

Lost in Translation

As Cuba is my native land, and Spanish the first language I learnt as an infant, I believe I have a unique insight into the ambiguities and absurdities of the other two languages I mastered since –English and French.

English is a particularly difficult language to learn for anyone whose mother tongue is a Romance language (i.e., a language derived from Latin –such as Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian), as the orthography of said languages tend to be both simpler and more rigorous than that of English. This is specially the case with Spanish, which was considered so rational that its grammar and phonetics were used heavily in the invention of Esperanto. In Linguistics one uses the terms “opaque” and “transparent” to explain that languages are transparent when they have regular phoneme-grapheme correspondences, (i.e., Hindi, Spanish, Finnish, Latin or Italian) whereas languages such as English or French are considered opaque, as they feature irregular spellings and combinations of letters.

Normally, when one learns English today, one has first to learn to speak it (usually from audio recordings) before learning to write it, as the sound of English differs greatly (and bafflingly) from its orthography. This is mainly due to the chaotic evolution of the language and to the fact that there is no regulatory “Academy of the English Language” such as one finds in French and Spanish.

A good example of this chaos is in the pronunciation of the letters “ough” in the following five words: tough, though, through, thorough and thought. If you were to pronounce them in Spanish they would sound, if spelled phonetically, like this: tough ⇒ **tof**, though ⇒ **ðou***, through ⇒ **zru**, thorough ⇒ **zerou** and thought ⇒ **zot**. Another example of pronunciation confusion is the words “**wonder**” –which looks like it should rhyme with “**on**” but in fact it rhymes with “**sun**,” and “**wander**” –which looks like it should rhyme with “**ban**” but in fact it rhymes with “**on**.”

A further source of confusion in English is its evolving and ever-expanding lexicon. For example: The past tense of the verb “to hang” can yield different sentences, like: “I hung the picture on the wall” or “We hanged the thief” or “Dude’s all hung-up.” This last sentence refers to the baffling explosion of colloquialisms derived from the integration of non-WASP languages and dialects, such as Ebonics. For instance, how can a Spanish speaker understand a sentence like this one from Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885): “*Sometimes you gwyne t’git hurt, en sometimes you gwyne git sick; but every time you’s gwyne t’git well agin.*” **

One of my particular peeves is the needless use of double consonants in both English and French. At least the Spanish had the gumption to spell Millennium, Milenio. What’s the point? I belong to a few anglophone committees, but would rather belong to Spanish or French comités.

My sister, Alina Newman-Delgado, a bilingual educator for many years, wrote her doctoral dissertation as a form of auto-ethnography, exemplifying the existential transformation of Hispanic children into anglophones through the American public education system. ** In it, she refers to Umberto Eco's *Experiences in Translation* (2000), who wrote that you cannot translate word for word. You need to place the texts side by side and look at the conceptual nature of the communicative process before you apply meaning to the idea of what you are translating.

In our most recent communication, Alina explained to me that: "For instance: in English you might say, 'I dropped the book,' whereas in Spanish we might say, 'Se me cayó el libro.' You can easily see the cultural nuances here: Anglos take on the blame for dropping the book; whereas Spanish-speakers blame the book for falling. You can see where anglos admit guilt for carelessness; whereas Hispanics don't take on guilt. It's the stupid book that fell! In Spanish 'educación,' or 'ser educado' may have a different conceptual meaning to the English term 'education,' which concerns itself with school, college, etc. In Spanish, 'ser educado' means to be respectful, considerate... You don't have to have 'schooling' to be 'educado.' Schooling would be termed as 'educación colegial.' Thus, when you tell someone from Latin America that he's had no 'education,' he or she may be offended."

This all reminds me of a joke I heard many decades ago which illustrates the difficulties I've been referring to: A Spanish duke invites some English diplomats to a fancy dinner at his mansion, and asks his butler to usher the guests in as they arrive, but the butler tells him he doesn't speak English. So, the duke tells him not to worry, just learn this sentence: "*¡Entre, entre, y tome asiento!*" word by word in English. Finally, as each guest arrives the butler greets them with this horrid but exact translation: "*Between, between, and drink a chair!*"

* (N.B. The use here of the letter "ð" expresses a sound non-existent in Spanish.)

** <https://booksonthewall.com/blog/huckleberry-finn-quotes/>

*** Alina Delgado –*The Child Left Behind: The Transformation of the Heart and Mind of a Bilingual Teacher Through Conversations with Immigrant Families*, Literacy Studies Department, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY (May 2005).

Written by © Pascual Delgado, May 29th 2023.