Letter from the Editor: Words and context

Translation and interpretation are about about context, message, sense; it's not just a matter of words.

Luigi LUCCARELLI.
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A bunch of grapes is a beauty to behold. You can immediately see that each individual fruit had to have grown into the space it occupies, from the center outward, because no other action could fit it in so tightly. A weighty affair, the cluster has an expectant gravity that no lone fruit can ever bring to mind.

Now picture the disengaged grapes that some airlines like to place on a fruit plate – and that always seems about to roll off into the aisle. Sad little spheres, they seem to be confused and end up causing confusion. I imagine them rolling aimlessly through the cabin from Sydney to Bangkok, and some even rolling their way all the way to Rome.

Orphaned words are just as sad when they roll off the tongue. “Tell me, how do you say coyuntura in English?” The bereft vocable falls off its tray and splatters in confusion on the ground! “In what contexto do you want it?” you think too late.

I once had to accompany a Spanish speaker who spoke English well and wanted me there for back-up as it were. The problem was that he always wanted to know how to say an isolated word before beginning the sentence in which it was to be used. Normal enough, but I was having trouble reading his mind that day.

Online translation programs seem to read minds even less well. A recent BBC article highlights some real economic consequences resulting from reliance on such programs, pointing out that “There are many instant translation programs on the web – but they are best used for individual words and short phrases, rather than for brochures, books or anything complex.” Ah, those good ideas to save money on language services can end up being expensive!

“The main problem is too much of an obsession with words and not enough attention to sense,” says Sergio Viaggio, Chief Interpreter of the UN Office in Vienna. We are recycling his “Tribulations of a Chief Interpreter” because it still has great relevance and deserves greater visibility on our site. We also think many of our readers will want to hear what a chief interpreter looks for in those he hires.

Words can also be approached and handled as terminology used in a specific context. We have all jotted down lists in one way or another, on pads or scraps of paper and more recently on our
laptops. In this issue, Peter Sand tells us of a terminology management program he has developed to facilitate the work and make it easier to find a word when in the booth.

If you were to add up the days, you would find that interpreters spend years of their lives in conference rooms. They and their work, however, are not often the subject of discussion. But when the German region of AIIC held festivities to wish the association a happy birthday (once again), the tables were turned: users of our services were invited to say a few words about what we do. Katherine Vanovitch’s article tells us about that evening in Berlin.

Interpreters are often offered words of thanks at the close of a meeting, but rarely are they asked to contribute their insight to the group. That trend was also overturned recently when a group of colleagues volunteered their services to Amnesty International. Phil Smith and Phil Hill opine that “Words can stir you or put you to sleep.” Get the context in their “Words for Amnesty”.

We’ve all heard of empty words, but in this issue we are offering an (almost) empty article - with an invitation to you, our readers, to leave us a holiday gift of words. It is said than an image is worth a 1000 words, but we’ll accept fewer under “Tools of the Trade.”

When a translator or interpreter is immersed in the context, seeing through the eyes of the author or speaker, tracking the sense, words don’t get in the way. To the contrary, they seem to open a path and beckon us onward. I sometimes imagine this happening when I find an excellent translation. I’ve always wanted to congratulate the person or persons who worked on the English version of Pedro Almodovar’s film “Átame.” The English title “Tie me up, tie me down” has become a concise reminder to me that translation is more than word-for-word replacement therapy. Six words for two – a cluster of flavor and meaning.

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