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A GUIDE TO EVERYDAY QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE

SECOND EDITION

From one language to the next: Why is it hard to learn a second language? Why is translation so difficult?

In the first chapter we looked at first language acquisition. There are important differences between acquiring a first language—a process that happens naturally to any child who is not linguistically deprived—and learning a second. The use of the word *acquiring* in one case and *learning* in the other is not accidental. Scholars debate, in fact, whether or not the cognitive faculties that are employed in second language learning are distinct from those employed in first language acquisition, and much of the evidence suggests that they are.

First, anyone who is learning a second language has already acquired a first language, so the language mechanism in the brain has already had certain linguistic parameters (such as word order) set, making the task quite different. What one needs to learn are the specific rules of the second language—often called the target language. The first language typically serves as the model, and errors often result from taking words from the target language and stringing them together by applying rules from the first language. So, for example, if the first language is English, and the target language is Japanese, a second language learner might position the Japanese verb between the subject and the object of the sentence, using the English word order, rather than placing the verb after the object, which is the correct Japanese word order. The greater the difference between the first language

and the target language, the more tasks are involved in learning the latter. Second language learning can even be characterized as a gradual shift from the first language orientation to the target language orientation.

Second, first language acquisition takes place in early childhood (by the age of five usually) and typically cannot take place after that critical period. However, second language learning, especially in a classroom setting, proceeds more quickly with adults and adolescents than with younger children initially, although ultimately the younger child will become more proficient in the second language than the adolescent or adult. That is, second language learning proceeds more quickly with people who have a high proficiency in their first language.

Third, whereas first language acquisition happens without conscious teaching, second language learning generally does not. Thus, the process is distinct. Studies have shown that self-confidence, motivation, good self-image, and low anxiety are traits that improve facility in a second language, but none of these traits is important to first language acquisition.

Fourth, the complexity of the input affects second language learning but not first language acquisition. For example, if a second language learner has a classroom teacher who talks in the target language at a quick rate, in complex sentences, and about complicated matters, the learner will have a harder time initially than if simpler constructions are presented about matters that don't involve a lot of decision making or mental judgment. However, first language acquisition proceeds at the same rate whether or not adults simplify their language.

Fifth, practice is important for second language learning but not so much for first language acquisition. Even very quiet children acquire their first language at the ordinary rate.

The two processes have some things in common, however. Second language learning proceeds more quickly if the target language is used as the medium of instruction. So exposure to ordinary language is important, just as it is in first language acquisition, although it can help if that language is a little bit slower and less complex initially. In fact, second language learning is more successful when richly interactive language is used in the classroom. Instructional conversations are better teaching tools than memorization drills or lectures and recitations. And certainly conversations are more like the ordinary language one is exposed to in first language acquisition than are memorization drills and the like.

So far I've presented several generalizations that you can find in the literature on second language learning, and I haven't introduced any controversy. In chapter 12 we put ourselves in one situation that some second language learners face. However, that chapter is mainly about language policy, and it doesn't deal extensively with the kinds of questions posed to people who are learning a second language. Here, I want to look at precisely those types of questions. I do so by turning to the issue of translation, which allows us rather quickly to wrestle with a wide range of issues relevant to second language learning.

One Italian saying is "traduttori, traditori," literally, 'translators, traitors.' The idea is that translation can never be perfect, so anyone who translates necessarily betrays the original.

Various types of activities fall under the rubric of translation. The Certificate of Foreign Status of Beneficial Owner for United States Tax Withholding form (federal tax document form W-8BEN) asks in part 1, line 1, for "Name of individual or organization that is the beneficial owner." When a recent Norwegian visitor to my college read this phrase aloud and asked what it meant,

the administrative assistant said, "Let me translate: 'you.'" Here the word *translate* was used to refer to an explanation through rewording within a language (intralingual translation).

Another way in which the word *translation* is used can be seen in the following situation. One of my college students wrote a poem, and another one did a dance that she called a translation of the poem. Here the word refers to an interpretation of one medium in another (intersemiotic translation).

I want to restrict the discussion to a third sense of *translation*, the commonest and the one most relevant to second language learning—interpreting from one human language into another human language, the activity the Italian saying claims is impossible to do with total accuracy (interlingual translation). Is the saying right? Or is true translation possible?

Students in high school language classes are continually asked to translate between languages. Probably you've been asked to do that, and you might even be able to remember some of the questions you faced. However, rather than make a list of the types of potential issues that come up, let's just jump into a translation exercise together.

We could choose a variety of texts to translate, for some of which the only real job is to transmit factual information grammatically. Think of translating legal documents, driving directions, or instructions on how to construct a harpsichord from a kit. Translating such texts is a matter of strict adherence to the (perceived) intended informational message of the original author. The translator can easily ignore the style of the original text without much threat of criticism. Instead of any of these types of texts, though, I'm going to choose poetry because the range of factors to consider is wider and because true facility in a second language entails recognition of these factors.

There are various types of poetry translations. Some of them are similar to the approach used in translating factual texts, such as instructions, in that they do not consider all of the factors present in the original. Let's look at an extreme case. The Austrian poet Ernst Jandl (1925–2000) focused on the importance of sound in poetry. He developed the art of "surface translation," whereby the sounds of a poem in one language would be rendered into another—using words native to the target language or nonsense words in the target language—without regard to meaning. When the two languages differ in their sound inventories (as most languages do), the closest approximation is acceptable. Here is an example of a poem in German by Rainer Maria Rilke, shown next to Jandl's surface translation into English. I've also provided a word-by-word translation so that you can see how the surface translation disregards the meaning of the words in the original poem.

Rilke's poem	Surface translation	Word-by-word
Der Tod ist groß.	Dare toadies gross	the death is big
Wir sind die Seinen	Vere sinned designing	we are the his
Lachenden Munds.	Laugh in the moons.	with laughing mouths
Wenn wir uns mitten	When we've ounce mitten	when we us midst
im Leben meinen	Am lay-by mine	in- in life believe
wagt er zu weinen	Farct hair so whining	dares he to cry
mitten in uns.	Midden in noons.	midst in us

I am not going to deal with surface translation of this sort but rather with holistic translation, which is more pertinent to second language learning.

Let's start by trying to translate a poem into English from a language that is quite similar to English—Dutch. Annette Hoeksema gave me this nursery rhyme, which Dutch children enjoy, and she translated each word individually for me:

Leentje leerde Lotje lopen
In de lange Lindenlaan
Maar toen Lotje niet wou lopen
Liet Leentje Lotje staan.

The very first word, *Leentje*, is a girl's name, as is the third word, *Lotje*. Do we leave them as is (in the Dutch) on the grounds that names can carry over from one language to another? That is, do you call your Italian friend Giuseppe and your Israeli friend Leila? Or should we choose English names, in the way in which you might call your Italian friend Joe and your Israeli friend Lilly?

The question may seem trivial, but it isn't. Our choice here might elicit emotional responses from the reader that we must be sensitive to. Let's say you have an Italian friend named Graziella. Do you call her Graziella or Grace? If you live in a city, probably neither choice seems very strange to you, and you'd be happy enough calling her Graziella. If you live in a small rural town, however, one where immigrants haven't been seen for generations, *Graziella* might seem to be a rather exotic name, one that could tend to isolate her from the community and one that you might even feel pretentious saying. We are trying to translate a nursery rhyme together, so maybe we want to stay away from anything that isolates the protagonists in the rhyme from the children who are reciting it and from anything that smacks of pretension.

All right, then, on the grounds that I want unpretentious names, I'm going to translate *Leentje* as 'Little Linda' and *Lotje* as 'Lottie.' You might object that in Dutch *Leentje* and *Lotje* both end in *tje*. So

maybe these two names have something in common that should be preserved when we translate them. If you made this objection, you'd be right: The suffix *-tje* is a diminutive ending, comparable to the *-y* in *Johnny* and the *-ie* in *Bessie*. If we put the word *little* with one name but use the English diminutive *-ie* with the other, we lose this similarity between the names. So do we say *Lindy* and *Lottie* or *Little Linda* and *Little Lottie*? One problem with the second choice is that the diminutive is already present in *Lottie*, so having *little* as well seems unnecessary. On the other hand, maybe in your experience *Lindy* is unusual, making the first choice feel too exotic for a nursery rhyme. You might even want to substitute 'Lindsay' for *Lindy*.

How did we get into all this trouble just dealing with something so straightforward as proper names? Since there are many other issues for us to resolve as well, I'm simply going to translate the names as 'Lindy' and 'Lottie' and forge ahead.

Let's go to the other words in the first line: *Leerde* means 'taught' (it is marked for the past tense and for agreement with a third-person singular subject), and *lopen* is the infinitive (the completely tenseless form that has no agreement) for the verb *walk*. We can now translate the first line word for word:

Lindy taught Lottie walk

This isn't a grammatical sentence in English. I chose Dutch to start our investigation because it is so similar to English that word-by-word translations often yield grammatical results. I wanted our attempt at translation to be successful. We've hit a glitch here, though. The problem is with the verb *teach*. Several other verbs would have yielded a good sentence, for example:

Lindy {helped/let/made/watched/heard/saw} Lottie walk

However, for *teach* we need the extra word *to* in front of the verb *walk*. So let's translate the four words in line 1 of the Dutch nursery rhyme with an English line that consists of five words:

Lindy taught Lottie to walk

(Notice that many verbs behave like *teach* in requiring *to* before a following infinitive verb.)

Now let's go to the words in the second line: *In* means 'in,' *de* means 'the,' and *lange* means 'long.' The last word, *Lindenlaan*, is a proper name again, the name of a road. *Linden* has to do with linden trees, and *-laan* is translated as (and historically related to) our word *lane*. So let's say:

In the long Linden Lane

This has a fine sound to my ear (and it's because of how nicely Dutch translates into English that I chose it).

Let's move on to line 3. *Maar* means 'but,' *toen* means 'as/when,' *niet* means 'not,' *wou* means 'wanted' (again, past tense, third person), and *lopen* (again) means 'to walk.' If we translate word for word, we'll get the following:

But when Lottie not wanted walk

Again, the result is ungrammatical in English. English requires that *to* precede the infinitive verb *walk*, just as in line 1. English also requires another extra word because the negative *not* calls for an accompanying (helping or auxiliary) verb. (This did not used to be so, however; compare the biblical "Judge not lest ye be judged" to ordinary modern talk.) So let's put in the appropriate form of *do*:

But then Lottie did not want to walk

Read this line aloud. It's grammatical but stilted. In ordinary conversation we'd say *didn't* rather than *did not*. So maybe the line should be

But when Lottie didn't want to walk

What can help us choose between these alternatives? Probably a consideration of our entire translation—the whole rhyme. However, for now let's take the line with the contraction (the ordinary line), and you can reevaluate later if you want.

In the final line, *Liet* means 'let' (past tense, third person, as with *leerde* and *wou*), and *staan* means 'stand.' A word-by-word translation yields

Let Lindy Lottie stand

Trouble again: Do you even know what this line means? *Lindy* is the subject of the sentence here, so in English we'd rearrange the words to get

Lindy let Lottie stand

Here's the first draft of our translation:

Lindy taught Lottie to walk
In the long Linden Lane
But when Lottie didn't want to walk
Lindy let Lottie stand

We are not done yet. Since this is a nursery rhyme in Dutch, we want it to be a nursery rhyme in English. Therefore, we need to see whether our translation has the characteristic elements of an English nursery rhyme. Nursery rhymes are often recognizable by their sound. Say our first draft aloud. Try to say the Dutch lines aloud (even though you are unsure of how to pronounce them).

Does our draft sound as much like a nursery rhyme as the Dutch does?

What are the sound elements of a nursery rhyme in English? One of them is rhyme itself. Dutch has a similar tradition. In the Dutch, the odd lines rhyme (actually, they end in the same word), as do the even lines. In our translation, the odd lines rhyme (and they end in the same word), but the even ones don't. So the English is a little off here.

Another sound element of nursery rhymes in English is the rhythm. Since most of my readers probably don't know Dutch (nor do I), you're going to have to believe me on this point: When Annette said the poem for me, each line had four strong beats (i.e., four obviously stressed syllables). The number of weak beats in each line, on the other hand, varied. The rules of rhythm in Dutch nursery rhymes, then, are a lot like those in English nursery rhymes. Consider this:

Thìrty dàys hàth Septèmber
Àpril Jùne ànd Novèmber

(Note that there is a strong beat on the first syllable of *April*.) The rule here is four strong beats to a line, but the number of weak beats doesn't matter. What kind of rhythmic pattern does our first draft of the translation have? A lot depends on how you say it aloud. As I read it, it has three strong beats in each line:

Lìndy taught Lòttie to wàlk
In the lòng Lìnden Làne
But when Lòttie didn't wànt to wàlk
Lìndy let Lòttie stànd

Shall we try to revise our translation to deal with these discrepancies? Let's take them one at a time. Certainly rhyme matters.

So let's try to revise the nursery rhyme so that lines two and four rhyme without losing the rhyme (here, identity) in lines one and three. I began by trying to find words that rhyme with *lane*, looking for one that would have a sense appropriate to the fourth line. I thought of *refrain*, not a word you'd expect in a nursery rhyme. No happy fit comes to my mind.

We could give up on keeping *lane* and look for two words that rhyme, one that is similar in meaning to *lane* and one that is similar in meaning to *stand*. I came up with *way* and *stay*. If we accept the rhyme *way/stay*, we give up the word *lane*. Does that bother you? Notice how many of the words in the Dutch poem begin with the letter "1." This alliteration will be reduced if we replace *lane* with *way*. On the other hand, *laan* in Dutch is not at the beginning of a word but rather is the second part of a compound word. So losing this alliteration is not so bad (perhaps), and now we will have a "w" alliteration, with the two instances of *walk*. Therefore, I vote for the *way/stay* rhyme.

Next, consider the rhythm. The Dutch line has one more strong beat than the English line. Do we want to make the English line longer perhaps? Or is this discrepancy acceptable? We have to be careful here because if we make the English line longer, we'll add words that don't correspond to anything in the Dutch line. On that basis alone, I vote to allow the discrepancy in rhythm.

Now, we've finally reached a point where our English translation sounds, at least to my ear, approximately like Annette's description of the Dutch original. Let's look at our final nursery rhyme revision:

Lindy taught Lottie to walk
In the long Linden Way
But when Lottie didn't want to walk
Lindy let Lottie stay

Perhaps we could do better than this, but I think that we've dealt with the major issues that this nursery rhyme offers. It's apparent that even something as simple as a nursery rhyme—and even translating between two languages as close as English and Dutch—offers serious challenges to the translator: Should significant or repeated elements of word structure (such as diminutives) be maintained? To what extent should the translation preserve elements of sound such as rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration? To what extent should the translation preserve style? At what point should conserving meaning be sacrificed and to what extent?

Let's look at translation from the other side—that is, a translation from English. Can you think of English utterances that present problems for a translator? What about

John kicked the bucket.

This is an idiom: It has a literal reading (one in which John slammed his foot against a bucket) and a figurative one (one in which John died). If *kicked the bucket* is not understood in the target language as meaning 'die,' how can we translate it to preserve the dual reading? Do we abandon kicking and buckets altogether and look for some analogous idiom in the target language?

Another question comes up when we think about how to translate a sentence such as this:

The dinner table was so festive, I expected him to serve turkey.

This is an English sentence, yet we know it is probably said by an American rather than an Australian, a Nigerian, or a South African. The turkey makes us think of the American Thanksgiving. It has that connotation, that cultural import. If someone were to translate this sentence into Chinese, would that person use the

Chinese word for turkey or pick some other food that was associated with a big family holiday in China? Certainly, the translator could do either—and the choice might well depend on the purpose of the translation. If this is part of a story about American life, the translator would probably use a more literal translation. If this is part of a story with a universal theme and if the setting of America is not important, the translator might feel comfortable in using a translation that was truer to the connotations of the sentence.

But how far do we go? What if we're dealing with allusions rather than connotations? If there is a reference to Shakespeare and we're translating into Italian, do we change it to a reference to Dante? If we're translating into Russian, do we change it to a reference to Pushkin?

Problems like idioms and connotations of certain vocabulary items and allusions come up regardless of the languages you are translating, and I'm sure you can think of many more. Consider translating a passage into English that refers to an act of conversation. Do we use *chat*, *talk*, *discuss*, *converse*, *debate*, or something else to denote that act? Formality, tone, and other matters of style come into play regardless of the languages.

In fact, style is such an important part of translation that sometimes styles develop in a language that are used only for translated materials. For example, medieval Arabic translations of ancient Greek philosophic texts were quite literal, often simply word-by-word translations. This style wasn't used for other texts. These stilted translations were then translated into Hebrew in the 1100s to 1300s, carrying that style with them. The result was a special style of Hebrew used only for translation.

This situation may seem strange at first, but think about the Bible. Many people object to modern renditions because they believe that the earlier ones were truer to the language of the era.

However, some scholars say that the earlier renditions were stilted even for their times; in other words, they used a translation language rather than a smoothly flowing one. Ironically, the accuracy of a biblical translation is particularly thorny since the identity of the original manuscript is constantly under debate.

Sometimes problems come up between languages X and Y that wouldn't come up between languages X and Z. For example, the sentence

She has brothers

can be translated easily from English to Italian. However, if we try to translate it into Sanskrit, say, we'd need to know whether she had exactly two brothers or more than two. English makes the simple distinction of singular versus more than one (which is our plural), as do many languages, including Italian. However, Sanskrit makes the three-way distinction between singular, dual (precisely two), and more than two (which is their plural), as do certain other languages. Grammatical differences between languages, then, can introduce questions for the translator—sometimes questions the translator can't answer. Perhaps the sentence in question is in a passage that says nothing more about her brothers, so the translator does not know whether she has two or more than two. What should one do? If I were unable to confirm the precise information, I'd use the Sanskrit plural rather than the dual simply because the former is less precise (being any number greater than two). But I might, in fact, be wrong.

What all this means is that, before we can do a holistic translation of a text, we have to analyze it: We have to break it down into all the components that make it precisely what it is. Then we have to make judgment calls about how to render those

components in the target language. Moreover, the target language might have differences in grammar that confound the translation, or it might belong to a culture that is different from the culture of the original language community in ways that again confound the translation. This analysis and this juggling act between grammars and cultures are part of every act of holistic translation, regardless of the languages. Compromises must be made, and the genius of translation lies, at least in part, in which compromises are made and how.

We can conclude, then, that translation is not a mechanical act; it doesn't proceed by any sort of simple algorithm. Rather, translation is a creative act. Some have even said that translating is rewriting. Different translators will offer different translations of the same text from language X into language Y. These different translations will have different strengths and drawbacks. Poetry, for example, involves meter, cadence, imagery, phrasing, and the personality of the voice of the poem. You might find you enjoy one translator's rendering of Dante's works more than another translator's. Does that mean that translations can be judged independently of the original? That they are perhaps as valuable as the originals? Some would say yes. Is one more (nearly) right than another? Or are all imperfect? Is true translation impossible to achieve, as some have argued?

One of the major flaws in the argument against the existence of true translations is the assumption that there is one correct way to interpret any text. Take something simple:

I love you.

This can be interpreted one way when a nurturing parent speaks to her child; another way when a parent is inducing guilt in her child; another way when a couple decides to marry; another way

when that couple has been married for fifty years; another way when a prostitute says it to a stranger who's paying her to say it; another way when a teenager is trying to manipulate a girlfriend or boyfriend; another way when a child says it to a parent at the end of a long and wonderful day; and so on. If you and I went to a movie together and then discussed every line in the screenplay, we would undoubtedly have different interpretations of some of the lines—even though we both witnessed the same movie and were both aware of the contexts for all of them. We bring with us our experience about life and language when we interpret what we hear. Understanding language is a creative process.

So either we say it's impossible for us to truly understand each other even when we're speaking the same language, or we allow ourselves to enjoy the fluidity of our linguistic interactions—and thus to happily read all sorts of literature in translation. Furthermore, with this attitude we can study a second language with optimism. As speakers of a second language, we are constantly facing the issues that a translator encounters. This doesn't mean that we always need to be translating from our native tongue. If we become good enough at the second language, we will not consciously go through such an intermediate stage. What second language speakers share with the translator is the creative task of expressing something in the target language in a way that will be maximally effective.

Can we do it? Can we ever be proficient enough at a second language to express ourselves as effectively in it as in our native language? I know so many people who speak multiple languages magnificently well that I believe the answer is yes. But being equally effective does not mean being identical. Our experiences in one language community will always be different from our experiences in another one, and our experiences play a role in how we express ourselves.

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