

Chapter 16

Latinisms

Speakers, especially in formal statements and in some technical contexts, may use Latin expressions. It is therefore advisable for interpreters to know some Latin, but this is not always possible because mastering modern living languages is far more important to an interpreter. As a general rule, it is safe simply to repeat a Latin expression you hear when you are interpreting a speech. That is certainly the best course when you do not know what a particular Latin expression means. Presumably the intended audience will know what it means if you have heard it and repeated it accurately.

However, it is also important to understand that there are at least three different kinds of Latinisms: (a) “assimilated” Latinisms, which have become part of the standard lexicon in the language that has adopted them (e.g. *a priori* in French, *ex profeso* in Spanish or *seriatim* in English); (b) literary or scholarly phrases, maxims, quotations, etc., which are sometimes used not as technical terms but interspersed in a speech mainly for rhetorical effect (e.g. “*Sic semper transit!*” or “*Tempus fugit!*”); and (c) Latin expressions used as terms of art, which occur most often in the legal, medical, and scientific contexts (e.g. *pacta sunt servanda* or *corpus delicti*). (This classification also applies to foreign words and phrases borrowed from languages other than Latin.)

Notice that type (a), the assimilated Latinism, does not have to be left in the Latin. It can be treated in much the same way as any other foreign-language term or expression. If you know what it means, it may be better to translate it. The French sentence “Je ne sais pas *a priori* si mon gouvernement acceptera cette proposition” means simply “I cannot readily say whether my government will accept this proposal”. Since we do not use *a priori* in that way in everyday English, it is stylistically preferable to put the speaker’s meaning into plain English. To use a Latinism (even if it exists in the English lexicon) where an ordinary English speaker

would not normally use Latin makes a simple statement sound odd and affected. It is probably for this reason that George Orwell urged writers never to use a Latin word when an English word would do.

Type (b), the literary Latinism, poses a different problem. A Latin phrase or quotation of this type is usually best left in Latin, since the intent of the speaker is to impress the audience with his erudition, or that of the source he is quoting. Sometimes, the speaker will spell out the meaning of the Latin quotation for the audience, in which case you will have the opportunity to interpret the explanatory translation into the target language. But if the speaker does not do the audience that favor, you need not feel that it is your job as an interpreter to translate the Latin phrase. The speaker is assuming a certain level of learning in the audience, which you must respect, or you may seem to be speaking down to the audience when the speaker is not. In interpreting a speech, you would not explain a Latin maxim to an audience of international lawyers any more than you would explain a Freudian term to an audience of psychoanalysts.

Type (c), the technical Latinism, poses yet a different problem. When used as a term of art, a Latin expression is being used in the same way as an English technical term like "hydrocarbon" or "metal fatigue". It has a specific technical meaning, and sometimes there does not exist any word in the target language that will convey that precise meaning. In fact, in some technical contexts, the Latin term is the only practical choice for a multi-national audience. The names of fish, for example, vary greatly from one country to another even within the same language, so that the only way an international meeting of marine biologists or fisheries experts can be sure of understanding each other is to use the Latin term for the species of fish they are discussing. Similarly, astronomers use only Latin names for certain stars or galaxies.

Here, your job as an interpreter (especially if the Latin term of art is unfamiliar to you) is simply to repeat it as accurately as you can, turning up the volume to your earphones if necessary so that you can hear the exact pronunciation. The worst problem with this type of Latinism is not to hear it right. For example, in a debate about jurisdictional immunity of states, one interpreter (due to poor sound quality) did not correctly hear an English speaker's reference to the distinction between *jure imperii* and *jure gestionis* (sovereign acts as opposed to commercial acts of states) and reiterated the latter in French as *jurisdictionis*, an interpretation which did not make sense. Such errors may not be very serious, since a specialist audience will probably not be misled and will usually forgive errors by non-experts. However, there is a potential for misleading some members of the audience for whom the Latin term is less familiar.