

THE WORLD OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS

PLEASE DON'T F*** THE GRASS

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Inspired by “Never Ask a Uruguayan Waitress for a Little Box: She might Apply Her foot to Your Eyelet” by John R. Cassidy, I found myself remembering similar situations from my experiences as an international conference interpreter and translator who has travelled extensively in Latin America.

Among the words considered taboo in Chile is *pico*, which in everyday Spanish means ‘peak, point’; ‘and a bit,’ as in “2 miles and a bit”; or ‘just after’, in reference to the hour. To Chilean, however, the word only means ‘prick, pecker,’ etc. in its most vulgar form. When Indira Gandhi stopped off in Chile on her return from an official state visit to Argentina, she brought her Argentine interpreter along with her to interpret her speeches into Spanish at official functions. At a very formal luncheon full of naturally long-faced Chileans colonels, Mrs. Gandhi began her speech by stressing the similarities between India and Chile, saying that the two countries had so much in common, particularly their peaks—‘pricks’-- and their valleys. The colonels’ faces froze. She continued, stating that both countries also shared many economic lows and peaks. Neither Mrs. Gandhi nor her interpreter could understand why everyone looked so glacial, and both became rather hesitant as the speech went on. I recall being told that it was just about the least successful visit ever made to Chile by a foreign head of state.

Then there was the wife of a new French ambassador who, upon her arrival, stated that she was certain she would love Chile because of its lovely people and its magnificent Andean peaks –again ‘pricks.’ I don’t know if she ever lived it down.

Also in Chile, it seems that once, to welcome the Spanish soccer team, great banners were strung all over Santiago with the words *Bienvenidos los Coños*, which is what they call the Spaniards. In Spain, however, *coño* is a frequently heard expletive meaning ‘cunt,’ used rather as English-speaking people would say “Oh, hell!” I wonder who was able to explain to the visitors that “Welcome, You Cunts,” was really a friendly greeting.

Some years ago a Guatemalan diplomat on a mission to Uruguay was invited to a formal reception. The next day, he was asked whether he had enjoyed himself, and he said he had even gotten a bit *bolo* ‘drunk’ or ‘tipsy’ before he left. Shocked faces and dead silence greeted his reply, and then he was asked: “Didn’t they throw you out?” “No,” he said, “it wasn’t that noticeable.” “Not noticeable? That’s impossible. You said you were *bolo*.” Eventually he was told that what he thought meant ‘drunk’ means ‘naked’ in Uruguay, derived from “balls are showing,” similar to English “balls naked.”

Ponerse un pedo ‘putting on a fart,’ and *ponerse un cohete* ‘putting on a firecracker’ mean getting drunk in Mexico.

On my first interpreting assignment in Nicaragua, I found out much to my chagrin that my translation for ‘handling,’ *manipulco*, meant ‘pocket pool’ to them (‘men playing with their testicles with their hands in their pockets’). However, I recently saw a document where the word ‘handling’ had been translated as *manosco* ‘pawing.’

Being *constipado* is what they call ‘having a cold’ in Mexico. Once a Mexican delegate at a meeting of bankers wanted to indicate metaphorically that for simple matters he liked simple remedies *Cuando estoy constipado uso Vicks* was his way of saying: ‘When I have a cold, I use Vicks.’ However, his interpreter was from Argentina, and so the statement came back into English as “When I’m constipated, I use Vicks.”

In Hispanic America below Mexico, a *causante* is a ‘deceased (person),’ but in Mexico this word means ‘taxpayer.’ A Peruvian interpreter at a tax conference had to apologize to her listeners on day two and tell them that all those “dead people” she had been talking about were really Mexican taxpayers.

At a Family Planning Conference in the Dominican Republic, I was very impressed when they announced that the band would play the *Merengue de la Ligadura*, a merengue in honor of ‘tying the Fallopian tubes,’ I thought. I was somewhat disappointed when it turned out to be a merengue in favor of ‘sweethearts,’ for *ligar* there means ‘to be tied lovingly to each other,’ which might have the opposite effect of Family Planning.

Between the neighboring countries of Honduras and Guatemala, there are endless linguistic obstacles-some more embarrassing than others. A common saying in Guatemala is *Amor de lejos es de pendejos* ‘Love from afar is for fools.’ But in Honduras, the word *pendejo* is used almost exclusively for ‘pubic hair,’ something no lady would ever mention in mixed company.

Arrecha or *arrecho* in Guatemala is used as a compliment, meaning “courageous, brave.” (“The penniless widow left with five children was very *arrecha* and managed to put them all through school.”) In Honduras, applied to females, the same word means a ‘loose woman,’ so when a friend of mine complimented my thrice-married Honduran aunt by calling her *arrecha*, she kept insisting that when she was young, people may have talked about her, but that she had never, never really been *arrecha*! On some of the Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean, *arrecha* or *arrecho* means ‘mad or angry,’ but if a woman used this expression in Honduras she would very probably be propositioned immediately.

In Honduras, the word *pisar*, elsewhere ‘to step on; to cover a bird; to ram, trample, tread on’ means ‘to fuck,’ just as do *coger* and *tirar* in South America. This is why Hondurans tend to be shocked when reading signs saying NO PISAR EL CESPED in public parks, since to them it does not mean “DON’T WALK ON THE GRASS but rather DON’T FUCK THE LAWN”!

Pupusas are a very popular sort of *taco*, originating in El Salvador, made from *tortillas* filled with cheese, meat, or other things and then fried or grilled. *Pupusas* are ‘cunts’ to Guatemalans and Hondurans. And for Spaniards, a *tortilla* is a sort of omelet.

The noun *chingaste* means ‘coffee grounds’ in Honduras, whereas in Mexico it could only mean ‘Did you fuck?’ *Chingo* in Honduras is an adjective meaning ‘short,’ as in a dress’s being too short: in Mexico it is a verb: ‘I fuck.’

One of my own most embarrassing moments was when, as a recently married young woman, I felt a cold coming on and was a bit feverish. So I asked my Argentine boss to let me go home early from the office, telling him I thought I had a *calentura* (which to me meant a low fever, whereas *fiebre* would have been a very high fever). He told me of course, I could go home, but that he really never expected me to be so frank and open about it. This puzzled me, until I found out that to him and other Argentines *calentura* meant being ‘horny’ or ‘in heat.’

For the female genitalia, the people from the River Plate use the term *cajita* or *cajeta*, and elsewhere it may be *concha*; but in Central America there are other rather descriptive terms, such as *cuchara* ‘spoon,’ *cuca*, short for *cucaracha* ‘cockroach,’ *bollo* ‘bun,’ or *pan* ‘bread.’ In Middle America many women are named *Concha*, which is short for *Concepción*, a popular biblical name meaning ‘conception.’ We also eat *conchas* ‘shellfish’ in seafood cocktails!

And then there was the Argentine lady who went to Mexico and met a charming, apparently very cultured gentleman who invited her out for tea at Sanborns and suggested she have *crepas* ‘crepes’ with *cajeta* ‘a creamy caramel spread’ which to her meant ‘cunt.’ She was furious, mostly at herself for having considered him a gentleman.

Until quite recently, when it became accepted in ecology circles, the word *polución* was totally taboo as a translation for ‘pollution,’ because its principal meaning was ‘semen,’ as in wet dreams. Now we may use this term officially at conferences without the fear of having our mouths washed out with soap.

The descriptive term for blondes in various countries can leave the best of us mystified. In Mexico they are called *guero* or *güera*, in Guatemala *canche* (for both males and females). In Honduras and El Salvador they are *cheles* (also sexless), and in Costa Rica-would you believe it-*macho* for men and *macha* for women, with the diminutive for girls being *machita*. The first time I heard a Costa Rican admiringly refer to my cousin as a *machita*, I thought he was calling her a lesbian! In Venezuela blondes are *catiras* and in Panama *fulas*.

In Central America breasts are known vulgarly as *tetas* and *chiches*, but in Chile *chiches* are ‘charms’ or ‘pendants,’ as worn on bracelets or necklaces. Consequently, more than one *chileno* has been slapped for voicing his admiration for the necklace or pendant worn by a lady with a low-cut evening dress. His compliment could be freely translated as, “What beautiful tits you have, *señora*.”

An automobile can be variously called *automóvil*, *carro*, *coche*, and in Cuba (before the forced popularity of the bicycle) *máquina*. However, in Guatemala *coche* also means ‘pig, hog,’ and South Americans might be more than bemused if offered *carne de coche* or *manteca de coche*, which to them would mean ‘meat of the automobile’ or ‘butter of the automobile’ instead of ‘pork’ or ‘lard.’

Argentines, to whom *trastes* are ‘bottoms, backsides, or behinds’ (preferably of pretty girls), tend to look rather shocked when asked by people from northern Latin America to *fregar los trastes* ‘to scrub the dishes,’ a request that to them would sound like ‘scrub those asses.’

I once received a text on Mexican rural housing for translation into English. I could hardly believe my eyes when a certain dwelling was described as being made of *órganos* ‘organs.’ My imagination did run wild, as I knew intuitively that they could not be the musical instrument. The dictionary did not help me either. Finally a Mexican told me that what was really meant was ‘organ cactus.’

As a final note, in Guatemala it is *quite comme il faut* to say to one’s hostess *¡Qué linda cola tiene Ud. Señora!* ‘What a lovely tail you have, *señora*’ She will understand that you are talking about her ferns, which are called *colas de quetzal*, and not her tail.