and clear. It is a violation of *human* rights when babies are denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or their spines broken, simply because they are born girls. It is a violation of *human* rights when women and girls are sold into the slavery or prostitution. It is a violation of *human* rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death because their marriage dowries are deemed too small. (Hillary Rodham Clinton, Address to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 5 September 1995)

2 Read the following classification of the main figures of speech often used by writers and speakers, and make a list of some examples of each figure of speech in each language you know:

- *idiom*: an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either grammatically (as “no it wasn’t me”) or in having a meaning that cannot be deduced from the combined meanings of its elements, for example: “Monday week” for “the Monday a week from next Monday”.