Phrase and Fable

Ace reporter Lucky Lou in conversation with one of the English booth’s senior citizens about interpreting age-old sayings from around the world.

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Mr. Smith, I’ve often heard speakers at conferences introduce a phrase by saying, “There is an expression in my country we use in a situation like this….” How does a rather old… er, veteran interpreter such as yourself deal with that?

Well, just as you’ve said ‘country’, you get palpitations and a horrible feeling that you are about to get egg on your face and all the way down to your boots. But it’s too late – you’re committed to the utterance and have marched your quiveringly expectant delegates to the very brink of revelation. You can’t back up, change the subject or seek salvation in a generic platitude of the stitch-in-time-spoils-the-broth variety. No. Your listeners are on the edge of their seats, straining to hear the pithy son-of-the-soil wisdom of rural Transmogria.

Tricky.

Yes. By now you’re thinking, what if I don’t understand what comes next, or miss the punch line. What if the cultural references (Morris dancers spring to mind – they always do) are resistant to international travel? After a great build up the aphoristic wisdom may sink pathetically to the ground like a punctured party balloon.

So how do you cope? Any advice you’d care to offer novices?

Sometimes the folk wisdom is clear: do not stone an olive with a steamroller, to thread a needle do not put on mittens, happy chickens make fluffy omelettes. All straightforward stuff that is unlikely to faze Junior. Sometimes it’s opaque: the puffin too has a mother, do not ice your cake when the Viking coughs, the tree thinks it’s a fish.

There are two schools of thought - you can either find an equivalent phrase in your own language or you can go for local colour in the hope it will convey the sagacity and earthiness of the original.

Of course converting stuff into your local language can backfire. There was a story from long ago about a French delegate who used an extended metaphor on the Tour de France to explain his point. In those days the British had not been bitten by the cycling bug, so the interpreter carefully translated TdF idiom into cricketing terminology. However the British delegate then took the floor to congratulate the nonplussed French delegate on his intimate knowledge of the national sport.

What do you do when a local saw is announced? Or indeed if one sneaks up and ambushed you?
I have to admit that I have been in one of those huddles of interpreters glimpsed at international meetings discussing sayings and expressions and how to render them in our various languages. I know, we really don’t get out enough. In fact I have recently started talking to my contemporaries in the English booth about all the expressions our parents used. Listening to modern international English, which has all the personality of lift music, brings on such nostalgia.

Have you heard any interesting examples recently that you can share with our readers?

Sure, here’re a couple gleaned from recent meetings:

You cannot teach potatoes to sing.

An orgasm is like a Christmas tree.

Perhaps you can ask your readers to leave pithy renderings in their respective languages. And then they’ll be ready next time they come up at a meeting, the delegates will be impressed with their dexterity and – unadulterated joy – they will knock the socks off their colleagues.

Do you have any final thoughts?

Someone once said “a good metaphor is something even the police should keep an eye on.”

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