

Translation & Interpretation

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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Rev. Paul Beckel

Participants at international conferences would like to be able to communicate with one another directly as if they were all speaking the same language...they are sometimes bothered by the intervention of the interpreter. Like motorists who get irritated by the slowness of traffic crossing a bridge and who curse the bridge instead of the river, participants tend to forget that, while the interpreter enables them to move from one language to another and thus overcome the language barrier, he is not there to eliminate it completely. His task is to help participants understand each other's cultural differences rather than pretend that they do not exist.

from Interpreting for International Conferences

Language. I loved it. And for a long time I would think of myself, of my whole body, as an ear.

Maya Angelou

Like a diaphanous nightgown, language both hides and reveals.

Karen Elizabeth Gordon

In some sense the text and the translator are locked in a struggle—"I attacked that sentence, it resisted me, I attacked another, it eluded me"—a struggle in which, curiously, when the translator wins, the text wins too.

Lydia Davis

WELCOME

If you are here for the first time, thank you for taking the risk, coming to a place where you're not even sure if we speak the same language. And that's our topic for today – religious language and how it might be possible for us to communicate with one another, learn from each other, even enjoy each other... even though we come speaking a wide variety of religious languages. Or none.

Additionally, today, we gather knowing that five of our neighbors in Skagit County were gunned down this weekend in an apparently random act of malice. In all likelihood there are fewer than 6 degrees of separation between us and the victims, and thus as we grieve, we also re-settle ourselves within an atmosphere of rising distrust and separation.

So may our coming together today remind us that even as we are exposed to cruelty and risk, we also dwell within a web of goodwill and the shelter of each other. May we recommit ourselves, then, to grow in strength and love and wisdom, in order that the shelter of each other, can be enough.

GATHERING SONG

Gather the Spirit #347

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Say It! by Charlotte Zolotow

As a mother and child walk through the falling leaves, the mother describes the rich beauty all around them. When the child continues to plead, "say it," the mother responds, "I love you!" Child: "What took you so long?" Mother: "That's what I've been saying all along."

READING

"A Core of Silence" (v.1&2) #286

MEDITATION / SILENCE (2:00)

NEW MEMBER WELCOME

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE

Shower the People

MESSAGE

I remember seeing the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. Well, not so much seeing the movie but *experiencing it*. Even for a war movie, it was harsh, and vivid. The noise the confusion the camera pushed here and there. It was irrational, viscerally disturbing to watch. It's odd what you remember 20 years later; what I remember is the discussion following the movie in which one person complained that with all the noise of battle she couldn't understand the dialogue...and therefore she couldn't grasp what was going on.

There were exploding ships, legs torn from bodies, people crying in shock, burnt radios crackling indecipherably. And because she didn't hear the exact words, she worried that she couldn't tell what the characters were experiencing!

Perhaps you've been to a movie with a child who tugs on your sleeve and says, "What did they say?" So you summarize the complex nuances of tone and idiom of what was just said, accounting for each character's background and how that particular utterance would have *meant* different things to each of the characters. And then the kid, who wasn't listening to you anyway, tugs again saying, "Now what did they say?"

My primary text for today is a book called "Interpreting for International Conferences." This is one of many reasons that I love Unitarian Universalism. I can read anything—organic chemistry or organic gardening, history, fantasy, or biography—it's all sacred literature. I can read "The Far Side" or listen to "The Dark Side of the Moon" and this too is understood as engagement with the holy. At least potentially.

"Potentially," because I may or I may not get it. The holy, the profound, the links in the web of life...they *are* in there, in everything, everybody, in every experience. And *sometimes*, I hear a note of that larger symphony.

So why was I reading "Interpreting for International Conferences"? Because translation and interpretation have always intrigued me. Even as a kid on the farm I knew that when my calves bleated in a certain way that they wanted to be fed, or wanted fresh air. How did I KNOW that? The question fascinated me. Even when it appeared that I *had* interpreted correctly, I wondered: would it have been accurate to say that I KNEW what the cows were trying to say?

I have always wondered how it is that we can communicate amongst ourselves. In our religiously pluralistic UU congregations but also in our families and neighborhoods and political discourse—even though we have lots of communication difficulties of course—how is it that we can communicate AT ALL?

One potential answer is that we can connect with one another because our words convey bits of universal human experience. Even when we use different languages to describe it, everybody hungers, everybody feels joy, everybody hurts, sometimes. So maybe we can communicate within and across language groups because of our universal human experiences.

And yet, do any two people ever experience the *same* thing? Even if I am looking up at a full moon over Bellingham, and my brothers and sisters in Kazakhstan, Romania, and France are all looking at the same moon from the same latitude, our experiences will be different, because each of us will filter them differently. Our views, our perceptions are filtered not just by the angles and the atmospheric conditions through which we gaze, but even the very *word* “moon” is going to mean something different to me because of the cultural connotations I bring to that encounter—connotations that are inevitably different from the poetic, historical, religious, and technological connotations that people from other cultures will bring to viewing the same celestial orb.

Interpretation occurs, of course, not only at international conferences and between speakers of different languages. A teacher interprets when he simplifies a complex idea for a child. The cable guy interprets for you when he explains which buttons to push on your TV, and your doctor interprets for you when she reads your EKG.

We’re interpreting whether we’re listening to ancient scripture, or contemporary poetry, and when we’re wondering what our partner means when she says, “I feel like Thai or Mexican food tonight, but you decide...”

I’m talking about interpretation today in this religious setting because I believe that interpretation is what we are called to do in our every religious conversation. I’m not saying that we SHOULD interpret. I’m saying that we DO. We cannot help but interpret. The question is whether we will interpret well, and whether we will interpret ethically.

Before I go on I should distinguish translation from interpretation: translation being the conversion of written text to written text; interpretation being the conversion of spoken language to spoken language.

Translators and interpreters face similar challenges. The difference is that the interpreter hears words only once, as they fleetingly pass, and must immediately respond. No rough drafts, no pondering allowed.

As they do this, interpreters have to notice all of the implicit, unspoken knowledge that the speaker assumes and add this in to make the message comprehensible for the listener.

To do so the interpreter has to know a bit about both the speaker and the listener, and know about the topic as well. Consider what you might hear from a Seahawks commentator, for example, who knew nothing about football. He might very accurately describe the players' shoelaces, the fans, and the cheerleaders while ignoring the game.

At the same time the interpreter needs to remember that a little knowledge can be dangerous. If they think they know what the speaker is going to say, they may stop listening or fill in the gaps before they've even heard the speaker finish.

If you speak a language other than English, and you were asked to serve as an interpreter, you would take into account the needs, the resources, and the limits of the listener. In real life, we mostly just interpret for ourselves, but we still do it within these parameters: we take into account our own needs, resources, and limits.

So as we listen, we adjust the meanings of the words we hear based on conscious and unconscious perceptions from the speaker's tone and body language. We adjust the meanings we hear according to the time and the place in which words are spoken. We discount or amplify what we hear because it is in character or out of character for the speaker. We assess whether the speaker "means it." And how she means it, and how much she means it.

And with new means of communication popping up faster than we can develop new norms, we flounder in the ambiguous contextual connotations of email, Facebook, text, and whatever may come next.

So we know that the words we hear today—whether words about art or fashion, politics or religion—these words mean something different than the very same words meant in 1950, 1970, or 1990.

There is no stepping in same river twice, and there is no hearing the same song, or anecdote, or complaint twice. Each time we read a book or watch a movie, our experience is filtered through new knowledge, and a new context; so we give it new meaning. Otherwise why would we want someone to say, "I love you" more than once? Because it means something different the 34th time and the 9,987th time.

So *how* should we interpret? First, we need to admit to ourselves that we are grasping at fleeting transient words. Especially when we're talking with someone with whom we differ on religion or another sensitive topic, we need to pay attention to the general message they are trying to convey. It will not help to pick on their words...or to look for hidden meanings.

And it's not always helpful to know the "correct" meaning of the words we hear. It's better to attend to what the person is trying to say than to what is actually said. A technically accurate translation can entirely miss the point.

Unfortunately we often play stupid. Pretending we don't quite get what the other person is saying because we have chosen to interpret their words in a way that's comparable to what we

sometimes see in manuals for assembling foreign-made products. We make a bad translation and then hold it against the speaker.

Instead, we can allow language to work for us as a tool. Rather than holding others captive with their words. As if using the right words were the final goal of communication.

I fear there will be little such effort in the Presidential debate tomorrow night.

I lived in Belgium for a year during college. The northern half of Belgium is officially Dutch-speaking; the southern half is officially French-speaking. The battles go back centuries. Now place into this context a college town with hundreds of international students speaking dozens of languages. On the streets I witnessed language wars, where, even in cases where two speakers clearly both knew each other's language, one person would persist in a conversation in one language while the other persisted in another language. This worked in a variety of ways. It wasn't that people always stuck with their native tongue. I might try to speak Dutch to a shopkeeper and he would speak back to me in English—not so subtly telling me I should stop butchering his language. These contests were not necessarily a bad thing—they would occur when people were trying to learn one another's language. But they could also reflect a power struggle and open hostility.

In our ordinary conversations there are no 3rd party interpreters. We find ourselves with the job of both speaker and listener. So when there is a misunderstanding, whose responsibility is it to adjust? The speaker or the listener?

What is your duty as a speaker? As a listener? Is it your role to be an agent for the other person, even to maximize their argument? Or should you be listening intently for the weakest part of their argument, so that you can tear it apart?

Realistically, we play different roles at different times with different people. It is a beautiful thing when we can give one another the benefit of the doubt (and there should always be a modest touch of doubt in any listening).

But if we cannot find it within ourselves to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, if we must take on the role of prosecutor, we can at least admit to ourselves that this is our real intention.

Still, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much goodwill we bring to a conversation, there are some ideas that just cannot be translated out of their native language. I think this is also true about religion. Some things cannot be understood without immersion into their cultural context.

Religion is often paradoxical, counter-intuitive, surprising, inscrutable. Religious words and ideas come in parables, jokes, and Zen koans. Koans are not puzzles to which one can get the

right answer. There is not a right answer to “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” An indication of understanding does not come through answering with the right words, but in a personal, heartfelt, lived response. One Zen master’s critique of a student who attempted to answer a koan with the “right” answer was this: "Even though that is true, if you do not know it yourself it does you no good."

The words “I love you” are meaningless if they are merely translated. For the mother in our story to “say it,” she had to do, and say many other things.

Imagine you are flying in a plane and you hear the pilot say that she’s unable to land. Would you panic? Would you assume that the pilot has never been trained to land? Or would you consider other possibilities? Such as: there is too much traffic or the weather is inhibiting landing, for now? You need to know some things to interpret.

But there can also be difficulty if you know too much. You might be tempted to insert information that the speaker hasn’t said, or jump to conclusions the speaker hasn’t made.

Knowing something can get in the way of knowing something new.

So what are the qualities of a good interpreter? They are curious, eager to confront the unknown. They know their limits. The good interpreter has knowledge of her own ignorance. She recognizes knowledge as a dynamic process (not just the sum of facts), and she continually challenges what she thinks she has heard.

Our thoughts and our words are not equivalent. Our thoughts and our words are not equivalent. It’s easy to make the mistake of thinking that our thoughts and our words ARE equivalent when we live in an environment with only one language. And we may get impatient as speakers and as listeners because we think that the other person should get our ideas since we’ve explained them in a language they presumably understand.

But language is only a bridge over which ideas travel from soul to soul. And bridges need to be maintained. In transit, ideas can pick up debris. They do not always make it across intact.

We might complain about the bridge for slowing us down. This is a mistake. It’s the river that is in the way. Still, the bridge is not meant to eliminate the river.

When I tell people about Unitarian Universalism and our non-creedal approach to religion, they often ask, “But how can you hold services if you don’t have the same beliefs?” I explain that we strive to learn from our difference perspectives, but also that there are elements of a Sunday service which people who have very different views can appreciate on their own terms. Music and silence are especially good for this. But there are even a couple of prayers: The Buddhist Loving kindness mediation goes like this: May I be filled with loving kindness; may I be at peace and at ease; may I be happy; may I be well. May *you* be filled with loving kindness; may you be at peace and at ease; may you be happy; may you be well.

There's also the Serenity Prayer: "May I have the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

So these are some examples of what we can do *together* in a creedless congregation. But what is required of each of us *individually*? We must constantly and willingly interpret what we don't understand. We open ourselves to the possibility that words and rituals and ideas that have no meaning to us right now, might be intensely meaningful to our neighbor.

Consider the Tower of Babel, which may be rooted in universal human experience, because there are variations of the same story in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Quran, and in the Book of Mormon. From South America to Nepal to Africa there are related stories about efforts to build a great tower being thwarted by a confusion of languages. The basic plot is that the people attempt to build into the sky and god intervenes.

A traditional interpretation of the story is: "if you try to reach too high, the gods will knock you down." (I intentionally chose the word "gods" here, because that's how it's told in the Hebrew Scriptures.)

Here's another interpretation of the story, from a socially conscious point of view: When we look at the enormous ziggurats that were built in ancient Mesopotamia, we could assume that these projects would require slaves, imported from all over the region and speaking different languages. So the socially conscious interpretation is that God -- or natural consequences -- will intervene when the powerful take advantage of the weak.

And finally, here's a fairly straightforward alternative interpretation: The people build, the gods look down and say "OK, that's pretty impressive, but before you can go any further, you need to learn to communicate better. Until you can talk together, you can advance only so far."

So if we have to communicate better, which language should we speak? In the *German Requiem* Brahms uses trombones to indicate the coming of the Last Judgment. He does this because in German religious texts it is trombones and not trumpets that announce the Last Judgment. So when a conductor in France or England performs the German Requiem, should he substitute trumpets for trombones because that's what the religious texts in French and English refer to?

If an Italian is describing to a Chinese her typical dinner, should she translate the word "pasta" into "rice"?

You might spend time in a Unitarian Universalist church without ever hearing the word "God." Perhaps you noticed that even when I spoke of the Serenity Prayer a minute ago I chose the phrasing: "May I have the courage," etc... instead of "God grant me the courage..."

And you've probably heard me explain the limited god language that I use in multiple contradictory ways. Still, I consider myself a religious person. Not because of the rules I follow or the beliefs I hold or even the institution that I belong to. I consider myself religious because I

aspire to pay attention. And often—not always but often—I hear meanings that cannot be spoken.

This is a free pulpit, so you will hear me and others using a wide range of words like God, spirit, divine. Or not. You might also hear, if you're paying attention to the words and the acts of those who don't speak in that language, you might hear in music, in silence, in handshakes, in goodwill, and even in satire... you may encounter meanings that cannot be spoken.

When you do not hear it, our two-way bridge of communication has broken. We have failed, together, to communicate.

I hope we have not failed today. I hope you have recognized that I have not been talking today about language or chemistry or politics or art. Today I have been saying, all along, "I love you."

SHARING OUR GIFTS

In Washington DC yesterday an African American president spoke at the dedication ceremony for the new Smithsonian Museum of African American History. Museums, of course, are interpretive centers. But there are better and worse interpretations of history; it's not just a matter of opinion. Institutions exist to preserve the artifacts of human culture and to provide a framework within which to think both critically and ethically about their meaning for our lives today. Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship is such an institution. Your support for our heritage and our principles will ensure our ongoing and advancing work of mutual understanding.

SENDING SONG

This is my Song

#159

BENEDICTION

The word "benediction" may grate on the nerves of those who feel that they've had more than enough religion for one lifetime. At its root, benediction means simply to speak well. As we go today may we strive to speak well and to listen well, and to recognize in our own voice and in each other's: what it is we really mean.