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*It seems that the watchdogs have deemed 'isiXhosa' to be the correct term for that language, even when speaking English. I can't bring myself to write this. After all, when speaking Xhosa, the word 'isiNgesi' is used, not 'English'. And we in English don't talk about 'Deutsch' or 'Francais', and the French and Italians talk about 'anglais' and 'inglese', so why should it not be 'Xhosa' when we speak English? In this column, I have left out the 'isi' in the interest of logic rather than political correctness.*

'When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first, but if he still obstacles your way, tootle him with vigour.'

This is a warning to Tokyo motorists quoted by Bill Bryson in his survey of the English language, **Mother tongue**. As he comments: 'one of the beauties of the English language is that with even the most tenuous grasp you can speak volumes if you show enough enthusiasm - a willingness to tootle with vigour, as it were.'

Whenever I travel, I try to collect examples of inept translations into English - this is not difficult, since, as Bryson points out, the language is 'full of booby traps for the unwary foreigner'. These attempts by foreigners to express themselves in English are often hilarious. Staying in a Greek pension once, I was amused by this notice in my room: 'No visitors aloud after 8 pm.' If they were very quiet, I wondered, could they stay later?

And here is a notice my son found in his hotel room in Korea:

*'IF YOU FORGET OR LOSE SOMETHING WE ARE NOT LIABLE.'*

*Thank you for visiting Jongnowon motel.*

*There is natural water to refrigerator in the room.*

*As there is water purifier to the first floor, use. (Hot water cold water)*

*Coffee and computer can use into free of charge in first floor.*

*Electronic goods can never use except hair-dryer (Burner, iron, coffee pot and so on).*

*After local call presses nine times, use.*

*Lacking things speaks in guidance (Towel, soap, tissue paper, tooth-paste et cetera.)*

*Delightful and well travel.*

*Thank you very much.*

Usually, we get the gist, and find these garbled messages amusing and really rather endearing, especially when we are wished 'Delightful and well travel'. There are times, however, when these mis-translations can be downright misleading - if not positively dangerous. Trying to fill up at a self-service petrol station in Italy, I was confronted with the following instructions:

*'To insert the notes aligned in any verso.*

*To wait the accreditation in the display.*

*To select the wanted bomb.*

*Out to the spy of the select bomb, to take the supplier.*

*In case of non-payment:*

*To wait some minute and to move away the receipt, to introduce it to the agent for the refund.'*

Make sense of that one if you can. It lends new meaning to the phrase 'Lost in translation'. I defy anyone to get a full tank of petrol following these instructions. In fact, it could easily be misconstrued as an encouragement to commit an act of terrorism. Fortunately, I was with a fluent Italian speaker, and we managed to get the supplier out of the spy of the select bomb, without having to apply to the agent for a refund.

I think it is extremely risky to attempt to translate into a language not one's mother tongue. Although I speak and understand

Afrikaans, and, to a lesser extent, Italian, I would never dream of translating from English into either of these languages. Yet it seems that others have no such inhibitions. It astonishes me that anyone can be so arrogant as to think they can do the job with just a smattering of the language - or even no knowledge of it, simply a dictionary, which the last example seems to suggest. Clearly the translator of the petrol pump instructions lacked even the most basic grasp of the language, unaware that the English, unlike Italians, do not use the infinitive when giving commands or instructions.

This is all very well if the aim is simply to offer guidance to tourists in a foreign country, but when it comes to official notices and formal instructions, I think that things have to be taken more seriously. I had assumed that there were fewer problems in other languages, which are usually less complex and confusing than English. So I was shocked to read, in a recent newspaper report, that this mis-translation is happening in our own country. Right here in Cape Town, in fact. And that these glaring errors are not occurring in notices aimed at foreign tourists, but are in one of our own official languages, directed at citizens of the country.

In the Western Cape, the three official languages are English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, and notices are required to appear in all three. While the messages in English and Afrikaans are usually correct, this is not always the case with the indigenous languages. Two concerned local women have recently conducted a survey of official signage, revealing a series of mis-translations into Xhosa bordering on the absurd. According to Tessa Dowling, director of the language institute AfricanVoices, and Thanki Mpambo-Sibukwana, language teacher at Wynberg Girls' High School, the signs range from the 'misleading' to the downright 'meaningless and offensive'.

A sign on St James beach, for example, which in English and Afrikaans warns that alcohol is prohibited, reads in Xhosa 'There is no alcohol here' - implying, surely, that people should bring their own. On the M5, there is a sign reading 'No Hawking/ Smousery Verbode/ Akuhanjwa apha', on pain of a R200 fine. This translates, in Xhosa, to 'No walking'. Presumably Xhosa-speaking hawkers will be exempt from a fine, provided they do not walk about. At the Taal Monument in Paarl, English and Afrikaans speakers are invited to 'Book for picnics'; Xhosa speakers are informed: 'You can bring book for picnics'. Encouraging a nation of readers, no doubt, but not helpful for would-be picnickers. A sign urging people to 'Save water' becomes, in Xhosa, 'Praise water' - by using it freely, perhaps?

The investigators found countless errors at the Khayalitsha Community Health Centre. Pregnant women are instructed to 'Phone the clinic when your tummy is running', rather than when they are in labour. 'Seizure' is translated with the Xhosa word for scissors - *isikere*. There are numerous other examples.

It seems clear that the while professional translators are used for English and Afrikaans, this is not the case when it comes to the indigenous languages. According to Tessa Dowling, official institutions do not employ qualified translators of indigenous languages, instead they simply turn to the nearest speaker of the language. One can imagine the clerk in charge of signage in some government department turning to his Xhosa-speaking colleague and saying: 'Hey Siphoh, what's the Xhosa word for 'hawking'', and Siphoh, not really concentrating, supplying the word for 'walking'. Similarly with 'seizure' and 'scissors'. One cannot imagine the language watchdogs allowing this to happen in English or Afrikaans. It seems that officials see the indigenous languages as somehow less important than the western languages.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel, however. Recently, after a five-year consultation process, the Western Cape Language Policy was launched, with over 4 million rand being set aside for its implementation. All departments will, in future, be required to provide for translation and interpreting services by language units. One hopes that not only will the existing glaring errors be remedied, but that similar howlers will never happen again.