

Translation of Idiomatic Expressions

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Russians do not have hands or feet, and Russians consider it inappropriate to "grab your mother." Russians do not have a word for hands or feet *per se*, and so they speak of the fingers on their arms or fingers on their legs. The English expression, "lend me a hand" (to solicit help) would be stated as "lend me an arm" in the Russian language. Moreover, a proper Russian would never use either the hands he does not have nor the fingers on his arm to grab his friend's mother. A Russian acquaintance, residing in the United States at a friend's house, told me he was bewildered by a phone call he had received from his American friend. The friend, who wanted to speak with his mother, asked the Russian to "Grab my Mother for me," which did not sound like something a loving, considerate son would want done to his own mother.

Korean students in the United States are extremely puzzled when they hear someone place an order by saying, "I want a pepperoni pizza with extra cheese, and step on it!" In America, "step on the gas" means pushing down firmly with your foot on the gas pedal of your motor vehicle to increase speed. "Step on it" is a euphemistic way to request rapidity. No doubt in Korea it is considered unsanitary to step on your food.

Language is embedded in culture, "forms of life," or more general ways of going about doing things. It is important to note that Wittgenstein looks at language as something that people do, instead of something that they think. It is a kind of activity. Wittgenstein states: "Here the term "language_game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life." (PI, 23) Hence, understanding amounts to acquisition of skill with regards to engaging in this activity. As he puts it, language activity is a "practice."

Rules are consistent patterns of language behavior. Understanding of a word or sentence is not a mental (or cognitive) sort of thing. Rather, it is "mastery of a technique" that is made evident by the ability to use a word or sentence consistently in ways that conform to established patterns. Wittgenstein states:

To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique. (PI, 199)

A "history of correct usage" is needed to achieve understanding, *viz.*, a person learns to speak and write according to the rules in about the same way a person learns to play chess by moving the pieces according to the rules.

Different cultures have different customs. So, it is not surprising that their practices, language rules, and language games also differ. Wittgenstein states: "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*." (PI, 226e) He also states: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (PI, 241) To really learn a language a person must also learn the

wider range of cultural activities in which it is embedded. Consider some examples.

The concept of "privacy," as it is understood in the United States and elsewhere, does not exist in Russian culture. This is understandable in terms of the communal nature of the Russian society, perhaps rooted in fatalism as a result of centuries of war and tyranny. So, in the attempt to translate the word 'privacy' into the Russian language, the closest one may come to the idea are Russian words for 'solitude', 'secret', or 'personal'. Although these words do illustrate aspects of the concept, they fail to convey the full meaning of the word. Privacy is more than being alone or secret or personal: It is, in US culture, something held very closely, with passion, and as an inalienable right. It maintains personal dignity and has legal implications (It is protected by law.). Where there are cultural differences, there is a necessity for explication in addition to direct rendering of the word. (Sofer 1999)

In some cases, words must simply be left in their original language. I recall a few instances when a Japanese philosophy student (and lover of the works of Wittgenstein) at Utah State University, struggled enormously to define a particular Japanese word for me. He felt it impossible to find adequate descriptors in English, or to fully appreciate the meaning without having experienced the culture. Hence, as a true Wittgensteinian, he proceeded to give me a list of examples. For example, the Japanese word *wabi* was made clearer to me by showing its occurrence in the world when viewed from a Japanese perspective. *Wabi* can be found in a teacup or an old book. An object may even be flawed, but nevertheless it holds our attention, creates affection, and touches our aesthetic sensibilities. In fact, it is the flaw, "the beautiful, distinctive, aesthetic flaw that distinguishes the spirit of the moment in which this object was created from all other moments in eternity." (Rheingold 1988). My young daughter created a flower vase in her ceramics class. The hand-built pottery touched me in a deeper sense than the ever-present pride a mother carries in her heart for her children's accomplishments. There was something about this simple, roughly-styled, asymmetrical vase. It had *wabi*. In English, real estate agents appeal to the potential buyer's sense of wabi when they describe a typically old, small house, often in need of repair, as a "cottage". Suffering from decades of sleek, mass-produced, "perfect" goods, Americans could find some respite and delight in the use of wabi and the internalization of its meaning.

In some cases, the introduction and usage of a word in a new culture can promote adoption and understanding. In the US, the Chinese phrase 'feng shui' has become a popular concept recently through the publication of several books concerning the incorporation of this human aesthetic concept into landscaping, interior design and more. It translates as 'wind and water' and names an ancient Chinese art, philosophy, and science involving the proper arrangement of the physical environment (objects, furniture, buildings, etc.) in order to obtain a maximal balance of *chi*, an invisible energy force. This philosophy claims to promote feelings of well-being and tranquility in the human psyche. It has enjoyed a timely introduction to the culture, as many Americans have

begun to cringe over the rapid increase in huge mega-stores and mega-malls, and ever widening highways in scenic areas, some with fragile ecosystems. This is an example of one culture enriching another, even helping to effect a healing of a sort, through the identification and naming of the problem. The answers to the cultural questions, what are we lacking, or what have we lost, can be found sometimes in the language (and culture) of another "form" of life.

Returning to the Russian language, it is interesting to note that while the Russians have equivalent words for the English and German expressions for good morning and good day, they diverge from good night, saying rather, *peaceful* night. Could this be the result of the horrific night raids and purges of the Stalinist era? Yet another example is that the English word 'excited' (as in, "I am excited about going to Hawaii this summer!") has no Russian equivalent. The concept of a happy anticipation of an event does not exist. This could have value in the understanding of the Russian culture, its history and idiosyncracies, such as why Russians typically have a neutral facade in public, which is often interpreted as unfriendly by foreigners.

The pelmeni house has significant connotations for Soviet era Russians that are lost in a literal translation. The term 'pelmeni house' denotes a small restaurant that serves pelmeni (Russian style ravioli), coffee, and sometimes ice cream. However, the Soviet era pelmeni houses were both a microcosm of the Soviet world and a retreat from it. The ambiance was grim, surfaces were sticky, forks were greasy, and a dirty rag would be tied around the door handles to keep the massive door from slamming. The air was steamy from the boiling of the pelmeni, and there was a faint odor of aluminum in the air. Behind the counter stood a couple of cheerless women rationing the more expensive toppings for the pelmeni. In the pelmeni house one experienced the aesthetics, politics, planning, and absurdities of Soviet life. Nevertheless, either consciously or unconsciously, the pelmeni house was a retreat for the passive resistance of the Soviet rule. Here inside the house, people could be themselves without slogans and propaganda. They did not go there simply to eat. They stealthily opened vodka under the table and poured it into their coffee glasses (Sometimes the cooks would overlook the fact that you took an empty glass or two). It was a place to go to converse with dear friends and become well. It was more than a mere restaurant. Pelmeni houses still exist in Russia, but they have changed and no longer hold this particular function and meaning. (Makaryevich 2001)

People in the US are creating something comparable to pelmeni houses themselves, as feelings of alienation in the workplace develop from impersonal corporate behavior. Americans are searching to fill a void. Small cafes and coffee shops are increasingly popular (even opening in the mega-bookstores). Some establishments are marketing themselves as a 'third-place', i.e., that which is not home and not work. Many folks do not even know the people in their own neighborhoods. They are looking for something, but cannot find the word. It has to do with feeling comfortable and free from cares for a while. Perhaps they are searching for the German language concept of *Gemütlichkeit*, which embodies feeling of home, hearth, and simple pleasures. This word has its origins in the impoverished era following the Napoleonic wars. There was a strong need at the time for contemplation and for relishing the small, everyday joys at hand. (Rheingold 1988)

In a recent English to Russian translation project, I came across the German word '*Schadenfreude*'. An

English equivalent of this word does not exist, and although a Russian equivalent does exist, the Russian writer chose to use the German equivalent in his English writing. After all, Americans have adopted a few German words, such as 'kindergarten', 'bratwurst' and 'gesundheit'. *Schadenfreude* is the tendency to feel happiness in someone else's misfortune. Americans may experience *Schadenfreude* when they laugh at slap-stick comedy, speak of sweet revenge or begin and perpetuate a cycle of jokes in the wake of a tragic event. Nevertheless, this raises an interesting question: Why have they not labeled this behavior? I have not noticed any joke cycles directly related to September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US. Maybe there are limits to its application in American culture, as a coping mechanism up to a certain point, whereas in other cultures it has a more deeply rooted and profound meaning.

The idea that language is imbedded in culture, and vice-versa, can be helpful in understanding and overcoming cross-cultural problems. For example, the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians over land in the Middle East could perhaps be greatly illuminated and more completely understood by the ways in which these people speak of land and land ownership. For a Palestinian to say he would sell his land in order to achieve some result, such as, to have his child enter some needed medical treatment, has a more profound meaning to him where land is so tied to the past, present, future, and personal identity; whereas, for highly mobile Americans, (with some exceptions, as in selling the family farm), it may for most part represent a mere transaction, the liquidation of assets.

Wittgenstein states:

We also say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them. (*PI*, 223e)

We cannot look at language for understanding without also considering culture. They are closely interrelated with each other. Language and cultural sensitivity provide us with critical tools for understanding and overcoming conflict, for embracing new world views, and rejoicing in the differences and the insight they provide into the human condition which unites us all.

References

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