



# the Linguist

## Sing it loud!

A new understanding of song translation and singable lyrics

## *In good health*

Could in-house medical interpreting improve patient wellbeing?

## *Rising together*

How reciprocal mentoring can boost your career





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# The Linguist



The Linguist is the official journal of the Chartered Institute of Linguists



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# CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S NOTES



As we head into the Northern Hemisphere summer, many people will be thinking about holidays. In Europe and around the world, where so many languages jostle together, holidays are a golden opportunity to sample culture, spot linguistic differences and practise less familiar languages. The difference in experience between visiting a country where we are 'independent' thanks to our languages, versus the anxiety which goes with having no confidence

in the language, can be all the difference in the world.

And this is also true for children and young people. So many linguists have had the good fortune to have had a bilingual or multilingual upbringing. I remember interviewing Ger Graus for *The Linguist* a while ago, for example, and he described crossing one Dutch border to buy one thing and another border to buy something else at the best price for his grandfather. Languages were everywhere in his early life.

But for people who aren't lucky enough to grow up with languages in their lives (as was the case for me) there are only really two routes to becoming a linguist: to fall in love with languages at school or to travel to or live in another country. School French certainly didn't push my buttons, but living in France did, changing my beliefs about whether I could 'do' languages and giving me the practical skills to live and work in French.

So, more power to CIOL Vice-President Jean Coussins for securing a debate in the House of Lords on the issues now facing UK schools and universities when organising international study and visits. Quoting the UK Department for Education's curriculum guidance, "learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures", Baroness Coussins went on to say: "University students who have spent a year abroad are more likely to gain a first or 2:1 degree and are 23% less likely to be unemployed six months after graduation, compared to people who have not spent a year abroad as part of their course, whether they are linguists or not." Encounters with difference, international experiences and – best of all – living in other countries are transformational for developing the enthusiasm for learning, confidence and practical skills in languages, and in life.

But there is one other way... I have been learning with Duolingo now for many years and have progressed to feeling independent in Italian. I am making headway in Japanese and making some early progress in Chinese. As Luis von Ahn, the founder of Duolingo, said in a recent interview: "Language learning is one of the very few things that people want to do outside of school. Not many people want to learn math outside of school. I wish more people did, but it's just not a thing, whereas language learning is something that people actually want to do... and that has actually been quite useful for us, because our users are of all ages."

With all the hype around AI – and the fatigue and angst about the negative impact of digital technologies on us all – I hesitate to say something wholly positive about tech, but I do think the potential of digital language learning is one of the most exciting possibilities to help the next generation of linguists fall in love with languages.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

John Worne

# EDITOR'S LETTER



As a freelancer, I have sometimes found it hard to make choices about my professional development, to stay motivated

and on-track with my goals, and trust that they will pay off. Agata McCrindle's simple but effective model of peer-to-peer mentoring offers a practical solution whereby two people support each other to shape their goals and hold themselves accountable (p.8). I'm sold!

Someone who appears to have no trouble with self-motivation is music promoter Rachel Strassberger, who reveals how her skills in six languages have helped her get ahead in a male-dominated industry (p.18). From helping Black Eyed Peas to communicate with fans in multiple languages to localising all their content, it's a dream job for someone who loves music and languages in equal measure.

Elsewhere, we consider some particularly challenging areas of language work: Gene Hsu improves our understanding of song translation (p.11); Aakanksha Chahar outlines effective approaches to dealing with idioms, focusing on Japanese-English (p.22); and Richard Vranck argues for descriptive translation in legal settings to avoid potentially dangerous misunderstandings (p.20).

Conference season was as inspiring as ever; as Anna Ostrovsky remarks (p.28), there was a running theme around the threats, challenges and benefits of AI. I also picked up a strong thread around working together – whether to join forces against rogue employers, pool experiences to share with tech manufacturers, or make connections and brainstorm at the in-person events. If you weren't able to attend, you can catch up on pages 27-29.

Miranda Moore

Share your views: [linguist.editor@ciol.org.uk](mailto:linguist.editor@ciol.org.uk)

# News *The latest from the languages world*



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## Revival efforts grow

*Philip Harding-Esch reports on moves in the UK to support and promote Indigenous languages*

Our media landscape can seem very monolingual in its focus, but there has been a steady stream of stories looking at the vulnerability of different languages. A piece in *The Telegraph* charted the efforts of Czech linguist Martin Neudörfel to document and revive Sarkese on the Channel island of Sark, which only has three surviving native speakers.

Another example is the work of Cambridge University's Ioanna Sitaridou, who has similarly documented Romeyka and is now campaigning for its revival. This dialect of ancient Greek is spoken by a few thousand native speakers in northern Turkey and has been described as "a living bridge to the ancient world".

In the UK, there has been an uptick in media coverage of efforts to revive our own Indigenous languages. In April, Cornwall Council wrote to the government demanding that Cornish be added to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on the same basis as Scottish Gaelic, Scots, Welsh and Irish. This came just weeks after the government announced £500,000 of funding for Cornish, showing that legal frameworks are just as important as resources for protecting languages.

Of course, Welsh has enjoyed the highest profile turnaround for an endangered language in the UK. In March, the Welsh Government launched a Cultural Ambassadors scheme to promote the Welsh language, culture and heritage in their communities, and in April, four new Welsh feature films were announced as part of the Sinema Cymru initiative.

But with success come challenges. Welsh language schools are proving so popular that parents are vying for a vanishing number of available places. The new BSL (British Sign Language) GCSE in Wales is going to be delayed due to challenges in bringing in a sufficient quantity of qualified teachers – a resourcing issue echoed in Northern Ireland as the Assembly prepares to pass its sign language bill.

And as the Scottish Languages Bill becomes law in Scotland, some experts argue it detracts from sustaining Gaelic-speaking communities. The Gaelic teachers association Comann Luchd-Teagaisg Àrd Sgoiltean is calling for better professional development for Gaelic teachers, as provision currently ends by early secondary. Turning the tide is a slow and complicated business!

## What the papers say...

### NDTV

**Bilingual Mothers' Babies Show Unique Brain Patterns, Says Study, 14/3/24**

This discovery builds upon prior research that showed distinct brain activity patterns in 4-month-old babies raised in bilingual households. Now, scientists are eager to understand how these early experiences with multiple languages might influence the development of other cognitive skills.



### INDEPENDENT

**The End of an Era for the French Language? 28/3/24**

Following in the footsteps of neighbouring Mali, Burkina Faso's new bill, which was months in the making, stipulates the demotion of the French language, relegating it to the rank of "working language," according to *Le Monde*... "France imposed this language on its colonies, which is why I believe that the decision to abandon it is both revolutionary and beneficial. Such steps will be replicated by other countries like Niger, which is in complete political and diplomatic harmony with Ouagadougou and Bamako," [political analyst Nyossa] Djimrao added.



**Is AI the Final Nail in the Coffin for Modern Languages? 25/4/24**

Despite concerns that Duolingo has changed learners' mindsets about the commitment required for language learning – reducing it to something that can be done in bite-sized chunks in spare moments – [Liam] Prince also thinks such "gamified language-learning platforms" have the potential to help reverse the decline of formal language study in anglophone countries... Offering those languages at university would "do wonders" for the diversity and retention of language learning in Australian universities, he adds.

# News



## Public sector language services gain support

“Taxpayers billed £100m for NHS translators – could pay for 3,000 nurses” proclaimed a recent *Daily Express* headline. This narrative is not new. For many years there has been an argument that language services in the public sector are unnecessarily expensive, or even detrimental. A decade ago, councils were tasked with reducing their translation services because, according to the Communities Secretary at the time, they waste money and reduce incentives to learn English.

But the narrative appears to be shifting in the UK. A new report by the Welsh Senedd’s Equality and Social Justice Committee considers the case of a woman whose cancer was missed because she relied on her son to interpret. It recommends that translators are provided to enable timely diagnosis, and that similar issues are addressed in education and criminal justice. The committee also makes a direct link to systemic racial inequalities and calls for language services to be included as part of the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan.

This echoes concerns raised by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Modern Languages in its submission to the Covid-19 Inquiry. Inequalities of outcomes are linked to inadequate translations of key messaging and treatments, poor public health communication, and key services such as Track and Trace being English-only.

The language sector has been organising to make the case. In October, Professional Interpreters for Justice (PI4J), an umbrella organisation which includes CIOL and the Association of Translation Companies, launched a ‘Working Together’ white paper. It lists ten recommendations for tackling immediate challenges around procurement and provision of language services in the UK’s public sector.

There are instances of key government departments, including the Foreign Office, overhauling their linguistic capabilities after belatedly reappraising their importance. And, of course, the police has successfully implemented its PAIT (Police Approved Interpreter and Translator) scheme across England – no mean feat when every force has its own procurement systems and local needs. While it is not without its challenges, PAIT has shown it is possible to implement a higher standard of professional language service in a key function of the state, even when operating at high stakes and in emergencies.

When looking at the costs of language services in the NHS and the police, we should be seeing it as a marker of successful policy implementation. Without it, the costs of litigation, post-hoc inquiries and reports – and, most of all, the human cost – would be so much higher.



In May, the government rejected the recommendations of the House of Lords Committee on Education for 11-16-year-olds, published in 2023. *Schoolsweek* reported that it had only kept one recommendation – to explore ‘innovative ways’ to boost language learning, including practical barriers such as teacher recruitment. In keeping with this ambition, there was good news from the British Council, which will offer £27,000 teacher training scholarships in languages on behalf of the government for a further year.

As exams season comes into view, the exam board AQA revealed that its plans to conduct reading and listening exams online would be delayed until after 2026. There was mixed news in the university sector, as the University of Kent joined the University of Aberdeen in announcing cuts to its language courses. After much media interest, and effective negotiations from staff and unions, these plans were watered down or even abandoned.

Around the UK, there were many local stories celebrating the UN International Mother Tongue Day on 21 February. For example, Tower Hamlets council held a commemoration in honour of student campaigners for Bengali, in partnership with the Bangladesh High Commission.

Several news outlets, both national and local, covered the publication of an interactive map by the Office of National Statistics. Using data from the 2021 census, it shows the proportion of the population in each local authority speaking a long list of different languages.

BBC Morning Live ran a wonderfully entertaining report on ‘the best way to learn a new language’. Riyadh Khalaf, who despite having an Irish mother and an Iraqi father speaks neither Irish nor Arabic, took advice from linguists and challenged two adults to learn Spanish for a week. Reader, they successfully ordered a beer at the bar. ‘¡Muchas gracias!’

*Philip Harding-Esch is a freelance languages project manager and consultant.*

# Inside Parliament

## *The cross-party group hears about city-wide language initiatives*

In April, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Modern Languages hosted five 'Cities of Languages' initiatives, joining up local experts and leaders, universities, schools, teachers and community groups to celebrate multilingualism and support language learning. Newcastle City of Languages<sup>1</sup> bills itself as the first city-wide initiative in the UK, focusing on improving language learning, take-up and teaching. Over many years, its founder, Declan Baharini, has developed a model combining partnerships, international experiences, travel, support for language educators and the annual North East Festival of Languages (pictured, right). Last year, the festival involved over 37,000 children from 419 schools.

Newcastle shared its approach nationally, supporting other cities to develop their own initiatives. Among these, Coventry,<sup>2</sup> led by Anna Grainger, and Portsmouth,<sup>3</sup> led by Liz Lord, shared their stories with the APPG. They spoke about the focus on supporting students' home, heritage and community languages, upskilling primary teachers, and



fostering collaborations between cities, experts at the universities of Warwick and Portsmouth, and national agencies such as ALL (the Association for Language Learning).

Manchester City of Languages<sup>4</sup>, which has superseded Multilingual Manchester,<sup>5</sup> includes a focus on research, international partnerships, dialogue and an ambition to foster grassroots activism to achieve and celebrate multilingualism in cities. Its founder, Yaron Matras, recently published *Speech and the City*, which considers the forging of a new civic identity in cities that embraces diversity and multilingualism, and can act as a counterweight to prevailing – often monolingual – national policies and discourse.

Finally, representatives from Hackney shared their experience of implementing a borough-wide language strategy.<sup>6</sup> This includes focusing on one language (Spanish) in all primary and secondary schools, leading to a smooth primary-secondary transition, while celebrating and supporting bilingual students, and providing cultural learning and international experiences to underprivileged communities. Their efforts have led to a significant boost in GCSE languages take-up.

It was enormously impressive to hear all of the aspects of this work and the success that can be unlocked by strategic, city-wide

thinking. It was also great to see several MPs attending the APPG to support their respective cities.

The meeting has led to these cities planning to work collectively to support each other and include other burgeoning initiatives in the hope that more Cities of Languages will spring up around the country. A truly inspiring example of grassroots excellence stepping up to meet national policy and guidelines, which so often struggle to be translated into the desired outcomes on the ground.

### Notes

1 <https://cutt.ly/NewcastleCoL>

2 Email Anna Grainger for details: [coventrycityoflanguages@gmail.com](mailto:coventrycityoflanguages@gmail.com)

3 <https://cutt.ly/Portsmouth>

4 <https://mrcityoflanguages.org>

5 <http://mlm.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/index.html>

6 <https://cutt.ly/9ewJwhtF> and <https://cutt.ly/HackSpanish>

### Interventions in the Lords

Baroness Coussins, Co-Chair of the APPG and Vice President of CIOL, made two significant interventions in the House of Lords. One was a debate on international exchanges and visits for schools, pressing the government to act more proactively to iron out some of the more onerous barriers facing schools post-Brexit, which have led to a drop in the number of school trips.

The other was to secure an amendment to the Victims Code, which sets out the rights of victims of crime, to include specific reference to the right to a professional, qualified interpreter. The measure is a milestone in shoring up the rights of victims in legal proceedings.

**TL** Philip Harding-Esch works on behalf of CIOL to provide the secretariat to the APPG on Modern Languages.

# *Someone to lean on*

Why peer-to-peer mentoring – a sort of supportive partnership – can help with professional development, motivation and accountability.

By Agata McCrindle





Mentoring offers personalised support among professionals and boosts career growth. Early examples can be traced back to Greek mythology. In Homer's *Odyssey*, King Odysseus goes to war, leaving his son, Telemachus, under the guidance of his old friend Mentor. The term 'mentoring' derives from the Greek μέντωρ; the prefix 'men-' means 'one who thinks' and '-tor' means 'man', so 'mentor' literally means 'a man who thinks'. 'Protégé' comes from the French verb *protéger*, meaning 'to protect'.

Mentoring can take many forms. As an experienced language professional, I've had the privilege of mentoring new entrants to our field. This has allowed me to share my knowledge and skills, and enabled my protégés to develop their business practices. But mentoring isn't just about guiding newcomers. Peer-to-peer mentorship, a form of reciprocal mentoring that fosters mutual motivation, inspiration and accountability among seasoned professionals, has also significantly contributed to my career path. I've found immense value in both types of partnership.

The CIOL Mentoring Platform is a great place to start if you are a linguist interested in becoming a mentor or a potential mentee looking for advice and guidance. My own mentoring connections have originated through the ITI Polish Network, which uses an informal matching process.

### *A focus on business skills*

I studied business as an undergraduate and international business as a postgraduate, and have successfully run a translation and interpreting practice for over 20 years. Levering this, I use a conventional business mentoring method to guide industry newcomers through the complexities of managing translation projects and developing essential business skills. Translators often work as freelancers and therefore essentially run small businesses. Many translation graduates find that their course hasn't really prepared them for that aspect of their career. That's why business mentoring is helpful, although it is often overlooked in favour of translation skills mentoring.

In guiding my business mentees, the process begins with identifying specific career development goals that they aim to achieve. We go over business skill enhancement in various areas, for example efficient project management, as these skills are crucial for handling multiple assignments and meeting deadlines.

In my experience, understanding the basics of marketing and branding is fundamental. This includes maintaining a professional online presence, showcasing expertise and effectively communicating our value to potential clients. I also teach that building good relationships with clients by responding promptly to

inquiries and setting clear expectations can contribute to a steady workload in the long run.

Sharing knowledge about pricing strategies, invoicing, insurance, contracts and continuous professional development helps me reinforce and expand my own understanding of these aspects of the work and keeps me updated on current trends. Things have changed a lot since I first started! Linguists new to the profession bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, so it is a win-win situation for both of us.

I use a fixed-term approach to business mentoring because it brings specific benefits. As mentees gain new skills, the structured learning timeline allows them to focus on acquiring targeted knowledge and skills within the defined time period. This motivates them to prioritise what they want to learn in the number of sessions agreed, contributing to a more manageable and organised mentoring journey.

### *Reciprocal mentoring*

While sharing knowledge and expertise is rewarding, my career eventually reached a point where I sought more focused development. I have been logging my CPD for years, but I felt that I needed to reflect more on my development and give it direction. Active participation in various professional organisations and networks made me realise that colleagues often have similar business experiences, allowing us to share our goals and support each other.

This realisation led to a mentoring partnership with my colleague Kate, an experienced translator working from Polish, German and Finnish into English. We meet quarterly online because she lives in Finland and I live in England. Our specialisms differ: Kate works with medical and literary texts, while I mainly work in business and legal sectors. We aim to give our CPD direction and boost our commitment to diversifying our skills, updating our knowledge and adapting to changes in the market.

Through this reciprocal arrangement, I am exposed to more information and ideas, which helps me plan my CPD to enable career growth. It also enhances my confidence in what I am doing. There is a sense of friendly accountability for the set goals. Having regular catch-ups and knowing what each other is doing (e.g. our specialisms) increases the chance of referrals and expands our professional network. We use the opportunity to share our frustrations too, but the meetings are generally positive.

Kate and I are both in a similar situation – neither of us lives in a country where our target language is spoken. This makes it challenging to maintain a native level of proficiency in the language. I was struggling with this a bit. Kate, on the other hand, reads a lot and attends various book clubs. As a busy mum running a translation



### COLLABORATION

*In a traditional mentoring set-up an experienced professional supports a mentee, but reciprocal arrangements can be equally valuable*

► practice, I found it difficult to commit to daily reading, which is necessary to maintain the required level of proficiency. Kate suggested trying audiobooks and it was a game-changer for me. Now, I listen to Polish books while travelling to interpreting assignments, accompanying my children to sports activities, doing school runs, tidying the house, folding laundry and cooking. I've even expanded my playlist to include true crime, news, current affairs and lifestyle podcasts.

Thanks to this regular immersion, I have been able to remember words and phrases I had forgotten, or not used for a while, and I've also learnt new slang and terminology. Language evolves with developments in technology, and cultural and political changes, and maintaining language skills has become a significant portion of my annual CPD, comprising more than half of it. It's not only essential for my translation practice but it's also personally fulfilling.

### *Different partners for different needs*

Encouraged by the benefits of my meetings with Kate, I have recently embarked on a new peer relationship with another colleague. Ewa is a Polish conference interpreter, so although we work in the same language pair, we provide different services. The focus of our partnership is on social media presence and marketing. Even though each of us has an established client base and online presence, we both felt that we had reached a plateau. We needed someone to bounce ideas off, inspire and reassure us. Our sessions offer a space to discuss goals and reflect on progress. We meet monthly online as Ewa travels a lot for her work.

In both peer partnerships, we set achievable goals for the next meeting. Admittedly, we don't always complete our 'homework' on time. Still, we are understanding and supportive of each other, and sometimes the idea behind our little project is enough to motivate and

inspire us, even when time and other commitments work against us. It keeps the momentum going.

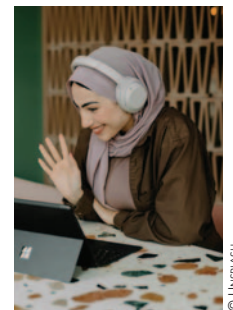
We don't communicate between formal meetings other than occasionally checking each other's social media posts and sending a message of appreciation to encourage one another. This strikes a balance between maintaining professional connections and respecting the other person's time and commitments, giving us the freedom to reflect and make progress on our own terms.

We haven't established a timeframe for these mentoring relationships; they are ongoing engagements. Fostering a long-term partnership has made a huge difference to my professional life. We benefit from having a constant source of support and guidance. The flexibility of this approach lets us adapt as our needs change, allowing for a well-rounded development of skills over time. Without a fixed endpoint we can consistently set and monitor goals, and it encourages open communication about where we see ourselves in the long run. The sense of community we've formed goes hand in hand with the idea of lifelong learning. It has become a foundation for our enduring success in the translation and interpreting fields.

Thanks to collaborative partnerships we can ensure that no translator or interpreter guides their journey in isolation. Freelancing can be a lonely way to work and that's why cultivating such relationships is crucial. Mentoring is a two-way street, where mentors and mentees mutually contribute to each other's growth and development. Together with experienced individuals and reliable colleagues, we will not only weather challenges and nurture growth but also foster a sense of connection in what can otherwise be a solitary professional endeavour. If you are interested in mentoring through CIOL, visit [www.ciol.org.uk/mentoring](http://www.ciol.org.uk/mentoring). Get involved at [www.ciol.org.uk/divisions-societies-networks](http://www.ciol.org.uk/divisions-societies-networks) to grow your informal networks.

### FLEXIBLE ACCESS

*Mentoring can be in person (main image) or online (below), depending on the needs and locations of those involved*





© PEXELS

# Make it sing?

*Gene Hsu considers approaches to song translation and proposes a comprehensive way to discuss the process*

In popular music, song translation is used to help the target audience understand the source song, but the translations are often not singable. Some are produced by translators or songwriters, while others are done by internet users. Although research in song translation is increasing, it is still rare. Most existing research discusses aspects of translation and rhyme, but few take music theory and songwriting into account.

My study of interlingual song translation<sup>1</sup> focuses on the roles that songwriting plays in song translation. I started by doing a review of the literature. Lucile Desblache proposes that there are three main forms in interlingual translation.<sup>2</sup> The first is when “lyrics are provided to be read/heard independently from or in conjunction with the original song

or musical text”. In the second, lyrics “are intended to be sung in another language than the original language with the aim of remaining largely faithful to the message of the original language”. In the third, “they are free adaptations into another language”.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Low categorises song translation into translation, adaptation and replacement text, and proposes that “Adaptation is indeed one way of carrying songs across language borders.”<sup>4</sup> Johan Franzon, meanwhile, proposes five choices in song translation.<sup>5</sup> The first is to leave them untranslated. The second is “translating the lyrics but not taking the music into account” (e.g. libretto in opera). The third involves “writing new lyrics to the original music with no overt relation to the original lyrics”. The fourth is “translating

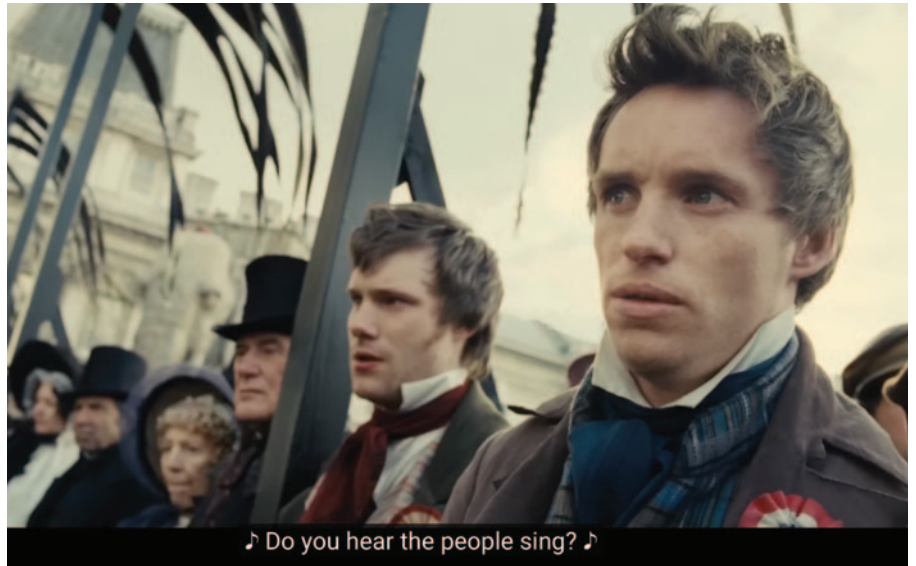
the lyrics and adapting the music accordingly – sometimes to the extent that a brand-new composition is deemed necessary” (as is often seen in popular, rock and folk music).

The fifth involves “adapting the translation to the original music”, which is similar to Desblache’s second or third form. A Cantonese version of ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’ from the musical *Les Misérables* uses the third method while a Mandarin version uses the fourth with the music unadapted. The lyrics of both versions are adapted to the original music (see boxed text, page 12).

It is important to distinguish between song lyrics and song text, though the two are easily confused. Lyrics are ‘singable’ while song text may not be; in other words, song lyrics



© Pexels



serve for singing purposes and can be regarded as ‘song text’ or a subcategory of ‘song text’.

The translation approach will depend on the reason for producing the target text – whether to create song lyrics for the purpose of singing in the target language or to create a written translation without the purpose of singing. In the former, the meaning of the target lyrics will not be the same as that of the source lyrics. The original messages can be reduced, adapted, rewritten or abandoned. Moreover, Desblache states that music has “inspired new forms of translation” in recent decades. This includes localising songs, where the new lyrics vary according to the target culture, audience, language and social milieu.

*The purposes of translation*

New lyrics can be localised to reflect social and current affairs. The Cantonese version of ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’ was first posted on Facebook by the campaign group ‘Occupy Central with Love and Peace’ in May 2014, as discontent was growing in Hong Kong. In light of this societal background,

which led to the ‘Umbrella Revolution’ street protests, it has been presumed that the translation was produced for use in the protests. The Cantonese lyrics support this assumption (see boxed text, below).

A singable target song can be regarded as a localised song if the majority of the target lyrics bear different meaning and words from the source song lyrics. This is acceptable if the aim is to create new singable lyrics that have no relation to the source lyrics.

When the purpose is to preserve the meaning without considering singability, 100% must be faithfully translated. This can help target audiences to understand the ideas and messages of the original song. For instance, in opera, singers rarely perform in the target language and libretto is used instead. Back translation or literal translation of lyrics is common among ‘fan translation’ for the same reason. In films or TV series, interlingual subtitling is often used to help viewers understand the dialogue. When a character is singing, or a song plays in the background, the lyrics are also translated but unsingable.

The assessment of categories of song translation should be carried out using specific criteria. Where Low, Franzon and Desblache refer to a ‘majority’ of text being of a certain type (e.g. differing in meaning to the original), that majority should be defined with a scale when target and source lyrics are compared.

Accordingly, I propose that a song text can be regarded as ‘translated’ if the singable target lyrics retain 91% or more of the original meaning of the source lyrics. It can be regarded as ‘adapted’ if the scale decreases to 51-90%, and as ‘rewritten’ when the percentage reaches 11-50%. Finally, it can be considered ‘brand new’ when it retains 10% or less of the meaning.

*Producing singable lyrics*

To produce singable target lyrics, Low suggests translators should pay attention to vowels in order to produce songs that rhyme.<sup>6</sup> Thus, songwriting can play a pivotal role in song translation, taking song structure, melody, rhythm and rhyme into account.

Songwriters can adjust the order of the words in the target lyrics to adapt the syllables to the music, so that the lyrics can be both singable by singers and listenable to by target audiences. This can help develop lyrics that are not only “possible to sing”, but also “suitable for singing” and “easy to sing”, says Franzon.<sup>7</sup> New singable lyrics can be either faithful or not to the original meaning.

Furthermore, when songwriting, music theory and practice are applied to song translation, dubbing or covers, the target lyrics imbue a high aesthetic appreciation of music. For instance, 流星 (‘Meteor’),<sup>8</sup> a Japanese version of the Mandarin pop song 小幸運 (‘Little Happiness’), sung by Marina Araki, uses

English original	Cantonese version	Back translation
It is the music of the people/ Who will not be slaves again	天生有權還有心可作 主/ 誰要認命嚟聲	Born to be entitled inalienable rights and to make decisions with our mind
When the beating of your heart/ Echoes the beating of the drums	試問誰能未覺醒/ 聽真那自由在奏鳴	Could any of us have yet to wake. To hear the music of freedom reign
There is a life about to start/ When tomorrow comes	激起再難違背的那/ 份良知和應	And once provoked, we cannot afford to defy the call of our conscience’s chord



GETTING LYRICAL

*Above (clockwise from l): Creating singable lyrics in the target language may include song writing techniques; Eddie Redmayne sings 'Do You Hear the People Sing?' in the 2012 film Les Misérables; TV subtitles, such as for Glee, tend to use literal translations of songs; while a performer needs a target-language song text they can sing; and singability is usually ignored in libretti for operas*

*Left: Sheet music for Gene Hsu's English translation of 'Prelude to Water Melody'*

new lyrics. They bear little resemblance to the original lyrics, but carry the same sense of a relationship ending and similar emotions of loss, confusion and sadness.

My English version of the Mandarin song 但願人長久 ('Prelude to Water Melody') composed by Vincent Liang has singable lyrics in English. I paid attention not only to rhyme and vowel sounds, but also to musical elements, including song structure and poeticity, to improve singability. For instance, I adjusted the word order from 唯恐瓊樓玉宇, 高處不勝寒 (lit. 'But fear that the crystalline mansions are so high and too cold there') to 'But fear it is too cold up there/ Crystalline mansions are so high' (see image, above). In this way, the lyrics are adapted to the music.

In verse 1, I adapted the number of syllables to the music. For instance, I omitted '[I] do not know that' from the lyric 不知天上宮闕, 今夕是何年 (lit. '[I] do not know that in the celestial palace, which year it is on this day?'), because audiences can understand it is a question without that phrase. I also ensured the lines rhyme: 'In the celestial palace up so

high/ What day tonight goes by?' Previous poetic translations did not aim at singability, though they preserved the meaning and main idea of the original poem.<sup>10</sup>

Singability, understandability and listenability should be assessed through assessment criteria that help to identify and categorise target lyrics. This will help a translator, songwriter or singer better understand approaches to song translation and select appropriate methods. Thus, to produce singable songs in a language other than the one in which the source was produced, it is important to take musical analysis and performing arts into account.

Notes

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# A TEAM IN GOOD HEALTH

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*Why in-house medical interpreting is better for our health.*  
*By Romina Espinosa*

**M**edical interpreting is often done by freelancers, hired for one-off assignments, even if the patient has a chronic condition and/or needs several appointments and procedures. UC San Diego Health has an in-house team of six full-time English<>Spanish interpreters. Our consistent presence meets an interpersonal need that is often missing in the US healthcare system. Given San Diego's proximity to the US-Mexico border (less than 20 miles away), there is a high demand for medical services in Spanish and the hospital offers free 24/7

interpreting. Freelancers are used for ASL (American Sign Language) and other languages on an ad-hoc basis.

Surgical oncologist Charles Coffey lists several advantages of working with a regular group of dedicated interpreters: patients become familiar with their interpreters and look forward to seeing them; this creates opportunities for relationship-building; and the presence of in-person interpreters can go a long way in bolstering patient trust and confidence in the medical team.

As interpreters, we feel privileged to be

present for clients at some of their most vulnerable moments, and when we know that our employer values our expertise, it brings us purpose and fulfillment. Patients are grateful that every instance of good news – a cancer remission or a successful transplant – can be fully expressed.

#### PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Humanity is at the centre of medical interpreting and the work brings us in close proximity to human suffering and mortality, and all the weight that carries. In the past

seven years, I have been present at both outpatient and inpatient appointments, diabetes insulin administration tutorials, physical/occupational/speech therapy sessions, briefs on cancer treatment options, clinical trials and end-of-life discussions.

On a typical day, I can attend prescheduled appointments and complete rounds in different units. One moment I may be interpreting for a social worker educating a family about bone marrow transplants, using languages to explain graft-versus-host disease (*injerto contra huésped*), the next I may receive an alert that I am urgently needed in the ER.

The pace can change from placid waters to a turbulent sea of IV drips, ventilators, loud voices and the sound of a monitor indicating a heart has stopped beating. In that moment, I am the only linguistic and cultural link between a distraught woman holding her husband who has just died, and a chaplain reciting the Catholic prayer. I am there providing chuchotage interpretation as calmly as I can.

It is a fast-paced environment that does not often allow advance notice to prepare for meetings or appointments, but providers let us know the complexities of a particular situation in advance when they can. I read and do research about medical conditions. I keep my phone handy and sometimes use *linguee.com* to find an unknown term or phrase. Science keeps evolving; there are always new medications being approved and there is always something new to learn.

The work requires presence, empathy and precision. A misinterpreted word can mean the difference between life and death. The first time I interpreted during a lumbar puncture, the unfamiliar medical tools in the exam room triggered a fight-or-flight response for me. I had to learn to compose myself and focus on what was being said. The physician assistant performing the procedure wanted the patient to alert her to any numbness or tingling so she could stop and avoid nerve damage. I had to interpret words like ‘numb’ (*adormecido*) and ‘tingly’ (*hormigueo*) on the spot – there was no room for error.

#### COPING TOGETHER

Medical interpreters maintain boundaries with patients and don’t develop personal relationships. This is part of our code of ethics,

as outlined by the US National Council on Interpreting in Health Care. Nevertheless, it is difficult to forget patients we have seen so many times when they pass away. We do rounds with the palliative care team, we check in daily with patients who are terminally ill or recovering and ready to be discharged.

This is why I’ve acquired coping skills (e.g. meals with loved ones, physical exercise, time in nature). Debriefing with the medical team after a tough encounter is also a way to heal and not carry pain home. Being in-house enables us to access the free confidential and low-cost mental health resources that UC San Diego Health offers employees.

Teamwork is a key component, making us feel supported. Our interpreting department holds weekly huddles and monthly meetings. These are opportunities to discuss any issues or concerns. Our days are long and include back-to-back interpreting sessions. We may serve 4 to 13 patients a day – the time spent with each one primarily depends on the topic (e.g. consent for surgery, clinical trials, therapy or transplant education, quick follow-ups).

Most medical staff at outpatient clinics are used to working with interpreters, but in an academic research hospital, doctors are regularly shadowed by medical students who may not be. On one occasion, a new nurse did not understand that she should address the patient directly and told me: “Tell her I am going to take her blood pressure and give her the pain med.”

Explaining my role as an interpreter on a daily basis can be an exercise in diplomacy, but is necessary in providing high-quality, efficient services. I am a naturally diplomatic person and this strategy has always worked for me as an interpreter. I believe diplomacy creates opportunities and helps maintain a professional relationship with everyone.

#### IN-PERSON VS. REMOTE

As we provide a round-the-clock service, when an in-person interpreter is not available, remote video and phone sessions are offered. Poor connectivity, frozen screens and choppy phone audio can be frustrating for staff, who must continually pause and repeat themselves, or contact the hospital’s IT department for help. For patients with aphasia and other cognitive impairments (such as traumatic brain

injuries), in-person interpreting is preferable.

Practitioners such as Dr Coffey pay special attention to their body language, and use tactile cueing and visual demonstrations. He may modify what he communicates to a patient by emphasising key words and using action prompts. These accommodations can be difficult to convey via a remote medium.

In-person interpretation offers an additional element of human connection. When multiple providers discuss in-depth medical information during an end-of-life discussion, for example, we are able to switch from consecutive to simultaneous interpreting to make these delicate conversations flow more smoothly.

Physical therapist Theresa Cermack adds, “For patients who may have a tracheostomy or endotracheal tube and are alert, aware and consistently attempting to communicate without sound over their interface, an in-person interpreter can be incredibly valuable in deciphering the patient’s needs through lip reading or in conjunction with communication boards that may be custom-created by our speech-language pathologists.”

Face-to-face sessions allow us to perceive body language that could be missed ●



*Working with a regular group of interpreters can go a long way in bolstering patient trust in the medical team*



# Is research working?

*Better use and understanding of translation are key to improving global research, says Celine Garbutt*

► during remote interpretation. We are more likely to notice when a patient signals confusion by frowning, makes a bewildered expression or turns to look directly at relatives in the room for help with medical decisions. We can cultivate human connections and build rapport, making patients feel more comfortable asking questions. We often hear statements from patients and colleagues such as “You’re a lifesaver!” and “Can you just stay with me all day?”

## EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

One benefit of working in-house is that I receive a regular, bi-weekly paycheck. When I worked full-time as a freelancer, I had to be very organised and keep track of the invoices I sent to various language agencies. I now work 40 hours a week in 8-hour shifts across 2 hospitals, with 2 paid 15-minute breaks and a 30-minute unpaid lunch break.

The main employee benefits include health insurance plans (including vision and dental), retirement plans, accrued paid time off (vacation, sick time), gym membership and tuition discounts. There are also green spaces and meditation rooms for us to use.

Communication plays a key role in our team. We help each other when changes in our daily schedules occur (e.g. cancellations, delays, additional time needed with a patient/provider). It is a supportive environment and every day is different, which makes me want to come to work the next day!

Special thanks to Allison deFreese and Glenda Carelhue for reviewing initial drafts.

Textbooks about how to design research surveys put great emphasis on the importance of using suitable language. Recommendations include “avoid ambiguity and bias” and “be exact and simple”. There is also a need to ensure that language is ‘faithful’ to the theory behind each question. In other words, will the question elicit a response that is relevant to what is being ‘measured’?

Understanding the do’s and don’ts of question development is essential, because answers from faulty surveys can distort the results of statistical analysis. For example, a leading question, ‘On a scale of 1 (not really) to 5 (a lot), how much do you enjoy learning foreign languages?’, is likely to produce a different response to the question ‘How do you feel about the following statement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): “I enjoy learning new words in a foreign language”?’

Writing questions in one language is challenging, so what happens when surveys are carried out across several countries at once? There are various ways in which questionnaires are translated. In ‘forward translation’, one person (often the researcher or research assistant) translates the survey into the target language. This approach is common because it is considered time and cost efficient, but there are disadvantages: the quality of the translation depends entirely on the skill and ability of one person, and if the translation is poor, the quality of the data suffers.

The ‘forward-backward’ approach aims to screen out errors which appear in the back translation. However, back-translation has major drawbacks as well. One recent study investigated the quality of translation in multilingual, multicultural and multiregional research and concluded that back-translation is not a hallmark of quality.<sup>1</sup> Dorothee Behr gives us an example of what can go wrong: in one case, the expression ‘care services’ was translated into German as *Pflegedienste*. This back-translated as ‘care services’, indicating a good translation. However, *Pflegedienste* refers to care of the ill or elderly, which in a survey about general childcare services, would be inappropriate. This type of error can only be detected by someone with contextual knowledge of the subject in both languages.

## A five-stage approach

The failure of these two methods to deliver reliable translations led to the development of a third: the TRAPD model. TRAPD stands for five key phases in team translation: translation, revision, adjudication, pre-test and documentation. Established in the early 2000s, it is part of a broader set of guidelines for the development of multinational, multicultural and multiregional surveys.<sup>2</sup>

The first and second phases require translation of questions by at least two accredited translators, followed by revision. Adjudication refers to the selection of one translated version. Pre-testing is then carried out to assess readability and to see if people



respond in the expected way to questions. The final phase refers to systematic tracking of documentation and translated versions to ensure transparency and allow other people, including language professionals, to examine the original questionnaire and its translation, and provide feedback for improvement.

The disadvantage of this approach, aside from complexity, is cost.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore only generally adopted for large-scale international assessments, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies. Consequently, these guidelines are difficult to implement in full.

This seems to be a two-sided problem. On the one hand, there is a need to investigate perceptions within the research community: the perceived cost of translation and the complication of involving 'non-researchers' in projects, along with an outdated belief that good-quality translation is as close as possible to the original text, if not word for word.<sup>4</sup> This suggests a deep misunderstanding about what translators do and the value they can bring to a study. On the other hand, there is the question of how to tackle the matter of specialist knowledge among translators and interpreters. If translators are regularly

embedded in research projects, they may be better placed to develop field-specific knowledge and an understanding of research-related constraints on language.

The need for multilingual research is not about to go away, nor is it limited to surveys; it also includes interviews and any form of language-based inquiry. Without translation and interpreting, people are at risk of being excluded, misinformed, disadvantaged or misunderstood. It may be tempting for researchers to turn to machine translation (MT), but while a recent study indicates that MT may not have a devastating impact on numerical results, it does show that human-led team translation outperforms machine output.<sup>5</sup>

To be relevant, multilingual research needs to be representative, inclusive and ethical. One possible avenue towards this may be more visible cooperation between translators and interpreters and the research community. As professionals, we need to reach out to academics, while those of us working in the research community can, perhaps, raise awareness about the key role translators and interpreters can and should play in supporting multilingual research.

There is also a need for specialist courses, adapted for working translators and

interpreters. If both researchers and funding bodies understand the possibilities of involving professional translators and interpreters in inquiry, then there is a greater chance that including the cost of professional linguists in research bids will be seen as an investment rather than a burden.

#### Notes

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## KATE TROTMAN MEETS

## RACHEL STRASSBERGER

## How languages helped the music promoter make it to the top in a male-dominated industry

Music promoter Rachel Strassberger, who counts Black Eyed Peas among her biggest clients, has combined a career in law and marketing with a passion for electronic music. She explains how speaking five languages shapes who she is, how she builds relationships and how she gets ahead in negotiations.

*You're fluent in five languages. How did you learn them?*

I'm really fluent in three: I grew up speaking French and Italian at home with my French Swiss and Italian Swiss parents. They were in the hotel business in South Africa and then North Africa, and I was in English-speaking international schools. Three languages was completely normal for me. A much bigger challenge came when I was 13. We moved back to Switzerland and school suddenly changed from English to French. That was a tough one as I couldn't read and write French.

I also needed to learn German. Beach holidays with my grandma suddenly switched to four weeks of intensive tuition in Cologne or Bonn. When a language is so improvised through childhood, having to learn it academically is very different. Mum was very strict with me about what it means to really know a language; you have to read, write and speak – the whole package.

As a teenager, we spent time in Cyprus and I was put in Arabic class. I don't count Arabic professionally, but having lived in Egypt and Libya, you start to appreciate all the different tones and ways of speaking it. I always do the Middle Eastern gigs because I love those. I have a feel for what's going on around me. Now I live in Barcelona. I didn't

speak Spanish when I arrived five years ago, but I've made a lot of progress.

*How did languages give you an edge in the music industry?*

Being comfortable in several languages gives me insights into the subtle nuances between cultures. I can build a rapport with people pretty quickly and jump on the opportunities for negotiation that this opens up. In everyday life, humanity and emotion are naturally exchanged. I can let the other person drive the conversation, making the most of the warmth that develops. Language fluency is so precious because then nothing gets 'lost in translation'. If you talk to people in their language at a high enough level to

**HIT MAKERS:** *Black Eyed Peas are one of the best-selling groups of all time (above)*

negotiate, you know how far to push things. Without that I wouldn't have accomplished the things that I have.

*Black Eyed Peas are dedicated to connecting with fans. How do you reach their audience before a song is released or the band goes on tour?*

We geo-target all our content. Everything is translated for fans in very specific regions so it connects with them personally. It's a detailed process but so vital to our success. You must always communicate in the other person's language and it must be absolutely right for



them. We make sure that fans in different countries get all the content they want. It sounds so simple but nobody does it because it's time consuming. There are two aspects of our communication success: translate everything perfectly for everyone, wherever their location; and encourage band members to speak up and build a rapport with fans.

***Can you tell us more about how new content is translated?***

It's always the same strategy. We have the same exacting standard for everything and nothing is merely 'basic information'. I love the process of improving, making sure a word is exactly right in that language.

I'll translate into French, for example, but I'll still have a copywriter work on it and polish it. I'm very comfortable in French but you are never really perfect. I'll give the brief and the emotional tone that I'm aiming for, such as 'I need this to come across as friendly', but I want a native monolingual speaker to proofread it. I know exactly where I want to go with the message and I don't want to confuse translation with copywriting.

Finally it's given the final touches by a native speaker totally outside our circle so we can be sure it's not influenced by the English original. It's got to be perfect for each group of fans and those in the industry. It takes time, but the human touch is what makes it work. If it's a language I don't speak I would have a different approach, but for the languages I seek to master, I know the message so well that I always need to be in control.

***Do you think the multicultural backgrounds of band members, and the fusion of styles, have contributed to Black Eyed Peas' international fan base?***

Their cultural diversity and personal touch definitely impact where the band is positioned. It's actually a two-way process: band members have their own connections with fans but I'm there, behind the scenes, to coach and encourage them to build on the opportunities. With his Filipino roots, Apl.de.ap naturally draws in and inspires fans from the Philippines and beyond, including the UK. Everywhere we travel we receive food, because fans bring their love of food and culture to the party – a whole extra dimension.

Taboo, a native American who particularly connects with fans in Mexico or Latin America or even Spain, is always our front man in

promotions with Spanish speakers. It can be a bit nerve-racking as he's conscious of occasionally making mistakes and wonders if that will be a problem in front of other people. It never is; you have to go with those things when you're speaking someone else's language. That's how I developed my Spanish and now I'm there to coach him. On this level, it doesn't have to be perfect; just go for it and grow through it.

***You're surrounded by huge personalities – what communication skills work best?***

Passion for the industry and experience are my biggest assets. We're all human and everyone responds to being included and respected for who they are. We do it all the time, through language and cultural finesse. Anything less is not proper communication. These are the things that make us human; it's the only way to be ourselves and create that real bond.

I always speak the language of the other person. Whether it's a meeting or chatting with a group, I'll constantly switch from one language to another, depending on who needs to feel that they are at the heart of the

conversation. It doesn't matter whether it's a performer, an agent, a PA or whoever, if you can speak their language then you should always show that respect and do so.

***What interpreting needs do the bands you manage have?***

Usually it's me doing all the communicating and as long as we're in places where my languages are spoken I don't need interpreters. We're just back from Japan and interpreting was essential there. Although I speak some Arabic, I would still use an interpreter because I don't want anything to get missed. Connections and negotiations are too important to risk that.

***How do you see your role developing over the next few years?***

At 17, I had my future mapped out, but experience has taught me that it's best to enjoy life as it happens and grab opportunities as they come. For sure, I'll be following my passions and building bonds with people everywhere. The sky's the limit when you love languages!



# Laws that make sense

## *A prescriptive approach can be misleading in legal settings; Richard Vbranch makes the case for descriptive translation*

Legal translation has been described as “the ultimate linguistic challenge”.<sup>1</sup> An initial read of a new assignment is often a journey into the unknown, quickly revealing unique and country-specific judicial systems, terms and procedures. This requires discipline, careful contextual reading and copious preparatory research in both source and target languages. An exciting and rewarding process for sure. Repackaging and expediting an obscure or unique legal concept to transcend subject-matter-specific, geographical and linguistic boundaries is as wonderful as it is daunting.

A solid translation theory canon has been evolving over the past seven decades offering diverse stratagems to that end. While a purely prescriptive word-to-word method may be preferable in terms of faithfulness to the original, it can fall short in properly conveying meaning. A strict sense-to-sense stance risks sacrificing faithfulness by omission or addition.

Equivalence avoids the distraction of word units by shining a spotlight on the message; yet formal equivalence sticks to boilerplate solutions, which may render a text unreadable without heavy footnoting. Dynamic equivalence propitiates a sense-to-sense naturalness while giving culture a foot in the door. And functional equivalence goes even further, fully committing to equivalence in the target language over faithfulness to the original while also embracing cultural aspects.

### Prescriptive v Plain

When it comes to standard legal forms and templates, a purely prescriptive approach, drawing essentially on well-established equivalents, works well. But in a globalised

market, legal translators often take on source texts from countries they are unfamiliar with, which requires a more flexible approach.

A true expert communicates complex concepts in plain and simple language. Moreover, not every English speaker is familiar with complicated English legalese. These two grounds alone present a strong case for a descriptive approach to legal translation. There has been a recent push for plain language in English legal documents. The UK Supreme Court (UKSC) sets a great example in this regard. Despite having the final say on any number of legal puzzles within its jurisdiction, it does so without straying from everyday vocabulary, wherever possible, and using short, clear sentences.

In *Wolverhampton City Council and others v London Gypsies and Travellers and others*, the UKSC outlined the cause in plain and simple terms: “Does the court have the power to grant ‘newcomer injunctions’, i.e. injunctions against persons who are unknown and unidentified as at the date of the order, and who have not yet performed, or threatened to perform, the acts which the injunction prohibits?” It then ruled “that the court has power to grant newcomer injunctions. However, it should only exercise this power in circumstances where there is a compelling need to protect civil rights or to enforce public law that is not adequately met by any other available remedies.” A style no doubt worthy of imitation by translators.

### A descriptive approach

A descriptive method allows legal translators to enhance this plain-language approach. Those navigating French and Spanish legal

texts enjoy an ever-growing library of benchmark reference works, not to mention a plethora of robust online resources. In his French to English dictionary, *FHS Bridge* sets the bar rather high by providing astonishingly understandable descriptive English renditions of complex French legal terms.<sup>2</sup>

He translates *concoeurs idéal* as a ‘single act fulfilling the conditions required to constitute various offences’, rather than the more direct ‘notional plurality of offences’. This even allows one to keep the original French term while adding the more extensive, descriptive rendering in a translator’s note. As to *concoeurs réel*, he suggests ‘plurality of offences dealt with in the same proceedings’. This descriptive stance is especially important for omnipresent yet commonly mistranslated terms.

In her outstanding lexicon, Rebecca Jowers takes a similar approach for Spanish to English.<sup>3</sup> In Spain, the term *procurador* is at serious risk of being confused as a false friend of ‘prosecutor’ in English. Jowers offers ‘party agent’ as a translation option. *Procurador* can also be confused with the party’s legal counsel. Indeed, ‘party agent’ fittingly describes this licensed legal professional’s role in representing a party procedurally, receiving notices and summons, and sending important documents to and liaising with both the party’s legal representative and the court.

Another example is *encubramiento*, which could be directly translated as ‘concealment’. Jowers delightfully describes it in legal English as ‘aiding and abetting after the fact’. Her flexible and descriptive approach allows nuanced renderings in English even when two different source terms include identical words or phrases. For example, she renders *medidas*



*cauteleras en el proceso penal* as ‘pretrial measures in criminal proceedings’. But her translation of *medidas cautelares personales* is ‘coercive measures against the person’.

Jowers’ translations of Spanish legal remedies are particularly descriptive. A *recurso de queja* could easily be misunderstood if translated word for word (‘complaint appeal’). But she leaves no doubt as to meaning, describing it as an ‘appeal of the refusal to admit another appeal’ in civil proceedings and ‘appeal of interlocutory orders and of the refusal to admit an appeal’ in criminal proceedings. Similarly, *recurso de apelación* is a ‘second instance appeal’; *recurso de revisión* is a ‘petition to review an unappealable conviction’; and *recurso de reforma y súplica* are ‘reconsideration appeals’. A descriptive method helps the audience to not only decipher a foreign source text, but also to discover a foreign legal system, or at least a snippet of one.

### Administrative ease

French-speaking legal systems are equipped with an arsenal of administrative remedies presented in clipped and clear terminology; English-speaking ones usually are not. While prescriptive solutions may exist in English, Bridge’s descriptive approach fits the bill. Take the following administrative terms in French and his descriptive equivalents in English:

1 One might challenge an authority’s decision after the initial step of French administrative

procedure by sending an ‘application to the same administrative authority to reconsider its decision’ (*recours gracieux*).

2 Should this fail, one might try an ‘application to a higher administrative authority to review the decision of a lower administrative authority’ (*recours hiérarchique*).

3 If such non-contentious options fail, one can file an ‘application to an administrative court to find that the applicant is entitled to a claim against the state or to set aside or vary an administrative act which does not fall within the scope of an action for misuse or abuse of authority’ (*recours de pleine juridiction*).

You may be hard pressed to find a reliable prescriptive equivalent for *référé*. Yet Bridge breathes clear meaning into the English by translating this notion as a ‘summary application to a single judge for an interim order in an urgent case’. Refreshingly readable while fully faithful to the source meaning.

The European Court of Human Rights’ HUDOC database follows suit with crystal-clear renderings of specific types of *référé*. When a liberty is under threat by an administrative authority one can file ‘an urgent application for protection of a fundamental freedom’ (*référé-liberté*). To suspend the effects of an administrative act while a judge considers the merits, one may lodge ‘an urgent application requesting a stay of execution’ (*référé-suspension*). Creditors can even start ‘proceedings to seek an interim reward’ (*référé provision*) to obtain an advance on a debt which is not seriously contested.

These descriptive gems may be scarce in dictionaries but can be unearthed using the HUDOC advanced search feature under ‘This exact word or phrase’. A simple comparison of the various language versions of the same decision provides uniform and readable translations of complex legal terminology. Given the wide range of legal systems subject to the Strasbourg Court, its jurisprudence is a spectacular resource for translators as a gigantic, searchable lexicon.

And if you’re really stuck, membership-based websites such as ProZ.com can help. Its priceless KudoZ feature connects translators from all over the world in a forum where translation problems are met with real-time solutions on a peer-to-peer basis, with lively discussions and constructive commenting.

Simply put, legal translations are easier to tackle for translators and readers alike when one relies on a descriptive approach as opposed to a prescriptive one. It just makes more sense.

### Notes

1 Harvey, M (2002) ‘What’s So Special about Legal Translation?’ In *Meta*, 47,2, 177

2 Bridge, FHS (1994) *The Council of Europe French-English Legal Dictionary*, Council of Europe Press

3 Jowers, R (2015) *Léxico temático de terminología jurídica español-inglés*, Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch

# IDIOMATIC SHIFTS

## *Aakanksha Chahar on the challenges of translating idioms*

Idioms, those colourful expressions deeply rooted in culture and history, present both a challenge and an opportunity for translators. Idioms such as ‘raining cats and dogs’ and ‘spill the beans’ are ubiquitous in English, each carrying a unique meaning that extends beyond the literal interpretation of its words. Similarly, Japanese idioms like 猫の額 (*neko no hitai*; lit. ‘cat’s head’), which refers to a tiny space, are rooted in cultural values and historical contexts (in this case, of modesty and minimalism).

The importance of idiomatic translation lies in its ability to preserve cultural richness, enhance cross-cultural communication and convey subtle emotional nuances that may be lost in literal interpretations. Where a parallel idiom is available, it is usually better to use it. For example, the English idiom ‘kick the bucket’ has a parallel idiom in Japanese: 骨を折る (*hone o oru*; lit. ‘break bones’).

We can break down the challenges of idiomatic translation into six key areas:

### 1. Recognising idioms

Due to their inherent complexity, deciphering idioms poses a significant challenge, requiring an understanding of their cultural and contextual significance. For instance, the Japanese idiom 花より団子 (*hana yori dango*) literally means ‘dumplings rather than flowers’ but implies valuing substance over style. Indicators which serve as clues for identifying idiomatic expressions include incongruity, unusual words and stylistic deviations.

### 2. Ambiguity and modification

One of the inherent complexities lies in the potential ambiguity of idioms, which have both literal and figurative meanings. Authors

may also modify idioms for emphasis or creative effect, compounding the challenges for translators. 猫舌 (*nekojita*; lit. ‘cat tongue’) is modified in the phrase 猫舌が三角になる (*nekojita ga sankaku ni naru*), where 三角になる (*sankaku ni naru*; ‘to become triangular’) intensifies the idiomatic meaning (‘sensitive tongue’) to describe extreme sensitivity to hot food. In English, ‘bite the bullet’ is sometimes modified as ‘bite the silver bullet’, amplifying the notion of enduring hardship or adversity.

### 3. Emotional and tonal connotations

Idioms carry emotional nuances that resonate deeply with native speakers. Translating these nuances accurately preserves the emotional impact of the source text. For instance, 雨降って地固まる (*ame futte jiko katamaru*; lit. ‘after the rain, the ground hardens’) conveys resilience and strength in adversity. A nuanced translation might be ‘adversity builds character’, capturing the emotional resonance while maintaining clarity in English.

Furthermore, idioms often evoke specific emotions or sentiments that are culturally significant. Consider 涙を飲む (*namida o nomu*; lit. ‘to swallow one’s tears’), which conveys the act of suppressing one’s emotions or enduring hardship without showing weakness. A possible equivalent in English is ‘to keep a stiff upper lip’. When translating such idioms, capturing the underlying emotional connotations is essential.

### 4. Challenges of untranslatability

Where no direct equivalent exists, skilled translators must navigate this uncharted territory with creativity and ingenuity. A nuanced translation of 猿も木から落ちる (*saru mo ki kara ochiru*; lit. ‘even monkeys fall

from trees’), which signifies that everyone makes mistakes, might be ‘nobody’s perfect’, capturing the idiom’s universal wisdom while adapting it to English-speaking contexts.

Moreover, idiomatic expressions often rely on cultural references or contexts that may not have direct counterparts in other languages. In Japanese, 虎穴に入らずんば虎子を得ず (*koketsu ni irazunba koji o ezu*; lit. ‘if you do not enter the tiger’s cave, you will not catch its cub’) emphasises the importance of taking risks to achieve success. A parallel idiom in English is ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained’. Translators must consider cultural differences while finding creative solutions.

### 5. Machine translation

Machine translation has made significant strides in bridging language barriers, but it often misses idiomatic expressions. The literal translations produced require extra work in proofreading, editing and revisions by professional translators.

### 6. Selecting a strategy

There are various techniques available to translators and selecting the most appropriate one for any given idiom can be tricky. Consider the idiom 二兎を追う者は一兎をも得ず (*nito o ou mono wa itto o mo ezu*; lit. ‘one who chases two hares catches neither’). Its vivid imagery emphasises the folly of attempting multiple tasks simultaneously. A parallel translation like ‘Jack of all trades, master of none’ could be used to maintain the engaging quality while imparting the intended meaning. Such an idiom can be confusing for the translator because it is possible to achieve a translation that is as lively and engaging as the source text through either a literal

## LAYERS OF MEANING

The expression 猫をかぶる *literally means 'to wear a cat'* but might best be translated as 'to wear a mask' to reflect the intended meaning

translation or a parallel idiom. Neither offers a clear advantage, making it difficult for the translator to choose the best approach.

So what are the four main techniques that can be used for effective idiomatic translation?

### 1. Literal translation

A literal translation often preserves the original flavour of the idiomatic expression and captures its intended meaning. It can even serve as an opportunity to enrich the target language and expand readers' conceptual world. 目から鱗が落ちる (*me kara uroko ga ochiru*) can easily be translated into English using the literal meaning: 'the scales fell from my eyes'. This conveys the idea of suddenly realising the truth or seeing things clearly. The two idioms in the different languages have similar literal and implied meanings, rendering a smooth translation.

### 2. Retaining the essence

Retaining the essence of idiomatic expressions involves capturing their cultural and emotional significance. Translators may choose to keep the original word or phrase accompanied by an explanation or note to provide clarity. In the translation of the Japanese idiom 一期一会 (*ichi-go ichi-e*; lit. 'one time, one meeting'), the translator may opt to retain the original phrase and provide a footnote explaining its significance in Japanese culture, particularly in the context of valuing the present moment.

Cultural nuances are often deeply embedded within idioms, reflecting societal norms and values. Take, for instance, 仏の顔も三度まで (*hotoke no kao mo sando made*), which translates as 'Even Buddha's face shows anger three times'. This implies that even the most patient individuals have their limits.



When translating such idioms it is crucial to maintain the underlying cultural significance. In this case, a suitable English equivalent might be 'Even saints have their breaking points'.

### 3. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing offers a straightforward explanation or rephrasing of an idiomatic expression to ensure clarity and comprehension for the target audience. Instead of translating 春はあけぼの (*haru wa akebono*) literally as 'spring is at dawn', a translator may opt for the paraphrased version 'spring brings new beginnings', which captures the sense of the original while making it more accessible to English-speaking readers.

### 4. Maintaining natural flow

In creative writing and communication, idioms infuse texts with authenticity and resonance. However, transplanting idioms across languages requires finesse. The phrase 猫をかぶる (*neko o kaburu*; lit. 'to wear a cat') signifies someone pretending to be innocent or naive. A literal translation may obscure its

meaning. To maintain natural flow, a suitable adaptation could be 'to wear a mask' or the parallel idiom 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'.

Translating idiomatic expressions often involves striking a delicate balance between fidelity to the source language and clarity in the target language. For example, 瓜二つ (*uri futatsu*) translates literally as 'two melons' but its intended meaning is 'two peas in a pod' or 'like two peas'. Here, the translator must prioritise conveying the idiomatic meaning to ensure comprehension and fluency in the target language.

Idiomatic translation is a multifaceted art which serves as a vital bridge between languages and cultures, enriching both with the nuances of expression and cultural depth. As translators navigate this intricate terrain, they embark on a transformative journey of linguistic exploration, preserving the richness of idiomatic expressions for future generations. With each translation, we foster understanding and empathy, bridging divides and celebrating the diverse tapestry of human communication.

# The best way to learn

*What is the most efficient way to learn a language? Petar Milin and Dagmar Divjak are turning to an algorithm to find out*



Learning a new language is an incredibly daunting task for adults. While newspaper headlines may give the impression that the interest in language learning is on the wane, fluency in a foreign language is something many aspire to. Over the past decade, language learning apps have gained immensely in popularity, with the industry leader alone attracting nearly 10 million active users daily.

Taking their cues from the gaming industry, these apps offer a high level of user engagement and retention but fall short when it comes to helping users achieve mastery. What is it that makes learning a foreign language so challenging? At the University of Birmingham, we use artificial intelligence to understand how languages can be taught more efficiently.

Grounded in two disciplines – linguistics and psychology – we rely on mathematical algorithms modelled on research into learning to develop a new account of what needs to be learnt. The aim is to offer

**Table 1:** Traditional grammar table of tense/aspect

	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Future</b>
<b>Simple</b>	wrote	writes	will write
<b>Perfect</b>	had written	has written	will have written
<b>Progressive</b>	was writing	is writing	will be writing
<b>Perfect progressive</b>	had been writing	has been writing	will have been writing

**Table 2:** Context-based grammar table  
(includes lexical items and contextual cues, e.g. ‘recently’)

	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>
<b>Simple</b>	She nodded; he replied; they remarked	I bet; you know; I mean
<b>Perfect progressive</b>	since then, so far, recently	I have given; he has left; they have sold; it is bleeding; I am starving



an effective, sustainable and rewarding experience for language learners, whatever the medium of instruction.

### The building blocks for learning

One well-known principle of learning is error-correction learning. This assumes that an organism gradually builds relevant relationships between elements in its environment to gain a better understanding of the world. Learning a language also involves building relations, correcting errors and gradually improving our performance.

But what do we need to pick up when we are exposed to a new language? Natural languages exhibit a unique property: a small number of words are very frequent, but the vast majority are rarely used. In English, for example, 10 words make up 25% of usage<sup>1</sup> and you need only around 1,000 words to be able to understand 85% of what an average speaker says. This observation has been used to make informed decisions about learning priorities, in particular which words should be taught first.

To illustrate our approach, let's look at an area that is notoriously difficult for language learners: tense/aspect. Generally, English grammars assume the existence of 12 tense/aspect combinations. These arise from three tenses and four aspects (see Table 1). In a traditional grammatical approach, you would define the abstract meaning of each tense and each aspect separately. Tense is relatively easy: if something happened yesterday, you use a past tense; if something will happen tomorrow, you use a future tense. Aspect can also be explained concisely: the simple aspect is there to express a fact; the perfect is for actions which are completed but retain some relevance to the present situation; the progressive describes an event that happens over a period of time. It's an economical method and works to teach forms and their labels, but it is terribly inadequate when it comes to enabling learners to use those forms.

An approach that factors in actual usage yields much more effective results. If we retain the relation between verbs and tense/aspect markers we see that the cells (Table 1) are occupied by a different subset of verbs (see Table 2): some verbs occur preferably with specific tense/aspect markers ('replied' in the simple past), while other tense/aspect combinations are typically accompanied by contextual elements ('since then' and the past perfect).

While this provides learners with knowledge they can apply directly, it does look like madness: do we really memorise these tense and aspect preferences for each individual verb? When we use computational techniques to check millions of examples it quickly becomes clear that those 12 cells (Table 1) aren't all equally important: the present and past simple make up more than 80% of all examples. This suggests that users do not get exposed to all forms equally, and this has implications for learning.

### Building an algorithm

To explore how this system would be learnt we turned a simple but fundamental rule of error-correction learning – the Rescorla-Wagner rule<sup>2</sup> – into a computational algorithm. In this way we have a model that mimics how people learn from raw language data in a naturalistic way. The algorithm uses the target form's immediate context as cue(s) to inform the choice of verb form, as people do. For example, in the sentence 'Almost a year later nothing has happened', the cues are individual words (what we refer to as '1-grams'), including 'almost', 'year', 'later', 'nothing', 'a', but also '2-grams', such as 'almost#a', 'a#year', and '3-grams', e.g. 'a#year#later' alongside the verb 'happen'.

After the model has worked its way through a large number of examples, calculating the strength of co-occurrence between the 1-, 2- and 3-grams and forms of the verb 'happen', the model is tested. It is given a

Figure 1: The prevalence of each tense/aspect in the British National Corpus

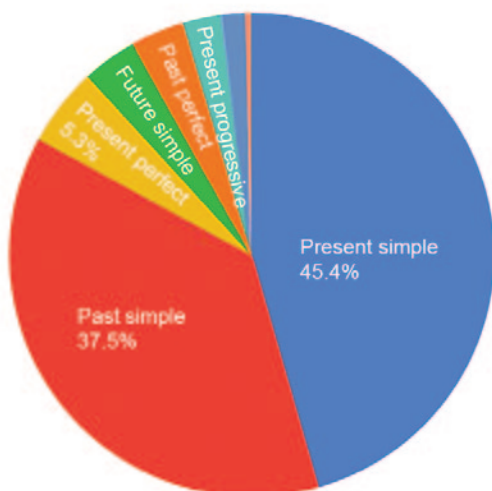
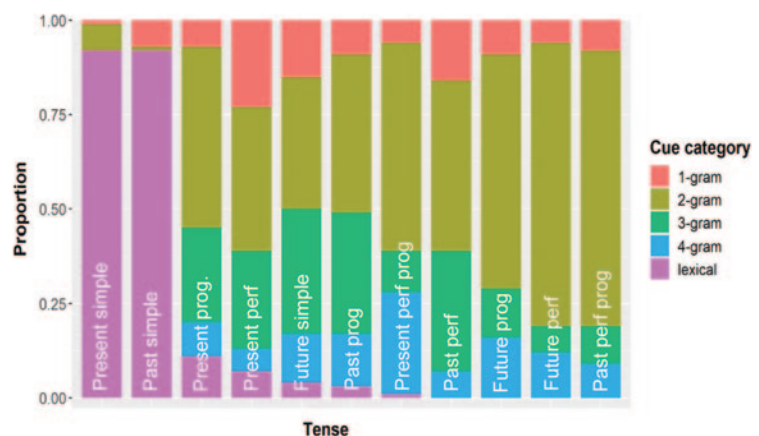
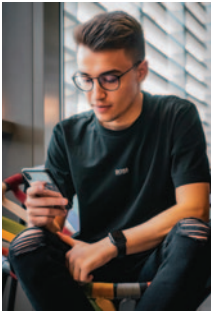


Figure 2: Prevalence of cues that enable language users to determine which aspect/tense to use. 1-grams are one-word contextual cues (e.g. 'almost'), 2-grams are two-word contextual cues (e.g. 'a#year'), lexical items refer to the verbs that are used (e.g. 'reply').





**ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT**  
*Neither traditional in-person courses nor popular apps have fully mastered the challenges of learning a language*



IMAGES © PEXELS

► sentence where the word ‘happen’ is missing and asked to fill the gap with a suitable form of the verb. Overall, our model learns to use tense and aspect forms rather well, makes choices that feel natural to English language users and is able to suggest possible alternatives. (Often more than one form is possible; in the example sentence, ‘has happened’, ‘had happened’ or ‘is happening’ could all be used equally well.)

We can also look under the hood of this algorithm and identify the cues that support learning.<sup>3</sup> This is where frequency of use comes in again: the verb system appears to consist of two types of tense/aspect combination. Simple tenses, such as simple present and simple past, are very frequently used and therefore strongly associated with specific lexical elements, i.e. regular verbs.

Learners need to be exposed to these verbs in their preferred tense/aspect forms, for instance ‘you know’, ‘I mean’, ‘he replied’, ‘she nodded’. But there are also more complex tense/aspect combinations which are rarely used and are therefore cued by contextual elements (1-, 2-, 3- and 4-grams, e.g. ‘recently’ and ‘since then’). To become a proficient user of these more complex verb forms, the learner needs to be exposed to context that supports the use of these forms.

Practically, when teaching the English tense/aspect system, learners would work their way through the tense/aspect combinations in order of frequency of occurrence, starting with the simple past and present, and focusing on the verbs that occur in these tenses. When this knowledge is secure, attention could gradually shift to the complex tenses, and the contextual elements that support their use.

Comparisons with already established tenses can be drawn where appropriate, e.g. simple vs progressive past. Crucially, the fine semantic differences between the different ways of expressing, e.g. the past would come

from a discussion of the differences between the contextual elements that support each of the relevant tense/aspect combinations. This would replace the current reliance on abstract concepts, such as present relevance, that are typically used to explain the meaning, and hence use, of tense/aspect combinations.

In other words, if we follow the science, and learn from data the way first-language users learn from data, and do this using copious amounts of data, we find relevant patterns that are difficult to spot with the naked eye. These patterns are highly relevant for understanding how the system works and hence how it should be taught. Our approach relies on these structures that are detected by applying basic principles of learning without reliance on linguistic rules.

An additional strength of our approach is that we can let the algorithm learn from data that matches specific learning goals in terms of genre, style, topic, etc. For example, the conventions for tense/aspect use differ between, say, academic articles and creative fiction. Training our algorithm on examples from the genre or style you are trying to learn or teach will generate tailor-made recommendations.

An approach to language founded on principles of learning also enables teachers to shift the focus away from prescribing usage through rules, towards describing usage in a way that directs learners’ attention to the type of cues that are useful for learning a particular structure. After all, there is an infinite number of things we might want to say and we cannot teach solutions to an infinite number of problems, but we can teach our students where to look to learn to solve any problem.

By equipping learners with a long-term learning strategy, we support them in building a bank of knowledge that is tailored to the task at hand. This increases their chances of developing efficient memory traces that resemble those of native language users and offers a more effective, sustainable and rewarding language-learning experience.

[www.youtube.com/@outofourminds8219](https://www.youtube.com/@outofourminds8219); X @oominds; [outofourminds.bham.ac.uk](http://outofourminds.bham.ac.uk). For teaching resources see [outofourminds.bham.ac.uk/resources](http://outofourminds.bham.ac.uk/resources).

**Notes**

- 1 ‘The’, ‘be’, ‘to’, ‘of’, ‘and’, ‘a’, ‘in’, ‘that’, ‘have’, ‘I’.
- 2 Rescorla, RA and Wagner, RA (1972) ‘A Theory of Pavlovian Conditioning: Variations in the effectiveness of reinforcement and non-reinforcement’. In Black, H and Proksay, WF, *Classical Conditioning II*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 64-99
- 3 Romain, L and Divjak, D (2024) ‘The Types of Cues That Help You Learn: Pedagogical implications of a computational simulation on learning the English tense/aspect system from exposure’. In *Pedagogical Linguistics*, John Benjamins; [www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/10.1075/pl.23003.rom](http://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/10.1075/pl.23003.rom)

# Awarding excellence

*The top performers in CIOL exams were recognised in the CIOL Awards ceremony 2024, along with those who have made outstanding contributions to languages*

▼ Rafał Byzdra, who was the best DPSI candidate this year, brought his young family to the awards ceremony in March – inspiring the next generations of language professionals. They pose with his trophy and the Threlford Cup following a ceremony to celebrate the award-winners' achievements.



▲ (L-r) Winners Rafał Byzdra (best DPSI), Michael Kelly (David Crystal Award), Jenifer Atkins (best CertTrans), Katarzyna Trzeciak (best DipTrans) and Cari Bottois of Charity Translators (Threlford Cup) with CIOL CEO John Worne and Vice-President Jean Coussins.

► Professor Michael Kelly OBE receives the David Crystal Award for his outstanding contribution to the field of languages. A strong advocate for language learning, he was a prime mover in the Nuffield Language Inquiry and has directed several UK projects.

▲ The co-founder of Charity Translators, Cari Bottois, has fun with John Worne and the Threlford Cup. The charity supports a wide variety of projects, in areas as diverse as human rights and palliative care, through their community of over 1,500 volunteers.





# Human connections

Highlights from the inspiring in-person events. By Anna Ostrovsky

For all its capabilities, and despite some well-founded fears, technology will not replace the humanity, empathy, engagement and compassion for which professional linguists are known and valued – that was the verdict of the speakers at CIOL Translators Day and Interpreters Day 2024. Statistically based and data-trained machine translation is still loaded with endemic inaccuracies and ‘hallucinations’, failing to render a consistently cohesive output in many languages. This was highlighted by Claudia Wiesinger of the University of Vienna’s Centre for Translation Studies in her research on post-editing and machine translation.

For interpreters, integrating technology into their workflow requires analytical acumen and expertise, as well as practice and adjustment for different languages and linguists. Automatic Speech Recognition can help interpreters, but there is more to do to make it easier to use, advised Sabine Braun, Diana Singureanu and Wangyi Tang of the University of Surrey’s Centre for Translation Studies. A significant challenge will be making the technology widely available.

Barbara Schouten, of the University of Amsterdam, set the stage for a lively discussion on the importance of public service interpreting standards to avoid the safety risks

of friends and family being used to interpret in healthcare settings. Research shows that patients want trained interpreters as the most sought-after patient right, contrary to the popular narrative that they prefer to use family.

For NRPSI (the National Register of Public Service Interpreters), ‘putting people first’ remains a key theme to protect the public. Consistent advocacy will be required to press for nationwide, coherent interpreting training standards to ensure comprehensive high-quality interpreting across public services in the UK, as was highlighted by Phil Muriel and Mike Orlov of NRPSI.

Seasoned linguists Julia Poger, Sue Leschen and Chris Durban advocated for freelancers to “think more like businesspeople”. All three advised self-employed translators and interpreters of the importance of negotiation, pricing, protecting income and sometimes saying ‘no’. Investing time and effort in client engagement and communication is also vital to help linguists position themselves and their services to attract a premium in a challenging – but still potentially rewarding – environment.

With a mix of UK and international research and hands-on business advice, both of the in-person events provided attendees with new insights, networking opportunities and

the reassurance that, with the right approach, whatever AI brings, linguists and CIOL members can have confidence in themselves and their value in 2024 and beyond.

Anna Ostrovsky MCIL CL is an admissions manager and sits on CIOL’s ED&I Committee.

## TAKE-AWAYS

Over two days of face-to-face conferences in London, linguists heard from a wide range of academics and practitioners. Vasiliki Prestidge MCIL CL explains what she took away from the events: “Change is inevitable, specialisation is key, human skills are our superpower, embrace the tech!”

As Zuzana Kusá MCIL said: “The message of both Translators Day and Interpreters Day was clear: as massive as the technological advances have been in our field of work, and as threatening as they may seem to our livelihoods, digital tools will never be able to fully replace what human translators and interpreters bring to the table – human connection and expertise, emotional intelligence and passion, and relationships based on trust.”

# Best foot forward

*Translators Day was all about dealing with the pressing issues of the day and near future, ending with an uplifting panel discussion focusing on the impact of AI*



IMAGES © CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU

The final session of CIOL Translators Day 2024 brought together a panel of Council members to discuss the impact of AI and machine translation on the language industry, and the role of professional linguists in this changing landscape. The overwhelming feeling was one of optimism and opportunities amid change.

Dr Mariam Aboelezz, lecturer in Arabic Translation Studies, stressed the importance of adopting a pragmatic approach to the inevitable integration of AI. She highlighted factors that may make certain translation work less susceptible to automation, such as accountability, creativity, confidentiality and the ethical awareness of clients. Mariam also noted the point, made several times during the day, that the impact of AI may vary depending on the languages involved.

Emma Gledhill, a translator and corporate language services professional, expressed optimism about the opportunities for experienced translators, particularly in new and related fields like interaction design, UX (user

experience), and content design and writing for accessibility. She stressed the importance of human oversight in high-risk fields, which is likely to be required by the EU's upcoming AI regulations, impacting the context for the UK.

Mark Robinson, director of the translation company Alexika, shared a long-term perspective, noting that while machine translation has been a concern for decades, many professional translators have adapted and thrived. Translation is ahead of other sectors in the understanding and adoption of technology, which will serve the industry well. He also asserted that it was vital to promote language learning and encourage young people to pursue careers in languages.

Vasiliki Prestidge, Director of Greek to Me, highlighted the unique skills of translators, particularly their humanity and ability to connect with people from diverse cultures. She also pointed out the durable value of translators' natural curiosity and aptitude for deep subject knowledge.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

*Head of Membership Dom Hebblethwaite's talk (main image); the panel discussion with (l-r) Mark Robinson, Vasiliki Prestidge, John Worne, Mariam Aboelezz and Emma Gledhill (top left); and attendees enjoy a delicious lunch (left)*

The panellists agreed that professional bodies like CIOL play an important role in representing the interests of linguists, setting standards, highlighting risks, and educating stakeholders and the public about the value of professional language services. They stressed the need for a united front and welcomed the work with ITI and others in advocating for the profession and promoting best practices in the use of machine translation and AI.

Despite the challenges, the panellists expressed optimism about the future of the language industry, noting its continued growth. They encouraged translators to value their skills, embrace and explore new technologies, and take pride in their vital role.

# Books

## The Centre

Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi



*Picador*  
2023, 320 pp;  
ISBN  
9781529097825  
Hardback,  
£16.99

*The Centre* is a thrilling, surreal novel set in a familiar world where new languages can be acquired in an unfamiliar way – if you're invited, that is. Deftly weaved with commentaries on racism, sexism, class and diasporic identity – and, of course, translation – this sci-fi-tinged novel is for fans of RF Kuang's *Babel* and *Yellowface*, and

those interested in interrogating the language industries.

The story follows Anisa, a Pakistani woman living in London who makes a living as a subtitler of Bollywood films. When she becomes involved with Adam, a British man who has mastered an unbelievable number of languages, she is eventually let in on his secret: Adam has been educated at a place simply known as 'the Centre'. Accepting Adam's offer to win her a place at this elite institution, Anisa submits herself to its admission process in the hope that acquiring more languages might increase her chances of finding success as a literary translator – and it does.

While Anisa becomes increasingly fascinated by the language-learning technique that has granted her the career of her dreams, she faces an obstacle: regular guests at the Centre do not have the privilege of knowing how it all works. She decides to journey closer to the heart of the mystery, whatever it takes.

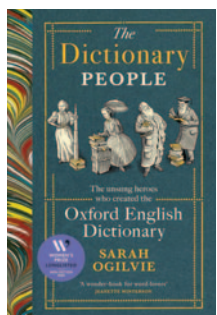
While the unravelling of the mystery was, for me, completely unexpected, leaving me with more questions than answers – marking a successful novel by my standards – it is those complex social and linguistic commentaries, interspersed into Siddiqi's unadorned writing, that won me over. Linguists will appreciate Anisa's candid musings on translation, and I was especially taken by her thoughts on intercultural dynamics: "I had never dated an English guy before... despite his extreme attempts at diplomacy, his imagination of where I came from was skewed."

*The Centre* pulls at some difficult yet necessary issues that we must interrogate further as members of the language industries: How and why do we acquire languages? Who has access to this profession, and why? How do we ensure that respect and responsibility are integral conditions to being a linguist? A must-read for any linguist.

**Anam Zafar MCIL**

## The Dictionary People

Sarah Ogilvie



*Chatto & Windus*  
2023, 384 pp;  
ISBN  
9781784744939  
Hardback,  
£25

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) is a monumental work by any standards, but the story behind its production between 1858 and 1928 is even more remarkable. *The Dictionary People* is subtitled 'The unsung heroes who created the *Oxford English Dictionary*' and it is a monument to good old-fashioned amateur dedication, interlaced with a fair amount of English

eccentricity, with the most curious and, indeed, unexpected stories behind the people who worked on the dictionary.

Its origins were, perhaps, conventional enough, when in 1857 a dictionary was proposed to the London Philological Society that would not only give definitions but also citations showing usage. The real drive began with James Murray, who called for volunteers to send in slips to his office – an iron shed in the garden called the Scriptorium.

Over 3,000 people responded enthusiastically. There was the man who stole as many books as he reviewed and the maiden ladies who sent in 15,000 slips in eight years, not to mention the celebrated pornographer (a pioneer in the field) who caused a headache for the British Museum by leaving it his library of 1,600 erotic items along with 384 copies of *Don Quixote*. (There were serious concerns about including obscenities and these did not appear until the 1970s.)

The index ranges from A for Archaeologist to Z for Zealots, with Kleptomaniacs, Lunatics and Murderers in between. This is not a book

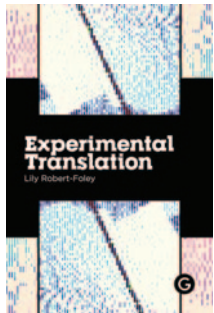
to be read (literally) from cover to cover. Every chapter is an episode in itself, and the characters and the details of their lives are quite implausible, so they must be true. Many of them were enthusiastic amateurs with the possible exception of Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor, who was very insistent about being paid for her work (which Murray thought was quite inadequate). There is so much wonderful detail behind every category of contributor that each chapter could be developed into a book (if not a film) in its own right.

*The Dictionary People* displays an encyclopaedic knowledge of the OED and its many contributors. It finally acknowledges the number of unsung heroes and heroines who laboured through any source (whether likely or not), ranging from medieval texts to works discovered on worldwide travels (and there was no shortage of American contributors). The greatest of them all was James Murray, who was knighted in 1908 but received no recognition from Oxford itself till the year before his death in 1915.

**Professor Tim Connell HonFCIL**

## Experimental Translation

Lily Robert-Foley



Goldsmith's Press  
2024, 248 pp;  
ISBN:  
9781913380700  
Paperback,  
£32

The first question you ask yourself upon opening *Experimental Translation* is: what does 'experimental translation' mean? In her lengthy and helpful introduction, the author illustrates the very broad scope of the term by telling us that it has also been called *avant-garde*, *creative*, *poetic*, *potential*, *perverse*,

*queer* and *performative* translation. We are given an example, in which a well-known biblical saying is translated consecutively from one language to another in DeepL (an online machine translation (MT) program) through 26 languages. We are then invited to compare the end result with the original sentence; obviously, there are differences. Should we regard this as a glorified digital version of Chinese whispers, fun but essentially trivial, or are there more profound implications in the nuances introduced by the program from one language to the next? This question raises the controversial issue of whether computers are actually capable of creative acts, which is inevitably invoked by such experimentation.

The book's subtitle, 'The work of translation in the age of algorithmic production', is somewhat misleading. Robert-Foley pays little attention to what most of us would regard as 'work', focusing almost exclusively on creativity for its own sake. Additionally, although computer algorithms are indeed a major consideration, many other linguistic topics and

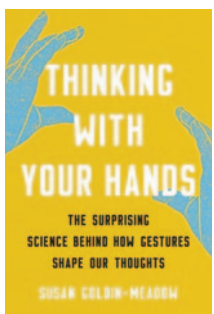
creative processes are studied, including the pioneering, entirely human efforts of Suzette Haden Elgin and M. NourbeSe Philip. In the course of her analysis, the author brings in a broad range of scholars, among them Walter Benjamin, Umberto Eco and Arika Okrent, taking the discussion of alternative translational approaches well beyond the output of neural machine translation software.

It should be noted that Robert-Foley's prose is dense and jargon-laden, and she wears her ideology on her sleeve. One brief quote should suffice to illustrate both points: "The law of fidelity... stems from European colonial discourses of meaning that privilege the transcendental signified, in a trifecta of patriarchal apparatuses that structure the translational norms that experimental translation questions: God, State and Capital." Readers are free to judge such matters for themselves. Otherwise, this is a challenging and admirably researched work which offers a thorough examination of the state of the art in this particular field.

Ross Smith MCIL CL

## Thinking with Your Hands

Susan Goldin-Meadow



Basic Books  
2023, 272 pp;  
ISBN  
9781541600805  
Hardback  
£25

Gestures of the fingers, hands, arms and head, in step with speech, are the visible accompaniment of discourse. They also articulate unspoken words. This much we know. Susan Goldin-Meadow's research is on how we display thought by using untaught gestures that are comprehensible to others. She does not consider 'emblems', i.e.

gestures with a range of meanings, common across cultures (e.g. a thumbs-up). Similarly, although sign-language users can gesture, signs differ from gestures. Thus sign language is largely sidelined in this study.

Gesture supports speech. Examples of this can be seen in speakers outlining shapes, providing emphasis, indicating motion, speed and direction. They are classed as 'dynamic' or 'still'. The former expresses growth, movement and continuity; the latter, closeness and containment. Gestures can add "a pictorial and dynamic texture to speech". Gesturing also allows economy and parsimony in speech when required or for reasons of style. The converse can also occur with gesture supported by the spoken word (e.g. a bold, pointing, indexical movement followed by the words 'Over there').

We gesture when speaking on the telephone even though our interlocutors are unaware of it. Relatedly, the author reports that the congenitally blind use gesture in the same way in conversation as non-blind speakers of the same language. She also cites her research in which those with prosthetic

arms gesture in accordance with how much they accept their replacement limb. The greater the acceptance, the more it is used. Most surprisingly, people born without arms, as well as those who have lost them in accidents, tell of how the absent arms (i.e. phantom limbs) gesture during speech.

Both modalities – speech and gesture – externalise our thoughts. Gesture is what Mark Johnson, cognitive scientist and linguist, calls the "embodied mind": the meaningful externalising of thoughts, images and memories by coordinated movement of the body. When gesturing accompanies a spoken account of how to carry out a task, it creates a "motor signature" that can make the task easier to recall for speaker and audience.

*Thinking with Your Hands: The surprising science behind how gestures shape our thoughts* contains many fascinating insights on the nexus of mind, language and body. The author is a professor in psychology and comparative human development at the University of Chicago and is ardent about raising the profile of this subject.

Graham Elliott MCIL



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# What's in a script?

*In the Year of Mongol Script, we consider how the survival of Mongolian cultural identity is tied to its writing system*



ENKHEE NAMSRAI

The Mongolian language has always been unique, both in its spoken form and in its traditional script. These have existed in parallel for a millennium or more, but during the 70 years of Soviet domination, the connection between spoken Mongolian and its ancient written form was broken in Mongolia when it was replaced by Cyrillic. In contrast, the traditional script was retained in the Chinese Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia. Now it is being revived in democratic Mongolia but faces suppression in China.

The Mongolian scholar Shagdarsuren Tsevel once said that “a people’s language, script, and intellectual life are an integrated unit. If one part gets distorted, the others get distorted too.”<sup>1</sup> Today, the survival of ancient scripts and languages is a matter of

global concern. What will be the fate of this ancient script and its connection to spoken Mongolian in the future?

### *A brief history*

At the start of the 13th century, advised by the Uyghur scribe Tata Tonga, Chinggis Khaan adopted the Uyghur script (which was derived from Sogdian) as the official writing system for the entire Mongolian state. As a result, it is sometimes called Uyghur script, but I will refer to it as Mongol bichig. The earliest-known monument inscribed in Mongol bichig is the stone Stele of Chinggis Khaan, dated around 1224. Its five lines of text commemorate the archery skills of Chinggis’s nephew.

Written vertically, the new script transcribed Mongolian as it was at the time and retains its pronunciation, spelling and grammar. As a result, there is a significant difference between modern standard spoken Mongolian and how the language is written in Mongol bichig. For

instance, Mongolia’s capital ‘Ulaanbaatar’ is written ‘Ulaghan baghatu’, which was the archaic pronunciation and spelling.

During the 17th to 19th centuries, Mongol bichig was widely used to translate Buddhist texts, as well as for official inscriptions, poetry, documents, literature, written versions of oral traditions and family records. Knowledge of the script was restricted largely to political and religious elites, while ordinary people were mostly illiterate.

Under Soviet pressure to spread communist ideology and education, Mongolia adopted the Cyrillic script in the 1940s. It was significantly easier to learn and literacy greatly improved. One cannot transliterate modern Mongolian into Mongol bichig letter by letter; you have to learn the archaic spellings and grammar. However, continuity between the modern and older forms of the Mongolian language is a fundamental feature of the history and





**CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

The statue of Chinggis Khaan in front of the main government building in Ulaanbaatar. The inscription reads 'Heavenly Ruler Chinggis Khaan Founder of the Great Mongolian State' (main image); a notice at Chojin Lama Temple Museum with Mongol bichig, cyrillic and English text side by side (above); and 'Mongol bichig' written in the script (below). It isn't possible to include words in Mongol bichig in the main article because it is written vertically

evolution of Mongol culture. Not being able to read Mongol bichig cuts Mongolians off from their literary and historical roots.

Mongolia's sense of national identity has strengthened following the retreat of Soviet influence and Mongolia's entry into the wider community of nations. Since communism ended in the 1990s, there have been efforts to revive the use of Mongol bichig as a core feature of that unique identity.

**Revival efforts**

When communist China was founded, the government decided to retain Mongol bichig, with Chinese, as the two official languages of Inner Mongolia. In this way, Inner Mongolia became the surviving heartland of Mongol bichig, maintaining widespread literacy in the script across generations.

A new Chinese nationalist policy restricting the use of Mongolian and banning Mongol script in schools now threatens the local

**Crossword no.36**

Solution, page 34

1		2			3	4		5		6		7
				8								
9								10				
11						12						
												13
14		15					16	17				
						18						
	19			20				21		22		
23												
24						25						
26										27		

Clues marked \* lead to a word derived from 1 down. If the clue is in 'quotes', it is a literal translation from 1 down.

**Across**

- 1\* 'Gentle way'. (4)
- 3 One who copies or mimics. (8)
- 9 If you take this, you accept whatever is available. (3,4)
- 10\* From Chinese, meaning 'Pulled noodles'. (5)
- 11\* Name of the home country in 1 down. (5)
- 12\* 'Big root'. (6)
- 14 Metal obtained from the ore argentite. (6)
- 16\* 'Art person'. (6)
- 19 If not passive, a verb is probably this. (6)
- 21\* Wrestling tournament. (5)
- 24 To fit out. (5)
- 25\* 'Sulphur island', site of a battle in 1945. (3,4)
- 26\* 'Shine grilling'. (8)
- 27 A syllabic writing system in 1 down. (4)

**Down**

- 1 See preamble. (8)
- 2 Double it for nonsense. (5)
- 4\* 'Heavenly sovereign'. (6)
- 5\* A traditional gateway. (5)
- 6 Primitive drums. (3-4)
- 7 Wife of a raja. (4)
- 8 Japonica is also known as 1 down \_\_\_\_\_. (6)
- 13\* Goodbye. (8)
- 15 Synonym of the home country of 1 down. (7)
- 17 As one unit or wholesale. (2,4)
- 18 Euphemistically it denotes financial loss in the world of accounting. (3,3)
- 20 To insinuate. (5)
- 22 Features with Brahma and Vishnu in the Hindu trinity. (5)
- 23 Conjunction, for fear that... (4)

survival of both the written and the spoken language. Chinese is now the only language of instruction in all subjects; increasingly, textbooks in Mongol bichig are being taken out of circulation, and even destroyed. "This is the final blow to our culture," according to Enghebatu Togochoг,<sup>2</sup> an overseas spokesman on Mongolian civil rights in China.

Since 2015, the Mongolian government has actively promoted the revival of Mongol bichig, naming 2024 the Year of Mongol bichig. From 2025, it will be adopted as an official script alongside Cyrillic. Calligraphy in Mongol bichig has already been included in Unesco's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Only when a new generation has grown up using it confidently will its survival be assured. For the sake of Mongolian culture as a whole, the government's efforts must succeed.

**Notes**

- 1 Quoted in Bulgamaa, B (2010) Туурга тусраар Монгол Улсын төрд үндэсний бичиг нь үгүйлэгдэж байна. National Association of the Teachers of the Mongolian Language and Script official website; <https://cutt.ly/bichig>
- 2 Quoted in Sonam, O and Bougdaeva, S (2020) 'Why the World Should Care About Language in Inner Mongolia'. In *The Diplomat*, 16/10/20

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**Crossword solution**

Puzzle page 32



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Originally from Devon, England, Richard Vranich MCIL is currently based in Congo, Kinshasa. He has freelanced as a French- and Spanish-to-English translator for 15 years, specialising in legal translation, and also speaks Arabic. During that time he has travelled extensively, living and working in Africa and Europe as well as Central and North America. He enjoys hiking in the Pacific Northwest. See p.20



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