OF VISA FOR THE MIND

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We've all heard the story, possibly apocryphal, about the computer program for language translation which renders "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" into Russian and then back to English as "The whisky is fine but the meat has gone bad." I wondered just how likely it was that such a humorous result would occur and, more importantly, just how useful is such a program for meaningful translation? Using the Lernout & Hauspie Simply Translating program which translates English to French, German, Italian, Portuguese or Spanish and from those languages back to English, I picked six common aphorisms to test, converting each first to the foreign language and then back to English:

A stitch in time saves nine

A rolling stone gathers no moss

Many hands make light work

Out of sight, out of mind

Absence makes the heart grown fonder

Too many cooks spoil the broth
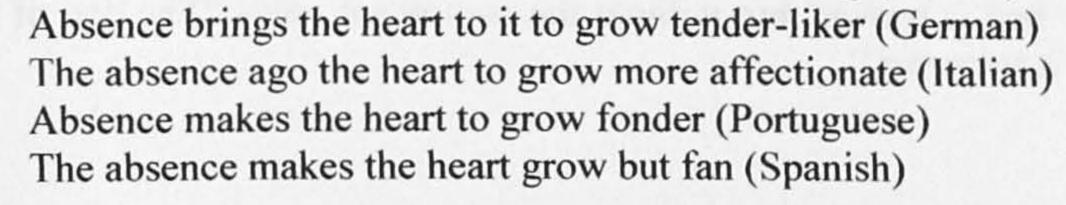
The results were:

A point in the time of it safe nine (French)
A sting in time protects nine (German)
A point in duration salute nine (Italian)
A point saves nine on time (Portuguese)
A stitch saves nine on time (Spanish)

A rolling stone doesn't collect a moss (French)
A rolling stone collects no moss (German)
A rolling stone doesn't gather musk (Italian)
A rolling stone doesn't join any moss (Portuguese)
A gathers of the rolling stone any moss (Spanish)

A lot of hands make light work (French)
Many hands do easy work (German)
A lot of hands do light job (Italian)
A lot of hands make clear work (Portuguese)
Many fashion of the hands the slight work (Spanish)

Out of view out of mind (French)
From sight from mind (German)
Out of sight out of mind (Italian)
Far away from the view out of mind (Portuguese)
Outside of view outside of mind (Spanish)

The absence makes the heart become more loving (French)
Absence brings the heart to it to grow tender-liker (German)
The absence ago the heart to grow more affectionate (Italian)
Absence makes the heart to grow fonder (Portuguese)
The absence makes the heart grow but fan (Spanish)

> Too many cooks spoil the soup (French)
> Also the broth spoil much cook (German)
> Also many cooks spoil the broth (Italian)
> Many cooks deteriorate the broth (Portuguese)
> Too many spoil of the cooks the broth (Spanish)

Most of these double translations bear a zany resemblance to the original, but I learned a few things in the process. It is important to use accents in going from the foreign language back to English. For example, in Spanish "más aficionado" means "fonder" but without the accent on "mas" the translation becomes "but fan." In Italian "muschio" means both "musk" and "moss." For some obscure reason the program chose to translate it consistently as "musk" although surely "moss" is a more common word. German and Italian seemed unable to distinguish "too" as an intensifier of "many" from "too" as an adverb.

I decided it would be interesting to see how the phrases came out if they were sequentially translated through all five languages. Unfortunately, the program will not translate from one foreign language to another, so in every case I had to return the phrase to English before moving to the next language. Cycling French-German-Italian-Portuguese-Spanish, the phrases became:

> A point in the duration of the his/her certainly nine
> A rolling stone doesn't choose the musk
> Many hands make the easy work
> Of visa for the mind
> The absence brings to be but affectionate the heart for the one
> Also the pillages the broth a lot of cook.

The phrase "Many hands make light work" preserves its sense best through all these permutations, although I wondered why none of the translations read "Many hands make lamp turn on." The probable reason is that it is a simple declarative sentence, not subject to misinterpretation. I tried the same permutation with "I have a brown dog" and in every case the foreign phrase translated back to exactly that phrase in English.

If one experiments with a more complicated phrase with a dependent clause, the program has more difficulty. I tried "The dog which lies on my bed is brown." Interestingly, German was the only language which punctuated the phrase, inserting commas after "dog" and "bed." With the commas, the phrase translates back "The dog, who lays down on my bed, is brown" but without the commas the phrase translates back "The dog that of itself on my bed puts down is brown." But whoever designed the German program doesn't know the difference between "lie" and "lay"!

Another anomaly came to light. The Spanish "El perro que queda en mi cama es castaño" translates to "The dog that is in my bed is brown." Asking for the translation of "The dog that lies on my bed is brown," you get the same Spanish phrase. Yet if you ask for the translation for English to Spanish of "The dog that is in my bed is brown" you get "El perro que esta queda en mi cama es castaño." In other words, the program is not consistent.

And what was the end result of taking the phrase "The dog which lies on my bed is brown" through all its permutations? Preserving the commas from the German, it becomes "The dog which puts inside under my bed is brown" but without the commas it reads "The dog of that in my bed allows to fall inside it is brown."

Mike Keith has called my attention to Carl Tashian's website at www.tashian.com/multibabel. Using Systran software, he has created a program that will successively take you through the five languages without having to re-enter the translations each time. I tried the six aphorisms on this program with the following end results which are much further from the original than those obtained using Simply Translating:

> An end in protection nine of the time
> A crock of the source does not gather some is some spuma
> With the hands it has the end much to work luminosity
> Of the Vista of the external alcohol for the part
> The absence sae of the most affectionate heart to be developed
> Too much many cooks damage the bubble

Tashian cautions that "Sometimes it's fast, sometimes it's slow. Sometimes it doesn't work at all." That is quite true. Oftentimes the translation will stop midway through the process. Other times it will say "unable to translate" and yet do so when asked again. More confusing is the fact that entering the same English phrase at the start may give a different translation after it has been through the five languages a second time, and when it finds a word that it is unable to translate into English, it will simply carry the foreign word through the successive steps as in the case of spuma, above.

It is clear that Tashian's program has a different vocabulary than Simply Translating and possibly different rules of grammar. "Many hands make light work" translated into French and back to English becomes "Much with hands does the work light" (Tashian) and "A lot of hands make light work" (Simply Translating), yet the translation from English to French is essentially the same. It is curious that Tashian's program translates "bouillon" as "bubble" rather than "soup." I can find no justification for this in my Oxford-Hachette French dictionary. Note also that while Simply Translating changes "mousse" (French for "moss") to "musk," by the time it gets to Italian Tashian translates it to "foams."

Tashian's program is fun to use to while away a rainy afternoon, but it is not (nor does it pretend to be) a useful tool for translating. It almost seems as though he has manipulated the vocabulary somehow to produce the most humorous results.

And what happens to the famous "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"? It becomes "The alcohol becomes ausgebritten, but the meat is weak person." Ausgebritten? Tashian translated "laid out" (from the French "disposé") into this word, but then failed to translate it back to English, and carried the word unchanged through the rest of the exercise. In my German dictionary, "ausgebritten" is the past participle of the verb "ausbreiten," meaning "to spread out."