

Don't Put Words In My Mouth!

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I am honored to be among you today, delivering a lecture on my industry, about which I am passionate. This lecture is designed to introduce the language industry to all of you through a bit of its history, some key points of reference, a discussion of current technologies, future trends, and the “real world” scenarios that language and foreign culture learning can facilitate.

How many times have we heard someone say “don't put words in my mouth”? How many times have we said this? Probably it is spoken too frequently, but almost always in the context of someone misrepresenting our original words, rather than annoyance at their repeating them. However, in the industry that I am in—often called the GIL industry, for Globalization, Internationalization, and Localization, or sometimes the GILT industry (with Translation added)—that is exactly what we do for a living and they pay us well for it. The key is to make your speaker or writer sound good. None of us minds if other people put words in our mouth that makes us sound better! By way of contrast, here are some examples of people and companies that might have chosen their words better:

The poultry purveyor Frank Perdue's brand slogan has long been, “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken.” A photo of

Perdue with one of his birds appeared on billboards all over Mexico with this caption: “*Se necesita un hombre duro para hacer un pollo tierno*” or in translation “it takes a hard man to make a chick(en) affectionate.” The impression was not what was intended!

When Parker Pen marketed a ball-point pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say “It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you.” However, the company's translation rendered the Spanish word “embarazar” as “embarrass,” giving us: “It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant” (“*no manchará tu bolsillo, ni te embarazará*”).

Coors put its slogan, “Turn It Loose,” into Spanish as “Suelto,” where the unfortunate connotation is “Happy Diarrhea!”

There are of course numerous other instances of poor translations, but you get the idea. Here's one more translation:

The American slogan for Salem cigarettes, “Salem – Feeling Free,” got translated in the Japanese market into “When smoking Salem, you feel so refreshed that your mind seems to be free and empty.”¹ Does this seem to be another bad translation? A free and clear mind has very positive connotations in Japanese society. It is indeed a great translation, but it shows up in many lists of “incorrect” translations listed by “professional” translation agencies and it is an excellent example of why cultural adaptation is so important.

Words matter. Communication matters. Context matters. Understanding should matter more! In fact, I would argue few things matter more.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TRANSLATION

Translation has a very long and rich history and I have summarized only a few snippets that I thought you might find interesting. I encourage you all to study this in more detail, as indeed, a history of translation is very much a history of civilization worldwide, as you will soon see. This history is also the subject of numerous controversies, none of which I am going to go into today, other than to note their existence.

Translators and interpreters have long allowed for cross-cultural movements of goods, services, and ideas. In the following,

I highlight some key dates in the history of translation and one example of the cross-cultural significance of translation.

Major Historical Developments in Translation

Chang'an School, China: Some of the earliest written translations date back to the eleventh century BCE. In a document from the late Zhou dynasty, Jia Gongyan, an imperial scholar, wrote: "Translation is to replace one written language with another without changing the meaning for mutual understanding."² This is a relevant definition today.

Plato's Academy (keepers of Greek and Egyptian knowledge) was founded around 387 BCE and led by Plato himself until his death in 347 BCE. His academy continued its work for almost 900 years making it one of the longest running institutions of higher learning in world history.

The Great Library at Alexandria (founded by Ptolemy in 300 BCE), and the Lyceum Academy: a host of new academic endeavors were pursued at the Library and Academy, furthering the study of languages and sciences. The collection of documents in Alexandria, in particular, proved especially fortuitous as it allowed the transmission and translation of crucial classical texts into Arabic and Hebrew, where they would be preserved long after copies were lost during the Middle Ages in Europe.

Jundishapur Academy, Persia: Founded in the third century AD, reaches its zenith in the 6th century (before the rise of Islam).

Christian emperor Justinian closes Plato's academy in 529 AD, on the basis that it was promoting pagan ideals and Christian heresies, sending all of its members scurrying. Numerous texts were burned: the Carthage library with 500,000 manuscripts was destroyed; the Pergamus library with 200,000 texts; the Great Library at Alexandria with 700,000 texts; and even the Pisistratus in Athens where only Homer's Epics were preserved. Many of Plato's refugees land at Jundishapur. While Greek and Egyptian knowledge runs the risk of being wiped out as Europe descends into the post Roman Empire Dark Ages, Jundishapur translates and preserves many of the original Greek and Egyptian texts (which were retranslated back into original languages much later).

Rise of Formal Translation: In Asia, disciplined and consistent translation efforts really began in China during the Six Dynasties

period (third to sixth centuries AD) with the translation and adaptation of numerous sutras and other Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Pali into Chinese.

House of Wisdom: Begun by Caliph al-Mamun in 830 AD, this Islamic translation school was the most ambitious in approach, seeking to translate basically anything and everything they could find, whatever the field. This school, based in Baghdad, had numerous Christian and Muslim translators “on staff.” As mentioned, while Europe descends into the Dark Ages, this school (along with Jundashipur and others) translates and preserves the remaining Greek texts for posterity.

School of Toledo: After Alfonso VI of Leon re-conquers the south of Spain from the Moors; Toledo becomes the premier European translation entity and ushers in the so-called “Age of Translation” (the twelfth century AD).

The Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther translates the Bible into German, and almost gets killed for it.³

The hallmark of the above is a tremendous cross-pollination of ideas that drives civilization forward, to the point where many historians are not sure which ideas originally belonged to whom.

THE MAKING OF A TRANSLATOR TODAY

In the setting of Juniata’s 2005-2006 Cross-Cultural Dialogue lecture series my personal history seems relevant. I was born in Holland to an Indian Father and a Spaniard Mother, raised in Belgium, England, and India, before relocating to New York City. Spanish is my mother tongue, but I learned French and English. My academic studies took place here in the US in English in which I pursued the fields of Philosophy and Political Science as an undergraduate, then took a Theological Studies master’s degree from Harvard. My career has included years spent as a journalist, editor, translator (I paid my way through graduate school with this), manager, director, senior director, and now CEO.

There are a couple of circumstances related to my upbringing that I think are instructive to our discussion today. Perhaps not many of you know that Belgium in the 1960s, when I was growing up there, was a highly segregated country, not by color or gender, but by language. The southern part of the country (close to France) is largely populated by French speakers (the Wallons as they are

known), and the northern part of the country (close to Holland) is populated by Flemish speakers (a variant of Dutch). In Brussels, where I grew up, these two linguistic groups co-existed very uncomfortably: although both the Flemish and the Wallons went to school together, they had separate classes, teachers, courtyards etc... (and beware if your handball inadvertently landed in their courtyard, as you would be kicked, punched, and spat upon on your way to retrieve it... in both directions). In addition, I also had the privilege of being the only “brown” child in my classes. So growing up in Belgium (which is a wonderful country that I highly esteem) I was always a “fish out of water,” always trying to get back into the mainstream, if you will.

I think this is an apt metaphor for all of us on the planet, to varying degrees. That is, we are constantly being challenged to move out of our comfort zones due to the “shrinking” world in which we live. That is, especially in the US, new cultures, ways of thinking and behaving, are constantly challenging all of us (regardless of what subculture we belong to) to deal with, assimilate, respond, digest all these new waves. And what facilitates us jumping back in the water is our ability and willingness to learn new mores, traditions, languages, and cultures.

The second relevant circumstance related to my upbringing has to do with the languages spoken at home. So, my mother tongue is Spanish, I became part of the Wallon “tribe” while in Belgium and thus picked up French. But my parents spoke in English to each other, which we kids did not know! So, my brothers and I spoke: in French to each other, in Spanish to our mother, my parents spoke in English to each other, but we couldn't communicate directly with my father who did not speak Spanish or French. The irony of all of this is that despite the many languages spoken in my home, I couldn't easily communicate with my own father. The corollary to our unusual situation is that when I did move to the US, I went to the United Nations International School, which was the complete opposite of my experience in Belgium. In my class of 120 people, sixty different nationalities were represented—quite a study in contrasts.

Having been fortunate enough to have been born into a multicultural, truly international family, I can tell you that the biggest thing I learned was an appreciation for the virtues of

communication, an ability to transcend cultural barriers, and a unique understanding that body language works!

THE STATE OF SECOND LANGUAGE SKILLS TODAY

As you will see in a minute, second language fluency is fairly common in Europe, but fairly uncommon in the US according to the US Department of State, only forty-four percent of American high school students are studying any foreign language and seventy percent of those were learning Spanish.⁴ In contrast, fifty percent of Europeans are bilingual with eighty percent of European students claiming competency in a foreign language.⁵

Why the discrepancy? In Europe, many languages and cultures are cramped onto a relatively small continent. Language learning becomes an imperative. In the US, not enough value has been placed on foreign language learning, because the often unspoken underlying assumption (and a correct one to date) is that most of the world will learn how to speak English to communicate with us. But Hispanics are the largest growing minority group in the US at thirty-nine million people (with an estimated \$700 billion a year in purchasing power—entrepreneurs, take note) and it is redundant to say that the world keeps getting smaller and smaller. In this area, the US is at a significant disadvantage, and it is a terrible shame, because it could relatively easily be rectified.

If you are interested in learning a new language, which languages should you learn? Here are some suggestions.

Most Spoken Languages Worldwide

	Language	Speakers (Millions)	Where Spoken
1	Mandarin	1051	China, Malaysia, Taiwan
2	English	510	USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand
3	Hindi	490	North and Central India
4	Spanish	425	The Americas, Spain
5	Arabic	255	Middle East, Arabia, North Africa
6	Russian	254	Russia, Central Asia
7	Portuguese	218	Brazil, Portugal, Southern Africa
8	Bengali	215	Bangladesh, Eastern India
9	Malay, Indonesian	175	Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore
10	French	130	France, Canada, West Africa, Central Africa
11	Japanese	127	Japan
12	German	123	Germany, Austria, Central Europe
13	Farsi	110	Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia
14	Urdu	104	Pakistan, India
15	Punjabi	103	Pakistan, India

Adapted from <http://www.krysstal.com/spoken.html>, June 6, 2006.

Now you may ask, how can I enter the “languages club”? You weren’t all born to actively multicultural families (though perhaps some of you were, and as I noted ironies abound even there—i.e. my inability to communicate easily with my Dad), but is that a requisite? No, the road to enter this club is not as hard as you might think. A couple of years of language study, for instance, could make all the difference in the world. You can all do this too. One example should suffice for now: I frequently employ a twenty-three-year-old freelance translator based on the outskirts of Bangkok. He is making \$100,000 a year. He spent a couple of years in Germany after earning a liberal arts degree. He is not so unusual as good linguists regularly make upwards of 100K per year, from their homes, at their pace, as free-lancers. Even a little familiarity with foreign languages and cultures can give you a tremendous advantage.

I’ll talk about all of this more extensively in a bit, and give you some pointers about the “culture” of the GILT world, and you will see that there are many, many other entry points into this world. But before I do that, I wanted to give you some sense of the economics of this industry.

TRANSLATION AS AN INDUSTRY

The economics of GILT is rather strong and is growing. Estimates vary broadly, but a reasonable estimate, my own, is about eight billion dollars in 2006. The largest player in the translation industry (a company called LionBridge) controls only 300 million of these (less than five percent).

Juniata entrepreneurs, here is an industry for you! Of this eight billion, I estimate that about three billion are government purchases (including entities such as the EU, which perform most of their translation work internally, i.e., with people on staff). The bulk of the rest is mostly in the technology and medical fields (primarily), followed by advertising, marketing, manufacturing, financial, government, legal and so forth. This eight billion dollar figure is estimated to grow to twelve billion in the next four years, although I believe these numbers are very conservative, especially as small to medium sized businesses are increasingly “discovering” the value inherent in international markets and many of them are moving quite quickly to capitalize on these opportunities. It is

significant to note that the bulk of these numbers come from the US and EU, but Asia is increasingly translating in the opposite direction (i.e. into English) for their fast growing sets of products and services.

THE LIBERAL ARTS AS PREPARATION FOR CAREERS IN BUSINESS AND TRANSLATION

And now back to the possibilities inherent in this industry for all of you, and I'll start with myself as a case study. What prepared me for a career as an executive at Microsoft (part of the management team controlling 200 million dollars at one point, setting international strategy for the company together with Bill Gates)? For me it wasn't a law degree (though I did a lot of "lawyering" for MS), not an MBA (though I did a lot of high level business administration and business management), not international relations, but rather Philosophy, English, and Theology degrees, coupled with journalism and "international relations" expertise. How do these fields apply? From Philosophy I learned common sense, empathy I took from Literature, and an appreciation for the larger picture came from Religious Studies. A little creative application and you will find these fields are perfect precursors.

The key to tremendous success in business (not just relative success) is unconventional thinking, constantly challenging assumptions, looking at new ways to do things, knowing your limits, being able to look yourself in the mirror honestly (at any age), and being truthful to yourself.

In this context, liberal arts degrees have been unfairly maligned in big business, and quite unnecessarily (though I think this is increasingly changing, and I am proof of this trend myself). For instance, why does the next slot in my business management team automatically need to be another MBA (and please note that I don't think there is anything bad with MBAs; many of them are very gifted)? But well-educated, well-rounded humanists can do the job just as well, if not better in many instances. I hired many people fitting this profile while at Microsoft, and most of them did extremely well. Unfortunately many liberal arts degree holders sell themselves short in this respect—I urge you to carry your degrees with pride and creativity!

But back to the qualities required: focus, drive, determination, guts, and a certain amount of fearlessness and willingness to make mistakes should be married to a thirst for knowledge. The more knowledge the better, but you need to parse it and retain the valuable (while not falling into the trap of restriction rather than enhancements through the good parsing of information—i.e. don't mistake the forest for the trees). These traits are not foreign to those pursuing other degrees, but the key to success is to be questioning, creative, studious and pro-active, all hallmarks of a good liberal arts education. In the context of our discussion today, it hopefully is clear by now that people of different cultures have different ways of thinking about things and looking at the world and what is required is an ability to appreciate their outlook and to converse in terms that are familiar and germane to them. This is not rocket science, if you take the time to study and cultivate your awareness and keep an open mind. You really must be flexible of mind, so please, whatever you do, cultivate this virtue!

There are many different jobs to choose from: linguists (translators, reviewers, terminologists, interpreters), project managers, business development managers, treasurers, accountants, executives, CEOs, COOs, cultural attaches, teachers, United Nations officials, International NGO members, interpreters, social workers, refugee aides, international civil servants, international finance specialists, computational linguists, programmers, techies of all stripes, and project managers. You get the idea, the question is more: what can you not do with international expertise?

Still, an understanding of foreign cultures is required! Live abroad, travel abroad, learn a language, and take history courses, philosophy, and more. There are many points of entry and they are going to be increasingly valuable. The whole notion of “cultural understanding” is vital. In another context, think how many world conflicts, needless diplomatic spats, and various international disturbances could be remedied if we learned to understand each other better and speak each other's language? Whatever your goals are as students or human beings, whether they encompass social justice, capitalism, religious understanding, political discourse or any other activity, learning and speaking foreign languages and understanding foreign cultures is absolutely key!

Finally on this topic, a quick point about the prevalent culture

of the translation industry—the bulk of language professionals work from home, at their own pace, in their own way. The internet now facilitates easy reach to many of them. Translators are quirky, interesting people!

TRANSLATION TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY

This is one of the more interesting areas of the modern GILT industry, and shows many other entry points into GILT. The more interesting and compelling technologies in this respect are machine-aided translation tools, machine translation and natural language processing. A description of each follows.

Machine-aided Translation Tools: these are designed to work with pre-translated segments, so that you can leverage previous translations. Also by building in comprehensive glossaries, these tools have become significant aids in speeding up the translation process and ensuring greater terminological consistency, as well as allowing the real time sharing of glossaries and other technologies.

Machine Translation (MT): this technology is quite dated (now almost fifty years old and virtually unchanged, though some more significant advances are beginning to be felt) and virtually unchanged for the first forty-eight years. These are attempts to automate translation and other linguistic tasks with minimal human intervention. About sixty percent accuracy (but never better, and it is more expensive to edit the results than to translate from scratch). Although exact estimates are unavailable, it is fair to say that MT accounts for much less than one percent of all translations worldwide.

Natural Language Processing (NLP): this is the holy grail of many outside the industry, but is still a long way off. This has to do with artificial intelligence, with parsers, and with sense disambiguation, the process of assigning a sense to an ambiguous word. For example, an NLP might read “the suit” (clothes) as an individual or court action. And even companies like Microsoft, which have literally invested hundreds of millions of dollars in this area over the last ten years, have recently given up their significant efforts here (the return simply has not been compelling). There are some exceptions to this: with highly controlled text, you can get up to eighty percent accuracy, but the “highly controlled text” is the problem, because it requires a very much stilted and unnatural

English to precede it (for instance Boeing's "Simplified English"). NLP then, lends itself better to principally static text, like telecommunications manuals, technology and user manuals.

The translation industry, indeed the world, faces a number of tensions at the moment. These include: the impact of the internet on communications (both international and future), regionalism versus globalism, migration versus immigration. The fact is that tidal waves of cultural interaction are upon us; some welcome, some uncomfortable. But, the question is, would you rather ride the wave or get buried by it? To ride that wave, compassion and understanding are key personal and even societal habits.

Please do put words in my mouth! But please make me look good in the process.



NOTES

- ¹ These are widely noted errors that have appeared on many websites including: <http://www.innocentenglish.com/funny-slogan-translations.html> and "How To Get The Best From A Translation Agency," <http://www.simply-communicate.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=662>.
- ² Jia Gongyan, *Zhou Li (The Rituals of Zhou)*.
- ³ This section is drawn from the international literature on the history of translation. See, Louis G. Kelly, *The True Interpreter: A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1979); Michel Ballard, *De Cicéron à Benjamin: Traducteurs, Traductions, Réflexions* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992); Jean Delisle, & Judith Woodsworth, *Translators through History* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins and UNESCO, 1995); André Lefevere, ed. by *Translation—History, Culture: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992); George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Henri Van Hoof, *Histoire de la traduction en Occident* (Paris /Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Ducolot, 1991).
- ⁴ <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/spbr/58737.htm> "Briefing on National Security Language Initiative" (Barry Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and Dina Powell, Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs, Washington, DC, January 5, 2006).
- ⁵ Ninety-nine percent of the Luxembourgish knows at least two languages. See "European Day of Languages: Half of the E.U.'s Population Can Speak a Language Other than their Mother Tongue," *Europa – Rapid – Press Releases* (September 9, 2005) available at <http://europa.eu.int/rapid/identification IP/05/1179>.