TRANSLATING UNTRANSLATABLES (III)

Exactly one year ago, the Lexington team began its linguistics writing journey with an article on the so-called untranslatable words, terms in one language for which there is no single-word counterpart in other languages (or, more often than not, English). They express ideas or emotions that other languages do not identify with a name, although the concepts may not be unfamiliar to speakers of those languages. Readers might remember German fremdschämen - feeling embarrassed for or on behalf of someone who should be ashamed but is not, or litost “a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one’s own misery” in Czech. We now resume our journey and focus on non-European languages by means of five more meaningful and appealing untranslatable words.

The most famous is perhaps tingo, a word Adam Jacot De Boinod liked so much that he included it in the title of his two books on untranslatables: The Meaning of Tingo: And Other Extraordinary Words from Around the World (2006), and Toujours Tingo: More Extraordinary Words to Change the Way We See the World (2010). It comes from Pascuense, the language spoken on the island of Rapa Nui, also known as Easter Island, and designates “the act of taking objects one desires from the house of a friend by gradually borrowing all of them”. Or, in the more straightforward terms of the Diccionario Etimológico Rapanui-Español, making the most of things.

Borrowing from a friend or neighbour until there is nothing left may seem an act of hostility, but on Easter Island it is actually a subtle manifestation of social flattery or homage, at the border between a violation of etiquette and a sign of high praise. This behaviour resembles potlatch, which in the language of the Haida, an indigenous people of the Northwest Coast of North America, means “act of giving that confers social status on the gift-giver”. Admiring someone’s possession so much as to ask for it is considered a supreme compliment, and the donor’s social status is enhanced by the act of giving. To express the hostile side of borrowing behaviour, the Rapa Nui use another interesting word, hakamaroo, for “the act of keeping borrowed objects until the owner has to ask for them back”. This is usually the first in a series of abuses, each more offensive than the last, in what could be described as a passive-aggressive pattern.

If such frictions appear, Arabic provides the perfect remedy: taarradhin or taradi as a root designates a positive solution to a conflict, which favours both sides, an Islamic win-win situation, or a reconciliation in which no one loses face. It differs from the concept which English names compromise, which is reached by making concessions, at the end of a difficult process involving struggle and disagreement. It appears that Arabic does not even have a word for this concept, its closest counterpart being simply the result of negotiation, or a middle solution. In contrast, by taarradhin the dispute is solved without humiliation or grudge, and every stakeholder unmistakably succeeds in the agreement, being satisfied with the solution - in fact, the term actually shares a root with the Arabic word for ‘contentment’. In Yemeni Arabic, taradi literally means ‘happiness’. This happy ending which allows everybody to win seems to be the ideal resolution to any dispute, the type of compromise for which we should always strive.

Researchers have speculated that taradi and English trade are etymologically related. What is clear is that the Islamic law stipulates mutual consent in the sense of taradi as one of the fundamental principles of trade in a Muslim society. According to the Quran, it is an essential component of mutual dealings, which are invalidated by anything that could affect the utterly free consent of the parties. This principle requires that all dealings be “in express, clear and emphatic terms”, and that the parties be fully informed of the transaction: its subject, the nature of business and the expected profit have to be precisely defined.
On the other side of Asia, Japanese shibui describes things that having a simple, subtle, unobtrusive beauty. The concept has seven components: simplicity, implicitly, modesty, silence, naturalness, everydayness, and imperfection. When these features come together, they beget, in the words of Matthew May, “things that exhibit in paradox and all at once the very best of everything and nothing: elegant simplicity, effortless effectiveness, understated excellence, beautiful imperfection”. The word is attested from the 14th century, originally referring to a sour or astringent taste, which remains its primary, literal meaning today. It gradually came to depict things that were beautiful because understated, or because they were exactly what they were meant to be, with no ostentation or elaboration. It is their commonplace appearance which engenders refinement, and an enduring tranquility of effortless quality.

This aesthetic term applies to art, fashion and many other fields, summing the best in Japanese life, the epitome of good taste. The traditional tea ceremony could be described as shibui. Other examples are argued to be found in the crafts, everyday objects made to be used, which are mass-produced and therefore more extemporary and healthy than the fine arts. The beauty of shibui is not attractiveness paraded before the viewer, but rather that beauty which turns the viewer into an artist, leading him/her to distinguish it in an economy of form, between the elegant and the coarse, the spontaneous and the disciplined. Shibui objects are apparently plain, but embody subtle details, such as textures, which balance simplicity and complexity. Due to this balance, they never become dull; on the contrary, their aesthetic value grows in time, as one constantly perceives new meanings and enriched beauty.

Beauty also lies in orenda, an evocative, forceful term surviving from the language of the Huron or Wyandot, an indigenous people of North America. It refers to the power of man’s will to oppose destiny and change his life or the world. When uncontrollable outer forces appear to impose a direction, orenda is the mystical inner force, a spiritual energy one invokes to change fate. The Hurons believed this supernatural, spiritual strength resided in all people and natural objects, in various degrees, and was responsible for human accomplishment. The term, nowadays found in English dictionaries, was brought to public attention in 1902 by J.N.B. Hewitt, a U.S. ethnologist of Iroquoian descent, who coined it from a supposed Huron form of a Mohawk word, in its turn related to the term for ‘song’. According to Hewitt, orenda is the Huron name of the inherent principle or magic power assumed to be the active source or dynamic energy involved in every operation or phenomenon affecting human welfare. This mysterious principle, which could be acquired or increased by occult formulae, was however not conceived as omnipotent, but limited in function and effectiveness. The Orenda is also the title of a 2013 historical novel written by Joseph Boyden, depicting the life of indigenous people in today’s Canada at the beginning of the 17th century. The novel presents the Hurons’ belief in the Orenda, the spirit force that occupies everything in the natural world, evoked “in the healing ceremonies in which poison flies out of the sick like specks of sand; in the faces of deceased relatives lovingly conjured in snow; and in drawings on a cliff wall that provide entry into an ancient world”. Magic manifests in dreams that foretell the future, reveal the past, or merely provide guidance.

Other natives of North America, the Inuit, invented a term that any language needs: iktuarpok. It designates the feeling of anticipation that leads one to go outside to check whether anybody is coming. This comprehensive word reflects the impatience which turns to anxiety when one is waiting for somebody that may or may not arrive, and going outside to see them earlier appears to be a way of making the expected visitors come faster. Waiting for them to signal their presence is impossible, and restlessness can make one go out repeatedly, more and more often, and return in increasing disappointment if they have not arrived. Time appears to become eternity, especially if one realizes that the caller is probably not coming. Does this sound familiar? Next time you experience such yearning, deflect and remember there is a word for it in Inuktut.
Consider the endless fields of snow and the isolation of an Arctic home and you may find a simple explanation for the fact that this concept was summed up in one single word by the Inuit. Nevertheless, *iktsuarpok* perfectly matches the fast-paced lifestyle of warmer, more populous climates as well. In Tokyo, London or Bucharest, one might feel *iktsuarpok* while waiting for a cab, the pizza delivery, a boyfriend, or, in our digital world, when obsessively checking one’s email or looking at the telephone screen every five minutes. The more one thinks about it, the more useful it seems to enrich many of the world’s languages by adopting this untranslatable, yet familiar term.

I.D.

Sources:
http://betterthanenglish.com/
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibui
J. Steckley, Words of the Huron, on http://books.google.ro/
S. Beckerleg, Ethnic Identity and Development: Khat and Social Change in Africa, on http://books.google.ro/
http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=2557548
http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/663/1/fulltext.pdf
http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Talk:tingo