

Beware those awful buzzwords

Tony Beckwith (c) 1997

WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG my father told me that the pen was mightier than the sword. I was greatly relieved to hear that since I had seen (in pirate movies, for example) what was done with a sword and I was fairly sure that I wouldn't be very good at it. Soon afterwards he showed me that if I rearranged the letters in "words" they actually spelled "sword," which was unbelievably exciting and seemed to prove him right beyond any doubt.

"That's called an anagram," he said, and explained that words are wonderful, flexible and funny things, and if I would just let them float freely in my mind, allowing them to separate into letters and sounds and syllables and come together in other combinations and meanings, I would have a constant source of education and entertainment. And he was right.

At that time we lived in an English-speaking community in a Spanish-speaking country, so we were bilingual by default. It was natural for us to speak a mixture of both languages, sometimes in the same sentence. The playfulness I had learned applied no matter which language I was speaking, and although at that time I had no idea what a false cognate was, I instinctively knew how to use one for comic effect.

What I didn't know then was that I was training myself for a future career. A translator must be able to dismantle words in order to grasp the full scope of their meaning, and to do this one must have no misplaced reverence towards them. Growing up with

somebody who loved wordplay encouraged me not to take words solely at their face value, but to look beyond their usual meanings into their components and see what they were made of, what they were related to, and from whence they came.

Along the way I learned to love and respect words and to feel a helpless sorrow when they are used incorrectly or overused until they are

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sullied and their original meaning becomes blurred. We have all seen how, from time to time, certain words become popular and gain an indefinable prestige, and are then used on a massive, mindless scale.

These "buzzwords" are all around us and will not go away. They are insidious and permeate the language like clichés and other boilerplate-like text. One is not obliged to use these words, but, how is the translator supposed to handle them?

The first one I remember was "dichotomy." All of a sudden, back in the seventies, there was no longer just the old dichotomy between, say, good and evil; there were dichotomies between ideas and achievements, pricing structures at the wholesale and retail levels, brand preferences, love and sex, and the relative performances of sports teams. I suppose we can be thankful it wasn't turned into a verb!

The eighties and nineties have

been increasingly fertile ground for buzzwords. "Segue," "typically," and "clearly" come to mind. More recently we have been plagued with "paradigms" (for example) at every turn. The latest one as far as I can tell is "myriad." Now, myriad itself is rather a pretty word. When used appropriately it has a certain almost mystic music to it, an elevated tone that improves a phrase. But I'm sorry, "Myriads of unruly fans destroyed the stadium" just doesn't work.

When words such as these creep (or stampede) into common usage, they begin to appear in speech and documents everywhere, and translators and interpreters face the challenge of handling them correctly. If one doesn't stop to consider the true meaning intended by a buzzword, one runs the risk of transferring a little bit of nonsense into the target language, which is a little like tipping your trash into your neighbor's yard. These words require a translator to see beyond the glitter of an expression's current popularity, and not be blinded by a trend.

A translator must be able to strip the tinsel from a word, seeing what is really implied, and then expressing it in the appropriate words of the target language. To do this one must love words and respect them, but not be too much in awe of them.

As my father might have said, being too full of awe is awful. ★