

His Excellency and His Interpreter

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The President of Brazil visited Africa in early November 2003 and made certain statements during his stay in that continent. The contents of the statements themselves need not concern us: he did not talk about translation and this is not the *Poughkeepsie Review of International Politics*.

An interpreter translated what he said and that concerns us, because this, as you very well know, is the *Translation Journal*. Whether interpretation is a species of translation or a sister discipline may be a matter of some dispute in certain quarters, but I daresay both activities are very close kin, and interpretation of Presidential speeches is news fit for the *Translation Journal* to publish. If it is not, the publisher will deal with this article in the appropriate manner.

Give me the Facts: What happened in Windhoek?

The President's translator ... considered the President's statement politically incorrect and decided he was the man to put things aright.

On a fine day in Windhoek, Namibia, the President ad-libbed a few remarks, as is his wont. At a certain point the interpreter stopped translating, looked at the President, and interrupted: "Presidente, não estou entendendo", a remark that can be construed both as *Mr. President, I cannot understand what you say* or *Mr. President, I cannot understand why you are saying this*. It might be added that the President always speaks in a loud, slow and clear voice.

In addition, he is a very simple man and would never use the convoluted, highfalutin language so many politicians too often indulge in. The President always calls a spade a spade and the chances of misunderstanding or misinterpreting him are indeed slim. It must also be stated that the interpreter has often translated for the President.

The President must have heard his interpreter, since he repeated the phrase and added a second phrase, so as to build a comparison. The interpreter then provided what would usually be considered an inaccurate rendering of the first part of the comparison and omitted what would generally be considered a key term from the second. The translation up to that particular point and after it was considered very precise.

Beyond the Call of Duty

The fact was widely reported by the Brazilian press. Translators usually make the news only when we blunder or when the ladies and gentlemen of the press need something cute to laugh at. In this case, however, the reports claimed that the interpreter had corrected a Presidential *faux pas* because the original statement would be offensive to some hearers.

The matter was also discussed at some length at translators' lists and it was generally agreed that the interpreter did well in bowdlerizing what the President had said. Many colleagues held that the interpreter had rescued the President from an awkward, embarrassing situation (what is termed in Brazil "wearing a tight skirt" for reasons better left unexplained) and, as such had gone beyond his duty both as a professional and as a patriot.

Did he? Perhaps. However, the more I think about it, the less I like it.

What do we need an Interpreter for, anyway?

Some interpreters like the "reported speech" mode of interpretation, principally when they are doing conversations. In the unlikely case you do not know what I am talking about, it is the mode in which the interpreter always begins each intervention with something like "Mr. Doe says that...". This may be very awkward, mainly when speakers themselves are in the habit of beginning each utterance with a "please tell him that...", which would result in a horrible "Mr. Doe asks me to inform you that...".

Conversations flow more easily in the "direct speech" mode when each speaker addresses the opposite part as if both had a common language and the interpreter uses "I" to refer to the person he is interpreting for. However, the reported speech mode has the advantage of emphasizing that the interpreter is entrusted with the task of delivering a message. If interpreters/translators willfully deliver a message different from the one conveyed to them, they are lying and that is that.

Like, say, when John calls the office and asks his friend George to please tell the boss that something came up and he will be a couple hours late for work and is very sorry about it and George tells the boss John called in and said he met this terrific blonde and was flying down to Acapulco for a couple weeks and the office be damned. This would be considered an outright, dirty lie. Now, why isn't the willful deletion of a couple words from a presidential speech considered a lie too?

A lie is a lie, of course, and although there may be cases where a lie is ethically justified, such as when a life is in danger, we should be really careful with exceptions.

Can we trust this Interpreter?

We must also consider the audience. They were there to hear what the President had to say. Since they didn't understand Portuguese and the President speaks only Portuguese, they needed an interpreter and the President provided one. And the audience believed that the interpreter was reporting what the President said, which he did not. So the audience was fooled. You might say that the interpreter's duty of loyalty was to his employer, the Brazilian government, not to the audience, which is very true.

But, if the President's interpreter is not to be trusted to provide a true translation of a Presidential speech, then the interpreter in such cases should be provided and paid for by the audience, because I am sure the audience wants to know what the President of Brazil said, not what his interpreter thought he ought to have said instead. I would go farther than that: the audience is *entitled* to know what the President said. After all, they were there to hear the President, not his interpreter.

The possibility of an unfaithful translation is one of the reasons why, in international meetings, each side brings their own interpreters. Interpreters are in charge of translating for their principals *and* keeping an eye on what the other guys do for theirs. But in case I'm relating the audience was helpless of course: they had to rely on the speaker's interpreter.

How I Prevented a Real Fight and Other Stories

A few colleagues at the trad-prt translators' list claimed we should always "dilute" statements and that is the correct way to act. They told stories of how an interpreter prevented a fight by omitting insulting statements from the translation. Great. But, first, if someone calls me an &#\$@!!! to my face in a foreign language I believe I'm entitled to know what he said and, second, the purpose of avoiding a fight might have been equally well served by providing an exact translation and letting the parties understand that the other guy was mad as hell and meant business, too.

In addition, I don't see myself as a negotiator or facilitator: my burden as a translator is already heavy enough for me. You start doing a little bit of editing here and there just to grease the gears and in no time at all people will be blaming you for the next international incident. (If the interpreter had only...)

We are always complaining against non-translators who decide they must have a go at translating and then they blotch the job. I firmly believe we should do what we preach and leave negotiations to the negotiators—and presidenting to the presidents, if I am allowed to say so.

The Perils of the Profession: There is no God!

In addition, the interpreter ran the additional risk that the President might have been playing a rhetorical game. Instead of explaining what I mean, let me tell you a story, an extreme case, but true nevertheless.

Father Antonio Vieira, a master of baroque Portuguese oratory, once climbed the stairs to the pulpit, cleared his throat and boomed: "There is no God!" The congregation froze in terror: had the good priest gone bananas? Was it the work of the devil himself? Would the roof fall on their heads? Was the end neigh? None of the above. Antonio Vieira was just using a very old rhetorical device. After allowing his audience a few seconds for general bewilderment, he said in a calm and controlled voice, something like "... that is what fools say". Then he proceeded to develop his sermon according to good Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

This, in my view, is the perfect example to show the two main differences between translating a text and translating a speech: the lack of "forward" context and the impossibility of correcting one's translation.

If you have to translate the published text of the homily and decided that was a typo, because of course a sixteenth century Roman Catholic priest could not and would not deny the existence of God and, as a consequence, decided to translate the *Deus não existe!* as *There is a God!* the following sentence would show your assumption was wrong and you could go back and humbly correct the translation of the first. However, if you were doing a "translate-as-he-goes" each new sentence would be a source of embarrassment.

Of course, it might have been a slip of the tongue and the interpreter might have to correct himself later by saying "the interpreter apologizes...". Not an easy situation, either. But I believe it would be the best alternative

The Dangers of Translating

Translation is about deciding. There are no hard-and-fast rules, no perfect translations, we must make decisions all the time and most of them are dangerous. We are always walking a tightrope. It takes many of us a long time to figure that out. Neophytes are always looking for *the right translation*, or for the *grammatically correct expression* or the *correct way to deal with...*

There is no such thing. There is always another solution and there will always be people who claim the other solution was better and offer strong evidence to support their views. Unfortunately, too often the guy who disagrees and the guy who signs the check (or decides not to) are one and the same person.

A Decision Made, an Effort Lost

The President's translator made his decision. It looks like he considered the President's statement politically incorrect and decided he was the man to put things aright. The President has press relations officers, the guys who are paid to claim that *the President was misquoted* or *the President was quoted outside context* if need be. Those are the experts, the real spin-doctors. But the interpreter thought *he*, of all people, should handle that.

It was all to no avail, alas. Other persons in the audience understood Portuguese and noted that the interpreter had sanitized the statement, and the matter received more attention from the international press than it would receive otherwise, for the press is always interested in anything that might embarrass a public figure.

The very fact that the statement was expurgated by the interpreter helped prevent the Presidential press office from doing its job of claiming the President had been quoted out of context or something.

And, finally, when he returned to Brazil, the President was questioned about his statement and, never a man to mince his words, answered *had you been there, you would have agreed with me*.

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