

Dirt Durable and Without Slippery

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Returning to the carport last night I found, sitting on the bonnet of my ageing Falcon, an empty cardboard package which had apparently once contained a leather steering wheel cover rejoicing in the trade name of LACE-OVER. Close scrutiny of the box failed to reveal the country of manufacture, but one thing is for sure; although written in English the instructions were certainly not written by a native speaker of English.

It must have been an interesting item however, judging from the features listed on the back of the package. For example, I was relieved to see that it was 'dirt durable without sticking the hand when sweating', and that it was 'entirely without slippery', which is certainly very reassuring. And I was additionally comforted by the promise that 'the hole which is made by punching is excellent for its function of ventilation'. But then again, what can we expect from a product 'invented by special technology' which the consumer can use 'at ease'. Perhaps it was imported during the recent military regime?

A series of diagrams clued me in as to the method of installation, which is perhaps just as well as, left to following the written instructions, I feel one might suffer at the least flesh wounds in an attempt to 'install it into the steering wheel' before cutting off the 'excessive part of the rope'.

I kept the box as a linguistic curio and a piece of potential teaching material for my advanced students (homework assignment: analyse what is 'wrong' with it from the points of view of language and communication), and it sits on top of my Apple Mac as I type this week's column. But it serves as a reminder of a wider problem. Probably all of us have at some stage come across some piece of electronic equipment with the same kind of indecipherable instructions. I myself spent a couple of hours last week with an ENTEL engineer trying to work out for him how to use some kind of stereophonic telephone/F.M. radio/alarm clock/teasmaid from the smudgy, flimsy and incoherent manual he proffered. He did fix my phone however, in return, so I wasn't being gratuitously altruistic. But the question we should perhaps ask ourselves is 'Why does this happen?'

After all, it can't be a question of money. Translators are abominably paid the world over, bar the odd one or two under contract to major publishers, and the economies of these eastern countries that make all this stuff are booming. Perhaps it's a question of pride, of not accepting that your own command of the English language is less than adequate. I have certainly come across plenty of people who have refused to accept my suggestions as a native speaker of English as to how to 'improve' a translation.

Let me give an example. Some years ago, a local bank asked me to check over the English in some important letters. One of the board members was an engineer, let us call him Ing. Blanco, and constant reference was made to him in the correspondence. The translator had put this as 'Engineer Blanco has submitted the following', and I pointed out that this mechanism does not exist in English, and that to refer to 'Engineer Blanco' in this manner was both pompous and ridiculous. She said words to the effect of 'I know, but Ing. Blanco insists on it; he feels he is losing prestige if he doesn't underline his name with his status'. In this case, Ing. Blanco was the man with the say, and he won the day, despite the translator's protests, though what effect it made at the other end is anybody's guess.

Perhaps too some texts are untranslatable. We turned one down in the office the other day as being impossible to do without consultation with the author, who was unavailable. There are perhaps two problems here. The first is with a particularly flowery style of writing, more common perhaps in Spanish than in English, which gives the impression of saying something but which on closer examination says nothing intelligible at all. The other problem is that although the person who wrote something like the *five largest British banks' claims* may have known what he meant at the time, (and even then not always), but the translator, usually working under pressure, can't decide whether the 'five' goes with the 'claims' or the 'banks'. A little thought on the part of the person who drafted the original document would make the translator's life a little more bearable.

But all this doesn't help us to understand why there are so many appallingly translated instruction manuals around. I wonder if it happens with a multi-million-dollar CAT-scanner, or in the pharmaceutical trade? Presumably not, at least I hope not. But I would have thought any company would have stopped a minute to consider its prestige. After all, the care taken in producing the instructions which accompany a product reflect on the importance the company has given to respect for the eventual purchaser. And if they have taken so little care to make the instructions intelligible, what encouragement do you have to think they have taken any more care in manufacturing the product itself.

And we see this not only in instruction manuals. The tourist industry is another case in point. Any number of hotels and restaurants all over the world have atrocious mistakes in their English language menus and publicity material. One obviously wonders if they take any more care with the cooking or hygiene arrangements. You have only to check out the English language version computer screen for tourist information in the reception of the Plaza Hotel to see how an international top-line hotel assigns such low priority to telling visitors what they can see and do in town. It's not that the English is 'bad', in fact it's quite intelligible, but I wonder if this 'Spanglish' gives the image the hotel really wants it to give?

With restaurants it is the same story. After all, what restaurant menu could take more than an hour or so to translate? Here again it is probably a question of not caring, not wanting to do things properly. After all, if you are going to the effort of having a bilingual menu, what other possible reason can there be, other than perverseness, for favouring a sloppy translation to an accurate one. At current rates any competent translator would probably be happy to swop a decent meal for the service of translating the menu, yet things seem to stay the same. (Actually, I must admit that menus are at least occasionally good for a laugh - perhaps readers might care to send in items from some of the more off-beat menus they've come across?)

Of course this all works both ways, and I've no doubt you can find the same appallingly translated items in most countries of the World. But as to why, I am perplexed. When I go to the cinema and hear one thing and read another I am perplexed. When the restaurant offers me 'jump in the mouth' I am perplexed. (Well, I was; I've since gained experience in such culinary matters). And when I buy a beautifully printed, lavishly illustrated book with bilingual captions in impeccable Spanish and execrable English I am perplexed. A few pence wisely spent would make your friendly neighbourhood translator happy and surely improve the product or service immeasurably at the same time.