

About Translations

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Excerpted from *Joy and Evolution* © 2004

Using a dictionary, almost anyone can understand or translate a sentence containing unfamiliar words, provided the sentence is descriptive of something that he or she is familiar with. This is a basic method of expanding your wisdom. With this brief reminder, let me start this section with my experiences of translating foreign writings.

Years ago, I found that I needed to translate technical Russian documents because they related to my field of work in energy. Consequently, I took a very short course in technical Russian where I learned such basic things as the transliteration of the Russian letters into English letters and sentence structure. With the help of what I learned in the course, and with a good Russian dictionary, I then found that I could slowly translate technical Russian into understandable English. About this same time, I was anticipating meeting some visiting Russian scientists and wanted to at least learn how to say hello, so I then took a course in conversational Russian. In the course, I did learn how to say hello as well as such useful things as being able to ask where the toilet was and what time the train arrives.

The instructor, who also taught formal Russian at the university, explained that conversational Russian was highly idiomatic and complex. To support her statement, she brought in some grade school books used by Russian children. Even with dictionaries, we could only understand but a small portion of the books.

One of the students in the class, who was also competent in translating Russian technical journals, brought in a few technical Russian articles to the next meeting and presented them to the Russian teacher and asked if she could read them. She could read them quite easily, but because she had no technical training, she admitted that she had no concept at all of what the articles were describing.

The resulting discussion was very worthwhile as it demonstrated to everyone the problems of attempting to translate or understand any article without a background or wisdom of what lay behind the words. As an example, an American speaking of finding a “cool outfit at the mall” would be absolutely incomprehensible to someone who did not have an awareness of the American way of life.

I remember, as another example, that at a much earlier time I was writing several technical books and one summer hired a stenographer who was also a high school literature teacher and much older than I was. After the first dictation, she returned with a typed copy that had phrases that I simply could not understand. Finally, after I asked about them, she admitted to changing the meaning of some of the technical terms to improve my writing, since she felt that they were no longer valid words. She explained that the word “potential” was better replaced with “possibility,” “pressure” with “compulsion,” “energy” with “vigor,” etc. Fortunately, she had a great sense of humor and could appreciate the funny result of her efforts and became one of the best stenos I ever had — after she quit assuming that I was one of her students.

Anyone translating a document must first have a wisdom and awareness of the milieu from which the document comes, as well as experience with the subject being written about. This effect of different backgrounds is evidenced even in the differing opinion you can have about reading the same newspaper article as someone else. In order to make your own view clear, you must then add words or modify the meanings of words in the article and many times you must restate the entire article so that it reflects what you think the writer was attempting to say.

This problem is multiplied many times in translating or understanding writings from a different culture. It is this process that generally makes translations by different people so different. As the scope of what is being translated expands, so do the variations between individual interpretations. For instance, there is less variation in the common understanding of an article describing the proper setting for a dinner table than is found in attempting to describe what was said at a dinner table. The variations in interpretation of the activities of the world are, of course, extreme.

There is an excellent method of dealing with these problems. It consists of first determining what is commonly called the set and setting of what is stated. For instance, it is common to ask, "Where is all of this coming from?" or, "Where does all of this lead?" in attempting to understand someone else's thesis.

In attempting to defend their own translation or interpretation, individuals may not be able to describe either the past or the future. To compensate they generally increase their arguments for the present such as by making the present interpretation sacred, approved, or beyond question or understanding. We encounter this in childhood as we question some grown-up's statement that seems to make no sense at all.

There is another problem that arises with writings dealing with metaphysical issues. This is a serious problem in the modern world, since the world increasingly denies and suppresses usage of metaphysical terms which occupied a large portion of the efforts of many early teachers and writers. As a quick introduction to the problem, consider the difference between an ancient and modern individual describing the flu. The modern individual can say quite easily with physical terms, "I am sick with the flu and am running a fever of 103."

Now consider the problem of an ancient Hindu who would have to ascribe the same condition to the Will of some god or to some failure in following proper religious ritual. The symptoms might be explained as resulting from indwelling demons or gods with the fever being perhaps the flames of the god *Agni*. Conversely, imagine the problems that we would have in attempting to describe the functioning of the perineal muscles in terms of cauldrons of fire, serpents, rushing vital waters, a heating breath, indwelling demons or gods, instead of with modern physiological terms.

Without the modern wisdom offered by science, the ancients had to rely upon metaphors to explain their views and feelings. The word metaphor comes from the Greek word *metaphora*, which means "to carry from one place to another." A metaphor was, therefore, an agent of transference of feelings and ideas. A metaphor becomes of particular importance in describing metaphysical forces, such as describing the mysterious inner heat of a fever with *Agni*. However, if the metaphysical is not understood or is rejected as done in our modern society, metaphors cease to exist as such.

The Chinese describe this modern inability for a metaphor to transfer the mind to the metaphysical with the short maxim, “The finger pointing at the moon.” The implication is, of course, that modern individuals see and talk only about the physical, manifest finger and do not look at what the finger is attempting to transfer the concentration to.

As a further example, Jesus, today, is not considered to use metaphors, but rather is said to speak in parables which are defined as simple stories illustrating or adding details to the text rather than suggesting another concept that cannot be directly described. The elements in the parable must then be considered as physical and real and studied rather than what the elements point to.

As an example, in the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus uses the metaphor of an individual entering the *tameion* during “prayer.” *Tameion* is the Greek name for a lower storeroom in a home also used to store or hide valuables. Since the translators had no knowledge or experience of a lower *sacral heart* as described in this book, they missed the metaphor entirely and translated *tameion* as a special room that should be used for reciting the “Lord’s Prayer” or “Our Father” (also metaphors). You can find modern dissertations as to what type of room and furnishings should be selected to pray in, with the general agreement among Christians that praying really should take place inside a proper church.

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