



capital translator

Newsletter of the National Capital Area Chapter of the American Translators Association
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NCATA Chapter Meeting Focus on Military Translation

By Barry Olsen

Just what is military translation? According to Joseph Mazza, a staff translator with the US Department of State, it is a complicated equation of technical terms, buzzwords, jargon, geography, and slang—a complicated mixture indeed.

It was that complicated mixture that William Cramer, Sasha Andreyewsky, and Paul T. Hopper, three seasoned translators with over 70 years of collective experience in military, naval, and aviation translation, were brought together to explain at NCATA's most recent chapter meeting held on April 26.

Some 30 plus NCATA members crowded into a conference room at the recently relocated Office of Language Services of the US Department of State to hear the three experienced translators share their thoughts in what turned out to be less of a subject specific discussion and more of an exchange of general ideas about the translating profession.

William Cramer shared a number of useful handouts on Russian military reference works and how to pinpoint common errors in military translations, among others. He also

gave a review of his career, which provided interesting historical insight into the translating profession from the early days of the Cold War up to today. Throughout his presentation, Cramer emphasized the importance of mentoring and the positive influence that mentors had on his career.

Sasha Andreyewsky spoke of his frustrated efforts to compile a comprehensive, centralized reference work for the field. And Paul T. Hopper noted how times have changed even for the staff translator, who is no longer able to take "company time" to work on language or subject area maintenance. Hopper did drive home the importance of teamwork and making use of the foundation built by translators who have gone before.

Another point that stood out during the discussion was that, in today's world of downsized government and outsourcing, useful federally produced reference aids like the Foreign Broadcast Information Service's (FBIS) NUTS (No Uncertain Terms) series are no longer readily available. However with the advent of the Internet, new venues for research have emerged, not only

compensating, but in many cases surpassing, what was available in the past.

Those who arrived at the chapter meeting expecting the "inside

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Editor: Ruth Zimmer Boggs
703-378-9305
REZB@aol.com

Assistant Editor: Dimitra Hengen
703-426-4938
DimitraH@aol.com

Production: Karin Wuertz-Schaefer
301-607-8036
wuertz-schaefer@erols.com

Deadline: No later than 5th day of
month before the issue

Membership: Alissa M. Webel
301-718-0405
amw6@gusun.georgetown.edu

National Capital Area Chapter of the American Translators Association (NCATA)

President: Scott Brennan
703-393-0365
sbrennan@compuserve.com

Vice President: Sangeeta Prasad
703-369-2068

Secretary: Kriemhild Zerling
202-543-7574

Treasurer: Yukako Seltzer
703-818-2306

Program Chair: John Vázquez
202-487-7878

Accreditation: Harvey Fergusson
703-849-8444

The **Chapter Address** is P. O. Box 65200,
Washington, DC 20035-5200,
Tel: 703-255-9290
Web site: www.ncata.org

The **National HQ Address** is American Translators
Association, 225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590,
Alexandria, VA 22314-2840,
Tel: 703-683-6100, Fax: 703-683-6122
Web site: www.atanet.org

For address changes, please write to the chapter at
the above address, Attn: Membership

For advertising in the *Capital Translator*,
please contact Angelika Spears, Advertising
Coordinator, Tel: 301-464-8309,
e-mail: 102502.3224@compuserve.com



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President's Corner

by Scott Brennan



First of all, I want to thank the speakers at our recent subject-specific chapter meeting on Military/Naval/Aviation translation: **Joseph Mazza** and **Paul Hopper** of the State Department's Office of Language Services, **Sasha Andreyewsky** of Voice of America, and NCATA founding member **Bill Cramer**. We also have Paul to thank for the original idea and leg-work for the gathering. His initiative in organizing the program is an excellent example of how NCATA's series of language- and subject-specific meetings is designed to work.

I also want to welcome NCATA's newest volunteer. **Sandra Burns Thomson** has agreed to develop client-focused content for the online and print editions of our *Professional Services Directory (PSD)*, due out in September. Sandra recently completed work on the revised *Consumer's Guide to Good Translation* for ATA. Her efforts will complement those of Vice President **Sangeeta Prasad**, who is developing and targeting the list of buyers of translation and interpreting services into whose hands we put the print edition of the *PSD* each year. The goal is to make the *PSD* an even more effective generator of prospects for members.

Finally, the offices of NCATA vice president and secretary come up for re-election this Fall. I strongly believe that NCATA makes a difference in our professional lives as working translators or interpreters, both by promoting our profession in the Washington business community and enhancing our ties to one another (aka The Fun Part). I want to encourage the many talented and energetic translators and interpreters in our organization who share that view to consider running for office.

To find out more, contact me or the current holder of the office that interests you. To register as a candidate, contact NCATA Vice President Sangeeta Prasad at (703) 369-2068. The formal elections announcement will appear in the September *Capital Translator*.

Your board and officers will continue working through the Summer on the Fall lineup of workshops and networking events. Until September, then, may your ears and eyes be blessed with understanding, and the words flow freely from your lips and fingertips. ✍

Wonderful World of ATA in Orlando

Will you be attending the American Translators Association Annual Conference in Orlando this year? If so, consider volunteering an hour to help staff NCATA's table and talk to colleagues and prospective members about our chapter. Contact Chapter Vice President Sangeeta Prasad at (703) 369-2068 or **SSPrasad@aol.com**. ✍

From the Editor

by Ruth Boggs



What Happened to May?

Did it slip off the calendar? Was it erased by the ILOVEYOU virus? Abducted by aliens? Forgotten? Overlooked? Ignored? Dismissed? Abandoned?

Actually, none of the above (except perhaps the last one). The truth is that May fell by the wayside due to some personnel and scheduling problems. Those things can happen, especially with full-time freelance translators who also volunteer as writers, editors, chapter presidents, and much more. That's why there was no May, or better, that's why May sort of slipped into the combined June/July/August issue.

Yes—summertime is here again, and it is time to take a break. Time to do some traveling (or rather, cultural immersion, as we like to call it for tax purposes), time to work a little less on the computer and a little more on the tan, time to visit the pool or the beach, and time sink into the hammock and do some serious pleasure reading.

Whatever your plans are for the summer, the *CT* wishes you safe traveling and joy in all your endeavors. We'll see you back here in early September, well-rested, and in an Orlando-frame of mind. ☺

Translation ...continued from page 1

scoop" on military translation may have left disappointed, however the meeting offered an excellent opportunity for discussing how the profession, especially military translation, has changed with the times and the budgetary ebb and flow in Washington. All of the panelists expressed very different yet valid approaches to their craft. By sharing information about their careers and their progression over the years in this niche, the presenters provided some interesting historical and professional insights that just about any translator could find useful. ☺

Barry Slaughter Olsen is a conference interpreter and translator (English < > Spanish, Russian > English, and Portuguese > English) based in Falls Church, Virginia. He holds a MA in Conference Interpretation from the Monterey Institute of International Studies (1998) and a BA in Translation from Brigham Young University (1995). Barry can be reached at bolson@ilinguist.net



NCATA's Online Directory: Spread the Word

When clients ask you for referrals, remember to mention NCATA's online *Professional Services Directory* at www.ncata.org. Your listing in the online directory and the hard copy distributed to hundreds of buyers of translation and interpreting services is a benefit of membership in NCATA.

Advertise in NCATA's Professional Services Directory 2001

From business-card-size to full-page spreads, NCATA individual and corporate members can advertise their services in the *Professional Services Directory (PSD)* at discounted rates. The print edition of the *PSD* goes out to over 300 buyers of translation and interpreting services locally and nationwide, and first goes on sale at ATA's annual conference, to be held in September this year in Orlando, Florida. Contact *PSD* Editor John Vázquez at johnvazquez@msn.com by July 15, 2000.

On the afternoon of Thursday, April 20, 2000, the Center for Applied Linguistics in Tenleytown was the site of a presentation by Professor Theo van Els of the University of Nijmegen on:

Models Of Language Use In International Organizations, In Particular In The European Union

by Paul Hopper

The presentation examined various (existing) models of language use in international organizations, with particular reference to the European Union. At present, the European Union recognizes 11 “official and working languages,” a number that is slated to expand to 20 or more in the near future. Officially, there is full equality of all these languages in the structures of the Union, bringing with it a very large effort in both written and oral translations and interpreting. Among the questions considered were: Will the dramatic enlargement of the number of official and working languages bring about a change in the theory and practice of language use in the various sectors of the EU organization? How do developments in one domain of language use affect other domains?

Prof. van Els mentioned that at some levels, such as committee meetings, certain major languages may enjoy a preferred status: usually English and French; sometimes also German. But in the European Parliament (Strasbourg) and the Commission of the European Communities (Brussels), an egalitarian model prevails, requiring translation and interpretation into all languages, at least for some documents. (Machine translation is used to screen documents, to find out whether a requester needs a human translation.) The quality of language services is good, though not as good as some people claim.

The European Union has no policy on language use within its member states. However, although a

country newly joining may bring more than one official language with it, one language must be designated as its official language within the EU organization.

Other organizations, such as the UN, NATO, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the conferences dealing with the CFE Treaty and the Open Skies treaty, have a restrictive language policy, whereby only one or a few major languages are the official and working languages of those organizations. This is possible in some cases because their mandated mission does not have the political, social, or cultural implications of the EU’s mission. In some cases, other considerations apply. And the European Bank in Frankfurt restricts itself to English—because banking worldwide is conducted in English.

A committee of the European Parliament has calculated that a doubling of the number of official languages will entail a quadrupling of the number of language pairs, if translation and interpretation are done directly, rather than en relais. The organization’s main buildings do not have the space to accommodate the increased language work force that would be needed.

Prof. van Els pointed out some communication problems that exist in the current situation. People may tune out when a speech is being interpreted from or into one of the minor languages. A speech may undergo “amputation” beforehand, as the speaker (or speechwriter) adapts it with a view to the needs of interpretation. (Prof. van Els also told the old joke about an inter-

preter who says, “The speaker is now telling a joke. I’ll let you know when you should laugh.”)

Meanwhile, “the spread of English has created a false sense of mutual intelligibility.” Speakers of other languages may not be able to state their points adequately in contexts in which they are speaking English, whether voluntarily or as a result of pressure of some kind.

If a restrictive language policy is adopted, it may be better to mandate as few languages as possible (or politically feasible), in order to reduce the burden of language learning (etc.) for speakers of other languages. Since Latin and Esperanto are probably not viable options, this means English and French (and possibly German). A variant of the restrictive policy (with two or three languages) that Prof. van Els believes

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Paul T. Hopper is a member of NCATA, the ATA, TTIG, DSNA [the Dictionary Society of North America], and the MLA [Modern Language Association]. He is a staff translator with the Department of State, formerly with the Department of the Navy, and before that with the Social Security Administration and (briefly) with a private translation company. In a previous incarnation he was an instructor of German and Humanities (and Linguistics) at a branch campus of a major state university.

Resources for Military Translators

by Paul Hopper



In some ways, translating military texts will involve problems that are common to other specialized fields; in other ways, some problems will be unique. (First of several truisms.)

Translating careers are not usually monolithic, which means that someone who is primarily a medical or legal or general translator will encounter some military texts. By the same token, a primarily military translator can expect to encounter some non-military texts. And texts to be translated are not always monolithic, which means that a primarily medical or legal or general text may contain passages or elements of a military nature, and vice versa.

In the spirit of “different strokes for different folks,” I would advocate letting each translator find his or her own balance between various sources of information: the Internet, terminology data bases, smaller glossaries (including card files), periodicals, reference books, and (as Bill Cramer pointed out) people—within the office or reachable by telephone (Rolodex), e-mail, etc.

One advantage of the old-fashioned card files, especially at the Foreign Language Services division of the Naval Intelligence Support Center, where Bill Cramer, Joe Mazza, and I used to work, was that people making cards were encouraged to put their initials on them, and when possible to include a note about their sources of information. I remember seeing cards when I worked there that were initialed “wbc” or “db” (= “hb”) or “dm” (for William B. Cramer, Dick Belferman, or Dan Michaels, all present this evening), or “jh” (= “jhb”) or “ptk” or “awh” or “crm” or “hph” (for Johanna Hensoldt, P. Thomas Koines, Arthur W. Holst, Carlos R. Moctezuma, or H. Pearson Hopper)—just to name a few. When I saw those initials, I

knew that I was in good hands; moreover, many of the cards had notes saying something like “confirmed by Mr. X, of the Bureau of Ships (or Aeronautics, or Engineering).” Mr. X and his counterparts, to put it in Bill Cramer’s words, were “research technologists who were specialists in their fields.” (Access to such experts became less frequent and less easy as the translators, like the major bureaus, were moved to other buildings, scattered around the Washington, DC, area.)

When such cards are converted to a book-shaped glossary, the initials and the notes about sources are often not transcribed. In this respect, the new approach of terminology databases may go back to providing that kind of data.

In the office I work for, several of us have found that the AltaVista search engine is a good resource for finding the information that we need, but I’m aware of people such as Ted Crump who prefer Dogpile or other search or metasearch engines. I’m going to leave the discussion of search engines and Web sites to another time, possibly another forum (such as the *Capital Translator*), and hopefully another author. In fact, some articles on these topics have already appeared in the *Capital Translator* and the *ATA Chronicle*. Our office is just beginning to learn to work with a terminology database, so I’ll leave that topic to another time and/or someone else as well (possibly Jonathan Hine of NCATA). But I will mention that our moderator, Joseph P. Mazza, took the initiative to create a shared word-processed document listing some useful web-sites of general interest, as well as documents with lists for specific languages.

There could be different approaches to compiling personal glossaries, or shared glossaries. One

extreme would be to compile one for each text that one translates, except the very briefest and simplest. Presumably one would make use of earlier glossaries, but the advantage would be that the current one would be more or less guaranteed to be a custom fit for the current job. Another extreme would be to maintain a single gigantic terminology data base for an entire organization, or anyway a single glossary for each language pair handled by that organization, labeling new entries by subject area, year, translator making the entry, etc.

Periodicals are nice if one has access to them (*All Hands*, *Proceedings of the Naval Institute*, *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, etc.; not to mention specialized periodicals available in other languages, such as German, French, Spanish, Russian, Dutch—with inevitable jokes about the meaning of “Alle Hens”—etc.). They can be good sources of terminology, but it needs to be captured in another form, such as a glossary or database, for ongoing availability. The *ATA Chronicle* is also useful for its dictionary reviews and tidbits of wisdom, or at least information, from experienced hands.

For many specialized fields, and particularly for military, maritime, and aerospace topics, an elusive term may sometimes be found and rendered with the aid of an intermediary language. Russian dictionaries are particularly likely to offer this kind of aid. For example, French-to-Russian dictionaries of nuclear technology, shipbuilding and navigation, military affairs, aerospace, etc. Or German-to-Russian dictionaries in an even wider array of fields. (A list of such items, as part of a larger list of military reference works, is

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Onionskin

Boning Up on Anatomy in France

by Chris Durban

The "Onionskin" is a column in the ITI Bulletin (UK). ITI is the UK's foremost association of professional translators and interpreters. —Ed.

Medical translators have a particular obligation to get it right, which makes a new bilingual electronic glossary from France especially welcome. Lexis®, available from Lyon-based Institut Howmedica (a former division of the Pfizer Medical Technology group) covers anatomy, pathology, traumatology, surgical procedures and biomaterials with nearly 12,000 entries, from abdominal aorta to zoograft. It was developed jointly by a group of French orthopedic surgeons, a linguist and an English surgeon. Dr. Frank Dupraz was head of clinical testing at Howmedica while Lexis was being developed. He put his weight behind the project after cringing at "countless howlers" in papers presented by fellow French-speaking physicians at international conferences. Example: *cal vicieux* translated as "vicious callus". The term refers in reality to the abnormal healing of a fracture, or "malunion".

"Some French researchers write their papers directly in English and their language skills are not really up to it. Others submit texts they've written to native English speakers for revision—forgetting that the revisers may not have the necessary technical expertise and vocabulary," Dupraz told the Onionskin. "Even when professional translators are called in, they are often not aware of the proper terminology." For Jean Soubrier, the team's linguist and a lecturer at INSA (Institut National des Sciences Appliquées), pitfalls are all the more treacherous because

there are two systems of nomenclature in French medicine. In 1955 the *Parisiensa Nomina Acta* introduced a new, Latin-based system to replace the traditional one. Yet many French medical practitioners continue to use the latter or mix and match—sometimes within the same article.

To make the translator's life more difficult, many bilingual dictionaries—including the latest edition of W.C. Gladstone's classic *Dictionnaire anglais-français des sciences médicales et para-médicales* (Maloine, Paris; 1996)—use only the traditional system. Without a firm grounding in anatomy, even specialized translators can find the going rough, says Soubrier. Not only must they identify *nerf tibial antérieur* and *nerf péronier profond* as one and the same, they must know that the correct English rendering is "deep peroneal nerve".

More confusion arises from eponyms. *Agrafage de Blount* is Blount's stapling and *maladie d'Osgood-Schlatter* is Osgood-Schlatter's disease, but not all terms have such straightforward equivalents: *Legg-Calvé-Perthes disease* is *ostéochondrite primitive de la tête femorale*.

Paradoxically, when anatomically descriptive terms are used, they can add to the confusion. Thus, for French healthcare experts an *opération de Lambrinudi* is a double arthrodèse, while their counterparts in the English-speaking world describe a Lambrinudi operation as a triple arthrodesis.

"A linguist can't even begin to work on terminology in this area without input from subject-matter specialists," notes Soubrier, who devoted two years to the project and will be contributing to periodic

updates. Lexis® is promoted as a tool for French researchers publishing and tracking scientific publications in English, but is sure to be of interest to medical translators as well. It is available from Institut Howmedica at 39, Bd Ambroise Paré, BP 8024, 69351 Lyon Cedex 08, France (price: FF603.00 incl. VAT; FF500 excl. VAT. PC & Mac compatible). ✎



Chris Durban is a French > English translator specializing in finance and capital markets. Based in Paris, her extracurricular translation activities include coordinating the Paris Bourse workshop for financial translators promoting signed work, and encouraging client education in general. Chris can be reached at 101327.35@compuserve.com

Medical Interpreting—the Vital Link

by Chris Durban

The death of a Somali child in a Dutch hospital in mid-October was a tragic reminder of what can happen when communication breaks down.

The boy was admitted to the emergency room of Tweesteden Hospital in Tilburg in critical condition after his parents, recent immigrants, had taken him to various doctors in the area over a period of several days.

According to press reports, neither they nor the doctors managed to make themselves understood during these visits, and by the time they reached the hospital, it was too late. The child died later that day of dehydration following a simple intestinal infection. Hospital officials confirmed the report, but with legal action pending had no comment.

For Cindy Roat, who manages the interpreter training program at the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program (CCHCP) at PacMed Clinics in Seattle, Washington, the case highlights the critical role of skilled medical interpreters.

“Clear communication between patient and provider is absolutely crucial to effective interviewing, accurate diagnosis, negotiation of a treatment plan leading to patient compliance and health education,” she told the Onionskin.

Unfortunately, many medical facilities offer language services on an ad-hoc basis only, drafting bilingual doctors, nurses, technicians, canteen workers and even cleaning staff into service as the need arises. In the Tilburg tragedy, language problems occurred before the Somali family reached Tweesteden, but the hospital confirmed to us that it relies on just such an ad-hoc arrangement for patients who cannot speak and understand Dutch.

The risks are enormous. To interpret effectively, individuals must not only master the two languages involved, but also be trained to interpret. Experience shows that in self-evaluation most people overestimate their language skills, and that many self-proclaimed bilinguals have far more limited abilities. Using unscreened, untrained bilinguals in life-critical situations entails risks for patients' health, but also, in many countries, the possibility of legal action for civil rights violations or professional liability.

Ways forward?

One promising model is that used by PacMed, a not-for-profit clinic system owned by the City of Seattle and one of the largest health-care provider networks in the Puget Sound area of Washington State in the US. Focusing on preventive health measures, it employs more than 125 primary and specialty care physicians and nurses, and was accredited with commendation by the US Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, a national agency.

Step 1: Match patient needs and interpreting services

Under PacMed's state-of-the-art system, each patient is asked on registration if he or she needs an interpreter, and responses are noted in computer records. Files are activated each time an appointment is made: the computer checks the language “flag” and automatically alerts the scheduling team, who assign one of nine staff interpreters or call in one of the 46 freelancers and agencies on its books. Since PacMed has no walk-in clinic, patients find an interpreter waiting for them at the check-in desk at each visit.

The situation is obviously trickier for institutions with unscheduled needs such as an emergency room or a large obstetrics service. This is the case for Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, for which the Cross Cultural Health Care Program also provides interpreter services. The team's schedulers carry a pager, a cell phone and a list of freelance interpreters' pager numbers at all times. “We can usually have an interpreter on site in under 30 minutes, any time of the day or night, except for a few hard-to-find languages,” says Ms. Roat.

Step 2: Educate medical personnel in best practice

But ensuring that skilled interpreters are on hand is only the first stage. At a recent industry conference, Cindy Roat noted that health-care providers who are not aware of how interpreters work can undermine their effectiveness.

Examples she cited include doctors who minimize the difficulty of interpreting, ridiculing interpreters who ask for clarification of medical terminology or ignoring suggestions that the patient may not be understanding.

Similarly, physicians and nurses who know a smattering of the foreign language may jump to conclusions, and even dismiss the interpreter (“I can handle this myself!”). One interpreter was asked to find out if an Hispanic patient had had any miscarriages. Recognizing *aborto* in her question, the doctor, a very partial bilingual, interrupted with an irritated “no, not abortions, miscarriages!” *Aborto* is part of the Spanish phrases for both miscarriage and abortion. Because of his limited Spanish, the provider missed the

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part of the interpretation that clarified that the question was about the former.

Research shows that physicians also show a worrying tendency to talk to the interpreter, not the patient—sending a clear message to the patient about who is important in the exchange.

Finally, healthcare providers may ask interpreters to supply services that go far beyond their brief. Roat cites requests ranging from “Find out what’s wrong” to “Can you just explain nasal irrigation to him?” and “Just convince her to have the tubal ligation!” Interpreters must obviously relay patient responses accurately, but they are not responsible for content, much less patient compliance.

Since 1993, Roat and her team [training@pacmed.org] have worked hard to sensitize healthcare providers to these issues, first in Seattle and now nationally. They have reached physicians and other providers on issues of language and healthcare by publishing articles in major journals such as JAMA, by presenting at national conferences, and by direct teaching in residency programs, medical schools and continuing education workshops. A 30-minute video entitled “Communicating Effectively through an Interpreter” is the latest vehicle they use to bring home to medical staff the fact that interpreters are, indeed, a vital link. ✎

Mystery question of the month:

Who is the gentleman appearing in the photograph with the Paul Hopper article?

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Sign up with NCATA’s electronic mailing list to receive announcements on job leads, seminars, conferences and NCATA events. The list is opt-in: Visit www.ncata.org and subscribe under the “Mailing List” option. You can cancel your subscription or register a new e-mail address at any time.

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currently being compiled and may appear in a future issue of the *Capital Translator*.)

As Bill Cramer once observed, Russian lexicography covering a wide range of languages is impressive, especially what was produced during the Soviet period: after all, if your country is even thinking a little bit about taking over the world, one of the things you need is a good lexicography program. ✎

Spooky Stuff!

An anagram, as you all know, is a word or phrase made by arranging the letters of another word or phrase. The following are exceptionally clever.

Word

Dormitory
Desperation
The Morse Code
Slot Machines
Animosity
Snooze Alarms
Alec Guinness
Semolina
The Public Art Galleries
A Decimal Point
Eleven plus two
Contradiction
Astronomer
Princess Diana

and the most intriguing one ...

Year Two Thousand

When you rearrange the letters

Dirty Room
A Rope Ends It
Here Comes Dots
Cash Lost in ‘em
It’s No Amity
Alas! No more Z’s
Genuine Class
Is No Meal
Large Picture Halls, I Bet
I’m a Dot in Place
Twelve plus one
Accord not in it
Moon Starer
End is a Car Spin

A Year To Shut Down

Are there any people out there who are either Scrabble virtuosos, or have too much time on their hands, who can think of more? ✎

Languages ...continued from page 4

deserves more consideration is the one in which no speaker is permitted to use his/her native tongue. In other words, native speakers of English would have to speak French (or German) in the European Parliament, etc.

But there is resistance to language learning even in Europe. Languages are still thought of as secondary or accessory. As an example of this kind of attitude, Prof. van Els told the old joke about a native of Maastricht (in his version) crossing one of that city's famous seven bridges, who hears someone shouting for help from the water below—in German (in this version of the joke). The native shouts back, "You should have learned swimming, instead of German."

Light refreshments followed the presentation; if you like grapes or strawberries, or melon chunks, you should have been there. Among those present were Glenn Nordin, former president of the Interagency Language Roundtable, and Prof. James Alatis, Dean Emeritus of the School of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University and primary point of contact for the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics.

Professor Theo van Els joined the Department of Applied Linguistics at the University of Nijmegen in 1965 and in 1981 was appointed the first Chair of Applied Linguistics. From 1994 to his retirement in January 2000, he was Rector (Provost) of the University. His publications include *Applied Linguistics and the Learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages*

(published by Edward Arnold) and articles on "Foreign Language Planning in the Netherlands" and "Foreign Language Loss Research from a European Point of View." Dr. van Els has worked extensively with the Council of Europe, the European Union, and NATO on issues of language needs, language programming, testing standards, and language policy. He chaired a task force for the Dutch Ministry of Education to develop a National Action Program for Foreign Languages, published in 1992, and then chaired the task force responsible for the Program's implementation. Dr. van Els is in the United States as an Adjunct Fellow at the National Foreign Language Center in Washington, DC. ✎

Gramática Histórica

By Berta Kirchoff

We seldom think about the origin of words and how they relate to their counterparts in other languages. Take for example the word *fenêtre* in French, *finestra* in Italian, *Fenster* in German; and the word *window* in English and *ventana* in Spanish? Would you believe they are all related?

Language evolution goes way back to pre-medieval years, when certain letters changed their original sound due to foreign influences and conquerors who established themselves in the country. The result was a mixture of the original language

and the borrowed sounds and expressions from the invaders' language. The Romans brought Latin to almost all of Europe. Now, many centuries later, we still have Latin words or at least use Latin prefixes and suffixes. We are lucky that we don't have to use Latin declensions and cases in most languages, except for German. But the world of prepositions is not easy in any language, as we all know very well.

The consonant "f" in Latin evolved in Spanish into a silent "h" (*fermoso* = *hermoso*, *figlio* = *hijo*), and in other languages into a "v" like in the above example, *ventana*.

In French, the accent circumflex took the place of an omitted "s" in many words, like in *hôpital* for *hospital*, etc.

Very modern words, like *cibernética* in Spanish, or *cybernetics* in English, may have an interesting origin. If anybody finds it, please share it with us. ✎

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English is a Crazy Language

by *Richard Lederer*



English is the most widely spoken language in the history of our planet, used in some way by at least one out of every seven human beings around the globe. Half of the world's books are written in English, and the majority of international telephone calls are made in English. Sixty percent of the world's radio programs are beamed in English, and more than seventy percent of international mail is written and addressed in English. Eighty percent of all computer texts, including all web sites, are stored in English.

English has acquired the largest vocabulary of all the world's languages, perhaps as many as two million words, and has generated one of the noblest bodies of literature in the annals of the human race. Nonetheless, it is now time to face the fact that English is a crazy language—the most loopy and wiggly of all tongues.

In what other language do people drive in a parkway and park in a driveway?

In what other language do people play at a recital and recite at a play?

Why does night fall but never break and day break but never fall?

Why is it that when we transport something by car, it's called a shipment, but when we transport something by ship, it's called cargo?

Why does a man get a hernia and a woman a hysterectomy?

Why do we pack suits in a garment bag and garments in a suitcase?

Why do privates eat in the general mess and generals eat in the private mess?

Why do we call it newsprint when it contains no printing but when we put print on it, we call it a newspaper?

Why are people who ride motorcycles called bikers and people who ride bikes called cyclists?

Why—in our crazy language—can your nose run and your feet smell?

Language is like the air we breathe. It's invisible, inescapable, indispensable, and we take it for granted. But, when we take the time to step back and listen to the sounds that escape from the holes in people's faces and to explore the paradoxes and vagaries of English, we find that hot dogs can be cold, dark rooms can be lit, homework can be done in school, nightmares can take place in broad daylight while morning sickness and daydreaming can take place at night, tomboys are girls and midwives can be men, hours—especially happy hours and rush

In what other language do people play at a recital and recite at a play?

hours—often last longer than sixty minutes, quicksand works very slowly, boxing rings are square, silverware and glasses can be made of plastic and tablecloths of paper, most telephones are dialed by being punched (or pushed?), and most bathrooms don't have any baths in them. In fact, a dog can go to the bathroom under a tree—no bath, no room; it's still going to the bathroom. And doesn't it seem a little

bizarre that we go to the bathroom in order to go to the bathroom?

Why is it that a woman can man a station but a man can't woman one, that a man can father a movement but a woman can't mother one, and that a king rules a kingdom but a queen doesn't rule a queen-*dom*? How did all those Renaissance men reproduce when there don't seem to have been any Renaissance women?

Sometimes you have to believe that all English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane:

In what other language do they call the third hand on the clock the second hand?

Why do they call them apartments when they're all together?

Why do we call them buildings, when they're already built?

Why is it called a TV set when you get only one?

Why is phonetic not spelled phonetically? Why is it so hard to remember how to spell mnemonic? Why doesn't onomatopoeia sound like what it is? Why is the word abbreviation so long? Why is diminutive so undiminutive? Why does the word monosyllabic consist of five syllables? Why is there no synonym for synonym or thesaurus? And why, pray tell, does lisp have an s in it?

English is crazy.

If adults commit adultery, do infants commit infantry? If olive oil is made from olives, what do they make baby oil from? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian consume? If pro and con are opposites, is congress the opposite of progress?

Why can you call a woman a mouse but not a rat—a kitten but not a cat? Why is it that a woman can be a vision, but not a sight—unless your eyes hurt? Then she can

be “a sight for sore eyes.”

A writer is someone who writes, and a stinger is something that stings. But fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce, hammers don't ham, humdingers don't humding, ushers don't ush, and haberdashers do not haberdash.

If the plural of tooth is teeth, shouldn't the plural of booth be beeth? One goose, two geese—so one moose, two meese? One index, two indices— one Kleenex, two Kleenices? If people ring a bell today and rang a bell yesterday, why don't we say that they flang a ball? If they wrote a letter, perhaps they also bote their tongue. If the teacher taught, why isn't it also true that the preacher praught? Why is it that the sun shone yesterday while I shined my shoes, that I treaded water and then trod on the beach, and that I flew out to see a World Series game in which my favorite player flied out?

If we conceive a conception and receive at a reception, why don't we grieve a greption and believe a beleption? If a firefighter fights fire, what does a freedom fighter fight? If a horsehair mat is made from the hair of horses, from what is a mohair coat made?

A slim chance and a fat chance are the same, as are a caregiver and a caretaker, a bad licking and a good licking, and “What's going on?” and “What's coming off?” But a wise man and a wise guy are opposites. How can sharp speech and blunt speech be the same and quite a lot and quite a few the same, while overlook and oversee are opposites? How can the weather be hot as hell one day and cold as hell the next?

If button and unbutton and tie and untie are opposites, why are loosen and unloosen and ravel and unravel the same? If bad is the opposite of good, hard the opposite of soft, and up the opposite of down, why are badly and goodly, hardly and softly, and upright and downright not opposing pairs? If harmless actions are the opposite of

harmful actions, why are shameful and shameless behavior the same and pricey objects less expensive than priceless ones? If appropriate

They did it ass backwards. What's wrong with that? We do everything ass backwards.

and inappropriate remarks and passable and impassable mountain trails are opposites, why are flammable and inflammable materials, heritable and inheritable property, and passive and impassive people the same? How can valuable objects be less valuable than invaluable ones? If uplift is the same as lift up, why are upset and set up opposite in meaning? Why are pertinent and impertinent, canny and uncanny, and famous and infamous neither opposites nor the same? How can raise and raze and reckless and wreckless be opposites when each pair contains the same sound?

Why is it that when the sun or the moon or the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible; that when I clip a coupon from a newspaper I separate it, but when I clip a coupon to a newspaper, I fasten it; and that when I wind up my watch, I start it, but when I wind up this essay, I shall end it?

English is a crazy language.

How can expressions like “I'm mad about my flat,” “No football coaches allowed,” “I'll come by in the morning and knock you up,” and “Keep your pecker up” convey

such different messages in two countries that purport to speak the same English?

How can it be easier to assent than to dissent but harder to ascend than to descend? Why is it that a man with hair on his head has more hair than a man with hairs on his head; that if you decide to be bad forever, you choose to be bad for good; and that if you choose to wear only your left shoe, then your left one is right and your right one is left? Right?

Small wonder that we English users are constantly standing meaning on its head. Let's look at a number of familiar English words and phrases that turn out to mean the opposite or something very different from what we think they mean:

A waiter. Why do they call those food servers waiters, when it's the customers who do the waiting?

I could care less. I couldn't care less is the clearer, more accurate version. Why do so many people delete the negative from this statement? Because they are afraid that the n't...less combination will make a double negative, which is a no-no.

I really miss not seeing you. Whenever people say this to me, I feel like responding, “All right, I'll leave!” Here speakers throw in a gratuitous negative, not, even though I really miss seeing you is what they want to say.

The movie kept me literally glued to my seat. The chances of our buttocks being literally epoxied to a seat are about as small as the chances of our literally rolling in the aisles while watching a funny movie or literally drowning in tears while watching a sad one. We actually mean The movie kept me figuratively glued to my seat — but who needs figuratively, anyway?

A non-stop flight. Never get on one of these. You'll never get down.

A near miss. A near miss is, in reality, a collision. A close call is actually a near hit.

Crazy

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My idea fell between the cracks. If something fell between the cracks, didn't it land smack on the planks or the concrete? Shouldn't that be my idea fell into the cracks (or between the boards)?

A hot water heater. Who heats hot water? This is similar to garbage disposal. Actually, the stuff isn't garbage until after you dispose of it.

A hot cup of coffee. Here again the English language gets us in hot water. Who cares if the cup is hot? Surely we mean a cup of hot coffee.

Doughnut holes. Aren't those little treats really doughnut balls? The holes are what's left in the original doughnut. (And if a candy cane is shaped like a cane, why isn't a doughnut shaped like a nut?)

I want to have my cake and eat it too. Shouldn't this timeworn cliché be I want to eat my cake and have it too? Isn't the logical sequence that one hopes to eat the cake and then still possess it?

A one-night stand. So who's standing? Similarly, to sleep with someone. Who's sleeping?

I'll follow you to the ends of the earth. Let the word go out to the four corners of the earth that ever since Columbus we have known that the earth doesn't have any ends.

It's neither here nor there. Then where is it?

Extraordinary. If extra-fine means "even finer than fine" and extra-large "even larger than large," why doesn't extraordinary mean "even more ordinary than ordinary"?

The first century B.C. These hundred years occurred much longer ago than people imagined. What we call the first century B.C. was, in fact the last century B.C.

Daylight saving time. Not a single second of daylight is saved by this ploy.

The announcement was made by a nameless official. Just about everyone has a name, even officials.

Surely what is meant is "The announcement was made by an unnamed official."

Preplan, preboard, preheat, and prerecord. Aren't people who do this simply planning, boarding, heating, and recording? Who needs the pretentious prefix? I have even seen shows "prerecorded before a live audience," certainly preferable to prerecording before a dead audience.

Pull up a chair. We don't really pull a chair up; we pull it along the ground. We don't pick up the phone; we pick up the receiver. And we don't really throw up; we throw out.

Put on your shoes and socks. This is an exceedingly difficult maneuver. Most of us put on our socks first, then our shoes.

A hit-and-run play. If you know your baseball, you know that the sequence constitutes "a run-and-hit play."

The bus goes back and forth between the terminal and the airport. Again we find mass confusion about the order of events. You have to go forth before you can go back.

I got caught in one of the biggest traffic bottlenecks of the year. The bigger the bottleneck, the more freely the contents of the bottle flow through it. To be true to the metaphor, we should say, I got caught in one of the smallest traffic bottlenecks of the year.

Underwater and underground. Things that we claim are underwater and underground are obviously surrounded by, not under the water and ground.

I lucked out. To luck out sounds as if you're out of luck. Don't you mean I lucked in?

Because we speakers and writers of English seem to have our heads screwed on backwards, we constantly misperceive our bodies, often saying just the opposite of what we mean:

Watch your head. I keep seeing this sign on low doorways, but I haven't figured out how to follow

the instructions. Trying to watch your head is like trying to bite your teeth.

They're head over heels in love. That's nice, but all of us do almost everything head over heels. If we are trying to create an image of people doing cartwheels and somersaults, why don't we say, They're heels over head in love?

Put your best foot forward. Now let's see.... We have a good foot and a better foot—but we don't have a third—and best—foot. It's our better foot we want to put forward. This grammar atrocity is akin to May the best team win. Usually there are only two teams in the contest. Similarly, in any list of bestsellers, only the most popular book is genuinely a bestseller. All the rest are bettersellers.

Keep a stiff upper lip. When we are disappointed or afraid, which lip do we try to control? The lower lip, of course, is the one we are trying to keep from quivering.

I'm speaking tongue in cheek. So how can anyone understand you?

Skinny. If fatty means "full of fat," shouldn't skinny mean "full of skin"?

They do things behind my back. You want they should do things in front of your back?

They did it ass backwards. What's wrong with that? We do everything ass backwards.

English is weird.

In the rigid expressions that wear tonal grooves in the record of our language, beck can appear only with call, cranny with nook, hue with cry, main with might, fettle only with fine, aback with taken, caboodle with kit. and spick and span only with each other. Why must all shrifts be short, all lucre filthy, all bystanders innocent, and all bedfellows strange? I'm convinced that some shrifts are lengthy and that some lucre is squeaky clean, and I've certainly met guilty bystanders and perfectly normal bedfellows.

Why is it that only swoops are fell? Sure, the verbivorous William

Shakespeare invented the expression “one fell swoop,” but why can’t strokes, swings, acts, and the like also be fell? Why are we allowed to vent our spleens but never our kidneys or livers? Why must it be only our minds that are bogged and never our eyes or our hearts? Why can’t eyes and jars be ajar, as well as doors? Why must aspersions always be cast and never hurled or lobbed?

Doesn’t it seem just a little wifty that we can make amends but never just one amend; that no matter how

It’s neither here nor there. Then where is it?

carefully we comb through the annals of history, we can never discover just one annal; that we can never pull a shenanigan, be in a doldrum, eat an egg Benedict, or get just one jitter, a willy, a delirium tremen, or a heebie-jeebie. Why, sifting through the wreckage of a disaster, can we never find just one smithereen?

Indeed, this whole business of plurals that don’t have matching singulars reminds me to ask this burning question, one that has puzzled scholars for decades: If you have a bunch of odds and ends and you get rid of or sell off all but one of them, what do you call that doohickey with which you’re left?

What do you make of the fact that we can talk about certain things and ideas only when they are absent? Once they appear, our blessed English doesn’t allow us to describe them. Have you ever seen a horseful carriage or a strapful gown? Have you ever run into someone who was combobulated, sheveled,

gruntled, chalant, plussed, ruly, gainly, maculate, pecunious, or peccable? Have you ever met a sung hero or experienced requited love? I know people who are no spring chickens, but where, pray tell, are the people who are spring chickens? Where are the people who actually would hurt a fly? All the time I meet people who are great shakes, who can cut the mustard, who can fight City Hall, who are my cup of tea, who would lift a finger to help, who would give you the time of day, and whom I would touch with a ten-foot pole, but I can’t talk about them in English — and that is a laughing matter.

If the truth be told, all languages are a little crazy. As Walt Whitman might proclaim, they contradict themselves. That’s because language is invented, not discovered, by boys and girls and men and women, not computers. As such, language reflects the creative and fearful asymmetry of the human race, which, of course, isn’t really a race at all.

That’s why we wear a pair of pants but, except on very cold days, not a pair of shirts. That’s why men wear a bathing suit and bathing trunks at the same time. That’s why brassiere is singular but panties is plural. That’s why there’s a team in Toronto called the Maple Leafs and another in Minnesota called the Timberwolves.

That’s why six, seven, eight, and nine change to sixty, seventy, eighty, and ninety, but two, three, four, and five do not become twoty, threety, forty, and fivety. That’s why first-degree murder is more serious than third-degree murder but a third-degree burn is more serious than a first-degree burn. That’s why we can open up the floor, climb the walls, raise the roof, pick up the house, and bring down the house.

In his essay “The Awful German Language,” Mark Twain spoofs the confusion engendered by German gender by translating literally from a conversation in a German Sunday

school book: “Gretchen. Wilhelm, where is the turnip? Wilhelm. She has gone to the kitchen. Gretchen. Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden? Wilhelm. It has gone to the opera.” Twain continues: “A tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter; horses are sexless, dogs are male, cats are female—tomcats included.”

Still, you have to marvel at the unique lunacy of the English language, in which you can turn a light on and you can turn a light off and you can turn a light out, but you can’t turn a light in; in which the sun comes up and goes down, but prices go up and come down—a gloriously wiggly tongue in which your house can simultaneously burn up and burn down and your car can slow up and slow down, in which you fill in a form by filling out a form, in which your alarm clock goes off by going on, in which you are inoculated for measles by being inoculated against measles, in which you add up a column of figures by adding them down, and in which you first chop a tree down—and then you chop it up. ✎

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Technology Corner

Researching the Search Tools Themselves

Search Engines

by Ray Archee



Let me ask you a question. What is your favourite Web search engine? Alta Vista? Northern Light? HotBot? Copernic? Now tell me: why do you use that search engine almost all the time? What is so special about that one, or two or even several search engines that gives you confidence in your choice? Is it because it the first search engine you started using, or because it is amongst the select few that Netscape or the Internet Explorer display when you click the 'Search' button? Or some other reason such as speed, the interface, the choice of services, or sheer habit?

The reason I ask these simple questions is to underscore the fact that whilst the Web is deceptively simple, those absolutely essential tools called search engines are not simple at all. We tend to take them for granted, but without search engines the Web would be impenetrable and unfathomable; information would be unknowable, and we would flounder in an ocean of data.

Search engines, which actually grew alongside the development of the Web, are not all the same. At last count there are more than 1500 search engines, which appear to all do the same thing – find clickable links for your keywords. Such search engines can be categorised as single search, meta-search, or hybrids; they may be accessible via the Internet, or they may be Windows-based programs; they might index general knowledge, academic papers, kids' sites, music sites, or be devoted to

medicine, engineering or some other profession. There are 'boutique' search engines, (see www.searchiq.com) and ones that cost money. All the search

engines however, work in diverse ways and will usually yield dissimilar sets of results. There are sometimes overlaps between results from competing search engines, but no

Here is a list of tips for using search engines:

1. Unusual words are often easier to find if you do not add general ideas to them in the same query. Try searching for the unusual term first. Then add the general term later, if you need to.
2. Use AltaVista for finding foreign sites and information in foreign languages.
3. Use Northern Light (www.northernlight.com) for subject searches. This engine references the most Web pages and includes a special collection of journal articles. Navigation using custom folders makes the service easy to use.
4. Use HotBot if you need a specific format, date, or field within a document such as the title or the URL.
5. Use a metasearch engine to give you a quick overview of your topic. Metasearch engines do have problems: they do not return enough information in order for you to decide to view the page; and they only present the first 10 hits from the search engine. Copernic2000 gives you the first 30.
6. Shorten an URL if you get a broken link. Then use the features of the site to find the page you seek. eg if <http://www.mirror.com/newinfo/menu.html> is broken, then shorten it to just the domain name: <http://www.mirror.com>.
7. The number of hits is not really that important. Every search engine has its own idiosyncratic way of working out how many pages relate to a query.
8. AskJeeves is good for product reviews, particularly for computer-related equipment.
9. Find and use synonyms for your most important concept. If you use only one term for your most important concept, and then use many synonyms for less vital aspects, you can skew the weighting of the query away from the most important term.
10. Work out for yourself the default parameters of the search engine. Some use AND, for two search terms, others use OR.

one engine searches the entire Internet, only parts of it.

What I want to stress is that your choice of search engines should not be a matter of chance or habit. Your final selection of a search engine should be through experience and knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of all the major search facilities on the Internet.

The first major mistake which many of my students make is using just one or two favourite search engines and never trying any new ones. A second mistake is that students will only inspect the first 10 or 20 hits, which a search engine shows them expecting their needs to be met right at the beginning of the returned hits. Both approaches are incorrect, and will perhaps give the impression that the Web does not contain the necessary information leading to needless frustration and assumed failure.

A good strategy for initial information searches is to use several search engines (at least three or four), and to inspect the first hundred hits of each for relevant information. If you do use a metasearch engine, then make sure to look at more than the first 10 hits of each engine. If you use the HotBot search engine (www.hotbot.com) then you can adjust the hit count to collect 100 hits, instead of the more usual 10, saving precious time. Keywords should always be more than one word, and using precise phrases will always give better results.

In alphabetical order here is a very short list of major search engines that you need to try out: AltaVista (www.altavista.com, definitely the fastest of all the search engines, able to search the Usenet, and available in different languages and geographical centres); Excite (www.excite.com, reportedly very accurate, and the winner of quite a few search engine shoot-outs in the past); Google (www.google.com, supposedly the simplest search

engine to use); HotBot (www.hotbot.com, the trendiest search engine with the ability to collect a hundred relevant hits at once); InfoSeek (www.infoseek.com, a good source for commercially oriented sites); and Yahoo (www.yahoo.com, in fact a human catalogue of vast categories of information, and the most popular search facility on the Internet today).

The metasearch engines use a combination of existing single search engines in order to generate their lists of hits. The Metacrawler (www.metacrawler.com), Dogpile (www.dogpile.com) and AskJeeves (www.ask.com) all query other search engines, collate the results and then present the hits in a long lists usually ranked by relevance and/or search engine. AskJeeves is rather unique insofar as it allows users to ask ordinary questions, supplying its own answers as well as querying a handful of other single search engines.

One of the most interesting and potentially useful search engines I have come across is Copernic 2000 Pro, essentially a metasearch engine. There are three versions of this standalone downloadable program from <http://www.copernic.com>: Copernic2000 is free, while

Copernic2000Plus and the Pro version cost \$39 and \$79, respectively. The beauty of the Pro version is its extra functionality such as automatic searches, removal of duplicate hits, elimination of dead links, access to specialised databases, and the ability to save results to spreadsheet or database formats.

Another downloadable engine is Bulls-Eye 2, found at <http://www.ncms.org>. Bulls-Eye 2 does more than just do meta-searches—it removes dead links from your search; it intelligently searches for target subjects and returns a small number of relevant results, which are scored, abstracted, and can be downloaded for further refinement—offline. The product can even generate an HTML-based Abstract report that can be e-mailed to co-workers. The Pro version costs \$149, whilst the ordinary Bulls-Eye 2 is free.

Good luck. ✎

Ray Archee teaches professional writing and electronic research at University of Western Sydney, (Australia). He works as an academic, journalist, and consultant to industry. He may be reached at r.archee@uws.edu.au

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