



“Jump off the cliff.”

## Discussion: Being a Translator Isn't Easy

One of the challenges Chinese translators faced in preparation for the 2008 Olympics was providing signage in English and Chinese. In the months leading up to the spectacular opening, I received many emails purporting to show signs that didn't quite convey what was intended, such as:



- The universal graphic for female paired with a sign that says “Gentlemen.”
- An arrow pointing left leads the way to

And then there were the care instructions on a garment:

- Wash by hand
- No Chlorine
- No wring
- In coleslaw

Where did *that* come from?



While the misguided translations were apparently real, they probably were not connected with Chinese Olympic translators. I first encountered translation oddities when reading books by Richard Lederer such as *Fractured English* a dozen years ago. Now the translations are all over the Internet, particularly at websites like [www.English.com](http://www.English.com) (where these signs come from) and [www.innocentenglish.com](http://www.innocentenglish.com). Here, for example, are some classic signs found in hotels and restaurants abroad:

- Our great food will never leave you!
- It will take about 1 minute to fix a hot drink. Please wait.
- Please keep chair on position and keep table cleaned after dining. (Taiwan cafeteria)
- In a Bucharest hotel lobby: The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.
- On the menu of a Swiss restaurant: Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.
- Outside a Hong Kong tailor shop: Ladies have fits upstairs.
- In an advertisement by a Hong Kong dentist: Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists.
- In a Budapest zoo: Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.

Interestingly, the teachers of foreign students learning English seem to have a sense of humor, too. One teacher in Korea gave this gem to his students to correct:

- We only serve water passed by our manager.

On the other hand, the teachers are undoubtedly amused by their students' writing. Here are a few of their twisted descriptions of romantic encounters:

- He had such a worm heart.
- We were two sheeps passing in the night.
- We have hated each other for so long. I want to borrow the hatchet.
- The groom was wearing a very nice croissant.
- He lifted the veal off her face and gave her a big kiss.
- I think she is really glad she got marinated.

To be fair, however, most of us would do far worse were our attempts to speak Chinese critiqued. I sing praises to all people who are furthering the cause of world peace by learning another language!

Talk about it

- Do you have any bloopers – funny signs, products, ads, etc. – to add to those we have listed?
- Do you speak a foreign language? Have you ever made bloopers that came out funny? Did you find people understanding and grateful that you were attempting to speak their language even if you made mistakes?
- Is English your second language? Have you ever made mistakes that came out funny – or that seem funny now? Were people understanding, or did they make you uncomfortable speaking?

If you would like to order Richard Lederer's *Fractured English*, [click here](#).

This sign is definitely wrong!



