

The Subject of Chinglish

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“Each of my two languages was an entirety, and that is precisely what made them uncombinable, incapable of forming a new totality.”

(Todorov 1994, p. 213)

For those who have traveled to the People’s Republic of China in recent decades, it is quite common to encounter a hilarious kind of translingual writing.¹ On everything from merchandise, billboards, and restaurant menus to toilets, parks, construction sites, and other public facilities appear bilingual signs in Chinese and English giving directions, warnings, and cautionary advice. These signs have become a popular source of humor, because the English used is often unidiomatic and ungrammatical, or comes across as nonsensical. Oliver Lutz Radtke, a German sinologist and the author of the book *Chinglish: Found in Translation* (Radtke 2007), writes that his book has sold tens of thousands of copies since it was first published in 2007, and that because of it he has appeared on media all over the world. His blog, which began as a personal homepage with a limited collection of these, what he calls “Chinglish beauties,” now gets thousands of hits every week. In 2009, he published a second volume, *More Chinglish: Speaking in Tongues* (Radtke 2009).

¹ [The article first appeared in *Testo a fronte: teoria e pratica della traduzione letteraria* (n° 48, pp. 155–62). The editorial board of *Problemi* would like to thank the editors, Edoardo Zuccato and Tim Parks, for their kind permission to reprint it in this issue.]

To give you a sense of why and how Chinglish has provoked so much laughter, let me cite some examples. Depending on whether you can read both languages or only the English, these signs will provoke you differently:

先下後上 文明乘車	After first under on, do riding with civility.
小心滑倒	Slip and fall down carefully.
北京東大肛腸醫院	Dongda Hospital for Anus and Intestine Disease Beijing.
請勿忘隨身物品	Don't Forget to Carry Your Thing.
文明方便 清新自然	You can enjoy the fresh air after finishing a civilized urinating.
禁止跨越	Forbid to Cross.
小心墮落	Take care to fall. ²

Such efforts of bilingualism are wonderful illustrations of what translation in cross-cultural situations can do, if unintentionally, to the ideals of communication and communicability. Just how are we supposed to think about such bilingual acts in the context of globalization, or as some have called it, Anglobalization? If such acts constitute a form of writing, how should the form, which is riddled with errors, be approached? To begin to answer these questions, we need to try simultaneously to consider another one, namely, why are these Chinglish signs so funny?

What appears funny can be a tricky issue in a cross-cultural situation, as laughter, which for some is equated with the state of being laughed at, can be an index to injured cultural pride. As can be expected, the native Chinese response to Chinglish is usually that of embarrassment, followed by prompt correction wherever possible. When China was preparing for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Chinese government was so determined to present a positive image to the outside world that it implemented various measures to clean up aspects of Chinese life, including attempts

² Radtke 2007, pp. 21, 60, 93, 110, and Radtke 2009, pp. 19, 41, 83.

to eliminate the ubiquitous Chinglish signs.³ This native response is underwritten with the memory of national humiliation, experienced for a century and a half by China, since the Opium War of 1839–42, in relation to Euro-America. Since then, as in most of the non-Western and postcolonized world, the necessity to know English has been accepted as an injunction for cosmopolitan lingual normativity. A lack of proficiency in English, accordingly, is treated with heightened self-consciousness, anxiety, and often shame. For those who know something about the history of the non-Western world of the past few centuries, such emotional reactions to English, which far exceed the ordinary experience of acquiring a foreign language, are nothing new. Such reactions are characteristic of what might be called a post-imperialist and postcolonial predicament, which is typically borne by those on the non-Western side of the divide.

For the same reasons, reactions to Chinglish from those on the non-Chinese side tend to be quite different. Free from the historical memory that burdens native speakers, many foreign observers, in particular those from Euro-America, typically respond to Chinglish in a more lighthearted manner. They may frown on the mistakes as things that urgently demand correction; they may be charmed by them as passing amusements or as weird treasures to be salvaged.⁴ To the sinologist, Victor Mair, for instance, “Chinglish has a charm and fascination all of its own, even for those who don’t know any Chinese. But for someone who knows Chinese, the appreciation is enhanced by an understanding of how its special features are generated” (Radtke 2009, p. 9). Or, in the words of Chinglish’s staunch defender, Radtke: “I am not arguing against correcting mistakes, but rather for a more relaxed attitude toward the so-called standardization of language.

³ For an informative account of the measures taken, see Henry 2010.

⁴ See Radtke 2007, pp. 7–8 for a brief account about David Tool, a retired army colonel from the United States, who is one of the main proponents of the campaign to clean up Chinglish in China.

After all, Chinglish is a major contributor to the English language, and it also provides a counterweight to the burden of political correctness, which, especially in the United States, threatens to whitewash everything” (Radtke 2009, p. 5).

In thought-provoking contrast to the embarrassed, native Chinese response, these foreigners seem readily tolerant of the flawed translations, which are treated as a creative kind of local color, indeed, as windows into the Chinese mind. In an endorsement of Radtke’s work, for instance, Susian Stähle, a Chinese lecturer at Heidelberg University, writes:

A high-class translation comes about only through a detailed understanding of cultural backgrounds and great sensitivity to minuscule language differences. ... Language and thinking are closely intertwined. This book [*Chinglish*] provides the reader the opportunity to explore *the Chinese mind*, their language and creativity. It serves as an interesting and insightful guide not only for translators, students, and teachers of Chinese but also for anyone involved in the discovery of a foreign language. (Radtke 2007, p. 15, my emphasis)

Unlike the symptom of anxiety exhibited by the native speakers, then, these friendly reactions from the Euro-American observers, specialists of the Chinese language, locate the manifestation of Chinglish rather in a wistfully neutral cross-cultural encounter, in which improprieties, however objectionable they may be by the criteria of “high-class translation,” are to be taken as the features of an exotic artifact, which is deemed fascinating on account of its peculiarly homespun, that is, unrefined, quality. If the native Chinese response has subjectivized these translingual signs by attaching to them a kind of injured cultural pride, which can only be restored by restoring proper English, the foreign observers’ more lenient reactions rather objectivize the signs as quaint native curios. For the latter, it is precisely the ludicrousness of Chinglish that constitutes its irreplaceable value. If there is a sense of anxiety here, it is that such curios will soon, under efforts

of linguistic cleansing, be entirely eradicated and become extinct. As Radtke writes: “My aim is to show the nowadays endangered species of Chinglish in its natural habitat” (Radtke 2007, p. 6). These polarized perspectives on Chinglish are summed up perceptively by Eric Steven Henry in the following manner:

Chinglish is ... one of the ways in which the speech community is structured into unequal groups. Expertise in English, and thus the authority to judge the acceptability of the utterances of others or to relegate them to the category of Chinglish, maintains divisions between native speakers, Chinese foreign language professionals and students. While the members of this common speech community engage with each other in frequent conversations, it is Chinese students who produce Chinglish, and linguists and teachers who interpret it ... [T]he magic of Chinglish is the ability of this [interpretative] discourse to mask relations of inequality as linguistic differences of form rather than the judgment of experts sanctioned by the authority of their expertise as native speakers or language professionals. (Henry 2010, p. 684)

The Comic Character par excellence

Notwithstanding the sophistication of the aforementioned sinological and sociolinguistic perspectives, the question as to why the Chinglish signs are so funny seems far from having been exhausted.

At the most basic level, what creates the effect of apparent nonsense is not exactly incompetence in the English language but the fact that a transaction is being conducted between two languages, with the implicit goal of a unified or synthesized meaning that is transparent or common to both. Rather than gauging the laughable errors at the level of only one of the two languages, English, it would be more precise to stress that it is the two-ness, the bifurcation (or multiplication) of linguistic situations that is the source of the difficulties. A story told by the literary and cultural critic Tzvetan Todorov is of special relevance at this juncture.

A Bulgarian, Todorov writes that he had spent eighteen years studying and working in Paris before making his first return visit to Sophia, Bulgaria. Being fluent in two languages, Bulgarian and French, he found that his bilingual capability had given rise to an increasing sense of malaise and psychological oppression, because switching from one language into the other involved such fundamental reorganization of assumptions, perspectives, relations with the audience and other factors that are intimately embedded in any linguistic context. For Todorov, double linguistic fluency did not, as might have been expected, lead to an expanded sense of social wellbeing in the form of a bridging with people; rather, it intensified his realization that neither of the two languages “was clearly subordinate to the other” (Todorov 1994, p. 212). This internal dialogism, which exerted pressure on every instance of speech, made him feel “split into two halves, one as unreal as the other” (Todorov 1994, p. 211). Mediating between two languages was tantamount to a form of madness or warfare: “It was too much for a sole being like me! One of the two lives would have to oust the other entirely” (Todorov 1994, p. 213). The experience was so painful, he writes, that in order to avoid it (while he was in Sofia), he “sought refuge whenever possible in physical labor, beyond the reach of social contact”: “I cut grass in the garden, trimmed trees, moved earth, somewhat as we do when, ill at ease in unaccustomed circumstances, we are quick to volunteer to peel the potatoes or accept an invitation to a game of table tennis, *happy at least to recover an integrity of the body*” (Todorov 1994, p. 213, my emphasis).

What is salient from Todorov’s riveting autobiographical account is the emphasis he puts on the process of subjectivization involved in the so-called translation zone, the state between languages that, for him, is disorienting to the point of being unbearable. Whereas other theorists may valorize translation as a potentially democratic activity, one that makes way for a boundless polyphony, Todorov accentuates instead the hierarchical

subordination that is necessary for effective dialogue to happen. By eschewing, in an unfashionable manner, the facile endorsement of pluralism that often accompanies neoliberal discussions of translation, Todorov reminds us of the profoundly conflicted place occupied by *the translating subject as an enunciating subject*. “The equality of voices makes me feel the breath of insanity,” he confesses. “Their asymmetry, their hierarchy, on the other hand, is reassuring” (Todorov 1994, p. 213). Most remarkably, he writes that under circumstances when both voices are vying equally for validity, the condition of *not speaking* is preferable because it is like recovering “an integrity of the body.” Linguistic equality, asymmetry, and hierarchy, and most of all what Todorov calls an integrity of the body: these are precisely the stakes pertaining to the phenomenon of Chinglish as well.

On closer examination, most of the Chinglish signs in question fall into two categories. The first is that of *naming*. Restaurant menus may be the most convenient cases in point (“Advantageous Noodle,” “Black Pepper Cowboy Bone,” “Strange Juice” [Radtke 2007, pp. 22, 39, 40]), but other instances of labeling, such as the translated names of public facilities (“Anus Hospital,” “Deformed Man Toilet,” “Cash Recycling Machine” [Radtke 2007, pp. 93, 80, 99]) are also eminently pertinent. The second category is that of *instructions-giving*: “Don’t forget to carry your thing,” “You can enjoy the fresh air after finishing a civilized urinating,” “Take care to fall,” and so forth. In both of these communicative capacities, the anonymous signs, while referring to something of an empirical nature, also announce the presence of an authoritative figure: someone in the know is talking to us. As Radtke suggests, this voice characteristic of the Chinglish signs is reminiscent of the schoolmasterly or maternal-sounding tones of the mass education campaigns of the Chinese Cultural Revolution period known for their deployment of propagandist slogans (Radtke 2009, p. 8). This performative linguistic affinity between China’s orthodox socialist and postsocialist regimes may be further clarified with

terms borrowed from psychoanalysis. The omniscient voice giving orders, be they names or other kinds of directions, may be thought of as a “subject supposed to know,” a superego guarding the common spaces shared by everyone. Invisible and intangible except through the commands it issues, this voice evokes a transcendent being, a bossy someone who enjoys summoning forth the unknown (by naming things) and telling people how to conduct themselves in public.

To help crystallize the comical nature of the situation—to zero in on exactly why it is so funny—let me borrow from Alenka Zupančič’s work on comedy (Zupančič 2008). In a boldly imaginative, theoretical stroke, Zupančič traces the genre of the comical to a particular type of movement and transition—indeed, one might say translation—that is constitutive of various forms of Western representation since Christianity: the transition from spirit to flesh. Although the terms spirit and flesh cannot be more familiar, what interests Zupančič is rather the ideological structure that supports, that insists on, the *presumed link* between the two realms, even while, as she suggests, such a link is missing. The locus of this missing link is, accordingly, the site where a certain phenomenology of the spirit—to follow the logic of Zupančič’s reading of Hegel through Lacan—materializes as a clumsy body; the site where, in aesthetic terms, the comical makes its appearance. To use a banal example, the moment a character slips on a banana peel is so funny because it is a moment when the transition from smooth motion to “stupid” physicality is the most palpable. This is how Zupančič theorizes incarnation: literally, as becoming-flesh (that is, when the body slips and falls), but also as the void where the presumed link to a transcendent meaning is corporeally staged and exposed as nonexistent.

Zupančič’s analysis unwittingly sheds light on the issues of authority and physicality that lie at the heart of the Chinglish phenomenon—a phenomenon that includes not only the signs themselves but also their receptions—making way for a possible

engagement with these “Chinese beauties” at a level beyond the more familiar critiques of orientalism and of postcolonial power dynamics. Following her logic, we may venture this proposition: What Chinglish reveals in its low-brow, broken, and often gibberish modes is none other than the fantasy of bringing (two) separate languages into alignment with one another, a fantasy that is fundamental to all acts of translating.

More specifically, the voice we hear in many of these signs is, as mentioned, an authoritative one, signifying the presence of someone in charge, who knows what she is talking about. The need to be bilingual, however, forces this voice to assume the additional role of a translator, in effect making it speak or *ventriloquize itself* in a second voice. From this procedure of voice bifurcation, as in the case of Todorov feeling obliged to negotiate internally between Bulgarian and French, trouble ensues. As this authoritative voice plunges headlong into the split that is self-ventriloquy, the transition from Chinese into English becomes, *de facto*, the proverbial banana peel, on which the translating subject helplessly slips. And once the slip has occurred, the audience would, from sheer curiosity (“What is it that the Chinese actually says?”), want to take a second and harder look at the original message. In being thus subjected to a retroactive, that is, post-translation, “security check,” the original speech is now stripped of its authoritative-seeming status, brought down to the mundane level of a local, cultural oddity.

In his endeavor to preserve Chinglish, Radtke writes that its direct or “in your face” quality, which often shocks foreigners, is what exposes the latter’s assumptions. “Chinglish is very often funny because of the sometimes scarily direct nature of *the new meaning produced by the translation*. A ‘deformed man toilet’ in Shanghai or an ‘anus hospital’ in Beijing is funny because it instantly destroys linguistic euphemisms we Westerners have carefully built up when talking about sensitive topics. Chinglish annihilates these conventions right away. Chinglish is right in

your face” (Radtke 2007, p. 7, my emphasis). While in agreement with Radtke, I would hasten to add that this scary directness is less an essential quality of “the Chinese mind” as such than a new product—one might say a new body—that *materializes in the very process of translation*, when Chinese expressions try to be born again as English (and also conversely, when English expressions try to be born again as Chinese). Directness is another way of describing the literalism of the translations, in which the bulk of the effort seems to have been spent on making the English match the Chinese word for word, as though to close the gap between the two languages.

To that extent, is not the enunciating subject who attempts to close the gap—the translator who blithely and determinedly goes about her business as though the gap *can* indeed be closed (that is, without the aid of all kinds of complicated linguistic maneuvers, suppressions, exchanges, concealments, and inventions)—the comic character *par excellence*? What makes the Chinglish signs so funny, we may now say, is not simply a matter of poor English on the part of Chinese natives. Rather, it is the glimpse the signs offer of an impossible but ever-generative kind of labor—of translation as a form of suturing, soldering, and synthesizing, even where languages are, as Todorov writes, “uncombinable.” Chinglish functions in this manner as a kind of theater in which an upright persona, speaking in a tone that is supposedly in command of the situation, keeps slipping and falling on something like a banana peel. Between the dignified pose of the subject supposed to know (the translator who knows how to move and transition easefully into proper English) and its corporealization in the crazy figure delivering heterologies stranded awkwardly between English and Chinese, an abyss looms, reminding us of the inexorable bungling that lurks in all acts of bi- or plurilingualism. To that unbridgeable gap that Todorov in a more anguished state of mind equates with schizophrenia, Chinglish has provided a controversially animated form.

As the task of the translator is recognized as inextricable from translanguaging, do not some of the Chinglish signs begin to sound like metacommentary of the most prescient kind? “Forbid to cross,” “Take care to fall!”

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