

# Journal des traducteurs Translators' Journal

## The Language Barrier

Anna Stearns

---

Volume 3, numéro 1, 1er trimestre 1958

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061452ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061452ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (imprimé)

2562-2994 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer cet article

Stearns, A. (1958). The Language Barrier. *Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, 3(1), 31–33. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061452ar>

## THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Anna STEARNS, Montréal.

When we speak of a language barrier, it is commonly understood to refer to matters of vocabulary, or syntax, not to mention a certain lack of familiarity with certain idiomatic expressions. Unfortunately, for both the newcomer<sup>(1)</sup> and the social worker eager to assist him, there is a lot more to the linguistic barrier than what meets the grammarian's eye! Were it only a matter of sheer *lingua* why would people with quite a good mastery of either English or French complain that their English or French neighbors are unable to understand them?

How many times did I have to intervene to iron out misunderstandings that arose when *both* sides claimed that the correct word or phrase had been used! Sometimes, I managed to clear away mutual grievances of newcomer and native by the simple expedient of letting the newcomer tell me the sentence in his native language: and there was the culprit, no more than a *misplaced* emphasis. Nothing bigger than a subtlety of "emotional weighting", different in the case of the speaker from that given to it by the listener.

In this connection, I came to a point where I dreaded dictionary-wise *correct* translations. Lexicographers of every kind have one fault in common: they pretend that words of one language have an absolute equivalent in another. They seem to forget that "word images" (*if nothing else*) vary from country to country. Because *word images* are linked to a culture, a way of life. They often refer to very specific (for one country) conditions with regard to political rule or set-up, geographical characteristics, etc.<sup>(2)</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>This article is an extract from a book on the integration problems of Neo-Canadians, which Dr. Stearns is preparing at present. The author is currently teaching translation at the University of Montreal (Department of Slavic Studies); she is a graduate of the Faculty of Letters of the same institution. For another article on the same subject, bearing the same title, see Alexander, Henry, "Breaking the Language Barrier", *Studia Varia*, Royal Society of Canada, U. of Toronto Press, 1957: 116-120. *NDLR*.

<sup>2</sup>In the 1920's, a witty Frenchman and a fine linguist, Félix Boillot wrote a manual for translators: *Le Vrai ami du traducteur anglais-français et français-anglais* ("The True Friend of the Translator..."). And it is in this book that Boillot, — in a humorous vein — makes a point concerning different "word-images," a point that to me appeared, in my daily dealings with newcomers, fraught with tragic potential. One of Boillot's best chapters in the book is the one on fuel used in automobiles; *Pétrol* (In British Isles usage) is what Frenchmen call *essence* (le *gaz*, au Canada français). If you say *pétrole* in France, it means *paraffine*. And paraffine,

Neither are the misunderstandings between newcomer and native restricted to the field of *concrete* meanings, to words of daily usage. But they are apt to crop up disastrously when the conversation turns to subjects like *loyalty, decency, idealism, ideologies* or *politics*. Some Europeans have been brought up in environments where such abstract terms had a specific and *emotionally weighted meaning*!

*Linguistic* quarrels assumed further complicating aspects if the newcomer getting involved in them was the parent of a youthful native (or, an adolescent who although not born in this country still has the great facility of children to take over, in every detail and colloquialism, the language and customs of the new country).

I remember one of my refugee-friends, a physician from Vienna, who flew into a rage because when he asked his young daughter: "Do you intend to go in slacks to the party?" She'd answered laughing: "Daddy, don't be silly!" The English Canadian landlady who happened to be present was aghast about the "lack of control" in "those refugees". And it would have taken me much too long to explain that the word *silly* — translated into Viennese usage meant 'you're a moron' (or, if you will, a perfect idiot). And never mind the Canadian landlady; how was I to save my friend from Vienna from thinking that his own daughter had turned against him in utter contempt when he did what we all do at times, namely: endowing words with a "private meaning" formed of our individual, past experience?

Take a simple, little word like "silly": Americans and Canadians all across the continent use it daily in everyday, bantering speech. Or, colloquially for different occasions. I have heard them say, "don't be silly" there where a Britisher will say "not at all" (when somebody thanks them for a favor or service). The Frenchman (from Europe) murmurs "de rien" in a bit of stilted politeness. While both the French and English Canadian will say, "you're welcome" if they prefer to be politely serious. (The German, from many parts of Germany proper, will say "nothing worth thanking for" — *nichts zu danken*, while the easy going Austrian and Bavarian'll say, "*gern gescheh'n*", — gladly done.)

But there's much more to the language barrier than small-talk differences. Take cases of sickness, for instance: I would get frantic calls from refugee friends, at all hours, day or night<sup>3</sup>, with complaints about the Canadian physician's "callous indifference" to a patient's misery.

---

in turn, is called *solid paraffin* in England. In Germany, "essence" is *Benzin*, in French *benzine* is something different again, and in American English, "essence" is *gasoline*, — *gas* for short, which is *no gas*! Surprised that there are so many accidents? Monsieur Boillot asks at the end of this paragraph. [Nous avons souvent parlé des travaux de M. Boillot, qui écrit régulièrement dans le *Journal* sous le pseudonyme de Félix de Grand'Combe. Le livre dont il s'agit ici vient d'être réédité et considérablement augmenté (Paris, Oliven, 1956). NDLR.]

<sup>3</sup>I would leave my telephone number to refugee families with the injunction (not just a permission) to call me if any difficulty arose involving "human relations" with their new environment. It was meant as a safeguard to forestall tragic difficulties originating from many a trivial beginning as I'd seen it happen so often in the beginning. When I first went to meet the boat-train from Quebec carrying refugees from Europe, in the first year of the last war, I hardly realized how *much social work has to be done when you are asked to be an interpreter*!

Physicians with experience in treating soldiers from different lands are aware that each of us falls back, sometimes without realizing it, into his mother-tongue when he or she is sick or very excited. (A fact so familiar to playwrights and movie producers that they have made it into a 'trick of their trade' to indicate the fact that the person in question is a foreigner who reverts to his native language at times when "he isn't quite himself" !). But in the cases I'm referring to here, the doctor's dilemma was even more precarious : the white-haired, gentle professor from Mannheim — to whose bedside I'd been summoned by the frantic call of his daughter — was explaining his symptoms to the Canadian doctor in a language composed of English roots and German suffixes (and *vice versa*). The patient has a high fever. And the physician was greatly hampered in reaching a diagnosis by the fact that he believed *the patient to be delirious*. Seemingly, a whole lot of difference in the diagnosis hinged on the presence of delirium. I understood that much although, by this time, all those present, including the doctor, were cross and very upset. I hurriedly went to work "translating" to the doctor what the old man had been telling him ever since he'd started to examine him. Trying to make it clear that the patient was saying perfectly rational things in linguistically garbled fashion !

This doctor, one of the older medical men in this city, later became a personal friend of mine to whom I turned with many a baffling case of "sickness-cum-refugitis". But that time, he showed no particular gratitude for my interference in spite of the fact that it did help him to make his diagnosis instead of sending the patient to an isolation ward for patients down with typhoid. "Why do these people bother calling a physician", he said gruffly, "you're doing nicely without having an M. D. obliging you to make correct diagnoses..."

It was Anatole France, in his political satire, *L'Ile des Pingouins* I think, who said, "*the finest words in the world are but vain sounds if you don't understand them !*" And an English bishop of the 18th century tells us that, "words may be either servants or masters". With most newcomers I knew — words were the trivial cause of heartbreaking unpleasantness in their relations with natives. And I can honestly say that there's a lot more to the language barrier than sociologists dream of.

