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Name-calling and jokes: should an interpreter decide?

Svetlana Polskaya

The issue of translating various obscenities, name-calling, anecdotes and dubious jokes has always created numerous problems for me as an interpreter. The very beginning of my career coincided with the early 90s, when upstart Russian businessmen wearing crimson jackets began to communicate actively with their foreign counterparts and they did it without any of the shyness usually typical of a novice. In Soviet times Russians used to treat any foreigner who happened to come to their country with profound respect, but somehow Perestroika encourage a feeling of false superiority, combined with scorn and disdain. The 'rags to riches' progress too quickly and some people thought they could behave in any way they wished. Working as an interpreter for many New Russians I always faced the complicated question of how to translate such dubious content.

My boss was well-known for his volatile temper and also for his inability to choose appropriate language. Our foreign partners were no exception to this, so expressions like 'get lost' or even worse were a usual part of our negotiations. In trying to improve my boss's statements, I automatically toned down his speech. Instead of "why the hell did you do that" I would say "This may have been an inappropriate course of action" or instead of "I don't give a f.ck" - "I am not sure that you fully grasp the problem". However, my free interpretations did not go unnoticed, moreover, and both sides felt something was wrong. Our partners, not knowing Russian, felt there was a clear discrepancy between the menacing intonation of my superior and the polite phrase which followed. And also my boss, while not knowing any English at all, somehow understood that my translation was not accurate and would occasionally, after the talks, give me a brief dressing-down: "You tone down my words, so these idiots don't fully understand what I am saying". I then tried to translate abuse word for word, but this turned out to be quite a complicated task: the threatening tone somehow invariably disappeared and words such as "excuse me", "you see", "maybe" came out of my mouth against my will. My boss grew angry and even tried to replace me with a male interpreter, hoping that he would be more capable of conveying his statements accurately and that, in addition, he himself could indulge in unlimited swearing and name-calling since there would be no ladies present. But the new interpreter was horrified when he heard my boss's typical language ("you ass-heads don't know what you want") and his career in our company was soon finished, as he tried to explain that one shouldn't speak like that in official situations. So my boss had to make do with me, and only now and then complained that I toned down his robust masculine language. I then found the ideal solution: he should learn English, and then would be able to swear as much as he wished and nobody would ever restrict him. He was initially thrilled at this idea and even started to attend some English

classes, but he very soon realised that he would have to learn a lot just to master how to swear in English properly.

Thus years have passed on and I have not come to definite conclusions about how to translate such things adequately. The problem is that there is a serious discrepancy between Russian and English swear words; serious terms of abuse in English sometimes sound quite casual in Russian, and vice versa: Something really insulting in Russian can be neutral in English. I have learned numerous euphemisms and used them extensively: instead of "f.cking", I say "frigging" and instead of "bullshit" I use "fiddlesticks" (of course, some of the emotive force is lost, but it can still be a solution).

Obviously, not all Russian businessmen are as bad, many of them are nice and they would like the atmosphere during talks to be pleasant and amicable. And of course, the best way of creating such an atmosphere is through light-hearted banter. However, jokes may also pose serious problems and very often instead of the expected laughter, one ends up trying to explain what the punch-line was while the other side tries to understand it and as a result makes pretence of sharing the joke. Again, usually, it is the interpreter who is blamed for not enabling the joke to be understood. But sometimes an interpreter does not have an opportunity to explain to the speaker that there are jokes which can be understood only by his compatriots, and not by foreigners. One of my clients was very fond of telling jokes about Carlson – stories about a small man who can fly as he has a propeller attached to him. These jokes are very popular in Russia and all Russian children are familiar with them and grow up knowing who Carlson is. But Americans, for example, do not know who he is, so jokes about him are practically impossible to convey. I frequently hinted to the speaker that his partners would not see the humorous side of his funny stories, but he was quite persistent and always prepared a new joke about the flying Carlson. As a result I would supply details about who Carlson was, where he lived, and why Russians were so fond of him and our partners did their best to understand, then at the punch-line I would laugh and our partners laughed too, trying to please the narrator and reflecting on the mysterious Russian soul. So everybody was happy. Except me, of course. I was completely dissatisfied with my performance, blaming myself for not bringing the funny side to the listeners. According to some professional advice, in such circumstances an interpreter is supposed to take a joke which is internationally understandable and tell this particular joke instead of the original one. That is what my friend of mine – a Japanese interpreter – usually does. But this is for Japanese! You can say whatever you like and nobody ever suspects something is wrong. But the situation with English is different – even those who learnt English at school and know only a few words can understand that you are saying something different from what was said. Or should I try to prevent the speaker from telling any anecdotes, saying they do not make sense? Well, not everybody would welcome being told that; some might explain who

the speaker is and whose job it is just to translate. Or maybe should the joke be adapted? Again, it can be done, but might be quite time-consuming and not always possible. This is something which cannot be taught – every interpreter has to learn how to do it by himself and draw his/her own conclusions. But we should bear in mind that tact, politeness and moderate humour will be always fruitful and beneficial.

Biography

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