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The Hard Life of a Translator

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Мямлить: to mumble, hem and haw

Ah, Friday! You can finally get some sleep tonight after the wild midweek celebration at the office. You all partied with your staff on Tuesday, right? (Pause. A sea of blank faces.) Tuesday was International Translation Day, so of course you recognized the indispensable talents, skills and hard work of your translators and interpreters. Right?

Here are five good reasons you should have:

1. Your translators keep your corporate materials from ending up in compilations of the funniest translation errors from around the globe. For example, there is the world-famous Squirrel Institute (Институт белка — Institute for the Study of Proteins; белок = protein; белка = squirrel). Or those wacky hotels where guests beg the staff: Please Remove My Number! Or: Please Clean Up My Number (просьба убрать номер — please clean my room; номер = hotel room). Not to mention the predictable menu offering of language in a test

(язык в тесте = tongue fritters). Or the odd, but touching, expressions of concern for Russian-speaking guests: Напряжённо ожидайте ступеньку ("Caution! Stairs!" translated as "Stressfully Expect a Little Step").

2. Your translators are used to the fact that everyone in the world, from the lowliest Ph.D. candidate to the president of the universe, will write or edit speeches until about 14 hours before they are going to present them, at which point they will e-mail them to the translator, who will stay up all night to do it only to get a batch of edits at 6 a.m. If translators were French airline workers, we'd be on strike every single day of the year.

3. Your translators know more than translation. As your company expands from importing computers to real estate development and mineral prospecting, they fill their bookshelves with specialized technical dictionaries and their hard drives with PDFs on aluminum production and land-use contract templates. And when you decide to invest in that medical center, overnight they will know the difference between a nurse (медсестра, медбрат) and nurse practitioner (фельдшер) — even if you don't.

4. Your translators are Leo Tolstoy and Evelyn Waugh reincarnated. They take your poorly written, confusing, ambiguous, jargon-filled texts and transform them into clear, elegant, logical prose. "We're going to disambiguate and unpack our company roadmap to be able to reach out to our whole team" comes out as "Мы разъясним и детально объясним все аспекты нашего плана развития всем нашим сотрудникам." (We will clarify and explain in detail all aspects of our development plan to all our employees.) Make sure they are happy so that they don't apply their literary talents to a barely fictionalized exposé of your firm.

5. Over the years, your interpreters have learned to read your mind, if not your lips. There you stand, mumbling and bumbling (мямлить) through the question-and-answer period after your presentation. Ну да, в общем, конечно, были, так сказать, отклонения от как бы желаемых гммм результатов (Well sure, in general of course there were, um, some kinda, ah, deviations from what you'd call the, uh, best results) becomes: "There were a few expected shortfalls in our production schedule." This happens at the highest levels. If there were justice in this world, Mikhail Gorbachev's interpreter Pavel Palazhchenko would have shared the Nobel Prize with him.

So if you haven't already done so, thank your translators and interpreters for all their hard work. Or better yet: Give them a raise!

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