Q&A: elusive idioms

We are all acutely aware that language can trip us up. Some websites offer well thought out advice on particularly difficult words or expressions, but interpreters need to deal with language straight away. So if we are having difficulties at work we nip round to the appropriate booth and ask what the UK/Argentinian/Belgian delegation just said. With luck our colleagues will be able to tell us. We call it team work.

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There are a few turns of phrase we come across time and time again that we puzzle over for a while and then shelve until next time. All of us have our bugbears, those expressions that we feel unable to render fully in our own language. Often there is no direct equivalent, or it is best rendered by completely different imagery. There are also turns of phrase that we discover we've not fully understood; sometimes even native speakers disagree about a saying's meaning and connotation.

To discuss such matters, we have come up with the idea of an occasional Q&A column. Readers would be invited to send in questions; answers (of a kind) would be published in a subsequent issue. This will under no circumstances be a rapid response system. A number of colleagues covering a range of languages have already said they'd be happy to act as consultants, either suggesting translations or explaining exactly what the phrase means in their own language.

Clearly we don't want this section to become a word list or to supplant websites dedicated to translating sayings; the idea is to look at stuff we hear frequently for which we're seeking a better equivalent in our own language. We all learnt on the very first day of our degree courses - or evening class for that matter - that language only conveys meaning in context; for that reason we can offer no pat, one-size-fits-all translations. This project comes with a health warning.

Here are some examples of the sort of question we have in mind.

Let's start with an old French friend: la fuite en avant. You may well "flee forwards" in English but you just don't say it, although you can in many others languages. The two suggestions I've gleaned over the years that make most sense are press on regardless and paint yourself into a corner - depending on the context. There is an American expression damn the torpedoes (from the Civil War) that would sometimes work. It would be useful to find out how others deal with this term which is I think derogatory and suggests that people are overreaching themselves.

What do the following conjure up: la France profonde, middle England, middle America? What pictures do you see in your mind's eye? For me la France profonde conjures up a slightly pastoral vision of rural France that lives by traditional French values. A colleague reported: « La France profonde, pour un Français...a une connotation légèrement préjorative: elle se réfère au milieu rural, accroché à ses valeurs (pas toutes positives et encore moins modernes). Donc, champêtre, mais surtout qui sent la bouse de vache et qui n'est pas à la pointe du progrès... »
Middle England is more of a political construct, the successors to the silent majority of previous generations, people whose instincts would be conservative (small c); Middle America makes me think of the Mid-West, people with little experience or knowledge of the outside world. Generally none are political radicals. Do the three terms trigger the same image in the three countries? Do their respective semantic fields overlap? Do other countries have a comparable term?

Consider the Spanish desencuentro, that cooling of a relationship or friendship that fits into the triad: encuentro, desencuentro, reencuentro. Any ideas of how you might convey that desencuentro?

Just what are the chattering classes? Do any classes outside Britain chatter? To me the term conjures up people earnestly discussing politics around a dinner table - but why they should be eating dinner whilst chattering I can't tell you.

What is a good rendition of langue de bois? I suppose turgid helps or [political] cant, but are there any other suggestions?

What is a proces d'intention? A deliberate slur? Character assassination?

Here are some more to consider:

- vases communicantes
- geometrie variable
- le mieux est l'ennemi du bien
- ordnungspolitisch
- Zumutbarkeit
- Akzeptanz
- bauernschlau
- Poacher turned gamekeeper

We hope this will be of interest to you; it will depend on your participation. Feel free to post comments on the phrases discussed in this article. And please send in new questions (and answers) in any language for possible inclusion in future columns to: p.smith@zde2.aiic.net.

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Recommended citation format: