

## Found in Translation

By Kirsten Dierolf M.A.

„Something has to change.“ said the man in the Peter Bichsel’s story “A Table is a Table”. And the man initiated a change. He started to call the bed “picture” and said “shiver” where he used to say “look” until he was no longer understood by anybody, and he himself found everything anybody else said strange. (Bichsel, 1997). He would have needed a translator explaining to people that he means “bed” when he says “picture” or a constructionist philosopher. Both would set out to discover with him that meaning is always dependent on the various interpretations that are negotiated anew in every new context (Hale-Haniff, 2003, 45) and that he simply forgot to engage in this process of negotiation. How this process of negotiation of meanings is carried out between client and coach is also essential for coaching and therapy. When seminars, therapeutic conversations, and coaching conversations are translated, you always have a third party who is involved in the construction of meaning, who tries to convey what is said in one language in another language. In this article, I would like to share with you what I learned about the use of language by translating seminars, live coachings, and articles by solution focused consultants, coaches, and therapists like Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, Ben Furman, Peter Szabó and Louis Cauffman. In my view, a lot of truth in life hides in the “inbetween” – and sitting between presenter and audience, between coach and client as translator, I was able to learn a lot for my own coaching practice – maybe there is also something in it for you.



## General and specific language

*„For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use.“ Wittgenstein (1958)*

Especially in translating for Steve de Shazer, I learned how useful it can be for a coaching conversation, if you look closely at when a general, almost generalizing statement is useful for the conversation and when it is useful to concentrate on very specific, detailed descriptions. When someone from the audience asked a question like: “What do you do with depressive teenagers?”, he reacted friendly but very persistently as if he did not understand what is meant by that question. I, as translator, of course, was startled at first, because I thought that my translation “Was tust du mit depressiven Jugendlichen?” had been adequate. Now I could have started explaining to Steve de Shazer, what I understood when I heard “depressive teenager” – but how the person asking the question uses “depressive teenager”, what he or she “means” by it and what Steve de Shazer would understand in this moment is probably not the same thing. If I add my own interpretation, it would only confuse things further. So I was silent and then heard Steve de Shazer ask: “What do you mean by ‘depressive teenager’?” The ensuing descriptions of a case, the behavior of an individual client, the course of the therapy made it possible to work on a useful answer to the question. Steve used something similar in therapeutic conversations. A client came with the diagnosis “bulimia”, and also in this case, they concentrated on concrete descriptions very quickly. Naturally, Steve de Shazer was not as provocative with the client as with the participants of the seminar, but he simply let the term “bulimia” drop and asked questions about solutions. Understanding terms like “bulimia” too quickly with the assumption that you do know what “depression” or “bulimia” actually is since this is what you studied for two semesters in psychopathology is not helpful. Chances are that you will not be speaking about the same thing as your client – and it is the client’s definition, his or her use of the word,

his or her solution to the problem that are the focus of the conversation. Ever since this translation experience, I have been noticing such “umbrella terms” in my coachings. There is simply too much that fits under them for me to know what it is exactly in the life of the client that we are talking about at the moment.

Especially when clients start speaking about possible solutions or about exceptions from the problem, concrete descriptions are called for: „I will have more energy, then!“ does not tell you a lot. An image that is described in detail like: “Then, I am going to laugh more with my partner. We will get up a little bit earlier to have some time together” is much more enticing and has more pull toward a desired future. Instead of using an abstract term like “energy”, the client uses sentences with an active person (her/himself) and a verb describing an action and not a nominalization with a limp copula. These exact descriptions in the conversation between coach and client make it possible for them to co-create solutions that have a basis in the concrete everyday life of the client.

On the other hand, it can also be helpful to take up abstract language of the client in order to give the client room to fill a statement or a question with his or her own meaning and content, in his or her own frame of reference, that we as coaches do not necessarily know much about. If, for example, the client uses the word “energy” or “value-system”, the coach can pick it up as it is (although he or she does not know how exactly the client uses the word) in order to ask the miracle question or to ask about a future positive development. The client might have said “my life would be more in tune with my value-system” (which is something that a solution focused coach would have difficulties understanding) and the coach might ask “So when your life is more in tune with your value system, what would you notice that is different?”

## Using Humor

*“How many coaches does it take to change a light bulb? Only one – but the light bulb must want it ...”*

It was wonderful to be able to observe the solution-focused coaches and therapists that I had the honor to translate for build a relationship of trust with their clients. Their sense of humor and the twinkles in their eyes were an integral part of this ability. Jokes and humor are usually very difficult to translate since they usually depend on the culture or can only be understood if you know the facts of a cultural reference system that they play off. Strangely enough, a translation of the solution-focused humor was never really difficult. It is a human, friendly kind of humor that targets the sides of human beings that are universally funny and even pointed remarks were appreciative. Ben Furman and Louis Cauffman, for example, attributed assumed negative behavior to their own nationality: “I don’t know whether this happens with you in Germany / in Switzerland, too, probably it doesn’t, come to think of it. However, with us in Finland / Belgium, it sometimes happens that the boss does not know how to criticize constructively.” The participants of the seminar chuckled and found themselves in the Belgians and Finns. Since it was presented this way, however, without a negative attribution, there were no discussions about intercultural applicability. In my view this is a wonderful example of how you can utilize difficulties (here intercultural differences) for something positive. Ever since this realization, I try to ask myself in my own coachings how I could make use of something that I perceive as a difficulty at first.

## Appreciation

*“Listen, God love everything you love - and a mess of stuff you don't, but more than anything else, God love admiration. You saying God vain? I ast. Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.” Alice Walker, The Color Purple*

The factor that makes the solution-focused approach so applicable across cultures is probably the respectful appreciation that therapists / coaches have toward their clients. Being appreciated feels good universally. How this appreciation is expressed in such a way that the client can accept it, is very different in different cultures. Steve de Shazer gave the wonderful hint that it is very helpful to listen to the exact words that the client uses and use them in our compliments. It helps to only compliment those things that the client would also say of him- or herself. Insoo Kim Berg's “WOW, how did you do that?” is famous as an expression of appreciation that also propels the client forward. Too bad, that this is not possible in a German translation. As we Germans are very skeptical when it comes to bold praise, a very enthusiastic compliment could sound ironic or sarcastic in German and thus would turn into its exact opposite. What I think works best as a cultural equivalent in German speaking countries is a genuine expression of interest to learn how the client managed to do what he or she did. The question helps clients to become aware in which context, by which strategies, and through which actions he or she was successful in doing something. For example, a client tells you that she had much less trouble with her colleague sharing the office. Instead of an exuberant “WOW”, in German, you would put on a serious face and ask: “This must have been very difficult to do. Can you tell me what you did to make it happen? I would really be interested to know” or something like that. The big advantage of a foreign coach coaching is that “foreign” exuberance and enthusiasm is more likely to be accepted as an honest, non-sarcastic compliment.

Something that we also do not have in German and that I often miss with envy in my coachings is “of course”. It is such a short and wonderful way of expressing one's empathy and agreement. All German equivalents like “na klar” (clearly) or “natürlich” (naturally) don't quite cut it. If any of you find an ingenious translation – please let me know.

## Nonverbal Communication

*„I shall also call the whole [of language], consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'.” Wittgenstein (1984)*

If you think of translation as the equivalent invention of language games in another language, non- and paraverbal signals, facial and other gestures, intonation are all part of producing a communication that is as close as possible to the communication in the original language. At last, here we reach the limits of translatability. Especially in simultaneous translation the production of non- and paraverbal signals is not something the translator is aware of. At the second SOL conference in Bristol, Matthias Varga von Kibed mentioned a “translator's trance” and without wanting to be mystical here, this is exactly what it feels like. As a translator you hang in midair between the chairs, one foot in the world of the original language, one in the target language, listening most attentively and the simultaneously reacting (or shortly afterwards).

For me, this is where the connection between translation and coaching is most obvious. You listen and observe closely what the client says and does. You try not to “interpret”: not in translation because there is no time and not in coaching because the conversation is not about my interpretations but about getting the client one step ahead in his or her system and context.

## Staying with one foot in the language and world of the client

*"We value what the client brings to the situation and work with that. Of course you can't totally leave your ideas behind you. And you don't have to. It is like you have one foot in the client's world and the other in your own. And if a client says something like 'My boss is a lunatic', I work with that but don't have to agree with it. I don't care if the boss is a lunatic or not. I don't have an opinion about that." Insoo Kim Berg im Interview mit Coert Visser (2004) auf <http://www.m-cc.nl/interviewinsookimberg.htm>*

Translating conversations between clients and solution-focused therapists or coaches made me realize once and again how closely the client is listened to and how exactly the words of the client are used by the therapist or coach. For the translation, it is then very important to keep using the same words in the respective language. "A lunatic boss" stays "ein verrückter Chef" (a lunatic boss) and does not turn into a "crazy superior". What I do as a translator here, is to take the words of the client and put them into English. The coach then takes these (my) words as the words of the client and reacts to them as if they were the client's words, uses the same words as the client when formulating his or her question or gives them a little slant or twist. I then take the coach's words, realize the twist (when I am on my toes) or non-twist and give them back with the same slant or unaltered (compared to the original words of the client, of course). In my view, being exact here is very important since the use of the same words is one of the things that reassures the client that he or she has been listened to well and that that coach has entered his or her world with one foot.

## The impossibility of understanding

*„Understanding is not possible, there are only more or less useful misunderstandings“ Steve de Shazer*

Even in Coaching or in therapeutic conversations you will have misunderstandings every once in while. In translating, I was especially impressed with how elegantly the therapists and coaches were able to deal with them. As translator, at first, you feel obliged to clarify, explain and elucidate. However, for the coaching process it is much more useful to leave the clarification to the client and the coach. A lot of resources and hints for the coaching process were hidden most misunderstandings or in the process of clarifying them.

Even when the most dreaded horror that can occur happened to me as simultaneous translator, when a word I needed hid maliciously in a fold of my brain and did not want to peek out, clients were able to use the pause to benefit from the coaching process. Steve de Shazer prefers consecutive translations for that reason: there are long breaks in which the translator talks and this deceleration makes it easier to listen and gives time to think. In a workshop in Winterthur the word "to rely on" eluded me. And miraculously the client did not mind at all –she simply described in detail how she knew that she can rely on her partner. This description seemed very useful to me, she realized more clearly how beneficial her partner is for her and what exactly he did to make her feel that she can rely on him. It somehow became more real. I never cease to be impressed by the way that clients are able to use the therapeutic conversation or the coaching to benefit in whichever way is good for them even if a coach and a translator get in the way. This realization boosted my confidence for my own coaching practice: It's hard to mess up completely.

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