

May 1, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 19)

Dear Colleague:

At a Conversation sponsored by the English Department, the subject of bilingualism came up. We concluded that if you speak half a dozen languages, moving effortlessly from one to the other as you do when you are a cabdriver in Central Europe or an UN employee, you have merely acquired a useful tool. Paradoxically, you cannot claim to have acquired much insight into the different cultures until you have become a bit tongue-tied and lost a little of your facility for translation. Think of it this way. Won't it be absurd to think that one national food can be translated, without loss, into another? When you offer someone a hamburger you are clearly saying something different from offering him a pot roast, or perhaps even a wimpy.

Anthony Burgess puts the point across most convincingly with the following example. He purchased a box of Shredded Wheat in Monaco. In English, the box says, "Ready to eat whole wheat breakfast cereal. Simply add cold or hot milk and sugar to taste." In French it says: "Céréale pour le petit déjeuner composée de blé complet, nourrissante et prête à déguster. Il suffit d'ajouter du lait froid ou chaud et du sucre à volonté, et voilà en réserve le plus gros de l'énergie indispensable à une matinée bien remplie." Well, you surely won't think you are eating the same thing! How elegant "prête à déguster" (ready to degust?) is compared with merely "ready to eat." We are, after all, not just animals. What about the German blurb? "Nahrhaftes fertiges Vollweizenfrühstück"...No! no! no! "It is as though that blé complet has turned into knackwurst." (NY Times, June 2, 1982, p. 19).

My favorite word in the French sentence is "voilà." I thought only Hercule Poirot uses it.

Best wishes,

*J. H.*