Why Mistranslation Matters

Would history have been different if Khrushchev had used a better interpreter?

By Mark Polizzotti
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Translation is the silent waiter of linguistic performance: It often gets noticed only when it knocks over the serving cart. Sometimes these are relatively minor errors — a ham-handed rendering of an author's prose, the sort of thing a book reviewer might skewer with an acid pen.

But history is littered with more consequential mistranslations — erroneous, intentional or simply misunderstood. For a job that often involves endless hours poring over books or laptop screens, translation can prove surprisingly hazardous.

Nikita Khrushchev's infamous statement in 1956 — "We will bury you" — ushered in one of the Cold War's most dangerous phases, one rife with paranoia and conviction that both sides were out to destroy the other. But it turns out that's not what he said, not in Russian, anyway. Khrushchev's actual declaration was "We will outlast you" — prematurely boastful, perhaps, but not quite the declaration of hostilities most Americans heard, thanks to his interpreter's mistake.

The response of Kantaro Suzuki, prime minister of Japan, to an Allied ultimatum in July 1945 — just days before Hiroshima — was conveyed to Harry Truman as "silent contempt" ("mokusatsu"), when it was actually intended as "No comment. We need more time." Japan was not given any.

And the events of Sept. 11, and everything that followed, might well have been averted had the Arabic-language messages that American intelligence intercepted on Sept. 10 been processed sooner than the 12th — a matter less of misreading than of personnel shortages, but a failure of translation nonetheless.

These are recent instances, but examples stretch back to antiquity. The Bible, reportedly the most translated book of all time, has begotten not only the longest-running debates about translation, including the endless war between fidelity and felicity, but also some notable misconceptions.

When Jerome, the patron saint of translators, rendered the Bible into Latin, he introduced a pun that created one of the most potent symbols of Christian iconography, turning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil ("malus") into the tree of apples ("malum"). It's true that "malum," in Jerome's day, could mean any number of fruits: the serpentine creature on Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, for instance, is coiled around a fig tree. But in the 16th century, both Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach the Elder, following Jerome's lead, famously depicted Adam and Eve beside unambiguous apples. And when, the following century, John Milton wrote of Eve's "sharp desire … / Of tasting those fair Apples," he helped concretize the image of the bright rubine Malus pumila that we know today.

Of course, "mistranslation" is often in the eye of the beholder, and its consequences can range from the philosophical to the fatal. A populist English translation of the New Testament by the 16th-century scholar William Tyndale got him executed by the clergy for heresy, and not long afterward the French printer and scholar Étienne Dolet was hanged and burned at the stake for a translation of Plato that was also deemed heretical.

More recently, The Armed Forces Journal reported in 2011 that interpreters in Iraq were "10 times more likely to die in combat than deployed American or international forces." Perhaps, in a further twist on the old Italian pun "traduttore, traditore" ("translator, traitor"), neither the troops they were interpreting for nor the enemy they were speaking to had complete faith in what they related.

One of the most infamous cases of translation-related killing involves the 1991 murder of Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses." What makes Mr. Igarashi's assassination even more deplorable is that it is due, at least in part, to a mistranslation, and not even his own.

The phrase "satanic verses" was coined by 19th-century British Orientalists to designate one or several suppressed verses in the Quran, which the Prophet Muhammad is said to have repudiated as having been suggested by Satan. This is not how the Muslim world refers to these verses, however, so when the Arabic translator of Mr. Rushdie's novel rendered the title literally, he inadvertently made it sound as if the Quran itself had been dictated by Satan. The perceived blasphemy, unintended by the author, led to international rioting, Mr. Rushdie's enforced seclusion, Mr. Igarashi's stabbing and the attempted murder of the book's Italian translator, Ettore Capriolo.

Lately, the perils of mistranslation have taken on renewed currency. How to convey Donald Trump's free-form declarations to a global audience? The president's capricious employ of his native idiom, his fractured syntax and streaming non sequiturs are challenging enough for Anglophones, so imagine the difficulties they pose to foreigners: How, exactly, do you translate "braggadocious"?

The speed and frequency of Mr. Trump's tweets have spawned an explosion of equally fast, equally viral amateur renditions, with little thought as to how they might be interpreted worldwide. The incendiary nature of many of his statements about other political leaders only exacerbates the problem. As an article in The Boston Globe suggests, Mr. Trump's dealings with North Korea's Kim Jong-un, given the two men's "mercurial speech patterns," is a potential minefield of catastrophic miscommunication. One can all too easily imagine another disaster on the order of Khrushchev's "We will bury you" or Suzuki's "silent contempt," with far more cataclysmic results.

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