

## 6.11 LOST IN TRANSLATION?

Professional translators and interpreters know this: Good translation requires more than a 'mechanical transaction' from one language to another. The key role in translating is played by something independent of language: CONTEXT.

Take a simple word like: "chair". If used in a question like "chair?" your answer would depend on whether you are

- speaking to someone wanting a piece of furniture
- looking for an object which might be used to sit on
- assuming the person expects a soft chair
- meaning the presider of a meeting
- asking for the lead violinist
- talking about an academic position
- asking the executioner about his procedures
- working as a glassmaker, railroads mechanic etc.

Give a hundred competent translators a text to translate, and the chances of any two versions being identical are close to zero.



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In international encounters  
**CULTURAL CONTEXTS ARE THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING.**

Here are some words which have different meanings, depending on the (cultural and other) contexts they are used in.

### A. Can you translate them into similar words in your native language?

Are there several meanings connected with one or more of these?  
Take your answers to class.

- friend .....
- home .....
- hot .....
- happy / lucky .....
- love .....
- Cheers! .....
- nice .....
- awkward .....
- hill .....
- romance .....

### B. Can you find words from your native language which have no equivalent in English?

Here is a list of such words <http://www.boredpanda.com/untranslatable-words-found-in-translation-anjana-iyer/>

## 6.11 LOST IN TRANSLATION? [Self-study]

## TRAINER'S NOTES

### AIM

To provide yet another example of how intercultural competence and language competence are inextricably connected. To raise awareness of the fundamental role good translation plays in most intercultural communication. To sensitise participants to the dangers of relying on dictionary translations.

### LEAD-IN

Connect this exercise to the examples given in Unit 2 (Self-Study): A Puerto Rican woman thanking her father & A Korean couple complimenting an American on looking old. These and this exercise are examples of how diverse cultural concepts are often hidden in language.

Ask participants how many 'friends' they have on *facebook* (or if they have this information about other people). Then ask whether 'friend' [English] has the same meaning as the lexical equivalent in their mother tongue.

Ask whether they know of other examples, where lexical 'equivalents' from two or more languages are not equivalent in all respects. This does not refer to "false friends" but to different meanings of apparent translations, such as can be found in dictionaries.

### WORKSHEET

Hand out the worksheet and ask participants to read it. Make sure everything is understood. Participants work in pairs or small groups and discuss the answers for sections A. and B. Discuss their answers in class.



### ANSWERS

Here are some words which have different meanings, depending on the (cultural) contexts they are used in.

#### A. Can you translate them into similar words in your native language?

Are there several meanings connected with one or more of these?

Take your answers to class.

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| • friend        | Acquaintance, neighbour, person of trust, contact on facebook...          |
| • home          | Country, city, house, family ...  |
| • hot           | Very warm, warm, "cool", spicy, exciting, fashionable, controversial, ... |
| • happy / lucky | Fortunate, prosperous, content, joyful,                                   |
| • love          | Affection, zero, greetings ...  |
| • Cheers!       | Good bye, thank you, to your health ...                                   |
| • nice          | Pretty, delicate, delicious, fantastic ...                                |
| • awkward       | Clumsy, unfortunate, embarrassing ...                                     |
| • hill          | Mountain, slight rise of land, medieval fortification,                    |
| • romance       | Love affair, romantic novel, romance languages .../<br>(to) fantasise     |

### BACKGROUND

For an up-to-date introduction to language and culture see Guy Deutscher (2011). *Through the Language Glass. Why The World Looks Different In Other Languages*. For an excellent discussion of translation see David Bellos (2011). *Is that a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*. See also: <http://bigthink.com/experts/david-bellos> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae1lvS0R91k&app=desktop#action=share>