

Translating a Speech with Heart: A Collaborative Experience



By Diane Van Hoof and James R. Morrin

My name is James Morrin, the client in this story. I earn a living by putting my thoughts into spoken and written words—English words. Six months ago, I found myself with the need to put my thoughts into a speech to be given in Flemish, which I am told is a variant of Dutch. The context of this speech was quite different from the writing I normally do because it was for a highly personal, not business, matter. I had the good fortune to employ a professional translator to help me with this project, which proved to be a rich learning experience for us both. We wrote this article, translator and client, to share with readers the obstacles we encountered in the process and the solutions that worked for us.

The Client and His Problem

Having spent most of my working life speaking to judges and juries in American courts, I am familiar with the process of putting my thoughts into speech, which is not the same as writing down thoughts for another person simply to read. There are similarities, but anyone who has read the famous soliloquy in *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 1, 55-87)¹ and then watched Richard Burton² perform it on the stage well understands the difference

between reading and speaking a line. My need for a “translator,” a term I think entails more than its definition allows, arose because of a bit of history in my life and how I decided to address it. Let me provide a bit of background.

My father was an American bomber pilot in World War II whose plane was shot down in 1944 over Duffel, a small town in Belgium about 20 kilometers south of Antwerp. Five of the 10-man crew were killed and the rest were captured and spent the balance of the war in prisoner of war camps. Sixty-five years later, the townspeople decided to build a monument to the men who had flown in that airplane. When I discovered the existence of this monument by pure chance, I considered this to be an act of selfless kindness on the part of the townspeople that deserved a tangible gesture of thanks.

To show my appreciation to the people of Duffel, I decided to present them with a plaque expressing the gratitude of the families of the airmen. To convey my respect properly, I would also deliver a speech in their native tongue. It was at this point I realized I needed a translator. A quick search online told me that the native language of the country is Flemish (Dutch), and another search provided

me with the names of translators who listed the necessary expertise. From the many names that popped up, I chose Ms. Diane Van Hoof. Her offices were near mine in Chicago, and her firm appeared to be independent and not part of a large firm or bureau in which I might become lost.

I worried that the assignment would be a problem because it was not recurrent and would not be a straight translation of English into Flemish, but would involve translating an English speech into Flemish and then helping me deliver that speech without eliciting catcalls from my audience. I recalled painfully an American actor from the 1960s, Bill Dana, who for many years made a handsome living completely butchering English while playing a well-intentioned Mexican-American character, José Jiménez.³ Yes, I had to give a speech in a tongue utterly foreign to me, but I had to do it well. So I was delighted when Diane accepted the assignment, understanding that my needs would differ substantially from those of her typical corporate clients. I knew this was a risk for her and hoped I would not become an embarrassment.

It seemed a pleasant and karmic coincidence that Diane had been born and raised in Lint, Belgium, only ➡

a few kilometers from where my father's airplane had crashed so long ago. I thought this would prove advantageous, since Diane returned to Lint biannually and would thus have an incentive to put in extra effort to avoid the embarrassment of having her American student sound like a Flemish version of José.

Even before I had written the speech, Diane began training my ear to the sound of Dutch, and also to distinguish Dutch from Flemish. She did this by sending me popular songs sung by Flemish and Dutch artists. Although at first I was oblivious to the nuances of the language, as I listened again and again to the recordings Diane had sent, I started picking up on the "sound" of Dutch. I also began hearing the differences between pure Dutch and Flemish, which are significant to a native speaker.

I wrote the speech I wanted to make quickly, and Diane not only translated it on paper, but at my request she also recorded it on a digital file at two speeds: very slow and at a more normal pace. I innocently thought the two recordings would solve all my problems, but soon realized that they did not, because my speech was too long for me to memorize. I would have to read the speech to my audience, which meant I had to master the additional skill of pronouncing aloud written Dutch—with a Flemish accent, of course.

To fast forward, many weeks later I flew to Belgium and gave the speech in Flemish to a crowd of very patriotic and kind people in Duffel at a moving ceremony that included participation by the town's mayor, an honor guard from a remembrance group called Band of Brothers, and by a second honor guard sent from a nearby U.S. Air Force base. Not a single tomato

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was launched in my direction, and even a compliment or two was heard. Diane's parents, who attended the ceremony to keep me on my toes, deemed my delivery and pronunciation "good." I had achieved my goal.

The Client and the Translator

Considerable effort was expended before Jim found himself in front of a live audience in Duffel, Belgium, impressing the crowd with a stellar delivery of his Dutch speech. To the translator who finds herself or himself with an assignment of this nature, we offer the following suggestions and tips.

Shortening the Speech: It is hard to tell a speech-giver that his speech is too lengthy, yet speaking for too long is the bane of most speakers. In this case, Jim's original version of the speech included a lengthy discussion that was used to make an important point; in fact, it was the centerpiece of the speech. Jim had referred to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a movie directed by Steven Spielberg about the Allied invasion of Normandy during WWII. The speech focused on a scene at the end of the film when the last soldier of the platoon is dying in the arms of the young Private Ryan, who earlier in the film had been saved with the help of his platoon. The dying soldier tells Ryan, who will now live to a ripe old age, "Earn it." Jim wanted to emphasize that all of us should never forget that real men and women paid for our freedom with their lives, and all of us

should live a life that makes us worthy of those past sacrifices. But setting up the point took many words. After the first session, I took a risk by suggesting that Jim shorten his speech. Reluctantly, Jim agreed and slashed the length by one-third. Reducing the length of the speech made his job easier, improved his ability to focus on a now-shortened presentation, and ultimately helped ensure that the audience would remain focused.

Emphasis: Jim wanted to know exactly what he was saying at each point in the speech, which he felt would help him put the correct emphasis and emotion into key parts; it was not enough for him simply to ape my recording. I prepared what we called our "parallel translation," in which I provided the Dutch on one line, with the most important words of the corresponding English directly above it. (See Figure 1 on page 27.)

Of course, allowances had to be made for different grammar and syntax, but the parallel translation enabled Jim to glance up from the Dutch text and see, in English, the point he was making to the audience. It was a tool that Jim came to rely on frequently as he worked.

Conversational Effects and Cadence: Jim's ear heard significant differences between my slow version of the speech and the "normal" version. And indeed, when a group of words is strung together into a sentence, a style of pro-

Figure 1: Parallel Translation

(1) I know	however	these men	their life	have given	to freedom	alive to keep	never
Ik weet	echter dat hij	deze mannen die	hun leven	hebben gegeven	om vrijheid	levend te houden,	nooit
(2) forgot	Like many	survivors	war	felt my father	very guilty		
Is vergeten.	Zoals vele	overlevenden van de oorlog	voelde mijn vader	zich erg schuldig			

nunciation evolves that is quite different from the way individual words are spoken and presented in a speech. Therefore, toward the end of the assignment, I made a third recording that we called the “performance” version, because it was read with more emotion and feeling than the normal version. That seems like a lot, yet these three teaching aids were necessary to enable Jim to pronounce words with the right accent *and* allow him to develop the proper cadence that gives any speech its importance and feeling.

Creating a Phonetic Version: The speech was too long for Jim to memorize, so he needed to read it to his audience. First, I taught Jim the Dutch pronunciation of the five vowels—all of which are pronounced differently in English—and of the various diphthongs (ai/ou, ij/ei, and ui). Other sounds that turned out to be challenging were the “sch-” sound at the outset of a word, the pronunciation of open and closed syllables, and the pronunciation of consonants “b,” “d,” and “v” that are pronounced voiced at the beginning of a word and voiceless at the end of a word. Learning all of this in a short period of time can be daunting, but it did not phase Jim because he was determined to get this right. (Full disclosure: Jim had studied German in high school and is fascinated by linguistics. It helped.)

During our first “live” session, Jim’s pronunciation of written Dutch was poor, and though it improved steadily, he did not believe he would

become a good Dutch “reader” soon enough. He laboriously prepared another version of the entire speech written out phonetically, using his own phonetic version of English as his pronunciation base. As we progressed, I noticed that Jim became

brought about the greatest improvement in Jim’s pronunciation and delivery. He made remarkable progress during the first and second sessions. Not only did his pronunciation improve greatly, but he was able to read the speech with the proper

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very dependent on his phonetically transcribed version because he feared that in the pressure of the moment he would fall back to English pronunciation of the Dutch words. He felt more comfortable using the phonetic speech as his “reading” copy. In retrospect, Jim feels he should have redirected all the time spent on his phonetic “crib” sheets into simply learning correct Dutch pronunciation. (I could not agree more.)

Personal Coaching: In a period of four weeks, I met with Jim in three two-hour sessions. Prior to that, Jim spent countless hours listening to the recordings I had prepared and reading the parallel version. During the face-to-face sessions, Jim would read a speech segment and I would listen and take notes, and then review his mistakes with him. These personal sessions

rhythm and emotion. Jim also started to gain insight into Dutch grammar even though we did not discuss grammatical issues to a great extent. For example, he came to realize that the “oo” sound in *oorlog* (war) and *lonend* (rewarding) are both pronounced long because in *oorlog* you have two consecutive o’s, and the “lo-” in *lonend* is an open syllable. Although we never formally discussed open versus closed syllables and how they affect pronunciation, Jim figured this out by listening to the recordings, reading the parallel version, and from our client-translator sessions. For me, it was interesting to see Jim quickly discover some logic in the sometimes bewildering array of Dutch sound patterns and grammatical rules. For example, Jim realized that the letters “ge” in *geredde* (saved), *vergeten* (forgotten), and *jongeman* (young man) are ➡

Working with Clients: Tips for Crafting a Performance

- Give your client a realistic idea of what can be accomplished within the time frame the client has in mind. The client should be informed of any difficulties he or she is likely to encounter and how they can be solved. A client who is fully briefed will be more likely to deal with the hurdles along the way and not be discouraged by the process ahead. In order to make the client more inclined to accept the translator's suggestions, the translator should have a few backup plans in mind. If the client's expectations are unreasonable, say so and provide an alternative and make the necessary adjustments. For instance, if the text is rather long, as was the case with Jim's speech, the translator could suggest a shorter version that does not affect the gist of the text but makes the task at hand more manageable.
- Provide the client with a parallel translation. The client must know exactly what he or she is saying in order to guarantee a heartfelt delivery.
- Provide the client with various mp3 versions recorded at different tempos. Jim delivered his translation in MS Word format and recommended I use Audio MP3 Sound Recorder (only available online at www.MP3-recorder.biz), which worked very well. Jim was able to listen to the recording wherever he could take his iPod.
- I would not recommend that the client create an ersatz phonetic version of the speech. If the client would clearly benefit from a phonetic rendition, the translator should provide one using a standardized phonetic alphabet that both the client and the translator can read.
- Schedule at least three face-to-face meetings. This is the only time the client will receive immediate feedback, which speeds up the learning process dramatically.

all pronounced differently. The more he practiced, that is, listened to his tapes, the more he became adept at recognizing various spelling patterns and the way they were pronounced. (See the box above for a few more quick tips you can use when coaching clients.)

Tongue Twisters: There were about eight Dutch words or phrases that Jim found especially hard to pronounce, such as *ongetwijfeld* (beyond a doubt), *baltorenschutter* (ball turret gunner), and *luchtafweergeschut* (flak). I digitally

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recorded these in an mp3 file. By using these files, Jim could focus on speaking these challenging words that had been giving him problems during practice. They were recorded at a slow speed, meticulously articulated, and also at a

faster, more conversational, speed.

Building Confidence

In reviewing all the tools we created to accomplish the goal, it is difficult to say in retrospect which of them were

unnecessary. Of course, the face-to-face meetings were the most valuable. But even the “parallel translation” became helpful in an unexpected way, when it revealed a point in Jim’s written speech that was capable of several interpretations and which led me down a path unintended by Jim. Initially, Jim had written, “Most people don’t realize this, but more flyers in the 8th Air Force lost their lives than were lost in the United States Marines in all theaters during the war.” I thought “all theaters during the war” referred to European theaters of war, but that was not the case. Jim was referring to all battles the U.S. fought globally during WWII. Because we had the “parallel” document, however, which functioned as a back translation, Jim was able to spot this significant discrepancy and the speech was easily corrected. Above all, the preparation and use of many tools helped Jim feel more confident and deliver a better speech to the audience.

Learning with Enthusiasm

This proved to be a most enjoyable assignment for both of us. For me, it was great to have an enthusiastic client who was highly motivated, curious, and determined to master the Dutch version of his speech, and who was truly interested—and sometimes baffled and amused—by the many intricacies of the Dutch language. Jim also appreciated the teaching tools, and I think it helped him feel more comfortable knowing that he would be able to express his words in a way that would convey his family’s sincere gratitude to the people of Duffel.

Notes

1. The Literature Network, www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/hamlet/9.
2. Richard Burton’s *Hamlet*, directed by John Gielgud and produced by



Above: Memorial to the 1944 bomber crew in Duffel, Belgium.

Right: Wim Bernaerts, president of the Allied Remembrance Group Duffel, holds the commemorative plaque Jim presented.

Photos courtesy of James R. Morrin



Alexander H. Cohen, was the longest running production of William Shakespeare’s play in Broadway history. It was filmed live on Broadway in 1964 and released in theaters. Watch Act 3, Scene 1, with Richard Burton and Linda Marsh at www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsrOXAY1arg.

3. An American comedian, actor, and screenwriter, Bill Dana’s career took a major turn when he began writing stand-up routines for the young comedian Don Adams, including the now well-known

“Would you believe?” jokes popularized by the television series *Get Smart*. From there, he was brought in as a writer for the *Steve Allen Show*, where he created the José Jiménez character for the show’s “Man in the Street” segments. Dana also appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. You can watch Dana’s portrayal of José at www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1MOLzFpqrU&feature=related.

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