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Missionary Language Mangling

Lynn Henrichsen

Missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a reputation that is celebrated in many ways. In the nineteenth century, for instance, there was a popular song that claimed, "None can preach the gospel like the Mormons do." Here is how it went:

We're going to preach the gospel to all
who want to hear.

A message of salvation unto the meek
we'll bear.

Jehovah has commanded us, and there-
fore we must go.

For none can preach the gospel like the
Mormons do, like the Mormons do.

(Kaufman 1980, 44)

MISSIONARY LANGUAGE LEARNING SUCCESS

In the early days of the Church, Mormon missionaries taught primarily in their native language—English. As years went on, however, the gospel was taken to nations where English was not spoken (for additional details see Henrichsen 1999). Under these circumstances, missionaries began learning foreign languages as part of their missionary duty. This was in fulfillment of modern-day scripture: "For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language" (D&C 90:11).

Speaking of missionaries and their investigators in foreign lands, Joseph Smith proclaimed, "Let the Elders preach to them

in their own tongue, whether it is German, French, Spanish, or Irish, or any other" (Smith 1976, 195).

Later Brigham Young added, "We should be familiar with the various languages, for we wish to send missionaries to the different nations and the islands of the sea. We wish missionaries who may go to France to be able to speak the French language fluently, and those who may go to Germany, Italy, Spain, and so on to all nations, to be familiar with the languages of those nations" (Richards 1974, 8:49).

In this endeavor, missionaries have been marvelously successful. Throughout the world, our missionaries have a reputation for being good language learners, learning to speak the local language fluently.

A few years ago, *U.S. News and World Report* carried an article on Mormon missionaries in Japan. In this article, the author wrote that "Most missionaries become somewhat to very accomplished in their host country's language. . . . Of the Americans I've met in Asia who can operate deftly and successfully in the local language, a disproportionate number have been Mormons" (Fallows 1988).

Perhaps we should update the old missionary song to go like this: "For none can learn a language like the Mormons do, like the Mormons do"

THE DOWNSIDE

This success is not without its downside, however. One problem is the impression many people have that young missionaries

enter the Missionary Training Center (MTC) knowing nothing of their mission language and emerge two months later speaking it with total fluency and 100 percent accuracy. This illusion not only trivializes the difficulty of learning a foreign language but may also lead to impatience with others who are learning languages (such as immigrants who have "been here six months and still can't speak English"), leading to questions like "What's wrong with them? My son went into the MTC and learned his mission language perfectly in just two months!" Another problem with this illusion is that it may lead other language learners to have a poor self-concept as they struggle with the complexities of their new language. After years of study, most still have limited fluency and ask themselves, "Why can't I master this language like the missionaries do? Why do I struggle so hard? What's wrong with me?"

THE REALITY OF MISSIONARY LANGUAGE LEARNING

In most cases, the answer is "Nothing!" The reality is that, despite their great successes, missionaries also struggle with language difficulties.

Many missionaries (myself included) can recount how they left the MTC thinking they had mastered their mission language only to arrive in the field and find that they could not understand the natives and the natives could not understand them. Although they "lived their language" at the MTC and managed to communicate with their companions in a slowed-down, pidginized form of their target language, communicating with natives in a native-like fashion is quite another thing. Once in the field, many can empathize with Mark Twain, who after visiting France said, "In Paris they simply stared when I spoke to them in French. I never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language" (cited in Benderson 1983, 1).

More seriously, research at the MTC has found that after two or three months of intense language study, most missionaries leave with only an elementary level of proficiency in their mission language. On the Foreign Service Institute language proficiency rating scale, they generally score at about the 1+ level (Eric Ott, pers. comm., 20 March 2001). At this level, a missionary "can ask and answer questions on topics very familiar to him; within the scope of his very limited language experience [a new missionary] can understand simple questions and statements, allowing for slowed speech, repetition or paraphrase" (Wilds 1975, 37).

After a humbling, frustrating experience or two, most missionaries quickly realize that they have a lot to learn before they will be able to communicate the way they want to.

Even after two years of using their mission language, most missionaries reach only the 2+ FSI level, "Limited Working Proficiency." They "can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations including introductions and casual conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information; [they] can [also] handle limited work requirements" (Wilds 1975, 37) especially on gospel and Church-related topics. This is not to say, however, that they do not occasionally stumble and miscommunicate—whether they are talking about the gospel or wandering into less familiar territory. These mistakes can be humbling, embarrassing, even frustrating for a dedicated missionary trying to represent the Lord. They can also be humorous—not necessarily at the time they occur, but at least in retrospect.

STORIES OF MISSIONARY LANGUAGE MANGLING

The linguistic errors that missionaries commit may involve a small slip that leads to a big miscommunication, or they

may entail outright language mangling. The examples that follow are true stories that I have collected over the years. Some of these are personal, some come from friends and acquaintances, and others come from the Mormon-Humor listserv (All quotations from this list are given largely as they appeared. I have edited them lightly, mainly for punctuation and spelling).

I would like to warn readers that, although innocuous-sounding to untrained ears, some parts of this paper may be unintentionally offensive to speakers of various languages.

My Own Story: Being "Embarrassed" in Spanish

I'll start with my own story. I had an experience that many Spanish-learning missionaries have had. It happened a couple of nights after I arrived in Mexico. We went to a ward social, and I was trying to speak Spanish with a group of members. I struggled and was humbled by the mistakes I knew I was making left and right. Not knowing the correct Spanish word for "embarrassed" (*avergonzado*), I made my best guess and explained, "Cuando yo hablo español, estoy muy embarazado." Of course, this brought more laughs. I had fallen into the false cognate trap. I thought that *embarazado* meant "embarrassed." Little did I realize (until it was explained to me a little later) that in saying "estoy embarazado" I was saying that I was pregnant.

This is a common mistake, and many returned missionaries have stories similar to mine. On the Mormon-Humor listserv, Heber Ferraz-Leite (17 December 1998) recounts, "It is told that a new sister missionary was called to bear her testimony. She felt embarrassed, because she didn't speak that well yet, so she went up and the first thing she said was 'I'm pregnant, and it's the bishop's fault!'"

Other Stories Involving False Cognates

I recently learned that English-speaking missionaries trying to communicate in Spanish are not the only ones who make false cognate mistakes like this. In Portuguese, the word *embaraçada* has a meaning very close to the English word *embarrassed*. My wife knows of a Brazilian sister who was called to serve as a missionary in Uruguay, where she had to speak in Spanish, a close relative to her native Portuguese, but in some key points quite different. She emerged from a meeting with some of the elders in her area—a meeting in which something funny had happened—and shocked the other sisters by telling them, "Me dejaron embarazada." Of course, the close Portuguese equivalent, "Me dejaram embaraçada," her intended meaning, meant only that she was embarrassed, not pregnant.

In a contribution to the Mormon-Humor listserv, Richard B. "Andy" Anderson (18 December 1998) explains false cognates with a French twist:

The French language, after all, is the very breeding ground (forgive me!) of what linguists call the "faux ami"—"false friend": you're sure you know what it means, because it looks or sounds so much like something you know. . . . My beloved companion's greatest achievement along these lines . . . may have been his attempt to compliment a family upon the attractive apartment into which they had kindly invited us. He said, "Ah, que vous vivez dans la luxure ici!" He *thought* he was saying, "Ah, you live in luxury here!" *La luxure*, however it may seem, does not mean "luxury," but rather "abominable lewdness." The French word for "luxury" is *luxe*. As in "deluxe." We were not invited back.

Mispronunciation

Another category of slips involves mispronunciation. Missionaries have to learn that small differences in a sound or two can lead to big differences in meaning.

Mensaje/Masaje

For instance, you may have heard the story of the two Spanish-learning elders who, when speaking to a woman on a doorstep, said, "Estamos aquí para darle un masaje" (We are here to give you a massage). Of course, they intended to say *mensaje* (message), but they didn't realize their mistake until after she gave them a shocked look and quickly closed the door in their faces.

Muy casado

On the Mormon-Humor listserv, Mike L. Hardy (20 December 1998) shared this story of a similar mistake:

Here's a foreign language funny that happened to me. In Spanish, *Cansado* means "I'm tired," and *Casado* means "I'm married." While in Mexico, someone asked me if I was tired, to which I responded in a very tired voice, "Yes I'm very married."

Makes you wonder what they thought about Mormons and polygamy after that, doesn't it?

Hambre/Hombre

On the same listserv, Steven Leuck contributed this story of confusion and humor resulting from the substitution of an [o] for an [a] sound:

One of my personal favorites was at lunch one day with several Elders and a pair of sisters. One of the sisters was relatively new in the mission and struggling with the language. Her slip up involved the non-interchangeability of the words *hombre* (man) and *hambre* (hunger). As she came into the room full of Elders and the family serving our meal she let out a big sigh and said

rather loudly: "Wow! What hunger I have!!!" Unfortunately for her but to our ample chuckleability factor it came out as "Wow! What a MAN I have!!!" This was funny enough but then we were rolling in the aisle when the young lady serving us didn't miss a beat by exclaiming "Where, where, I want one too!!"

Pecado/Pescado

Thomas Stoddard (17 December 1998) contributed this story to the Mormon-Humor listserv:

The word *pecado* means "sin." The word *pescado* is "fish." Many a time a young elder has stated to a contact or investigator, "We do not believe in original fish."

Ordenar/Ordeñar

Stoddard continues with another funny example:

Or, the two words *ordenar* and *ordeñar* (with a tilde over the *n* such that you say the "ny" sound) . . . *ordenar* means "to order, or ordain," as in confer the priesthood; *ordeñar* means "to milk," as in to milk a cow. Imagine the horror when an investigator learns that "Joseph and Oliver were *milke*d by John the Baptist."

Ånd/And

And now, lest you think that all my stories involve Spanish, here's one about a missionary learning Danish (reported by a sister missionary on the listserv, 22 March 2001):

The Danish word for "spirit" is *ånd*; the word for "duck" (web-footed bird) is *and*. One missionary testified to an investigator that if he prayed about what they had been talking about, that the "holy duck" would manifest the truth unto him!

Lexical Substitution (Similar Sounding Words)

Sometimes errors that missionaries make involve using the wrong word, not just the wrong sound. In fact, the substitution of one word for another is a common mistake. In many cases it is difficult to determine whether these are lexical substitutions or mispronunciations because the two words typically sound similar—especially to the ears of the unsuspecting missionary.

Going Ichigaya/Kichigai

For instance, in the days before the MTC or Language Training Mission (LTM, the forerunner to the MTC), my friend Earl Wyman served in the Northern Far East Mission, which included the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, and he struggled with a new language every time he was transferred. When he was serving in Japan, he found himself one day on a subway in Tokyo headed for the Ichigaya station. He used his elementary Japanese to strike up a conversation with a pleasant Japanese person near him. When that person asked Earl where he was going, Earl replied, "I am going *kichigai*." He didn't even realize his mistake until the pleasant Japanese person stepped back startled that he had substituted the word for "crazy" (*kichigai*) for the name of his station (*ichigaya*).

Hilse/Hest

A sister missionary who served in Denmark (18 December 1998) tells the following stories about the confusion that resulted when she and her companion substituted one similar-sounding word for another in Danish.

Soon after I began my mission in Denmark, my trainer and I went to visit an inactive sister. The sister wasn't home, so we talked to her teenage son for a few minutes before leaving. As we were getting ready to leave I decided to try out a phrase I'd

heard a lot since I'd been in Denmark: *Hilse*, which means "Say hi." I tried to say, *Hilse din mor for os*, which means "Tell your mother hi for us." Instead of saying, *Hilse*, I said, *Hest din mor for os*. The boy gave me a strange look and went into his house. I turned to my trainer and asked why he'd given me such a funny look. She laughed and said I'd just told him to "Horse your mother for us."

Several months later I was a trainer. My trainee wanted to say, "Because of [the] atonement we can receive forgiveness for our sins." Instead of using the word, *Tilgivelse* (forgiveness), she used the word, *Tilladelse* (permission). So what she actually said was, "Because of [the] atonement we can receive permission for our sins." Luckily we were in our room studying and not teaching an investigator when she said that.

Tengo Miedo/Mierda

On the Mormon-Humor listserv, Marc Page (17 December 1998) shared this story:

In Spanish, *miedo* means fear; *mierda* means, well, it's a vulgar term for excrement. A sister missionary was trying to say she was afraid (or in Spanish grammar, she had fear), but it didn't come out that way.

Estornudar/Desnudar

In the same list discussion, Rik Andes (17 December 1998), a Spanish-speaking returned missionary, described a fellow missionary's blooper:

The verb for "to sneeze" in Spanish is *estornudar*, while the verb for "to undress; get naked" is *desnudar*. While trying to explain his allergies to the family he was visiting, he said, "Every time a cat enters the room I get naked."

Rama/Ramera

Rik Andes also reports the following (17 December 1998):

As if that wasn't enough, the word for "branch" is *rama*, and the word for "whore" (as in "whore of all the earth," a well-known phrase from the Book of Mormon) is *ramera*. During a rather interesting discussion about the wide variety of religions in the world, my companion agreed with the man, saying, "You're right, there are a lot of whores in the world."

Paz y gozo/Gas y pozo

A lexical mix-up of a different kind is illustrated in the following story, contributed by Steven Leuck (17 December 1998), who served in the Argentina Rosario mission:

During a lesson one day I was explaining about the happiness and joy that come from being a celestial family. The question I posed from the memorized discussions was: "Brother Brown, how would you feel to know that your family could live in peace (*paz*) and happiness (*gozo*) together forever?" Unfortunately, because I juxtapositioned the first letters of the words "peace" and "happiness" it came out as "Brother Brown, how would you feel to know that your family could live in a pit with gas forever?"

My companion told me later that evening why I was getting such strange stares over that one.

Paloma/Plomo

Steven Leuck (17 December 1998) told another funny story about lexical mix-ups:

I had a companion who accidentally used the word *plomo* (lead, as in heavy metal) when he meant to say *paloma* (dove). His fractured sentence

came out: "and then the Holy Ghost descended upon Jesus like lead."

Johannes der Täufer vs. Johannes der Teufel

In German, according to Mark A. Schindler (18 December 1998), the terms *Johannes der Täufer* and *Johannes der Teufel* sound very similar to someone learning the language, but the former is John the Baptist, and the latter is John the Devil. Big theological difference.

Erdbeben vs. Erebeeren

Schindler continues:

I'm convinced the following is an apocryphal story, but it's too good to let historical accuracy get in the way. The story goes that a junior companion was talking with an investigator about the signs of the times and meant to say, *wenn das große Ende kommt, wird es große Erdbeben überall geben*, which means "when the End [of the world] comes, there'll be big earthquakes everywhere." Of course, what actually came out is *wenn die große Ente kommt, wird es große Erdbeeren überall geben*, which means "when the giant duck comes there'll be big strawberries everywhere," which may not be theologically correct, but appeals more to the palate, you have to admit.

Lexical Substitution (Wild)

Sometimes the substitution of the wrong lexical item can only be explained as the result of a mental process akin to drawing a wild card. The substitute word bears no apparent relationship to the correct word. It's just what popped into the missionary's mind while he or she was searching for the right word in the course of a discussion. The result can be some astounding new Church doctrine.

Two Carrots in the Sacred Grove

When serving in Taiwan, my friend, Earl Wyman struggled to communicate in Chinese (in pre-MTC days). He finally memorized the Joseph Smith story to where he thought he could share it with investigators. He recalls bearing fervent (but unintentional) testimony that in the sacred grove Joseph Smith really did see two *carrots* in a pillar of light. In Chinese the word for “carrot” (*húluóbo*) bears no resemblance to the word for “personages” (*rén*). For some strange reason, however, it was the word that came to his desperate mind at the time.

Incorrect Semantic Domain for a Lexical Item

Occasionally lexical mistakes are not the result of incorrectly substituting one word for another. Rather, they involve choosing the wrong word for the intended meaning. In some cases, these mistakes are not just casual slips but come after careful preparation.

Love vs. Lust After

Such was the case with a mistake made by my friend Earl Wyman. After spending months in Taiwan, he had gained some proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. Of course, he still depended heavily on his bilingual dictionary. As he was preparing to leave Taiwan, he diligently prepared a farewell speech. In it he intended to say, “In my time in China I’ve come to love the Chinese people.” In fact, however, he didn’t get quite the right meaning of *love* from his dictionary. Instead of *ài*, which means “to love” in the pure sense of a mother loving her child, he used *tanqíú*, which means “to lust after.” We can only hope that the members laughed.

Problems at the Syntactic Level

Of course, mistakes that missionaries make are not limited to the sound or word level. Sometimes they involve incorrectly formed phrases or larger

structures. This mistaken formation may be the result of translating word for word from the missionary’s native language. It may also involve the insertion or deletion of a key element in a phrase or sentence.

Dio a luz

Mark Page (17 December 1998) tells a story that illustrates this point:

I had a companion who was trying to say that the Lord brought light to the people in the Americas, but used the phrase *dio a luz*, which literally translates to “give to light” but means “to give birth.” So he ended up saying instead that He gave birth to the people in the Americas.

American English Speakers Miscommunicating in Other Varieties of English

Interestingly, it is not necessary for missionaries to be speaking a foreign language to make embarrassing mistakes, unless you count other varieties of English as foreign languages. For example, in England, apartments are called *flats*, and elevators are called *lifts*.

Stuffed

Rob Herr (17 December 1998) told this story on the Mormon-Humor listserv:

Two sister missionaries, one from the U.S. and the other an Aussie herself, were serving together in Australia. After a large dinner appointment the American sister exclaimed, “I am so stuffed!”

Her Aussie companion was a little shocked at first, knowing that *stuffed* is Aussie slang for being pregnant!

Pants

Another list member (17 December 1998) told a true story that happened to an American elder serving in the UK.

In England, a new missionary complimented a woman who entered the church on the nice looking “pants” she had on because the weather was so bitterly cold. She stared at him to see if she heard right. (*Pants* in Britain refers to undergarments.) He thought she did not hear him, so he repeated it. She promptly slapped him! The poor missionary was quickly educated by his more seasoned companion, and never repeated the mistake!

English Language Teaching Blunders by Missionaries

A final category of missionary language mangling stories involves not language learning but language teaching—particularly, English language teaching. In many missions around the world, young, untrained missionaries set up and teach English classes. In most cases, their only qualification is the fact that they are native speakers of English. Of course, this is hardly sufficient. Thinking, “I speak English natively; therefore, I can teach English to nonnatives” is akin to saying, “I have teeth; therefore, I am a dentist.” Nevertheless, missionaries still set up English classes and provide language lessons that are sometimes humorous.

A Spud in Spain

The story is told of a missionary from Idaho serving in Madrid, Spain. He ended up teaching English classes to a rather sophisticated group of learners—lawyers, doctors, educators, etc. One night he had the idea of teaching a lesson on fruits and vegetables. Using his best teaching methods, he brought in some realia—a sack of fruits and vegetables. His teaching procedure was to pull an item out of the sack, name it, and have the class repeat. The teacher would reach into the sack, pull out a carrot, and say,

“This is a carrot.” Then, the class would repeat, “Carrot. Carrot.” The teacher would grab an apple and say, “This is an apple.” The class would then say in chorus, “Apple. Apple.” The class went reasonably well, until this elder pulled a potato out of the sack and seriously, almost reverently (perhaps he was homesick), modeled, “This is a *spud*.”

CONCLUSION

I began with a popular nineteenth century Mormon folk song, and a language-learning variation on it—“For none can learn a language like the Mormons do.” It may be appropriate for me to end with another popular nineteenth century hymn—one that is no longer in our hymnbook. As early converts to the Church gathered to Zion, many of them had unrealistic expectations and were disappointed with what they found when they finally arrived in Nauvoo or Salt Lake City. To help them understand, Eliza R. Snow penned the words to “Think Not When You Gather to Zion” (Snow and Tullidge 1948). It goes like this:

Think not when you gather to Zion,
Your troubles and trials are through,
That nothing but comfort and pleasure
Are waiting in Zion for you:
No, no, 'tis designed as a furnace,
All substance, all textures to try,
To burn all the “wood, hay, and stubble,”
The gold from the dross purify.

If it's not too irreverent, I would like to conclude by sharing with you my own language-learning version of this song:

Think not when you learn a new language,
Your troubles and trials will be few,
That nothing but communicating
Is what without trouble you'll do.

No, no, languages can be tricky,
 Their fine points will cause you to cry.
 To become proficient will take effort
 And you're bound to mess up by and
 by.

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