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HOW NOT TO GET LOST IN TRANSLATION

When I was a missionary working in Asia, I looked forward to the occasional times when a guest speaker would be preaching in English at my local church. On one of those occasions the English church bulletin announced the guest speaker's topic as "Birds of a Feather." Curious, I cautiously looked at the translation of the topic into the local language. "Birds Have Feathers," it read. Somehow I feared that this miscommunication at the beginning would not bode well for the speaker.

Unfortunately, I was not wrong. The translator struggled to explain the nuances of meaning derived from this English proverb. The speaker went on to draw many lessons from birds near his home—robins, cardinals, chickadees and finches—birds whose appearance and habits, unfortunately, were not familiar to his listeners. The translator struggled to explain and describe bird after bird, but it was clear that much of the impact of the speaker's words and thoughts were lost in translation—on both the translator and the listeners.

This and other similar experiences remind me that entrusting one's finest thoughts to a translator or interpreter is like walking across a minefield. (A translator generally works with written material and an interpreter deals with the spoken word.) The potential for major disruptions in meaning and thought are numerous, whether one is communicating in written or spoken form. Any bilingual person has probably had the experience of listening to a message being translated and, being familiar with both languages used in the oral translation, noticing that the translated version of the presentation has little or no similarity to the original. Even when the translation is done quite well, it is not at all uncommon for the interpreter to diverge at times, following

the line of thought that a particular word or phrase seemed to indicate, only to discover several sentences later that she and the speaker had parted company somewhere. Often the situation leads to an uncomfortable pause for negotiation on the real meaning, and a certain amount of backtracking before the presentation can continue.

Similar difficulties arise in the translation of written material. Nuances of meaning can easily be lost, even if the main point is clear. So how can one avoid such situations and use translators or interpreters in a way that assures both speakers or writers that the intended meanings are communicated accurately across the language barrier?

Selecting a Translator/Interpreter

Having been on the giving and receiving end of translations, I offer these thoughts:

Choosing a translator/interpreter is an important place to begin. First, the interpreter needs to have a working knowledge of both languages. Textbook knowledge alone will not suffice. This is important for several reasons. An interpreter who has only book or written knowledge of the second language will have extreme difficulty understanding the language as it is spoken, especially by a native speaker. In addition, spoken language, even formal language (i.e., a sermon or lecture), will be less precise, since there are more contractions, pauses, and backtracking than in written language. In addition, the language will almost inevitably be spoken at a faster rate that gives the interpreter little time to think. A good working knowledge of both languages will ensure that you can build on a good foundation.

Those who will translate written language must have a thorough knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. However, they must also be able to recognize idiomatic or figurative usage as well. One word may have several dictionary definitions, but usually only one of them retains the nuance or specific meaning intended. In addition, a translator needs to have some general knowledge of the basic subject matter in order to choose the words that will best convey the real meaning.

Working With a Translator/ Interpreter

After choosing a translator or interpreter, the challenge for negotiating the minefield of translated communication falls on the speaker or writer. We will begin by examining some of the major challenges

speakers face.

Remember that everything will take twice as long. It is always a challenge for the audience to stay focused during a translated presentation, so it is therefore of vital importance that the original presentation not be too long. That means the speaker's part of a 30-minute sermon is only 15 minutes—tops!

A basic rule for speeches has been summarized as the KISS rule—Keep It Simple, Stupid. Crass though this may sound, it is doubly true for a presentation that will be translated. The meanings hidden in involved illustrations, rambling presentation structure, and long, complex sentences will almost certainly get lost in translation. Make two or three basic points with a few well-chosen illustrations and one or two basic facts (i.e., texts or short quotes). Speak (and write) in shorter, simpler sentences than you normally would, using more active voice and avoiding the use of passive verbs as much as possible. Communicating via translation is definitely a case where “less is more.”

Picking appropriate material for a translated presentation is also important. All of Jesus' illustrations were drawn from local events and life—sheep, vines, birds, a mugging on the road to Jericho—all familiar things to His audience. His example can guide us. Speaking of snow in a tropical climate or skyscrapers in a remote jungle is less than effective and very hard to translate. To illustrate important points, find items of local interest or illustrations from the local culture and life. It will improve the presentation and make it easier for the interpreter to translate.

How to Get in Trouble

In addition to things that one *should* do in preparing material for translation, there are a number of things that one should *not* do. Avoid the following:

1. *Poetry.* Poetry is very cultural and virtually impossible to translate. The best of poems will lose their meaning and power when translated. Leave them home.

2. *Acronyms or acrostics.* These can be fun in one's own language and may provide a clever memory device, but they can almost never be translated meaningfully into another language.

3. *Idioms or a plays on words.* This category includes puns and rhyming sets. I have heard speakers play on variations of Adventist, such as sad-ventist, bad-ventist, glad-ventist, and mad-ventist, which

are simply not translatable. This point is probably quite obvious, but because many idiomatic expressions have become a part of everyday speech, we may not even notice them. For a presentation that will be translated, write it out or think it through in detail, looking for phrases that do not convey the plain meaning.

4. *Slang*. I am not referring to swearing, but rather to pop culture words, such as *bro*, *s'up?*, *cool*, *way out*. Even in more formal speech, slang can creep in. Slang is current “pop” usage which is casual and perhaps not even fully recognized and understood by everyone—certainly not those for whom a translation is needed. It may work well with a youth audience in your own language, but rarely is it translatable.

5. *Proverbs*. Proverbs are very cultural and require knowledge of specific situations and language. Unless the meaning is very straightforward, such as many of the proverbs of Solomon, they are best left behind.

6. *Jokes*. Humor is nearly 100% cultural, based on local beliefs, politics, and life situations. The chances that something humorous in one context will be even remotely funny in another is slim. No jokes, please.

Rehearse With Your Translator/Interpreter

Finally, after the presentation is prepared and carefully examined to avoid dangerous missteps, it is time to take the material to the interpreter or translator. Whenever possible, you should go over it with the translator carefully. Allow enough time to discuss the introduction, main points, and conclusion, as well as any difficult words or concepts. Be open to questions or even suggestions the interpreter may have that help clarify something that is difficult to understand. In many parts of the world, it might be considered rude for someone to make suggestions to or question a guest. It is therefore important to openly request such input with a humble attitude. It is much better to clarify things before you're standing in front of a live audience wondering what went wrong.

It is easy for people's minds to wander during a translated discourse, but there are several things you can do to retain their interest.

1. Be animated and enthusiastic and encourage your interpreter to do the same. People may not be able to understand your words, but they can understand a lot from your body language.
2. Speak in short phrases—no more than a sentence or two at the

most. This will help the audience maintain interest and aid the interpreter who has to remember what you said, translate the concepts intelligibly into another language, and then say it. Be kind to her by keeping each segment short.

3. Remain engaged with the interpreter during the translation, showing interest by focused facial expressions, body language, and eye contact. These short breaks are *not* the time to plan what to say next.

The bottom line is that no translation is perfect. There almost certainly will be a few missteps. It is important, then, that both speaker and interpreter be patient with each other and enjoy the process.

Above all else, pray. The best translator of all is the Holy Spirit. Whether your prayers are answered with the gift of “tongues” for you or your interpreter or with the gift of “ears” for the listeners, the true meaning can get through in amazing ways—partly because of you and your translator, and sometimes in spite of you. With the Holy Spirit’s power, you, your interpreter, and your audience can maneuver this minefield successfully—to the glory of God.