

## Gained in translation

### Science at the multilingual crossroads



*“No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”*

Edward Sapir (1884–1939)

The article by Susan DiGiacomo in this issue of *TWS* highlights in many ways what translation is essentially about. Perhaps most important, translation is not a matter of language. Rather, translation takes place at the level of culture, with culture being whatever it is we know, perceive, or believe, how we behave, and what rules and conventions we adhere (or choose not to adhere) to.

The concept of culture was given a firm place in translation theory in the early 1990s [1]. The idea that there is an intricate connection between language and culture, language and thought, language and behaviour dates back to the widely travelled German diplomat and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt. His observations later gave rise to two rather conflicting philosophical perspectives—one maintaining that thought is conditioned by language, as stated by Sapir and Whorf, and the other postulating that language is based on universal principles shared by all humans, as brought forth by one of Whorf’s most adamant critics, Noam Chomsky.

Taken to their extreme, Sapir and Whorf’s theory of linguistic relativism would mean that translation is essentially impossible, whereas Chomsky’s theory of linguistic universality would imply that everything is perfectly translatable. The translator does not have to choose between these extremes. However, he does have to determine “the point on the scale between them which is valid for the case in question. In other words, the extent to which a text is translatable varies with the degree to which it is embedded in its own specific culture, also

with the distance that separates the cultural background of source text and target audience in terms of time and place” [2].

Susan highlights two text genres that are located on rather different points on this ‘scale of translatability’ [2]. A biomedical article, striving for objectivity, is likely to be characterized by highly conventional speech, making reference to concepts that have their direct, or a near-direct, equivalence in the target language. At the other end of the spectrum are writings that are strongly marked by the author’s creative individuality and subjectivity, at times stretching the confines of language norms and requiring the translator not merely to look up a term in a dictionary but to search deeper in whatever it is the author knows, perceives, or believes, how he behaves, and what rules and conventions he adheres (or chooses not to adhere) to.

Why would this be relevant for a community of European science writers? First, these fundamentals of translation are true, to varying degrees, for every text genre—no matter how conventionally standardized or individually creative a text may be. Whichever text, text segment, or unit of thought we read, write, or translate, it will be located on some point of the scale of translatability. Second, with Europe encompassing some 50 countries and an almost uncountable number of different languages, translation takes place wherever people from different countries or regions come together in one place. As we take a radiographic look at what happens in translation, we learn much about how our partner in speech learns, knows, perceives, believes, feels, and behaves. As Susan’s text convincingly shows, this can be a rewarding experience.

**Gabi Berghammer**

*gabi@the-text-clinic.com*

#### References:

1. Vermeer HJ. *Übersetzen als kultureller Transfer*. In: Snell-Hornby M, ed. *Übersetzungswissenschaft—eine Neuorientierung*. Tübingen-Basel: Francke; 1986:30-53.
2. Snell-Hornby M. *Translation Studies—An Integrated Approach*. Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company; 1988.

### Translating patient education materials

*Chest’s* medical writing tip of the month for February 2010 considers translation.

In their article ‘Translating patient education materials’ Jett and Ivnik conclude that providing patients with educational materials written in their own language with

culturally appropriate translation is crucial to meeting patients’ needs. It considers whether or not existing materials should be translated and what to consider before deciding to translate any patient education materials into a specific language.

**Available at:** <http://chestjournal.chestpubs.org/content/137/2/488.full.pdf+html>