





Lost and Found in Translation

Life in a Second Language

RACHEL DEWOSKIN

THE SUMMER I WAS EIGHTEEN, I moved to Taiwan with the idea that I would learn Chinese while I taught English as a Second Language to Taiwanese children. Learning Chinese would be easy, I thought, since I had the advantage of having grown up with a Sinologist father who spoke Chinese himself and took us on journeys across internal China every summer. My brothers and I would have preferred summer camp, hot dogs, ice cubes, and fourths of July. Instead, to our dismay, we got 105-degree weather; teams of Chinese archaeologists unearthing ancient Chinese instruments; banquets of sea slugs; and cruises down the Yangtze River. But now, I thought, came the silver lining. I had heard the sounds of Chinese my whole life—our house in Michigan was always full of visiting scholars and artists from China. Learning Chinese? How hard could it be? And teaching English? I knew it like I knew my own name. My students would pick it up in no time. Soon we'd all be communicating effortlessly.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who's ever tried to learn or teach Chinese, English, or any second language, that this idea was preposterous. Within moments

of my arrival in Taiwan to embark upon my “formal study,” I began to feel about Chinese the way my ESL students would later say they felt about English: that either the rules were totally random and idiomatic and designed to trick foreign speakers like me—or that I was tone deaf and talent-less. I realized in the Taipei airport that I knew nothing past “hello,” “good-bye,” and the lyrics to “Are You Sleeping” in Chinese (“Two tigers, two tigers, run very fast, run very fast. One has no eyes; one has no tail. How weird, how weird”). How weird, indeed.

I had planned to spend eight weeks in Taipei, and then return to the US triumphant and bilingual. But I could not find a cab driver who understood the address of the tiny, boiling kiln of a room I had rented. I could not find the street it was on, or any building it was near, let alone the room itself. I rode around most of that first night, staring at signs that were so utterly meaningless to me that I couldn't have said whether I'd passed each once or a thousand times. When the cabbie finally found my place, in an impenetrable complex off of Roosevelt Road, I thought I might die of confusion and culture shock. I couldn't speak, couldn't hear, couldn't read, and the result was that I began forgetting who I was. The next day, I met both my teachers and my students.

I learned something that summer in Taiwan, but it wasn't Chinese.

After two weeks in Taipei, I'd worked out the kinks in my logistical life well enough to take three consecutive buses every afternoon to a nouveau-riche neighborhood

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Paul untangles umpteen almost purple aardvarks, even though quixotic mats

where I taught English. After spending my mornings as a student, I changed clothes in a proverbial phone booth and flew into those afternoons of being a teacher. The transformation wasn't just from the cinder-block classroom at the university to the gilded living room of a student's family, but also from one Rachel to another: the shivering victim in Chinese to the all-knowing perpetrator in English.

My students that summer were eleven-year-olds and there were three of them, Tiffany, Jeff, and Martin. The class was audited by their mothers, who watched the lessons like police to make sure there was no goofing off, no wasted second, no chance of their children falling behind in the grinding race to learn English. My third week there, I asked Tiffany, Jeff, and Martin to write English-language poems that rhymed, even though their moms intimated to me gently that they found the lesson frivolous. We read Shel Silverstein's "Hungry Mungry" for inspiration, and then met one suffocating Thursday afternoon in June. Martin volunteered to read his poem first. The moms, Tiffany, Jeff, and I listened politely.

"It's called 'The Stupid Jeff'," Martin said. I resisted looking at anyone's mom and tried not to laugh.

Martin read his poem: *The stupid Jeff are having cough / he cutting medicine into half. / The stupid Jeff are playing golf / He hitting ball up onto roof. / The stupid Jeff are playing in fall. / He eat the leaf and then he barf.*

I was staggered by the poem. How had he come up with those rhymes? What were the chances that a native speaker/reader of English could have heard in the words cough, half, golf, roof, leaf, and barf such a specific and fantastic music? And what about the inimitable gerunds, "are having" and "he cutting"? Could his utterly unique metrical success could have been duplicated in a poem with normal idiomatic phrasing or grammar?

I practically leapt to my feet and cheered. But in

spite of my knowledge that it was probably the most original poem I'd ever heard (and the fact that I would commit it to memory immediately, recite it literally hundreds of times and still be thinking and writing about it eighteen years later), I was worried that Jeff would find it insulting.

This possibility was more daunting than I can express, even now. Because I suffered the nuance paralysis common to foreigners and non-native speakers everywhere, I didn't know if I could even recognize a social gaffe, let alone mediate one. What if "stupid" were the most hideous word in the world to Taiwanese children or their moms? What if "cough" and "barf" were offensive in some way I couldn't guess at? Was there some way in

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which I should know to respond? I glanced around the living room: chandelier, glass table, crystal animal figurines, enormous maroon-and-yellow couch with plastic cushion covers and metal feet. Everyone was watching me. I waited, hoping someone else would respond before I had to. Because even when I spoke English with my students, I wasn't capable of making the points I hoped to make. What would I do in such a sensitive situation? I wondered who had taught them the word "stupid." Maybe their mothers would think I had used it in a lesson when their backs were

turned. I didn't know whether to pretend nothing had happened, address the insult directly, or laugh about it. In an American classroom, I would have had sure footing around these matters of manners and grammar. Learning languages is, in large part, about deciphering when to be lugubriously courteous and when to be brutally frank. Unsure, I kept waiting.

As soon as Jeff saw that I wasn't going to take the mic, he leapt to his feet clapping. "I will write new poem!" he shouted, "and it will called 'Dear, Stupid Martin!' Like a letter to that Stupid Martin!"

Tiffany and Martin appeared to love this idea as

much as I did. I wondered if Martin had written his poem in an American classroom, what the hypothetical American Jeff would have thought. Maybe he, too, would have been overjoyed. Even the boys' mothers appeared pleased. I was struck by what now seems like an obvious fact: learning another language is actually about understanding what your listeners want to hear and how they want to hear it. The recipe for that involves not only grammar and energy, but also deep consideration of how people who come from other places speak to, listen to, and hear—both each other and you.

The same week that Martin wrote "The Stupid Jeff," I took a quiz in my own language class. I was studying Chinese vocabulary about family. Who are the members of your family, my teachers asked. And I scribbled my characters: mama, dada, brother, sister. I had what I now recognize as a common Chinese-dictation-out-of-body experience, one of being born again, re-learning every culture's first words. Was I really here, in my own body and mind, writing "mama"? Who was I? At the time I had no idea, and that feeling, the wobbly search for self that happens when you're lost learning a language, is the very definition of culture shock.

I sensed the truth, which was that I was now morphing into the Chinese-speaking version of myself. And that that Rachel was only peripherally related to the English-teaching one, and embarrassingly limited, silly, slightly lobotomized. I wanted desperately to improve her.

Whenever anyone studies a new language, she forms a new self, sometimes not even from the new language itself, but simply from the space in between what she means to say and what she's said. Every time I think something first in English and then have to translate it in order to say it in Chinese, a chemical change happens in the atmosphere; by the time I speak whatever my first thought is, it has, in its transition from one language to the other, become a different thought. And I've become a different thinker. A different person. Does this mean I

only know one, tiny version of each of my students? Who are they in their own languages?

Even when I was finally somewhat fluent in Chinese, almost a decade after that million degree summer in Taiwan, the two Rachels—one always a teacher of English and the other a student of Chinese—never merged. They were always two separate people, even after I stopped translating. Even after I began dreaming in Chinese, living in Chinese, I was, in those conversations, moments, and dreams, my Chinese self. My jokes were different; my sense of humor was different. My

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thoughts and ways of thinking them were different from what they might have been in English. So it must be for the now dozens of non-native speakers I've taught English over the last eighteen years. There are whole people and histories and languages in each of them that I—and anyone else who converses with them only in the new, studied language—will never meet.

One piece of good news about this, let's call it the two-you's distinction, is that it allows me, whenever anyone in China greets me by saying, "Hi! You look fatter today!" to clasp my hands in a gesture of gratitude and say, "Thank you! You look prosperous, too!" This happens daily, by the way. Because when the Chinese version of me hears the word "pang," which means but is not a translation of "fat," I know to feel flattered, healthy, celebrated, beloved. If the English-speaking Rachel heard it in English, I'd be less delighted.

Life in second languages can be full of neck-breaking stumbling blocks. My Chinese language teachers spent hours drilling into me the differences between my way of saying "ma" and their way of saying "ma," indecipherable to me but to them as different and meaningful

as the differences between say, beach and bitch. But I had a moment of unparalleled empathy on the day when Jeff, of Martin's "Stupid Jeff" poem, greeted me at the door, and asked, "Do you like penis?"

While I considered possible responses to this, his mother appeared behind him with a glass dish of honey-roasted peanuts. "Love them," I said, "Thank you."

I have always believed, once in a youthful and optimistic way and now (after spending my twenties in

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China) in what I think is a vaguely more nuanced way, that as cultures are contained in their languages, so our personalities and identities are contained in our native languages. Maybe it's odd, then, that we are revealed most precisely in the moments we spend moving from one culture or language to another. I now live most of the time not only between New York City and Beijing, but also between the two Rachels, in a kind of Chinglish netherland. I like it there, feel at home.

My Chinese friend Shanying, who also occupies that space, once described to me, in English, her ex-boyfriend. He had returned from several years abroad, and she was disappointed. The reality was no match for the dream version she had conjured during his absence.

"Now," she warned me right before he and I met, "he is a successful career and a failed personality."

There is no combination of words she could have used that would have made clearer the point she was trying to make. I knew exactly what she meant, as if her thought had originated in my mind, not in spite but precisely because it was in Chinglish, an efficient hybrid of English and Chinese, one that imports the most expressive components of each language into the other. Shanying's English, like her Chinglish, was new. She, like Martin, had no access to cliché, and so the ways she placed words together in English were entirely original. This made our conversations sharper and more vivid than any I've ever had with a native speaker of English. She and I agreed in the early days of our friendship that nei-

ther of us would correct the other unless she had horribly embarrassed herself and was at risk of doing it again (as when I once made a tonal mistake and used the word "castrate" in place of "strict" or when she said "beat you off," instead of "beat you up" during a client meeting). She liked my flawed, often absurd Chinese as much as I dug her English. The mixed languages became a kind of symbol for our mixed feelings and selves, as joyfully complicated and full of contradictions as we are. As the great and whimsical Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi once said, "Language is like a fish net. Once the fish are caught, you can throw the net away. Once the idea is caught, you can throw the words away."

Last semester, doing a T&W poetry residency at a hard-scrabble New York City public high school in the South Bronx, I taught a class of ESL students one of my all-time favorite poems, a 21-line masterpiece by Robert Pinsky called "Samurai Song." I always teach this poem to high-schoolers, because it's soulful and macho and so brilliantly cool that it allows even the toughest kids to admit they like it. The poem is about self-sufficiency, loneliness, mastery of one's own world. It begins, *When I had no roof / I made audacity my roof. / When I had no supper / my eyes dined. When I had no eyes, I thought / When I had no thought, I waited. When I had no father I made Care my father. When I had / No mother I embraced order.*

After we unwrapped the basic meanings of the toughest words—audacity, supper, and dined—my students read the poem out loud, over and over, until they could hear the sounds of it, and then they told me what it was about.

"He's homeless," one fourteen-year-old girl said, "because he has no roof." Another said, "when he didn't have a father, he said that he is the father of his own family. And because he is always by himself, he is embraced by himself. And he prays by himself."

Then they wrote their own "When I had no" poems, the things they lacked were fathers, money, freedom. What they had were their hometowns and native languages. And what they made for themselves included gangs, problems, routines, languages: *When freedom finds me*, one student wrote, *I'm back at home, doing homework*,

/ Eating arroz con abichuela y pollo, / Finishing my chores, feeling loyal.

A lively fourteen-year-old from Ghana named Martha wrote a poem in response to “Samurai Song” that reminded me of “The Stupid Jeff,” by its sheer force of ESL originality and brilliance. Her poem, about what she had, she called “The Hot Day.” It went like this: *My friends and I went to a hot party / My hot breath was running away from my heart. / My hot dress was fly. / The flies were around my feet. / My friends ran away from my hot breath. / The hot boys were looking hot. / The hot boys were fronting around me because they liked my hot body. / They surrounded around me and they said, “Hi, sexy Mama.” / I opened my mouth and my hot breath hit them. / And they said, “Damn, Mama, you have a hot breath. / Hot breath.*

What would that poem be if it didn’t have in it the unique rhythm of Martha’s brand of English? Who, in the sanded-down, beach-glass English that results from a lifetime of speaking and hearing its regular idioms, would think to use the two syllables “hot” and “breath” to turn a piece of writing into something so onomatopoeic, hot, and breathy? Native English, even when used by poets and orators, has a smoothness that is precisely the opposite of what I love in ESL poems.

Once, when I was teaching Dostoevsky’s novel *Poor Folk*, an undergraduate student asked me, of the protagonists Varvara and Devuskin, “Why can’t we just call them Kate and Bob?”

He meant for the purposes of our class discussion, wouldn’t it have been easier for everyone if he didn’t have to butcher Russian names every time he wanted to utter a comment about the book. I said absolutely not, of course. But it was a good, if blasphemous, question about translation. Why can’t we move the unfamiliar, hard-to-pronounce things into our own safe consonants and vowels? Maybe because keeping the strangeness in what’s unfamiliar to us is the same as keeping its truth. Just like finding the strange self each of us can discover in

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between our language and an unfamiliar one we try to learn. Words we read, write, or speak in somewhat-known languages exist in an important in-between, somewhere after the speaker and before the listener, never reaching the exact destination for which they were designed. In our studied lan-

guages, we don’t speak or hear precisely the message we’re meant to and so sometimes the weird words deliver both more and less.

Like all found treasures, words lost and found in translation create their own conversation—a third language all its own. And that is the language the world speaks as it gets smaller and we can become slightly more global versions of ourselves, and come closer together. ☺