Watch Your Language! Translating Euphemisms

By Peter Unseth

Whatever language we are translating, we frequently find ourselves wrestling with euphemisms, those words or phrases used by people of all cultures to refer politely to subjects they feel awkward mentioning openly in simple or direct terms (i.e., death, certain body parts, legal problems, sexual activity, bodily functions, and the supernatural). For instance, translators are likely to come across euphemisms (or find the need to insert them) in documents discussing some type of trauma, psychiatric evaluations, court testimony, or police reports detailing family violence and abuse. They also appear in medical literature written for a general audience.

So how do we translate euphemisms or determine if one is really necessary in our target text? For one thing, good translators not only know the vocabulary and grammar of the languages they translate between, but are also familiar with each language’s culture, including which subjects a particular group considers sensitive. In many cases, the source language will address a subject with plain language while the target language uses a euphemism, or vice versa. Regardless of where euphemisms are encountered, translators must strike a balance between choosing words that adequately convey the original message while avoiding language that will be offensive to the target audience.

To help us in this task, I will outline four possible tactics for handling euphemisms in translation:

- Translate the euphemism using plain language; or
- Translate the euphemism using a combination of two of the above.

Hopefully the following discussion will make translators more aware of some of the issues they need to consider in order to deal more effectively with this tricky subject.

Translate the euphemism literally. If the source and target languages both have similar euphemisms, then translating a euphemism fairly literally is not difficult. For example, Spanish speakers often refer to the death of a person by saying “pasar a mejor vida” (“to pass on to a better life”). In this case, a literal translation into English is acceptable because English speakers will understand the connotation. Another example where an alien sounding euphemism may still be clear enough to communicate the intended meaning comes from Sesotho, one of the official languages of South Africa. The sexual euphemism “ho arolelana dikobo” (“to share blankets”) would likely be understood by English speakers, as in the following passage translated from a Sesotho police report detailing a rape: “He pushed me into the bed and then told me to give him blankets…he told me not to deny him the—the—cake…he pushed his pipe…inside my cake” (Thetela, 2002:183,184). Though the individual words are not instantly obvious to an English reader, the tragic meaning soon becomes very clear.

Translate the original euphemism in the source language with one that has a similar meaning in the target language. When the meaning of the original euphemism will be lost if translated literally, translators can opt to substitute it with one that will be readily understood by the target audience. The form the euphemism takes in the target language may be radically different, but the meaning should be the same. For instance, the English euphemism “she is in a family way” can be translated into Spanish as “está esperando” (“she is hoping”), or into Amharic as “nàfsà t’ur nat” (“she is a caregiver for a soul”). These all politely communicate that a woman is pregnant.

When adopting this tactic, it is important for the translator to substitute a euphemism that is appropriate to the original context. For example, the man who translated Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam war story The Things They Carried into Vietnamese struggled to find Vietnamese military euphemisms for “killed” to translate the American euphemisms “greased” and “zapped.” Euphemisms for killing used only in a criminal setting would not have been as appropriate for a military situation.

Translate the euphemism using plain language. Sometimes what the original author expresses can be translated using plain language in the target text (although what is considered “plain” language today is often yesterday’s euphemism, such as “bathroom” or “intercourse”). The decision whether or not to use plain language cannot be made without first understanding the original author’s intentions and the audience he or she was writing...
for. For example, the rape victim in the Sesotho police report mentioned earlier might have used euphemisms when describing her ordeal (i.e., “they did abominable things to me”), but those reading the document want to have the reported facts rendered as concisely as possible. However, if the purpose for using a euphemism in the original was to convey the victim’s embarrassment or shame, it may be best not to translate using plain language.

**Translate the euphemism using a combination of two tactics.** Literally translating the original euphemism might preserve some of the flavor of the source text, but the meaning may not be clear to the target audience. Sometimes a translator will want to maintain the flavor of the original, but add a word or phrase to clarify the meaning for readers in the target language. In this way, the translation succeeds in transmitting the meaning clearly while maintaining a sense of the original context.

For example, the following sentence discusses the experience of two former victims of the Soviet labor camps:

> “Dolgun and Militariev quietly talked together of their earlier times together working in the labor movement…”

Notice that the men refer to their internment obliquely as “working in the labor movement.” To clarify such comments, the translator could add one of the following explanatory notes at the end of the passage.

- “Labor movement”: a sly reference to the penal labor camps.
- “Labor movement”: an insider’s reference to the Siberian labor camps.
- “Labor movement”: an under-stated reference to the years the two men had worked 12 hours a day in a Siberian labor camp.

Authors of literary texts have frequently incorporated this approach into their work, using euphemisms that are not widely known in order to give the flavor of a certain time, place, or segment of society. In *The Great Train Robbery*, Michael Crichton uses euphemisms to describe the actions of criminals, after which he gives the reader an indication of what is actually meant. For example, the plans of a shady character named Spring Heel Jack are euphemistically discussed by two men, with an author’s note inserted: “Jack was going south to ‘dip the holiday crowd.’ In those days, London pickpockets left in late spring…to other cities.”

**Trouble Spots**

The following explains some possible problem areas to watch out for when deciding how to handle euphemisms in translation.

**Keeping Euphemisms Obscure**

Sometimes a euphemism is meant to be deliberately vague. For example, in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the wizard Gandalf falls into a great crevasse in a cave. It is later reported that Gandalf “has fallen into shadow.” The reader understands this to be a report of his death, but it is actually a deliberately veiled reference to Gandalf being engaged in a great struggle with an evil being, and of eventually being mystically transformed. Translating this euphemism calls for finding a way to suggest death while still maintaining the ambiguity Tolkien intended. In this case, the translator should not attempt to clarify the author’s original wording.

**Being Deliberately Offensive**

There are times when what is said plainly, even offensively, in the original should not be translated with a euphemism. For example, in Sylvia Maultash Warsh’s *To Die in Spring*, the kidnappers say to their victim, “They will get you to talk, Jewish whore.” The captors’ use of “Jewish whore” is intended to be maximally insulting and demeaning, which is part of their pattern of abusing and intimidating the victim. The narrative continues: “A gun barrel was pushed into her side as they rode down the elevator. The blanket still over her head, they threw her down onto the floor of a car. Their feet perched on her body, the gun barrel stuck in her back as they drove away.” To convey the harsh impact of the kidnappers’ insult in the original, this passage must be translated with equally strong language in the target language.

**Inserting Euphemisms**

When translating archaic or historic language, a good translator must gauge the impact of the original wording on a modern-day audience. If leaving the original phrasing will only serve to distract the audience from the message, the translator might decide that it is necessary to insert a euphemism. To take an example from an historical context, the 16th-century English politician and theologian Thomas More spoke of Luther “with his filth and dung, shitting and beshitted.” To today’s readers, especially readers of theology, this seems incredibly vulgar, but in More’s day, this was not the case. When translating such a passage, a translator might consider using euphemisms so that the readers...
will get the point without becoming offended by the original wording. Another option might be to insert a note at the end of the passage to explain to the reader that it was quite common to use such crude language during the time More was writing.

**Misidentifying Euphemisms**

Sometimes we might mistake something that is said in the source language for a different euphemism from our own language. For example, an Amharic translator coming across the English phrase “she went out to the yard” might mistake it for a standard Amharic euphemism related to personal hygiene, not realizing that it is simply a factual statement in English (that the woman merely walked into the yard). Therefore, translators must be aware of how each language uses euphemisms in order to readily identify them in the source text.

**Conclusion**

There is no single technique for translating euphemisms, as how we handle them will depend upon where they are found. By using the approaches outlined here, we can find a way to communicate clearly without offending our audience.

**References**