

On false friends and other hazards of translations

Abstract

False friends are one of the many difficulties faced both by translators and second language learners. These are homographs from two languages that differ in their meanings. Calques (aka loan translations) offer a further potential pitfall for translators. A calque is a word-for-word translation of a word or expression. Several examples are given.

Keywords: *Translating; false friends; calques.*

Traduttore, traditore (A Tuscan proverb)

The act of translating has given rise to extreme opinions. The above proverb, likening translators to traitors, illustrates one extreme: It is based on the argument that since a translation can never be true to the original, translations always betray the authors. Many have shared this opinion:

- "Translation is the other side of a tapestry" (Cervantes Saavedra, 1983, p. 877).
- "La traduction, ce crime de gens malhonnêtes qui, ne connaissant ni l'une ni l'autre langue, entreprennent avec audace de remplacer l'une par l'autre..." (Renard, 2006).
- "A translation is like a stewed strawberry". (Attributed to Reuben Brower, to Harry de Forest Smith, and to Robert Frost; see Brower, 1959a).
- "Robert Frost once said that what is lost in translation is poetry. Translation in verse appears impossible to Victor Hugo. For Heine it is equivalent to straw-plaiting sunbeams. Dr. Johnson and Voltaire too reflect the same ideas" (Bhandari, 2013).

A quite different school of thought is represented by George Steiner (1975). The central theme of his book *After Babel* is that understanding always implies translation. Translation occurs not only between languages, but also within a language: The vocabulary, syntax, accent, and register of senders must be translated by receivers into their own for understanding (or misunderstanding) to take place: "Any thorough reading of a text out of the past of one's own language and literature is a manifold act of interpretation" (Steiner,

1975, p. 17). And again: "When we read or hear any language-statement from the past, be it Leviticus or last year's best-seller, we translate" (ibid, p. 28).

Here are some supporters of this notion:

- "A translation remains perhaps the most direct form of commentary" (The British poet D. G. Rossetti, in 1874, quoted by Fang, 1959).
- "That translation is an interpretive art is a self-evident truth" (Poggioli, 1959).
- "It is also worth remembering that translating is necessitated not only by differences in the national language of speakers or writers, but also by distance in space and time within a single language" (Brower, 1959b).

The task of inter-lingua translators (and foreign language learners) is often facilitated by similarity between source and target language. For example, it is easy to see how "liberté, égalité, fraternité" means "liberty, equality, fraternity", or such basic concepts as "Arm", "Hand" and "Finger" in German have the same meaning in English. Yet such similarities can occasionally be deceptive, leading to so-called "false friends" (first used by Koessler & Derocquigny, 1928),¹ defined by Chuquet & Paillard (1987) as "mots qui sont proches par la forme mais partiellement ou totalement différent par le sens" (p. 224).

Some false friends are more dangerous to translators than others. On the one hand, there is a very low probability of mistaking French "pain" (bread), "chair" (flesh), or "car" (for) for their English homographs, or of confusing German "also" (so), "die" (the), or "den" (that) with identically spelt English words.² On the other hand, French "diffuser" may mean broadcast, "ancient" does not always mean ancient, neither does "arrive" always translate to its English homograph.³ And let us not forget President Macron thanking Malcolm Turnbull and his 'delicious wife' Lucy for their hospitality during his visit to Sydney (Henley, 2018).

In her doctoral dissertation on false friends Boumali (2009/2010) listed several additional French words (such as *eventuellement*, *evidemment*, or *sensible*) that are liable to confuse students of the English language (see also Rothwell, 1993 about English/French, as well as Gouws, Prinsloo, & De Shryver, 2004 about Afrikaans/Dutch complications).

Hebrew and Arabic – two Semitic languages -- provide additional examples of both useful similarities and of false friends. Many common Hebrew and Arabic words are similar or identical, such as: day, night, sun, son, peace, and most of the numerals. But false friends can cause difficulties here, as well: Arabic *شمال* (*shamal*: North) becomes *שמאל* (*smol*: left) in Hebrew; Arabic *لحم* (*lahm*: meat) turns into Hebrew *לחם* (*lehem*: bread).

Calques (aka loan translations) offer a further potential pitfall for translators. A calque is a

1. False friends are also known as false cognates, false pairs, false equivalents, deceptive words, deceptive cognates, treacherous twins and belles infidelles.

2. All of these are inadvertent identities, sharing the same written form, but often fulfilling totally different grammatical functions. The same goes for German "war" (was), "fast" (almost), "such" (seek!), "Most" (fruit juice), "Bier" (beer), "Stock" (stick), or for Hungarian "most" (now), "nap" (day), "pad" (bench) or "lap" (page) vis a vis their English counterparts.

3. Our son opened the door to my French cousin who came for a visit. Seeing the boy's arm in a cast he asked: "What arrived?"

word-for-word translation of a word or expression. On the one hand, calques can be very useful, as in "superman", which is a loan translation from German "Übermensch", or "skyscraper", which has been successfully translated into a great many languages (Calque, n.d.), gives 50 word-for-word translations of this object. The same holds for French "marché aux puces" (flea market), or for the world-wide literal translation of the computer "mouse" to the rodent's name in target languages. But on the other hand, a word-for-word translation can cause confusion and occasional embarrassment: German "Kopfstein" (cobblestone) is not a headstone, "Lebensraum" is not a living-room, "Seitensprung" (a bit on the side) is not a sidekick, and "Prelude" is not foreplay.⁴

In addition to the above false friends and unfriendly calques there are also plain mistranslations, failures that can be both intentional and accidental:

- The translation of the Hebrew word "almah" in Isaiah 7:14 as a virgin, rather than as a young woman, has created the basis of the Christian faith.
- "In 1877, Giovanni Schiaparelli, an Italian astronomer, reported seeing canali on the surface of Mars. When his report was translated into English, canali, which in Italian means channels, was rendered as canals, which are by definition man-made" (Washam, 2010). This naturally led to endless speculations about life on the Red Planet.
- One of the most basic concepts in Freud's theory is "Trieb" (as in Todestrieb); this has been translated as instinct, rather than drive or impulse. Since instincts are by definition innate, this translation error has ruled out the possibility of acquired drives, thus altering the course psychoanalytic theory has taken.
- In 1956 Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's Russian phrase, aimed at the West ("Мы вас похороним!"), was translated as "We'll bury you", instead of "We shall be present at your funeral" or "We shall outlive you" (We will bury you!, 1956). No wonder the so translated phrase heated up the Cold War...
- Machine translations are a great source of errors. Though anecdotal, the translation of "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41) into "The vodka is good but the meat is rotten" provides a good example (A gift of tongues, 1997).
- Dozens of mistranslations, ranging from funny, through hilarious or embarrassing, to disastrous, have been collected, inter alia, by Macdonald (2015), Umansky (2015), and Nickels (n. d.),

Translators have traditionally suffered from low status and often of low remuneration, as well. Their professional life is made even more difficult by the pitfalls, listed here.

4. See also French "compromise", which is English compromised, French "conscience" which is English consciousness, or Spanish "constipado", which means a cold in English. Also note that even though German "Heim" is English home, neither English "homey" nor "homely" have anything to do with German "Heimlich" (secretive). The same holds for idioms. It would be a great mistake to literally translate "she took him to the cleaners" or "he lead her up the garden path".

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