Dear Brunhild[1],

Thank you for the inspiration and opportunity to address matters of great interest to myself and, I imagine, all professional translators.

Let us begin with your request posted recently on Facebook

Oh. Can I ask a favour of you two? Any ideas on how an expression "Eat Your Noodles" could be mistranslated into Japanese? I need it for a conference paper. Also, I would need it translated back into English since I don't speak Japanese. Please?

I responded in a deliberately obtuse fashion, because I felt that there was something missing from your question, which I was trying to tease out, by teasing you.

We then had a short discussion on the phone which helped me understand, and I have gone on to make some assumptions about what you were asking, which I set out here. After I set them out I will assume that my assumptions are correct and explore the two issues raised by your question, which are "back translation" and "mistranslation".

I assume that what you were asking was an example of an *actual* instance of translation, from English into Japanese, that was defective in some way, and when that defective translation was rendered back into English, would have the effect on a group of people, of whom we know only that they are literate in English, of both amusing them and alerting them to the dangers of "mistranslation".

Failing an actual instance you would also be happy with a phrase that *could plausibly* be mistranslated with the same outcomes I have described above.

This scenario requires that the Source Language (SL) text "O" be translated once into a Target Language (TL), that translation being called : "T1" and that it then be translated again *back* into its original SL, though now that is the TL for the text of T1. Once it has been translated this second time, we will call it "T2". T2 is the "back translation".

The key to this scenario having the desired effect is that O and T2 are different, in ways that amuse and alert.

Further to this, between O and T1 there is a process "P1" that we assume is "translation". Then there is another process that T1 goes through to become T2 which we will call "P2". Here's a picture.
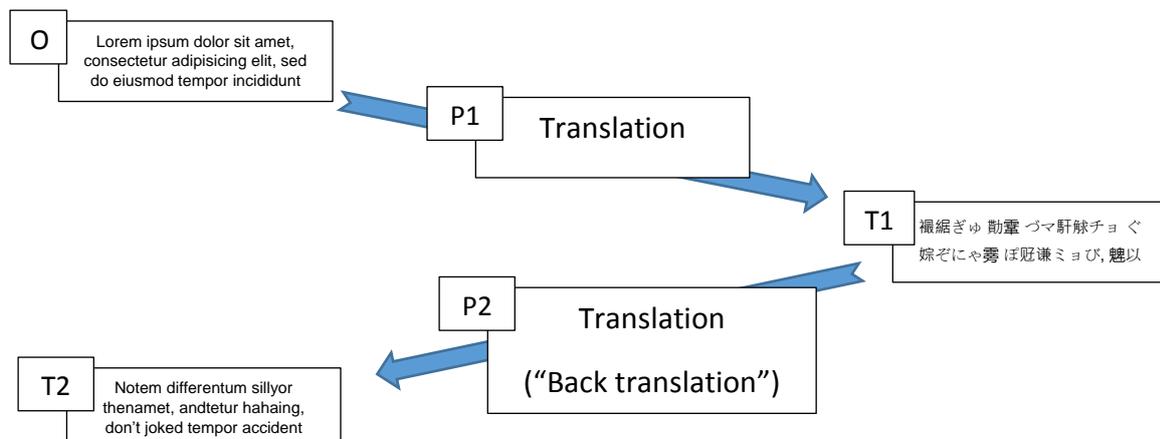
The first thing we need to examine, analysis, then dispense with because it completely ridiculous, is the process "P2" in the diagram above, colloquially known as "back translation".

It is ridiculous to present T2 to an English speaking audience, and invite them to be amused and alerted at the crazy things that you imply *must* have happened at P1, all the while assuming that *none* of these same things have happened at P2.

Why on Earth should we accept that, without some sort of explanation or evidence? Clearly if so many hilarious things can happen at P1, why couldn't or haven't they also happened at P2?

People often produce back translations in expectation of amusement or alarm, and yet they never advise whether, or explain how, P1 and P2 are so different that this expectation is plausible.

In fact there are several possible alternative things that may be happening:

1. P1 might have been perfect and all the mistakes occurred in P2
2. P1 might have been defective, and P2 was also defective, replacing all the mistakes in T1 with new ones (which could have been more or less amusing and alarming than the first ones)
3. P1 might have been defective producing a mistranslation T1, but then P2 might have also been defective with T2 ending up exactly the same as O and no one is the wiser
4. Both P1 and P2 may be fine, T1 and T2 both satisfy criteria such as accuracy and faithfulness, but are different from one another and so the ignorant conclude that something has gone wrong somewhere
5. P1 may have been defective, and T1 obviously and hilariously incorrect to the TL readership, but for reasons which are not visible in T2 to SL readership even given the best efforts at P2

Furthermore there can be a number of scenarios that differ in an important respect:

1. P1 and P2 are owned by the same party; same person or people translating back and forth
2. P1 and P2 may be owned by different parties (i.e. two different translators) and P2 knows that they are back translating and also has access to O
3. P1 and P2 may be owned by different parties and P2 knows that they are back translating but *does not* have access to O
4. P1 and P2 may be owned by different parties and the owner of P2 doesn't even know that they are back-translating

The differences in outcome are very many and very great according to which of the above scenarios applies, but I mention it simply for your consideration; I won't go into that in detail here.

The success with which T2 is presented may be measured by the amount of amusement and alarm expressed by the English speaking audience. But this in itself is problematic.

As we know the understanding of the complexities of language and translation amongst the lay population is patchy and rarely rises above ignorance. What does it mean to have amused and astounded ignorant people with supposed evidence of "mistranslation"? How can we know what they are laughing at or their reasons for concern? They may be laughing at the bit we think is OK and not concerned with the error obvious to us.

For example. The spoken Japanese language has its own set of phonemes. None of them are necessarily perfectly aligned with any of the sounds that a native English speaker habitually makes

with their mouth, but some are so far removed from any of them that it is well known that Japanese people struggle to pronounce some English phonemes (and slightly less known, for cultural imperialistic reasons, that English speakers struggle to pronounce several Japanese sounds). Most of the sounds in English can be crammed into a Japanese mouth but the most famous problem is the inability of Japanese to distinguish between "l" and "r".

Well that is how it is characterised. It is more accurate to say that there are five phonemes in Japanese: ら、り、る、れ and ろ、 which, if transliterated into English (where we have to use two letters) would be "ra", "ri", "ru", "re" and "ro".

This is quite arbitrary though. Using "r"s is the convention, but it could just as well be "d"s or "l"s, because the sound in question really falls between the three.

Another English letter that generally defeats the Japanese is "v", which they generally work around by pronouncing it as a "b". And another one is "a" as in "cat", which they tend to lump together with "u" as in "hut". You need to know all these things for the next story to make sense.

This story illustrates how an amused reaction to a mistranslation by ill-informed people can in itself be misleading. Imagine a maintenance manual for a piece of equipment, translated from Japanese into English, by a Japanese person who feels that they have sufficient familiarity with the spoken language, and who produces the sentence "Replace the bulb if it is faulty".

The piece of equipment does have a bulb. But it also has valves and the correct translation is "Replace the valve if it is faulty". Imagine, that much more costly damage would result if a faulty valve was not replaced than if a faulty bulb was not replaced. The two words are indistinguishable from each other to a Japanese speaker because they are both pronounced (transliterating back into English): "barubu".

Now as a translator that is funny. Such similar things, such a costly piece of equipment at risk and the mistranslation is invisible. But you won't get an audience to actually laugh, or even be interested unless you produce a mistranslation – that relies on exactly the same problem of "l"s and "r"s and "v"s – that is both visible, and funny as English, perhaps because it has a hint of prurience like "I rub you" (instead of "I love you") or Benny Hill's sketch of the Japanese politician being interviewed about how often they have elections in Japan.

So that example is just to show how even a satisfying result (i.e. people being surprised and amused by some linguistic defect) really doesn't tell anyone much about language.

As well as being pointless, back translation is also insidious. It does not only take the carefully set out form I have described above, but rather infests our discourse at the lowest level. It inhabits every unthinking nook and cranny of our speech and pollutes almost every comment we hope to make on translation.

Every time you utter the phrase "…the word for…" you are positing a back translation. You are saying to your SL-only literate audience that there is a TL word that, when back translated, is always T2.

This is absurd. Translators of all people ought to know, and be first to advise, that there is no pair of words, in any two languages, anywhere, ever, that always serve as a replacement for one another. If that is how language worked then you and I would be doing something else for a living because a machine that replaced one word with another with zero errors would have made us redundant years ago.

Indeed it is the translator who must make the final decision on what word, or phrase, or grammatical structure/s, or pragmatic effect must serve as a translation of a given word, or phrase, or grammatical structure/s, or pragmatic effect on each and every occasion, and if they successfully demand payment for these decisions then they are the ultimate authority on that matter. (As I am sure you already know, though not so sure that I won't remind you again, it has been a twenty year long frustration of mine that so few of my colleagues realise that they have this authority!)

It is also absurd from a purely linguistic point of view as no two languages share a precisely equivalent concept of where "word" boundaries actually fall, or whether there are such things as words at all! Japanese and German are both examples of this.

But it goes even deeper. If you say "In French it means…" and then utter an English phrase, you are back translating. You are doing so without providing any evidence whatsoever that any, let alone all, of the problems described above have been solved by you translating it back into English.

Every time you utter the phrase "…what it actually means is…" or "…turns out it really means…" you are suggesting that there is an "actuality" or a "reality" that again somehow has greater authority than the owner of T1, and of which T2 gives you a magically perfect and unimpeded view[2]. Where every confounding problem that confronted the hardworking translator at P1, has been miraculously blown away like dusty cobwebs at P2, enabling everyone and anyone who can read T2 to glide above all languages, all-knowing and pan-literate. Ridiculous.

The number of loose ends and muddlements listed above present an almost insurmountable pile of problems to solve before the entire back-translation program can serve any meaningful purpose. In fact it is not "almost" insurmountable. Back-translation is completely, 100% pointless.

But do not despair. As professional translators we are able (and bear in mind my twenty years of frustration trying to persuade my colleagues that it is a *duty*) to provide what we call "meta-linguistic commentary".

"Meta", a concept abstracted from another, means that when we talk about language, *without* relying on fluency in the specific text or utterance we are talking about to make our point, then we are talking "meta-linguistically". It does require that we use some technical terms, but then translation is a highly technical area. I will show below several ways to do this.

But if you want to reveal to an audience fluent only in the SL, the defects of a translation into a TL, back translation is simply not the answer. In fact it is highly misleading and only deepens the trench of misunderstanding, that lies between translators and everyone else, helping to create a world where translation and translators are completely misunderstood, un-appreciated and therefore to be perennially frustrated in their efforts to obtain a reasonable reward for their expertise.[3]

Back translation simply begs the question of what translation is. So let's look at that. Here's my definition of "translation":

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[2] As repeated in this article:
http://www.foxnews.com/story/2006/05/09/please-remove-my-nonsensical-asian-tattoo/
[3] To see what I mean, have a look at the ramshackle collection of so-called mistranslations at this link:
http://www.ojohaven.com/fun/translation.funnies.html
Clearly many of them have nothing to do with translation at all, but are simply attempts at English by non-English speakers, that involve many poor word choices. Yes they are funny, but there was no O and no T1. Nevertheless they are presented undifferentiated and everyone goes away laughing thinking they've learnt something about "translation". What a joke.

The reproduction in a TL, of the meaning and pragmatic effect of a SL string of words, accurately and faithfully enough that the benefit to the person paying for it, is greater than the cost.

Anything that fails to meet the "accuracy and faithfulness" part of this definition is therefore a mistranslation. So that would mean every possible sentence other than the few that satisfy this criteria. Which was how I was teasing you on Facebook, by saying that there are infinite mistranslations of "eat your noodles".

So trying to define "mistranslation" or even trying to talk about it seems a hopelessly enormous task. There are literally infinite mistranslations of anything. So better to refine your search and only look at actual instances of mistranslation, and even here, there are so many it is challenging. The problem is that there are so many different *types* of mistranslation. So many different *kinds* of thing that can happen. So many different flavours of wrong.

Some are funny, some alarming, sometimes both at the same time. More to the point and strangely overlooked whenever people talk about "mistranslation" are those mistranslation that look perfectly correct in the target language. Surely these are the worst kind of all!

Some say that the English translation of the response of the Japanese Government to the Potsdam Declaration: "We are treating your ultimatum with silent contempt" contributed to the decision to bomb Hiroshima. It was years before someone publicly observed that it could also have been translated as "we are considering it", but did anyone point and laugh at the first version and say "Oh what a funny mistranslation!"? No. They thought that was what they intended to say.

When people talk about mistranslation what they often mean is faulty language production by non-English speakers. They are talking about mistakes in the sentence that are visible to an English reader but which may have had absolutely nothing to do with translation.

This ties in perfectly with the most common and frustrating popular perception of translation amongst the public which is that it is a skill consisting of nothing more than being able to speak two languages, and that judging the quality of translation is simply a matter of judging the quality of the ability to produce sentences, without enquiring at all into whether those sentences are an accurate and faithful reproduction of the original. How many clients have you had describe the work of another translator as pretty good because it "reads quite naturally"?

I have certainly had clients who after initial doubts that I would be able to interpret, seemed to be completely satisfied once they heard me speaking in an obviously foreign language, with absolutely no knowledge of whether what I was saying was intelligible to the target audience, or, and more importantly given the money I intended to demand for it, whether they were accurate and faithful translations of what the client said!

Fluency and literacy in two languages are surely two *prerequisites* to being a translator. But they are only *necessary* condition to be a translator, not *sufficient*. People are generally oblivious to the third and most important prerequisite: the ability to translate between the two. This is clearly the rarest, hardest to acquire, and most valuable skill out of the three, and yet it is chronically overlooked by translators when pleading their value to the market.

When we try to explain mistranslation to the lay person, what we should aim for is to leave them alarmed at the stupendous variety of things that can go wrong in the translation *process* – P1, that leave evidence as both visible *and* invisible mistranslations.

We should leave them realising that there is no one simple fix to preventing them, like get someone "accredited", or insist on a "native speaker". Rather we must make them see that translation is a task that requires all manner of inputs, that are maintained and applied with constant effort and vigilance. If we could get them all to understand that, just imagine how much easier it would be for us to obtain good rates of remuneration for what we do!

Instead, if you just parade before them completely spurious examples of back translated errors, for their humour value, further cementing into place who knows what strange misconceptions they already had, and the only lesson learned being "They used the WRONG PERSON" well we are back where we started from.

So the aim should not be to alert and amuse by showing them T2, on the ludicrous pretext that this is an unimpeded view of T1. We should aim to amuse and alarm by explaining to them what happened at P1. Take the lid off that! Show them how it works, and when it doesn't work explain the results meta linguistically. Here, I'll show you.

Example Number 1

I was sitting in Holden one day and there was a manual supplied with some machines, that had been translated in Japan, and on one of the first pages there was a comment that caught my eye:

"Please refer to the squid"

Unfortunately I did not take a copy or have a phone with a camera but I swear that's what it said. Now how could that have happened?

To get an audience to understand P1 you must educate them, and get them to understand some technical terms. So here goes.

"Transliteration" means to render sounds in a phonetic script. Often we render sounds from one language in the phonetic script of another. Like "Tokyo". We don't translate 東京 because that would be "East Capital". We transliterate 東 as "to" and 京 as "kyo". Sometimes we use macrons over the "o"s to indicate a longer sound, but I don't know how to do that on my keyboard.

In English we have an alphabet, which is only a phonetic script. It is simply a set of symbols that tell the reader what sound to make[i]. But in Japanese they have several sets of symbols for writing. One is "hiragana", and it is a phonetic script. Everything in Japanese can be written in hiragana, but since they also use a couple of thousand ideograms called "kanji" and originally from China, each one with meanings as well as sounds, they are used to this and rely on them, as they are in fact very convenient.

This does however raise the problem of computer keyboards, because obviously you can't have several thousand unique keys. So let me explain how you write on a Japanese keyboard.

First, another level of irony. Modern Japanese people and language uses so much English anyway that it turns out the all Japanese word processors use a qwerty keyboard, because it is quicker and easier to use that to input Japanese, than it is to cognitively switch back and forth between different keyboard layouts every time you come to an English word.

So let's look at the word 「以下」. This is the Japanese expression used to direct a reader to text below. It is pronounced (transliterating into English) "ika". Or, in hiragana 「いか」.

In the table below I show the key strokes (underlined, with the letters already entered not underlined), and what appears with each one on the screen.

Keystroke	Appearing on screen	
<u>i</u>	い	
i<u>k</u>	い k	
ik<u>a</u>	いか	
ika <u>[spacebar]</u>	以下	This is the correct word. It managed to predict the correct one because it would the most often used homonym.
ika <u>[spacebar]</u>		But if you wanted a different word, a different homonym, you hit the space bar again and it offers you all the other words that are pronounced "ika". There's at least eight that MS Word will offer you that are compounds of two kanji. One of them, number 5, is 「烏賊」 Also pronounced "ika" it means "squid".

Now when I said that kanji are convenient, they are up to a point, but this is a very unusual couple of kanji and basically no one in Japan writes 「烏賊」 when they want to refer to the ten-tentacled master of marine disguise! They write 「いか」.

So what we can assume here is that someone has typed into some machine translator, just the hiragana 「いか」 and because it isn't kanji, the translation software cannot be sure which of these eight words it might be, and it has guessed and got it wrong.

There are much more advanced online dictionaries and translators now which would offer several possible target words, like this

And it is unlikely that the person would have chosen "squid" here because it says clearly in kanji what it is. And this website didn't exist ten years ago.

But even now Google translate gives you this
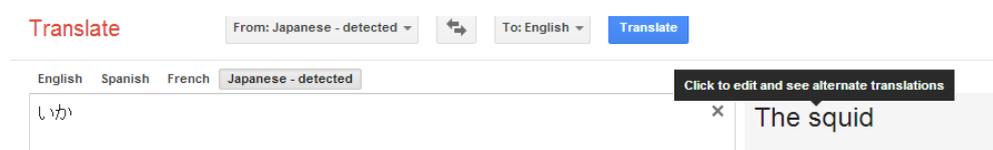
And perhaps the same pocket translator back then did the same. Which is how they came to write, and publish, a manual which asked the reader to "Please refer to the squid".

Example Number 2

At Holden again, some pieces of equipment were being installed, and part of the installation involves "alignment" and "levelling" and to get a piece of machine perfectly aligned and levelled they often have feet with "jacking screws" in them like this:
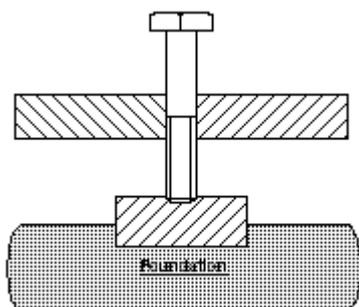
They have one in each corner of the machine and by turning the bolt it will either raise or lower that corner. The Japanese wanted to leave instructions for the Aussie night shift fitters and so they taped a piece of paper with the message "please take jacking screws out".

Luckily I noticed this and saw immediately the problem. This ("take out") was a translation of the Japanese verb 出す ("dasu"). Now to explain this meta linguistically I will show you a screen shot of all the different ways this verb can and should be translated according to the object with which it is collocated.

- **出す**
  - come down with(金を)
  - find out(答えを)
  - give off(光・気体・熱・雰囲気などを)
  - hit it [the ball] out《ゴルフ》
  - let out(声を)
  - make with(飲食物を)
  - put forth(考え・アイデアなどを / 芽・葉などを)
  - put out(金を / 植物が芽・葉などを)
  - put up(記録を)
  - set out(食べ物を)
  - set up(旗・看板を / 酒・食べ物を / 大声・叫び声・悲鳴・ほえ声を)
  - switch on
  - throw off(匂い・煙・熱・光を)
  - throw out《軍事》(斥候を)
  - turn on(栓をひねってガス・水道を)
  - work up(汗を)

  【他動】
  - belch(げっぷを)
  - cover《トランプ》(他の人より高位のカードを)
  - draw(結論や結果などを)
  - emit(声や音を)
  - empty(容器などから中身を)
  - expectorate(咳をして痰などを)
  - fume(煙・蒸気などを)
  - get(解答などを)
  - heave(うめき声などをやっとの思いで)
  - indicate〈英〉(車の方向指示器を)
  - log(航空機や船がある速度を)
  - place(新聞・雑誌などに広告を)
  - play《トランプ》(札を)〔【参考】trick〕
  - pop(ポンという音を)
  - ring(ベルを鳴らすような音を)

That's about the top quarter of the first of over ten pages of examples of how that verb is used. I still come across new ways to use it.

In the film "Ring" (Japanese version) when they are on the island and the storm is coming and they say "there is no way I would take a boat out in this weather" I was surprised to hear the verb 出す。When you take a boat out in English, you are taking it with you. It was surprising to hear them say 出す because in my limited understanding of Japanese I thought that meant the object of the verb moved away from you, or away from a more important thing: emptying your handbag, or putting the cat out or poking your tongue out. But I was wrong.

So this is a very subtle difference between what they intended and what they wrote. In English it sounds (in the context of a bolt) like they wanted the bolts removed from the feet. This is absurd, the bolts were holding up half a million dollars of machine tool.

What they intended was that the bolts be turned so that they gradually extended further below the base of the machine. To be honest this was unlikely to have led to any sort of disaster because the fitters' common sense would tell them that the Japanese couldn't have meant for the bolts to be removed, but still. It is this sort of thing, multiplied over and over that leads to widespread inefficiency and increased risk of mistakes. And it was flawless English.

Examples Number 3, 4, 5 and 6

I became involved in a project to manufacture trucks in Australia and export them to Japan. They were fitted with Caterpillar diesel engines and these are quite sophisticated now with on-board computers that can carry out diagnosis of any engine trouble, and the little display in the cab that tells the driver that something is wrong is called the "Cat Messenger System". Before I turned up they had been translating documents (to support this project worth tens of millions) on the internet. Naturally this expression had been translated into Japanese as 「猫メッセージシステム」。Can you guess? To explain metalinguistically, let's put 「猫」 into Google images:

So that translation software could not recognise proper nouns, or abbreviations, nor was able to see in the context reference to other Caterpillar products.

In the very same document there was reference to the "horn" and sure enough that had been translated as 「角」 (see next page)

Just be absolutely clear, the fact that the word "horn" can refer to both a pointy bit of keratin and bone, *and* the electric warning device under the bonnet of an automobile, is a *specifically English fact*. Failing to appreciate that facts like this do not apply to all languages is typical of the uneducated public.

Google images is incidentally a very good metalinguistic tool. It does not rely on any particular language, but rather is a robust and democratic corpus of usage.

Another very good example of metalinguistic commentary can be found at this link, where the website Snopes deals with the old example of the car called "Nova" marketed in Spanish speaking countries, apparently hilarious because "no va" means "doesn't go". The whole story is rubbish, read on to see why.

http://www.snopes.com/business/misxlate/nova.asp

That same job saw some people in Thailand translate some English into Japanese. Now let me give you an example of alternative three. The context was equipment for trucks and some part was described as being "lightweight". Great. They translated that as 「軽量級」。Now a back-translation of that would be "lightweight". Great! No problem! Must be correct!

No. Apart from being a mistranslation, and completely undetectable when back translated because it is a case of alternative 3, it is also a good illustration of the insidious effects of ignorance. This was translated by someone who was a native speaker of neither English nor Japanese and so was unaware of the other possible senses of "lightweight" in English.

The correct translation was 「軽」。The translation they used 「軽量級」 is a boxing weight class falling between featherweight and welterweight. This mistranslation was caught just before it was displayed in a PowerPoint presentation to over a hundred people, to whom it would obviously have been a hilarious and embarrassing mistranslation. But back translating would not have helped an English speaker understand their amusement at all.

The same translator translated reference to a "jet" in the context of a high-pressure, air-assisted tanker trailer (the "jet" being a nozzle at the outlets of the trailer that speeded up the unloading process). This word however when translated 「戦闘機」 referred to supersonic attack aircraft.

They are not remotely similar words in the TL. The possibility that meanings might not be shared around amongst the same number and locus of words does not occur to someone with very limited understanding of how languages work, and correcting this want of understanding is the ethical obligation most deeply embedded in our work.

This is because our business model consists of innocent people entrusting their interests to us precisely because we have professed to them that we have sufficient knowledge of these matters to take on that responsibility. To fulfil that promise requires, amongst other things, informed instruction from them, without which we are unable to help them. Knowingly accepting payment from people ill-equipped to instruct us, and who we are therefore unable to help, would surely be unethical.

Example Number 7

Now the other day a FB friend of mine (and yours too now!), who studied Russian literature, reported that the title of J. D. Salinger's novel "Catcher in the rye" was translated into Russian as "Над пропастью во ржи". He was all "It actually means 'Above the abyss in the Rye'".

I teased him as well, trying to gain insight into this "actuality" to which he seemed to have exclusive access. It must be some charming motherfucking actuality if it trumps the response of a Russian bookseller when a customer asks for "Над пропастью во ржи", because if they hand over J. D. Salinger's novel about a teenager then as far I have been able to comprehend in my actuality, that is as "correct" as correct can be, and surely as correct as it needs to be!

To be fair, I think his only error is to mistake metalinguistic commentary for back-translation. What he was trying to say was that the (perfectly correct!) Russian translation of the novel's title, happens to include a lexeme which, if entered into Google images for example, will reveal:
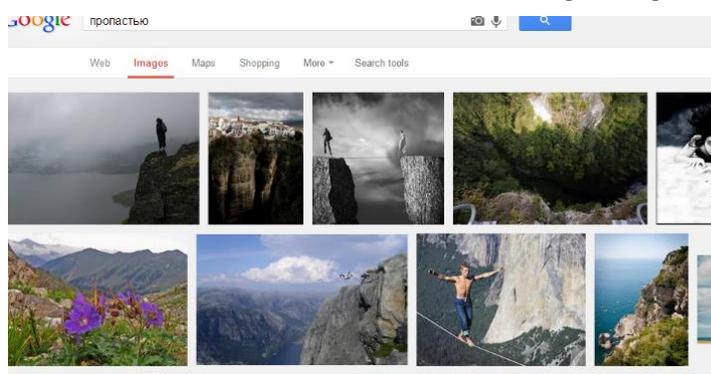
And that is an interesting comment to translators and linguists etc. But to say that the novel's name in Russian is…and then write a phrase in English, is to try and slip in a back-translation, which as we know, by now, is completely ridiculous.

Example Number 8

As a metalinguistic analysis of formal equivalence however it was perfectly legitimate, so let's do some more of those. Here's the sign on the door to the toilet in a favourite soup and hotpot restaurant in Footscray.

This is obvious to any English speaker as a funny mistranslation. It is even easier for me to see what has gone wrong, as Japanese uses thousands of characters originally from China, and which in the majority of cases have retained their original meaning.

Here we see 地 and 滑 . The first is often used to describe the ground, or earth, and the second would often be employed to describe the action of slipping or sliding. I don't speak Chinese and am always amazed at the apparent brevity of their sentences, but we can see what's happened here. They don't want us to slip on the floor, and that must be a Chinese compound that means that, but taken at the lexeme level someone has found "land" and then found "slide" and stuck them together where by complete coincidence they mean something entirely different in English, almost never encountered in Footscray, notwithstanding its reputation as being a dodgy part of town.

Example Number 9

But what about this sentence: "She placed her handbag on the table"? Let's translate that the same way as the person did above: one lexeme at a time. I will focus on "handbag". If we put "hand" into a

machine translator we will get 手 and if we enter "bag" we will get 袋。So the lady placed her 手袋 on the table. This (assuming it was formed into a whole Japanese sentence) is perfectly plausible. 手袋 would most certainly the sort of thing that a lady might place on a table. So let us back-translate into English in the same way: "handbag". All good.

Now let's put 手袋 into Google images.

Oh.

This error is made even more likely because there are no plurals in Japanese, so the necessity to indicate with an "s" that there were two gloves placed on the table (if that had been what we wanted to say), never arises.

An interesting point is that when I first Google imaged that I actually got a mix of handbags and gloves, until I realised that 手袋 is actually how you say "handbag" in Chinese. So I had to refine my search to Japan only to complete this example.

Examples Number 10 and 11

Now I am sure you remember the story of when we were showing our kids Terminator for the first time and we had to pause on this scene below while Jack went to the toilet, and so Josephine and Max and Kester and I are sitting there staring at it waiting for him to come back, Max would have been about five or six, and I said "hands up who thinks they're going to have sex?" and we all put our hands up. Then Max added "but not til I'm a grown up though."

Darling.

It wasn't a mistranslation, but this next one is, and I did it today, and it is almost the same. I was working at Ford and I had three gentlemen from a Japanese company, seriously behind in their work, and they said 「弊社で作業タイミングをもう一度調整しなければならない」 I translated this into English as "Well we need to redo the timing plan for this work" and someone on the Ford side of the table was annoyed at this and said "Well I think that is your responsibility, not ours." He had taken "we" to mean everyone in the room, whereas the Japanese word 「弊社」 unambiguously refers to the company for which the three Japanese worked.

This was an important function of that expression and for the sake of brevity and informality I had stripped that away and caused brief but unnecessary tension in the meeting. (There are many instances where the word 「弊社」 could safely be rendered "we", this was just my poor judgement). It wasn't funny or visible to anyone until the flouting of a pragmatic maxim caused that reaction in the English speaker (no one would have

suggested that it was partly Ford's responsibility), but could be quite serious and has happened before.

Another one that happened once at Ford was there were tense negotiations over the design of some part, and the supplier wanted to change a particular angle, and Ford did not want it changed. The meetings had gone on for a week, and we regrouped one day and the Japanese said 「この角度を変えたいということなんですが」 which I translated as "You know we want to change this angle here" and one of the English speakers said "Yes, we know. Four degrees." And I translated that as 「はい。フォードは賛成します。」 and all the Japanese started smiling and saying "thank you" thinking the problem had been solved.

I'm sure you can work out what had happened. Funny, and factors contributing to the mistranslation were a degree of ellipsis, and that I only heard it rather than read it. In terms of felicity conditions it was perfectly plausible that overnight Ford had decided to go with the change and "agree" so there were no contextual alarm bells going off, as perhaps may have been evident to a Japanese speaker if they had been in the room watching the lady put something on the table.

To go back to the Terminator example, and applying it to your noodles, we can imagine a number of people standing around watching some noodles cooking, and the person with the spoon might say "who thinks they're ready?" It is possible that the people watching might interpret this question as asking whether they felt that they personally are ready to eat, rather than asking whether the noodles are ready to be eaten.

Example Number 12

Here's another one where you really have to ask what degree of contextual information would be necessary to prevent it, and you have probably heard this story before (in fact it may have been you that told it to me). The state government had a brochure listing various community services translated into several languages including a number of languages from the Horn of Africa, such as Somali, Oromo etc., and the "Suicide Help Line" had been translated in such a way that led the reader to believe that you could ring this number and someone would help you kill yourself.

So we've seen twelve examples of "mistranslation" which I hope begin to give a taste of how all the different things required for translation to work, and so therefore the many different opportunities for things to go wrong, and consequently the difficulty of bundling up all mistranslations into the one concept.

Whenever the topic of quality in translation arises, let's try to actively tear down all the misconceptions in which people popularly drape defective sentences in order to call them "mistranslations", and go after the big game.

Let's sweep aside the funny, identify and disregard poor language production, go beyond the visible. We need to show how poor quality in translation is wasteful and can have serious consequences

We should make big demands of our clients and audience, that are in proportion to the monetary risks they court with poorly managed translation. It will oblige them to acquire and improve their practical understanding of linguistics and translation – including learning many new terms and concepts. Then they could participate in the mature and informed examination of some really serious mistranslations, demanding to know, as we should, "why do these things happen?"

It is our duty as translators to ask this question; to develop and deploy ways to prevent them happening; and then continually improve them.

Example Number 13

It is worthwhile asking why each of these mistranslations took place, as the answers will constitute a negative photo of what a translator needs to do produce accurate and faithful sentences. Many of them are simply a product that tends to be random because lack of contextual knowledge has left too many possible translations from which the translator must choose, and they have either done this consciously (they've guessed) or they haven't even been aware of all the possibilities and thought that they had got it in one. Then there may be other issues in the background that once known will govern word choice.

The sentence you asked about was "Eat your noodles".

There are certainly ways in which this could be translated into Japanese causing reactions in the person to whom it was said other than those intended by the English speaker.

It is the intent, and the reactions, that matter in communication, and therefore in translation. And intent and reactions are largely governed by the context.

A good way to clarify the context is to ask "to what question is this the answer?"

1. For example if someone had been weaving their noodles into place mats someone might have said in English "*Eat* your noodles" emphasis on "eat".
2. If someone had been eating someone else's noodle the same phrase but with the emphasis on "your".
3. And if people in a hurry were waiting for someone to make up their minds about whether should eat their noodles or their meat they would stress the last word.

That is just one way of countless in which the context may influence the meaning of the utterance and happens to be one which does not drive any change in the words or word order, but that's because it is in English.

Japanese is notorious for its ellipsis, in particular the omission of subjects and therefore possessives. So in most formulations of this sentence in Japanese there is no word that marks possession. It would only appear in Japanese if the intent was that of number 2 above.

For that matter you wouldn't even bother mentioning the noodles. Which is just as well. Your example is actually a good one because it serves to demonstrate how different languages are lexically richer or poorer than one another.

You must be aware, as a professional linguist, that language and linguistics are highly susceptible to being harnessed for political reasons. A classic and humorous example of this is the so-called "Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax". In a nutshell, Franz Boas, studying Eskimo languages in the early 1900s, discovered that their lexicon is very rich in nouns related to snow. (I'm trying to avoid saying "words for" snow, obviously).

Then in the 80s some post-modern academic decided that this was a racist theory that sought to lay the foundations of denigration of marginalised language groups on the basis of the size or complexity of their languages and so denounced it, disputing Boaz's definition of "Eskimo", his definition of "word" and managing to scrape together enough snow-related words in English to rebrand it as a "hoax".

Later, or even contemporaneously, other linguists were perfectly happy with the idea that different languages dealt with different aspects of the natural world in more or less detail, resulting in more

or fewer words to describe it, according to what they cared about. (None of those alleging a hoax have disputed that the word "seal" had to be substituted for the "lamb" of God in Greenlandic Bibles..) Australians have many expressions to describe a state of inebriation, the French many ways to declare their love for someone, and Polish surely has dozens of word for "gherkin".

As well as Japanese having over ten different personal pronouns, in Japanese cuisine there is a variety of dishes that we may call generically "noodles", but which they would be less likely to lump together. They would draw on their richer vocabulary and identify them individually as 「拉麺」 "ramen", 「素麺」 "somen", 「うどん」 "udon", 「春雨」 "harusame" and 「蕎麦」 "soba" (to give five examples – there are more).

There is a kanji character in a couple of them that by itself is a generic word for unleavened dough formed into a variety of shapes and rehydrated or warmed before consumption which is 「麺」 "men". This information will be useful below.

Clearly without seeing the bowl of said noodles or perhaps knowing what had come before and after this utterance we would be at something of a loss as to which particular type of "noodle" it was that someone was being encouraged to eat. We could use the generic, but that would sound quite unnatural in most contexts other than perhaps a cooking show where the speaker specifically sought to make a distinction between the noodles and other ingredients. I am sorry but I can't think of any that would be funny, let alone any that would provoke mirth in a way that could be preserved while I translated it back to English for your amusement.

Not to worry though, as I said, in most plausible Japanese translations of this sentence you wouldn't mention the noodles. It would just be a verb. But picking the right verb is an even bigger problem

The first challenge with Japanese is that the choice of most things: sentence structure, verbs, verb inflections, nouns and pronoun etc. is strictly governed by the relative positions of the interlocutors in the social hierarchy. All of these things. The very same sentence in English may end up two sentences utterly different from one another depending on whether a very senior person is speaking to someone junior to them, or vice versa.

Without the contextual knowledge of who it was saying this to who, we would be taking a bit of a stab in the dark. Based on the English we can certainly assume a couple of things. Firstly that the person being addressed is not superior to the speaker. Secondly the noodles have already been accepted by the person being addressed, as ownership seems established (which is why it can safely be omitted in the Japanese).

But inferior or equal still leaves us with at least four different verb inflections, reflecting four different registers, listed here with likely scenarios

1. Boyfriend is taking is time over a bowl, girlfriend doesn't want to miss the start of the movie:
   「食べて」 "tabete" (said affectionately)
2. Cross Mother standing over a fractious child with a bowl of noodles:
   「食べなさい！」 "tabenasai!"
3. Slightly senior teenage boys trying to sound tough and order their clubmates to eat:
   「食べろ！」 "tabero!"
4. POW Camp Guard screaming at prisoners:
   「食え！」 "kue!"

Now you could, I suppose, mix these up inadvertently, and have the girlfriend scream at her boyfriend, or the camp guard gently urge the prisoners to get a wriggle on, and these poor choices could I suppose, given enough alcohol, cause observers or even the protagonists to laugh, but if you came to me and asked why they were laughing, then I am sure that you can see, that I would forced, *forced* to write another dozen pages. And this silliness has gone on for long enough. But I thank you for your patience and look forward to further, inane expostulations, at your expense.

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[i] Although it is not a very good system, as shown in this excellent round up:
Dearest creature in creation,
Study English pronunciation.
I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like corpse, corps, horse, and worse.
I will keep you, Suzy, busy,
Make your head with heat grow dizzy.
Tear in eye, your dress will tear.
So shall I! Oh hear my prayer.
Just compare heart, beard, and heard,
Dies and diet, lord and word,
Sword and sward, retain and Britain.
(Mind the latter, how it's written.)
Now I surely will not plague you
With such words as plague and ague.
But be careful how you speak:
Say break and steak, but bleak and streak;
Cloven, oven, how and low,
Script, receipt, show, poem, and toe.
Hear me say, devoid of trickery,
Daughter, laughter, and Terpsichore,
Typhoid, measles, topsails, aisles,
Exiles, similes, and reviles;
Scholar, vicar, and cigar,
Solar, mica, war and far;
One, anemone, Balmoral,
Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel;
Gertrude, German, wind and mind,
Scene, Melpomene, mankind.
Billet does not rhyme with ballet,
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.
Blood and flood are not like food,
Nor is mould like should and would.
Viscous, viscount, load and broad,
Toward, to forward, to reward.
And your pronunciation's OK
When you correctly say croquet,
Rounded, wounded, grieve and sieve,
Friend and fiend, alive and live.
Ivy, privy, famous; clamour
And enamour rhyme with hammer.
River, rival, tomb, bomb, comb,
Doll and roll and some and home.
Stranger does not rhyme with anger,
Neither does devour with clangour.
Souls but foul, haunt but aunt,
Font, front, wont, want, grand, and grant,
Shoes, goes, does. Now first say finger,
And then singer, ginger, linger,
Real, zeal, mauve, gauze, gouge and gauge,

Marriage, foliage, mirage, and age.
Query does not rhyme with very,
Nor does fury sound like bury.
Dost, lost, post and doth, cloth, loth.
Job, nob, bosom, transom, oath.
Though the differences seem little,
We say actual but victual.
Refer does not rhyme with deafer.
Fe0ffer does, and zephyr, heifer.
Mint, pint, senate and sedate;
Dull, bull, and George ate late.
Scenic, Arabic, Pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific.
Liberty, library, heave and heaven,
Rachel, ache, moustache, eleven.
We say hallowed, but allowed,
People, leopard, towed, but vowed.
Mark the differences, moreover,
Between mover, cover, clover;
Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,
Chalice, but police and lice;
Camel, constable, unstable,
Principle, disciple, label.
Petal, panel, and canal,
Wait, surprise, plait, promise, pal.
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, chair,
Senator, spectator, mayor.
Tour, but our and succour, four.
Gas, alas, and Arkansas.
Sea, idea, Korea, area,
Psalm, Maria, but malaria.
Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean.
Doctrine, turpentine, marine.
Compare alien with Italian,
Dandelion and battalion.
Sally with ally, yea, ye,
Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, and key.
Say aver, but ever, fever,
Neither, leisure, skein, deceiver.
Heron, granary, canary.
Crevice and device and aerie.
Face, but preface, not efface.
Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
Large, but target, gin, give, verging,
Ought, out, joust and scour, scourging.
Ear, but earn and wear and tear
Do not rhyme with here but ere.
Seven is right, but so is even,
Hyphen, roughen, nephew Stephen,
Monkey, donkey, Turk and jerk,
Ask, grasp, wasp, and cork and work.
Pronunciation (think of Psyche!)
Is a paling stout and spikey?
Won't it make you lose your wits,
Writing groats and saying grits?
It's a dark abyss or tunnel:
Strewn with stones, stowed, solace, gunwale,
Islington and Isle of Wight,
Housewife, verdict and indict.
Finally, which rhymes with enough,
Though, through, plough, or dough, or cough?
Hiccough has the sound of cup.
My advice is to give up!!!