

What is lost in translation from one language to another

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



" A cowboy went to the hairdresser's. When he got out again, his pony was gone. " Do you think this joke is funny? It is translated word by word from German into English. In German this sentence is a joke. The part which makes this sentence funny, however, cannot be translated into English because the German word for pony and fringe is the same - " Pony". This shows that the joke is lost in translation. This essay is going to analyse what is lost in translation from one language to another and why it is lost.

Anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message" says Eugene Nida in his book " The Theory and Practice of Translation". Nida's theory applies to the example above. It is an ambiguous joke which is hard to translate into another language, because some words have two meanings in the one language, but not in the other. Normally, these so-called homonyms, which are a group of words that share the same spelling and the same pronunciation, can be translated without a problem, but in the case of a word joke the essence is mostly lost in translation.

Proverbs are hard to translate literally as well. The article " The Perception of Proverbiality" published in 1984 by Shirley Arora says that typical stylistic features of proverbs are alliterations, parallelisms, rhymes and ellipses. All these stylistic devices are the reason why proverbs are likely to be lost in translation. Either they are grammatically not possible to exist in another language or in the case of an alliteration, the direct translation would not contain an alliteration anymore. The writer Riley Frost says that poetry is lost in translation.

Poetry is a good example for the use of connotations. A connotation is defined as a meaning of a word or phrase that is suggested or implied, as opposed to a denotation, or literal meaning. It is a characteristic of words or phrases, or of the contexts that words and phrases are used in. If you hear or read a word or in this case poem, certain images will be evoked in your mind. If poems are translated, most of the time these connotations are not the same in the other language, which means that the intension or message of the poem is lost in translation.

Another example of what is lost in translation is the structure of politeness. In e. g. Thailand there are several levels of formality that affect the structure of the language. Instead of just greeting their king with for example " Hello, King! ", Thai people say, literally translated: " May the power of the glow of the dust under your majesty's foot bless me. " If this sentence was translated like this from Thai into another language, it would seem rather strange to the readers. But translating it into " Hello, King! " would not show the special formality in it. Gender is also lost in translation.

In Finnish there are no existing words for " he" and " she". All gender is summarised by " han". So that there is no confusion with the subject of a sentence, the Finnish people add extra words in a context where it is relevant or not. But for those who translate something Finnish, it is really hard to know immediately, who is male or female. For geographical or cultural reasons, some words from one language are not existing in another. It could also be, that there is maybe one word in the on language and in

another there is much more variety or range of words, all describing the one thing.

This applies especially to regions, where there are specialists for one certain topic, which maybe does not even exist in another region. People in e. g. Europe would call a coconut tree only coconut tree and there is no other alternative to name it. But e. g. on the Maldives, where coconut trees are used as food, building materials, fuel or decoration, there are many different words to call the tree. The Maledivians also have several words for the stages of the ripeness of the coconut and others for the leaves, trunk and roots.

All this variety of words would be lost in translation, therefore the effort of the Maledivians of the distinguishing between the many little criteria would be for nothing. All in all it is to say, that something is lost in translation, due to cultural differences between countries and their environment which, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis says, determines their language. Also the history of all languages has to be taken into consideration, because it developed that grammar and connotations are different in every language.