

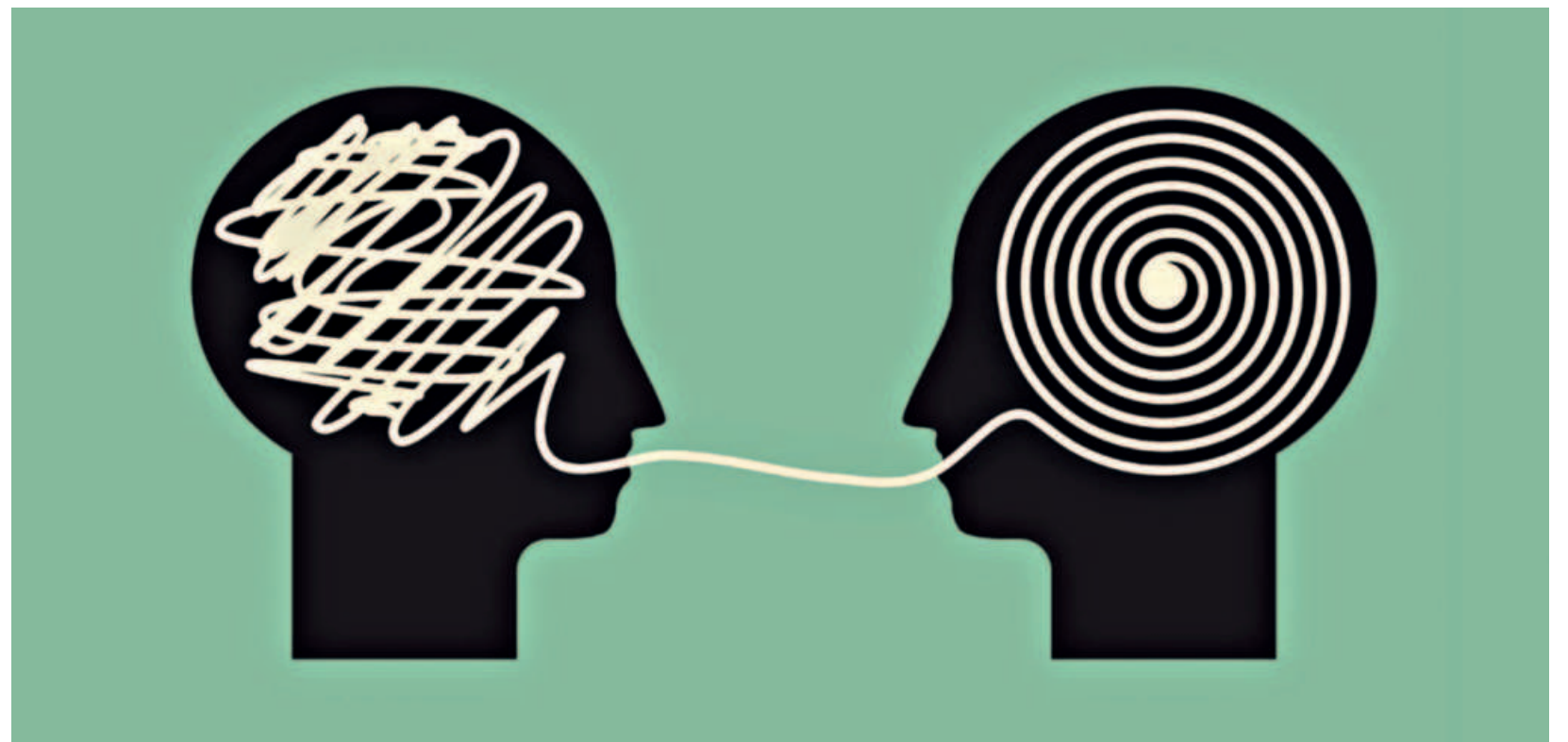
Lost in Translation

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Back in 2013, my wife's job took her to Kunming, the capital province of Yunnan in China. Google translator back then was in its infancy, and the amount of English used by average Chinese people was negligible. Even the official translator that my wife's office hired would require another translator to get things across. At times, she would come up with word equivalence that would create more confusion than clarity as she tried to compensate for her lack of vocabulary with words or expressions of her own. For instance, in her coinage 'sauce' would become 'a sausage' or 'a fire extinguisher' would become 'a fire distinguisher.' She once complimented my daughter's sandals by saying "you have so many beautiful scandals." Thankfully her English improved significantly in the course of two years that she worked for us. We could not have survived Kunming without her, and only in her absence, we would realize her importance in our day-to-day interaction with our host culture.

One day, we let the translator go home early as we were going for our grocery shopping at the downtown superstore that was tucked inside a



mall. The superstores all over the world are pretty straightforward and you could navigate without any real assistance. After the essentials were bought, my wife and I fancied a taste of authentic Chinese food. The restaurant was near the gate of a very crowded superstore. We requested a seat further away from the public area and insisted on sitting in a particular area inside the restaurant. The waiter tried to warn us of something, but it was lost in translation. Because

of the basement location, the restaurant had little or no signal for us to use the phone internet to operate the Google translator. We had to rely on our nonverbal skills.

After a while, a waiter came in with a menu that looked like a pathological report on a clipboard! After a volley of sign language, an English version came in containing a lot of 'the's. The English teacher in me was bothered by the wrong use of definite articles: the cow, the beef, the chicken, the coke, the facial tissue, and so on. A long battle of yes and no was forged with a lot of finger-pointing, and finally 'the order' was restored! The waiter went to the kitchen to bring our food. It turned out that this area was restricted to hotpot servings only.

Our order came in the shape of a double-chambered large bowl. It was placed on an induction cooker in the middle of the table. The waiter turned on the heat and a red chili-infested broth started boiling right before our eyes. The ingredients that we ordered started appearing one by one, all raw—"the beef," "the mushroom," "the lotus root" dived into the dining pool where red chilies were already swimming like sharks! Some of the vegetables went into the upper chamber while the lower chamber was for the meat or fish. The waiter sensed our helplessness as we were about to mix everything together. She volunteered to help us with the preparation. We requested knives and forks. There was none. They just had chopsticks, and for us, it was almost like that story of the fox and the crane inviting one another to eat from a plate and a

bottle respectively. The waiter took pity on us and gave us two soup spoons. After about 5 minutes of boiling, the glass noodles were added to the broth which looked like seaweeds in our sea of red chilies. Once the food was cooked, we had the most amazing hot dish. We managed to brush aside the pile of red chilies to scoop our food with the soup spoons. The experience of cooking your own food at a restaurant is something we had not done before. It made me even more philosophical. When life offers you a hotpot, you need to learn to sift the red chilies who like false friends offer nothing but color and hurdles; the real meat is down there. And you have to dig for it!

We came out of the hotpot eatery replenished enough to browse through the shopping center. The sale sign tempted us to enter a branded T-Shirt. We picked up four T-Shirts, and after the concession, the price came down to ¥796. The only salesgirl in the store tried to say something about some socks, and we kept on nodding no. She kept on insisting that we should have them, and we kept saying we didn't need socks. After a long bout of head swingings in all directions, we came to realize that she was giving us four pairs of socks for free for the T-shirts we had bought. Instead of just bagging them, she was swerving them before our noses so that we could choose the color and design.

After recovering from 'a state of socks,' my wife suddenly remembered the foreign office memo according to which she needed to spend at least

¥800 in one store to qualify for her diplomatic tax refunds. In other words, spending another ¥4 would therefore help her get a tax rebate of ¥100. So again, another non-verbal movement was staged. My wife used her Google translator to ask for a receipt for ¥800, and the lady gave us a strange look.

Then we wanted to buy a pair of socks, but there was no way she would give them to us. She snatched the pair from my hand which I wanted to buy for a possible fresh receipt. She kept on saying something in Mandarin. She probably thought we were being greedy; we already had four and why were we asking for another freebie! I wanted to buy another T-shirt to go with the sock, asking to cancel the old receipt and issue a fresh one. She just kept on showing 199 in her calculator for the additional T-shirt. We had no way of knowing how Google was translating the correspondence, but something was amiss.

After ten minutes, we gave up our hope of redeeming taxes. However, just before getting out of the store I used the Google translator and wrote: I get a tax refund if I buy ¥800. Now the translation probably worked. There was a clear sympathy on her face...Well, not everything was lost in translation ... the only thing that was lost was 100¥.

Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at the University of Dhaka (now on leave). Currently, he is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB.

"The Baby"

TASNEEM HOSSAIN

In the chilly winter night as I walked past the forest, I heard a feeble crying of a baby. I shivered in my warm clothes.

The snowcapped fir trees lining the forest looked like ghosts in the moonlight. Was I hallucinating? No, it was clearly a baby's voice. I tiptoed towards the sound. As I inched closer, the weeping became clearer. In the moonlit night, I saw a small basket among the trees. As I moved forward I slipped on the black ice and fell with a thud. My head struck something—a stump? My vision blurred into complete darkness.

A sudden glaring light jerked me out of the total blackout and I saw it again—the memory that will haunt me forever.

He was standing there on the stairs—quite drunk. He pulled me towards him. Given my state, I didn't want to give in to his lust. I tried pulling away but it only infuriated him. He kicked me hard and even though I grabbed onto the rails, the kick was too strong. I rolled down the stairs as he stood there jeering at me.

'It serves you right, you bitch!'

He staggered towards the washroom. Somehow I dragged myself to my neighbor's home for help. By the time we reached the hospital, I was bleeding profusely. I kept praying. I was immediately rushed to the ICU. I could only see the outlines of the doctor and nurses' masked faces. Then I passed out.

When I regained consciousness I saw a nurse. My hands automatically moved towards my belly. My stomach was aching and I felt a kind of nausea.

'Is the baby okay?'

'The doctor will be here shortly. She will be able to tell you.'

A lady doctor entered the room. She looked at me affectionately and held my hand.

'Is the baby okay?'

'It was a bad fall. The placental abruption caused too much bleeding. We tried to save the baby but it was too late.'

'No!'

I was breathless, my whole body was shivering, I couldn't breathe.

'Look, I know it's hard and I am sorry. But you need to calm down dear,' the doctor whispered softly.

The nurse pushed an injection. Slowly I fell into deep oblivion.

As the darkness slowly faded away, the cries of the baby made me come back to the present. I rested my hands on my stomach. The muffled weak cries worked like magnet. Somehow, I managed to drag myself to the basket. I touched her lovingly. She looked at me with those sweet tiny crinkled eyes. I thanked God for keeping my baby alive.

The clouds drifted away slowly with the

gentle breeze wafting through the air. A cluster of fireflies started dancing among the trees. Everything was quiet and peaceful. Tears flowed.

I took the baby in my arms.

Tasneem Hossain is a multilingual poet, columnist, op ed columnist and training consultant. She is the director of Continuing Education Centre, Bangladesh.



POETRY

After I Go

YASIF AHMAD FAYSAL

After I go

Will the memory linger?

My heart beat for you?

Phone calls exactly quarter past seven?

Tiny fingers feeling my beard?

After I go

There will be Thursday and late night,

terminals all crowded, people breathless restless

Busy town slowly crouching to slumber.

Home at last!

Will the knock at the door be greeted by a melting smile?

Will the house wake up?

Will mother's face suddenly come alive, a secret bliss like beads of pearls stringing our hearts together, a solidarity felt deep at bones?

After I go,

After afternoon and sunset and quiet night, My children will go trembling

Into the world outside,

Sands on earth will shift

Sands on earth will shape

new marks

And the old ones will be erased like

They existed never before.

Yasif Ahmad Faysal teaches English at the University of Barisal.

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