



# Lost and Found in Translation

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 58

*by Philip Yaffe*

## Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first one, "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," and then read each succeeding essay.

*Most people write in their native language, which is why too many pay too little attention to how precisely they say what they want to say. "Well, everyone will understand." People who write or translate into other languages know this isn't true.*

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Strictly speaking, translation has little to do with effective writing; it is quite a different discipline. However, it behooves anyone who wants to improve their writing to be sensitive to translation, even if the text they are writing will never be translated. Why? As every good expository (non-fiction) writer knows, their overarching objective should always be to produce text that readers can easily consume and assimilate with little or no chance of misinterpretation.

This overarching objective was probably best expressed by essayist and novelist Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, etc.): "Do not write merely to be understood. Write so you cannot possibly be misunderstood."

In my e-book *The Little Book of BIG Mistakes*, I show how failing to rigorously adhere to this admonition can lead to strange, amusing, and often embarrassing nonsense.

Hotels, restaurants, airlines, and other businesses that cater to a wide public offer some excellent examples. It is hard to know if these are mistranslations or the result of someone writing in English as a second or third language. However, the results are blindingly clear.

- In an Acapulco hotel: "The manager has personally passed all the water served here."
- In an Athens hotel: "Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 a.m. daily."
- In a Bruges (Belgium) hotel: "Bathroom light operates with motion sensor. Turns off approx. 15 minutes after the last registered movement."
- In a Bucharest hotel: "The elevator is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable."
- In a Japanese hotel: "You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid."
- In a Zurich hotel: "Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedroom, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose."
- In a Paris hotel: "Please leave your values at the front desk."

Of course, hotels are not the only place you can find humorously garbled language. In fact, anywhere anyone posts signs is fertile territory.

- On the menu of a Swiss restaurant: "Our wines leave you nothing to hope for."
- Outside a Hong Kong tailor shop: "Ladies may have a fit upstairs."
- In a Bangkok dry cleaner: "Drop your trousers here for best results."
- Outside a Paris dress shop: "Dresses for street walking."
- In a Rome laundry: "Ladies, leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time."
- In a Copenhagen airline ticket office: "We take your bags and send them in all directions."
- In a Czech tourist agency: "Take one of our horse-driven city tours—we guarantee no miscarriages."
- In a Bangkok temple: "It is forbidden to enter a woman, even a foreigner if dressed as a man."
- In a Norwegian cocktail lounge: "Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar."
- In a Budapest zoo: "Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty."
- In a doctor's office in Rome: "Specialist in women and other diseases."
- In a public lavatory in Spain: "Please put used toilet paper into the basket."

International companies need to be especially careful about translations. Mistranslations can cause a lot of embarrassment, as well as a lot of money.

I live in Brussels. A few years ago, I needed a Yale combination padlock. I went to a branch of the leading do-it-yourself chain in Belgium. There were many other padlocks on the shelves, but not Yale. I was surprised. I asked the section manager why.

"Oh, we discontinued them because they didn't work." Now I was really surprised.

"I specifically need a Yale padlock. Do you know where I could find one?" I asked. "Wait a moment," he said. "We may still have one or two in the stockroom." He checked and handed one to me. "May I try it?" I asked. "Certainly." The instructions in English for using the combination were perfectly correct, but the instructions in Dutch and French were not. The lock wouldn't open.

In short, Yale (generally considered the "gold standard" for combination padlocks) had lost a significant portion of the Belgian market due to a mistranslation. I couldn't tell whether the French translator had made the grievous and costly error and then the Dutch translator started from their text or vice versa. What is clear is that one of them made the fatal error and the other started from the corrupted text rather than going back to the original English. A highly unprofessional way of working.

Here are a few more examples of humorous—and sometimes damaging—mistranslations:

- When translated into Chinese, the Kentucky Fried Chicken slogan "finger-lickin' good" came out as "eat your fingers off."
- Chicken magnate Frank Perdue took pride in the slogan, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken." However, when translated into Spanish, it came out, "It takes a hard man to get a chicken aroused."
- In Italy, a campaign for Schweppes Tonic Water translated the name into Schweppes Toilet Water.
- The slogan for Salem cigarettes, "Salem—Feeling Free", was translated into Japanese as "When smoking Salem, you feel so refreshed that your mind seems to be free and empty."
- A T-shirt maker in Miami, Florida, printed shirts for the Spanish market, which promoted the Pope's visit. Instead of the desired "I saw the Pope," in Spanish the shirts proclaimed, "I saw the Potato."
- When the Parker Company marketed a ball-point pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say, "It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you." Instead, the ads said, "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant."
- In Taiwan, the translation of the Pepsi slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi Generation" came out as "Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead."
- Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer Electrolux was embarrassed to find lackluster sales when they told potential customers in the U.S. that "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux."
- The name Coca-Cola in China was more or less phonetically translated into Ke-kou-ke-la. After printing thousands of advertising posters, company executives were dismayed to discover that it meant "Bite the wax tadpole" or "Female horse stuffed with wax," depending on the dialect. They then went back to the drawing board and came up with Ko-kou-ko-le, which loosely translated means "happiness in the mouth."
- Bacardi once created a fruity drink with the name Pavian to suggest French chic. Unfortunately, in German *pavian* means baboon.
- The Coors beer slogan "Turn it loose" was translated into Spanish as "Suffer from diarrhea."
- The "Jolly Green Giant" is the emblem of Green Giant canned foods. When translated into Arabic, it came out as "Intimidating Green Ogre."

A final anecdote. I once spent a few days in Saint Tropez, a resort city in the south of France. While roaming around I came across a world-famous five-star hotel, so I decided to drop in to have a look. One of the high-end (meaning expensive) shops in the lobby had two signs in its display window. Both were seven words long. It was clear it had first been written in French, then

translated, because the seven words of the English version had four grammar and spelling errors. Hardly conducive to inspiring confidence about the quality of the high-priced items on sale inside.

The solution to these funny—and sometimes very costly—translation problems? There are three of them.

First, no matter how simple the translation might seem, always have it checked by a native speaker.

Second, if you are writing instructions in another language, have a native speaker try to follow the instructions to see if they really work.

And above all, whenever you put pen to paper, in your language or another, keep Robert Louis Stevenson's admonition uppermost in mind: "Do not write merely to be understood. Write so you cannot possibly be misunderstood."

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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