

Chapter 4

Word Order/Clusters

It is important to avoid automatically following the word order and structure of the source language when translating and interpreting. The words of the source language must be recognized, and the sentences must be understood. But the words are only the trees, and it is more important to see the forest. The “meaningful structures” with which translators and interpreters deal are neither words nor sentences. They are *units of meaning*, which may comprise a number of words, or part of a sentence, or more than one sentence at a time. (See Barbara M.H. Strang, *Modern English Structure*, Arnold, London, 1968, p. 73.)

Notice, for example, that the units of meaning in the following text, marked off with brackets, do not correspond to single words or to whole sentences:

[Once upon a time] [there was] [a lovely little girl] [by the name of] [Little Red Riding Hood]. [One fine day] [she decided] [to go and visit] [her poor, dear old grandmother], [who lay sick in bed]. [Taking a basket] [filled with flowers and fruit] [under her arm], [Little Red Riding Hood] [set out happily] [through the forest]. [Little did she know] [that] [deep in those dark woods] [lurked] [the Big Bad Wolf]!

It is important quickly to identify units of meaning by scanning a speech as you hear it for phrases or clusters of words that can be translated into corresponding clusters of words in the target language.

The way words are organized into clusters in the source language will not necessarily correspond to the way they should be organized in the target language. But the *meaning* will correspond.

Two kinds of clusters are especially important:

- noun + adjective clusters
- verb + object clusters

Noun + adjective clusters must be dealt with as units because adjectives in different languages fall into different sequences in a noun phrase. For example, in English, the adjective of size must come before the adjective of color (“big black dog”, not “black big dog”), whereas in French the adjective of size comes before the noun and the adjective of color comes after (“grand chien noir”, not “grand noir chien”). Moreover, in English, adjectives of age generally precede adjectives of color (“old blue car”, not “blue old car”), adjectives of size precede adjectives of age (“big old house”, not “old big house”), and all of the foregoing precede an adjective of nationality (“old blue French car”, not “French old blue car”). As a result of the complex rules governing adjective sequence in different languages, a phrase like “la grande conférence Brésilienne sur l’environnement mondial de 1992” becomes “the big 1992 Brazilian global environment conference”. Phrases containing several adjectives will become unmanageable for a simultaneous interpreter unless they are mentally processed as a unit.

Verb + object clusters should be dealt with as units because, as a practical matter of usage, some verbs will not work with some objects and vice versa. For example, in French the verb that usually goes with “plainte” is “enregistrer” or “porter” and the verb that usually goes with “progrès” is “enregistrer”; but in English you do not “register” or “carry” a complaint; you “make” or “file” or “lodge” a complaint; and you do not “register” progress, you “make” progress. In other words, these verb + object combinations have become crystallized by usage into clusters: “porter plainte” = “file a complaint”; “enregistrer des progrès” = “to make progress”.

Treating clusters as single units of meaning will also help you to identify those cases where you can compress wordiness by translating several words with one, which is especially useful in interpreting a fast speech, for example: “**aboutir à une conclusion heureuse**” = “to **succeed**” / “para **facilitar la comprensión** de nuestra propuesta . . .” = “to **clarify** our proposal . . .”. A good way to identify these cases is to “listen for definitions” and then use the word corresponding to the definition you have just heard. For example, if you hear a speaker say “Nous traversons **une période de grande prospérité** . . .” you can say “We are experiencing a **boom** . . .”. To develop this skill, it is helpful to browse dictionaries and do crossword puzzles.

Exercises

1 Form the habit of looking for word clusters whenever you read, and learn to “scan” the text for them when you interpret. You will find that,