

MAMIHLAPINATAPAI AND PLEK

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Clemens Berger, the Austrian playwright, was telling the audience one of those stories—you know the kind—about “untranslatable” words, in this case a word from an indigenous language in southern Patagonia, and the word means, well, when a man and a woman are in a bar, and he looks at her, and she looks at him, and they look at each other and their looks say okay I’m interested in you but you need to make the first move and come over to me? The word means that. Everyone laughed, Clemens Berger is charming and tells a good story. I was on the panel as the translator, of his play *Angel of the Poor*, and he’d told the audience the story because I had just said that as a translator I didn’t like to admit that anything was untranslatable, and now I said: “See, you translated it! You told us in English and everybody laughed!” He said: “But you can’t translate it in one word—” and I said: “Well, what matters more to you, how many words it has or whether everybody laughs?”

Translation is kind of like life that way—if you decide that something is what you want to devote your life to, you usually can. The debates about whether to translate literally or for the overall sense, whether to naturalize a concept or leave it feeling foreign (the gaucho-or-cowboy problem), whether to translate rhymed and metered poetry with rhyme and meter, and all the rest of the debates are pointless, because—obviously—it depends. What translators do is read to decide what’s important and what’s less important, then re-create what they’ve decided is important. These decisions tend to get made unconsciously and instinctively, even if the translator likes to rationalize them afterward. In any case, it isn’t programmatic: the decisions are different in every novel or story or poem or instruction manual, and in every moment of every such text. Now what matters is a rhyme, a joke, a repetition, a specific description of a particular object, a verbal tic, verve, historical accuracy, sentence structure, now it’s something else—in instruction manuals it’s mostly the literal content—and translators snake through the text carving off what they can live without from what they can’t. They gerrymander unscrupulously.

Because if what matters is that look in a bar, then the translator needs to spend a sentence or two describing it, or add a footnote; if what matters is keeping the text smooth and lively by not adding footnotes, then that's what you're translating for and that's what you'll get. If a character says something that would take fifteen words or inappropriately technical language to express in English, so you substitute something else to keep the conversation moving, that doesn't mean the word for that thing was untranslatable, it means that you're translating for naturalness of dialogue. Anything left untranslated is what you've decided doesn't matter anyway. Or if not, then, as Borges once told one of his translators: You just need to try harder.

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By way of example, here is the first sentence of "The Freeloader," the first story in Nescio's *Amsterdam Stories*. Nescio is the writer who swept away stuffy literary formality and brought idiomatic, spoken verve into Dutch writing about a century ago (Google Translate currently converts the word "Nescio" to "Mark Twain") and this is one of the most famous sentences in Dutch literature, in a story practically every Dutch person has read, about a nationally beloved character. Think "Call me Ishmael" spoken by Holden Caulfield in *The Great Gatsby*. No pressure.

*Behalve den man, die de Sarphatistraat de mooiste plek van Europa vond,
heb ik nooit een wonderlijker kerel gekend dan den uitvreter.*

*Except for the man who thought Sarphatistraat was the most beautiful
place in Europe, I've never met anyone more peculiar than the freeloader.*

(Nescio has a sentimental attachment to the neighborhood around Sarphatistraat, in east Amsterdam, but it is not by any objective measure a sightseeing destination; this unnamed man more peculiar than the freeloader is never mentioned again.)

Now nearly every word here except the "the's" is a translation problem, although in ways that are very difficult to talk about. The dictionary definitions are all clear enough and the words all have one-word equivalents in English, but the translator has to capture what Virginia Woolf called the whole fling of the sentence. The usual classroom or critic's word for this is *voice*,

typically thought of as a matter of tone, register, rhythm, and other musical analogies, but here I would say it's a social problem (or, if you prefer more formally, a problem of address): the sentence introduces three people—the Sarphatistraat fan, the freeloader, and the I—and addresses itself to a fourth, and what's most important in the sentence are the relations it sets up among these people. Is Nescio, or the narrator, making fun of the Sarphatistraat fan, or secretly agreeing, and if so, agreeing defiantly or insinuating that deep down you know you agree too? (He assumes that you are familiar enough with this figure in some sense that he can bring him up and never mention him again.) And then how does the qualification about that man set up or prejudice your expectations about the way the freeloader is remarkable—marvelous or just bizarre? wondrous or crazy?

A more literal translation of the sentence is: “Leaving aside the man who found Sarphatistraat the most beautiful spot in Europe, I have never known a stranger fellow than the freeloader.” So is it the *prettiest, loveliest, most beautiful, or nicest spot, corner of, nook in all of, or place in Europe?* (*Mooi*, like the German word *schön*, means “beautiful” in the most elevated, sublime sense, but as a nice one-syllable word it is also, more blandly, used to mean *nice, pretty, neat*, all the way down to nearly meaningless interjections like *uh-huh* or *okay*. The word is extremely common, and every time it comes up the translator has to decide, not what it means, but where to pitch it. A *plek*, cognate with English “fleck,” is a spot or patch, as on clothing, also a small area, zone, geographical spot.) Has the narrator never met an odder *fellow* or *chap* (the dictionary definitions of *kerel*), *guy* (more idiomatic but arguably too contemporary—now do we start researching if “guy” was current in 1910 English? do we think it would make a difference either way?), *man*, or *person*, or do we dodge the word altogether and say “anyone” (or “anybody”)? Even the first word of the sentence, a striking and slightly fussy opener (since it starts by pushing away, by excepting or excluding someone we've never heard of anyway), confronts the translator with choices: *Leaving aside, Disregarding, Save for*, or simpler: *Aside from, Except for, Other than?* The “freeloader” himself—the title of the story—is the *uitvreter*, literally “out-gobbler,” someone who snatches up everything you've got, eats you out of house and home: the best translation is *schnorrer*, but the Yiddishism is too jarring; other possible translations include *sponger* and *leech* (both metaphors of sucking dry and thus closer to the original) and *mooch*, all old-fashioned in kind of the wrong way. Lesser dilemmas are involved with every verb in the sentence: the man “found” Sarphatistraat the most beautiful place in

Europe (is it important to keep the metaphor of searching, or is the construction too formal in English?); the narrator has never “known” an odder fellow (implying longer acquaintance, not just running into him, but “met” is more natural in English). If you want to count the auxiliary “have” as a verb, there’s an issue there, too: contraction or no contraction? Nescio is famous in Dutch for his original use of contractions, though not in this sentence; the particular verb form here (*heb ik*) isn’t subject to contraction in Dutch, so Nescio didn’t choose to avoid the contraction and *I have* and *I’ve* are equally correct translations.

There are dozens, hundreds of permutations, and don’t forget that each one resonates differently with everything else in the rest of the page, the story, the book. So you place your bet and you take your chances, but there is nothing in a dictionary you can point to to defend your final choice. Dutch speakers will tell you—believe me, they’ll tell you—that *spot* is the “correct” translation for *plek*; there is another Dutch word, *plaats*, for *place*. So why use *place*? *Spot* doesn’t “sound wrong” in a usual sense, and in a way it’s a better word since it’s more chatty, like *plek*. But it throws the sentence out of tune somehow: maybe because *Sarphatistraat* is more alien and unfamiliar to an English reader than a Dutch reader, so for balance we need the least obtrusive word for *plek*; maybe because *spot* is too casual to go with the elevated *more beautiful* (whereas *prettiest spot* or the like wouldn’t make the man seem quite as unique, especially to readers who don’t know anything about Sarphatistraat); maybe because *Except for* is a straightforward translation for *Behalve*, so the sentence needs less colloquializing down; maybe because the contraction *I’ve* does the colloquializing work already (partly to set up the polysyllabic *peculiar*). I don’t completely believe any of these explanations.

The analogy to music has crept in again: “resonates,” “out of tune.” That’s not quite what I mean. The sentence with *spot* grabs you less; it casts this peculiar fellow as peculiar in a hair’s-breadth different way, and thus sets up your feelings for the freeloader differently, and speaks to you differently as a whole. I warned you that all this is hard to talk about. If anything is “untranslatable,” it’s what lies behind every decision that goes into a translation.