

## 20th Century changes in English Language

### Conferencia dictada por el Prof. Sir Randolph Quirk

The very first job I did, the very first thing I published, was a translation from an old Norse text, an old Icelandic saga, a runic saga, and that task of translation was an eye-opener to me about the difficulties that are involved in translation. Because here I was, translating a work that had been written a thousand years before in a very very different society, and having to put it into an English that the late 20th. century British and American readers would understand, while at the same time trying to capture some of the social and political mores, and literary mores, of the time in which the runic saga was written.

Now tonight I want to attempt something much simpler for you, much more direct for you. But as translators you will know, as I learned, that language is constantly changing and that the values of words change from decade to decade, and indeed the words themselves change from decade to decade. New words come in, old words go out. And that's why I have chosen to speak to you of the changes that have taken place within living memory, because I assume that everything that you translate will have been written within living memory. Of course, most of what you translate has been written very recently. But you are involved in translating the work of people who may have been born a long time ago, forty years ago, fifty years ago, sixty years ago even. And that their language, as their English if you are translating into Spanish, represents values, represents actual words that are unfamiliar to you and where you have to look them up in a dictionary that really features those years. I want therefore to try and explain to you, or to share with you, some explanations of how much change there has been in the English language within living memory. This is a subject that I have been interested in for my own purposes, for my own students' purposes, who are not usually professional translators, something that I have tried to capture for myself and my students. By reading literature that was written by people who were really quite elderly, even by my standards, and by talking to people who are elderly, even by my own standards, I have tried to build up a picture of the way in which English has changed since about 1910, because most of what we read - novels, plays, poems - has not been written within the last five years. Most of what we read has been written a good two or three generations ago, not usually more. By building up this picture we learn a good deal of the ways in which the tonal values of words have changed. Among my own elderly friends, have been people who astonishingly to me were present in the theatre when George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" was first put on, and who remember the shock that went around the theatre when Elisa Doolittle said for the first time "not bloody likely", and the thrill, and the shock of surprise, of embarrassment, that occurred on that occasion.

Another of my elderly friends has told me that when she was a girl the word "toilet" meant solely the activity of washing and dressing and I was so surprised that I went and checked in an edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, published in the 1920's, actually it was published in 1928, and I found the confirmation that the sense of toilet meaning a "water closet", a "W.C.", a little room, was in fact marked in that dictionary as an Americanism, not used in the United Kingdom.

Language represents the period, any period, just as do the social and material allusions. Indeed the two often go together. Dreadnoughts were much talked about eighty years ago, during the period of the First World War, and dreadnoughts were not merely things, this is what I want to bring home to you,

dreadnoughts were not merely horrible, terrifying battleships, they were stimuli to the imagination, for metaphor, and hyperbole, analogous to the way in which the marvels of space exploration, microbioelectronics, and telecommunications are to be used for today. Technological change has made the 20th. century particularly momentous, and so the language changes are also particularly momentous, as compared with most eighty-year periods. In other words, what I'm saying is that all languages are always changing. So that a period of 80 years always sees a considerable change. I am claiming to you that the language changes over the past 80 years have been particularly momentous. Of course this is true for Spanish, as also in English. The changes that occurred in our material culture are as true for Bolton or Boston, as they are for Buenos Aires. But I also say that the changes affecting the English language have been even more momentous than they have for most other languages. In other words, the impact of the past 80 years upon Britain has been more sizable than the impact over the same 80 years on most others. It's hard now to realize, but in 1910 and indeed in 1920, the British Empire was at its zenith and Britain presided over not merely the Pax Britannica as the undisputed world power, but presided over an empire larger than any the world has ever known, including even the Spanish one. This power and the sheer extent of the imperial geography, as well as the fact that English was the language of the United States, a fact that has become increasingly important during these eighty years, those facts had already caused English to become the leading world language, and had already caused English to involve within itself many words and expressions taken up, borrowed and adopted from all over the world. Many of these have stayed in the language. But such exoticisms, as words from India, and Arabia, and Africa, were far more familiar to ordinary people in 1920 than they are today. For example, the word "bint", another word meaning "girl", "cheroot", something to smoke, like a thin cigar, "dungarees", the predecessors of modern jeans, "kowitz", to make a respectful greeting, "sahib" and "memsahib", the boss; "tiffin", a word for lunch, and the affix "wallah", meaning person who does something, like "tea wallah", and so on. Those words would have been familiar to anybody between 1920 and 1940, some of them still exist, as I say, but most of them my own students don't know. And many English words were used with inferior meanings, like the words "bearer", "bush", "bungalow", and "native". "Bearer", meaning a porter; "bush" meaning anywhere that was not in the city, in the jungle somewhere; "bungalow", which is now a very small modest one-story building near Brighton or something, was a handsome multi-story building standing on its own ground, only very rich or powerful people lived in bungalows in India. And the word "native". This is one of the things that you still have to watch in translating. That there is a straightforward sense in "native", that is to say, somebody who was born here, but the way it was used imperially was to mark somebody who was born "there", not "here". In other words, you had natives in India, natives in Nigeria, natives in Malaysia, but you did not have natives in Kent, or even natives in Scotland. That is beginning to change, but all those words you have to be very careful about in translation, because there are many people who would regard "native" as meaning a foreigner for some ironic reason.

Now, there are social changes that have profoundly affected the language, two in particular. One is a democratization of society, of British society. This again is a worldwide phenom-

enon, of course, but I think it has been particularly striking in Britain. That is to say, Britain in 1910 or 1920 was much more class-stratified than the society of the United States or Australia, or Argentina. The other is a dramatic rise in the standard of living, and this again, as I say, is a worldwide phenomenon. The result of this, both of them together, was to make the humbler classes of people, the middle class and the working class, far more self-confident, far more assertive, than they were. The rise of the Labour Party, for example, meant a change for people whose voices were not previously really heard, voices they had, but they were not really heard, they were ignored by advertisers. Suddenly, these people, as a result of the rising standard of living, had greater purchasing power, and their voices started being heard and noticed. Folk aimed now, not to live in a terraced house, but to live in a semi-detached house, and whereas their parents would have had only one living-room, possibly a living-room in which a kitchen also existed, a living-room and a bedroom, and that was it, all the children lived in the same bedroom, now they aimed to have a semi-detached lounge as well as a dining-room, and a small kitchen, very very much smaller than the kitchen of yore, which combined the living-room as well as the cooking facilities, simply called a kitchenette.

People became listeners, no longer just readers but also listeners, with their own wireless set. At first it might have been just a crystal set, a very primitive radio set, and then later a valve set, but in the epoch the crystal set had only earphones, and then you aimed to have a valve set, with a loudspeaker. All of these were progresses in the standard of living and of course in technology, and changes of course in language, because language has got to follow the culture. When listening to different stations, this is a new meaning of the word "station", no longer just a bus station, no longer just a railway station, but a radio station. One then tuned in to the station, and one would speak of being disturbed at that time, the technology of radio being what it was, both from the point of view of poor transmitters and poor receivers, by a phenomenon that you learned to call "atmospherics", as though there were little maiden women upstairs making cackling noises in the atmosphere.

One aimed to have a motorcar. One aimed to have the kind of mobility that came with the motorcar. It is an ironic irony, you see, that for hundreds of years, indeed almost a millenium, there was the notion of a horse, and the horse pulling some kind of transportation. But it never got down to the masses, it never got down to the middle class, it never got down to the working class. Now with the new technology, and with the increased standard of living, it wasn't just the rich that aimed to have a motorcar, everyone aimed to have a motorcar, even if it was the cheapest type, even if it was only a two-seater, with a dickey seat at the back, an incomplete seat at the back, where children very dangerously were parked. But if you were better off, you went for a saloon car, and the metaphor involved there of course is from the two bars in a pub. There was the ordinary bar, and there was a nice, comfortable bar, where everyone sat, and that was the saloon. That was transferred then to this marvelous roofed, windowed, hard-topped, more permanent sort of vehicle, which we called the saloon. The Americans, interestingly, lexicalizing the same thing, they also had the contrast between the soft-topped and the hard-topped car, but they went back to the 18th. century for their way of lexicalizing the saloon car. They went to the sedan chair as used by Dr. Johnson and his contemporaries.

But even without your own transport, you could now afford to travel, even afford to travel abroad. Usually on an organized tour, as a tourist, but if you could afford it, you went on a cruise,

and if you could afford it very much you went on the Mediterranean cruise. That was the aim of every family in the kingdom, not only of course in our kingdom, but in the kingdoms and republics of Western Europe.

You will know the writings of Evelyn Waugh. Recently, then, about in 1926, he came down from Oxford. He was born into the upper classes, and he lived through this period. We should not forget that 1926 is the year of the general strike, and the general strike, more than anything else, more than any other single event, made people everywhere in the country realize the power of the working class, that the old times had gone. Not merely had the First World War shattered the notion of having servants, servants would rise themselves from the market. But now, with the 1926 general strike everyone was aware of the working classes. Now, Evelyn Waugh became a journalist, and decided that, before he actually started work, he would do what the traditional gentlemen, very very few traditional gentlemen did, in the 18th. and 19th. centuries: go on a grand tour. Grand tour was not as grand as coming to Argentina, but a grand tour was a Mediterranean tour. See great monuments, see the ancient world, bring back things, some people who really lived well brought back Ionian marbles, but most brought back lesser trifles. And he went, he could no longer of course afford to go with his own servants, with his own carriage, travelling through Europe, with his letters of credit. He went on a ship with a whole lot of other people, as a tourist, and he was ashamed but also amused by this fact. And he contemplates in a book that draws attention to the way in which society is changing beneath Evelyn Waugh's shrewd and rather cruel eyes. The word "tourist", he says in this book, seems naturally to suggest haste and compulsion. One thinks of those pitiable rogues, battled, reckless, their heads singing with unfamiliar names, their bodies strained and bruised from scrambling in and out of carriages, up and down staircases, and from trailing disconsolately through miles of gallery and museum. Are there still more beauty spots, more sites of historical events, more works of art? And one sits at one's country table, playing listlessly with sketchbook and aperitif... In other words, he was not there with his little box-brownie, taking pictures, he was still a gentleman who made his own sketches wherever he went, he was enough of an experienced person, and sees these poor fragments of humanity stumble by. The book bears witness to that social tension that I mentioned of the time. And in its concluding sentence at once we have a drama as well as the bored social graces of the outnumbered, outstripped class, the lone English gentleman, with his sketchbook, doing the grand tour, quite in the manner of A. W. Kingley a century earlier.

In his concluding phrase we have the machinery of upward social mobility boldly associated with the advance of mechanization. It was that upward social mobility that led gradually to the demotic voice being heard, and heard with a growing respect. In the English Middle Ages it used to be said, "Jack would be a gentleman, if he spoke French". I'm sure that some of you will have heard that medieval proverb before. When Shaw wrote his *Pygmalion* before the First World War, that was in 1912, eighty years ago, Shaw's *Pygmalion* reflects a time when Elisa would be a lady if she spoke the hieratic accents of Mayfair. Evelyn Waugh was entering a very different world from either one, when people pretended that there was no such thing as gentlemen or ladies, and when it was thought rude to say this woman is at the door, when one should say this lady is at the door. That was the very thing that was beginning to crumble.

I have another elderly friend, whom my wife and I met in India, in Bombay, in 1975, though I had known him earlier.

Professor Barnagy was a professor of English at the University of Bombay, and he had been a student at Oxford at the same time as Evelyn Waugh. And he told me that around the middle of the 1960's he went back to Oxford for the first time in 40 years, and he was shocked. He'd been shocked to hear how differently the undergraduates spoke. All around him were young men and women, far more women than he'd ever known there, and they were all speaking regional accents, and above all with a grammar, a vocabulary, and mores that he felt to be uneducated. Robert Graves, who spent most of his adulthood writing English literature in Mallorca, in the Balearic Islands, and who was very rarely in England throughout that time, (and his English shows it), was also a student at Oxford in the 20's, and by chance he became Professor of Poetry, or elected to become Professor of Poetry, which required him to go back to Oxford about 1965. He made a broadcast which struck me at the time as very interesting, because he also made a comment on the changed language of undergraduate students. Barnagy's impression was more radical than that of Graves, and less in tune with what had really happened. He thought that the language had changed. Graves and I know that the language, although it has changed, wasn't what Barnagy was really hearing. He was not aware that there was a different social mix at Oxford from the time that he was there. And what is more, both of these gentlemen were making their reacquaintance with Oxford at a particularly interesting time of what we've come to call the social revolution, when even the children of the best educated, of the middle classes, were aping working-class accents, when they were deliberately cultivating working-class clothes, they were wearing dungarees, what we'd call now jeans, they were wearing shabby patched jackets, and they were ashamed to be heard speaking in those hieratic accents that their fathers and mothers assumed was their right and their destiny. That period between 1950 and 1965 saw very very major changes in the life of Britain and America, and I suppose very generally in Europe and in Europe-like cultures such as your own. That is to say, the manner of dress that had come in with the things that had been part of the good life concept, of just after the war, nylons, and fully-fashioned silk stockings, were giving way to the beatnik fashion, as youngsters thronged bars, playing guitars, wearing their jeans, cultivating hippie habits, and looking out for the trends that would make them trendy. Finding out how to do their own things, that independence, that social independence of the individual, the new individual. At the same time doing their own thing and wanting to be with it, wanting to be with the majority, the herd, and yet being part of, seeking to be part of a movement, a group.

Now, there seemed to be always two main forces at work in language development. One was an orientation toward the fashionable, the other is an orientation towards the inescapable. In other words, what is fashionable makes us responsive to the spirit of time, emulating the language of the socially dominant, quick to seize upon what is new and in some sense progressive. The orientation to the inescapable means that there is behavior around that is so ambient that you can't escape from it. That even if you don't want to imitate it, you are caught up in it and can't avoid it. Now when these two forces act alongside, the influence is overwhelming. It was thus after all in the closed community of the English public school, or of the ancient university. And it is somewhat thus in the present day world of the 70's and 80's, with the simultaneously magnetic and inclusive influence of American English. On the one hand, this has come increasingly in the 20th. century to represent all that is fashionable, exciting, innovative, creative. All of those things are value judgments, there is very little truth in any of them, but the perception is there. On the other hand, and again increasingly in the past two years, the sheer statistical mass of

American influence has made itself felt everywhere, in Australia, and I imagine in Argentina, as well as in Britain, which is the purpose of what I'm talking about. So that even those who have no interest in trying to be trendy, even those who try not to be trendy, absorb American English quite unconsciously, and quite inevitably, wherever they are. Now, the modes of infiltration are fairly obvious. Personal contact has increased exponentially. In 1910 the vast majority of Britons had never spoken to an American. By 1990, very few have not. And indeed no one does less than hear an American every evening of his or her life. Maybe only in the television news, but it's also going to be in television soap operas, which are of course undubbed when they come to Britain or Australia. You are used to having Dallas with a Spanish subtext, but not us.

I want to illustrate some of the ways in which American English has affected us. Of course some of these are Americanisms, as is the expression "with it". "Throw rocks": in 1955 the only people in Britain who could have thrown rocks would have been very tall giants. Rocks were too big for human beings to throw. What we could throw was stones. But from then on throw rocks has become almost as common as throwing stones, and that distinction has been lost. The word "commuter" was unknown in Britain in 1950. By 1955 even a journal, a newspaper as anti-American as the Daily Telegraph, was using "commuter" in its news pages. The converse, of course, is also true, that is to say, by reason of the electronic revolution, words go around the world very very easily, and American English has picked up many words from British English. When I was a student in Yale, the word "shop", when I uttered it, would be greeted with whoops of laughter, because they only used "store". Now wherever you go, not only on the East Coast, the West Coast too, anything which is a little chic by way of a store would be called a shop.

But there are also grammatical influences, for example, what the grammarians call a disjunct. Disjuncts in the form of adverbs have greatly increased in British usage because of the greater frequency in American English. What I'm thinking of is, just to give you an example, is the following: if one says "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive", the traditional proverb, that means that one is travelling "full of hope". But when you have this used as a disjunct, "hopefully we shall arrive in Buenos Aires this evening", that is not "arriving hopefully", but "I hope that we shall arrive", and that type of disjunct is something which has come in from the United States.

But also there are many auxiliary performers, the verbal auxiliaries. All of these expressions "I'm not about to", "I refuse to", meaning "under no circumstances will it be the case that", "it is not the case that this won't happen", it's not just future as in, for example, "I'm about to leave Argentina", I shall be living shortly, pure future. When it is used negatively, there is this additional sense of I'm refusing, I'm not about to leave Argentina, I refuse to leave Argentina. "You've got to be careful" means "it must be the case that you are careful". Not that I'm obliging you, like in "you've got to go now". "It must be the case that you are joking", surely you are joking. Other examples: "she got to feel", "she came to feel", "I'll get around to writing to my mother shortly", "well, you could be right here" (it is possibly the case that you are right).

And the last example, the tendency to replace the perfect by the past: although it is still in British English more correct to say "I have never seen such a thing before", increasingly one hears and reads, as in American English, the form without the perfect.

Now, you may say well, all that you are saying is that American English is a very slangy form of English, it is more

demotic than British English, British English is more hieratic. This is not the case, nothing is as simple as that. In many ways American English is far more formal than British English, and Americans are frequently shocked by what they see as the slanginess about British English. Now, here is a case in point. If you take the phrase "it is essential that she ... a license". There are three ways in which this can be done in English. The traditional British way is to ignore the distinction between indicative and subjunctive. "It is essential that she acquires a license", "she acquires a license by going to this office". That distinction tends to be lost in British English, or rather it did tend to be lost. If you wanted to be absolutely precise, you could use in British English the verbal auxiliary "should". But in American English, they have preserved the indicative/subjunctive distinction, and neither of these would be used, but "it is essential that she acquire" would be preferred. Now the point that I'm making about this influence of American English on British English, this also has caught on, and this subjunctive/indicative distinction has been reintroduced into British English in this particular instance, by reason of the American influence.

Some of the further grammatical changes that we have seen in England in these years has been the evolving of a new concept between singular and plural, the notion of what I have called in my work an aggregate noun. In other words, data is historically the plural of datum, just as media is the plural of medium. Both singulars have tended to be lost in these two words, so that one talks about the media, meaning the press, and the electronic media and the British media, as though it was one phenomenon, not of the particular newspapers, or radio programmes, or television programmes that make it up. Just as when one feeds data into a computer, one does not think of it in English now in terms of the individual pieces of information, but as an aggregate. But both of these words now tend to be used with a singular verb, and in computational use "data" is always followed by a singular verb. The use of criteria as a singular is however still regarded as British uneducated, as are misuses of agreement, so that although this occurred in the Times newspaper of London, most people, teachers and public alike, would frown on it.

Now, I talked about democratization, I talked about the way in which people continuedly or increasingly wished to feel with it as members of a group. Now, of course we would not write like we speak. If you take it that as translators you are distinct from interpreters, as a group, translators do not interpret, and interpreters do not translate.

But interpreters come across this kind of problem very very much, like when you have people interpreting, say at the United Nations, or at a conference, and a British minister says something of this kind, or an American minister says something of this kind, one does not quite know how to handle it. I sort of felt there isn't just a muddled lack of vocabulary, it isn't a sloppy use of English, at least it is not what the guy means. What the speaker is trying to do here, whether it be he or she, is to defuse the posture of "I'm telling you, I know exactly what's what and you are there to listen". In other words, he shares or tries to share with you the process of finding the "mot juste", as we say in England.

I want to take up this notion of the sensibility that's involved in the act of communication, and tie it up with the whole process of democratization, because between about 1920 and now, as we all know, as teachers if not in any other way, we all know as subjects and citizens, that we will not tolerate being talked to by someone up there as though he knows best or she knows best. We want to be consulted, there is a consultative

mode in all of our activity, whether we are teachers, whether we are pupils, even quite young pupils, whether we are citizens of a government.

And this sort of sensitivity lives up with abstractions that we would never have heard about forty or fifty years ago. It's only a short step after all, from saying I'm not going to treat you like servants, I want to treat you like friends, I want to think this out with you, and put things rather in a sort of way that will make you sympathize with me, and show, or at any rate suggest that I am sympathizing with you, to saying yes, but would you do that to everybody. Would you do that if I had a black face, would you do this equally with a group of women, or would you take this rather democratic tolerant attitude only with other men. And we have gone through a period in which abstractions of sensibility have been lexicalized in the language: discrimination, racism, sexism, which are really quite remarkable lexically, particularly that first one. After all it's not very long ago, ten years, fifteen years ago, when discrimination was what we would try to cultivate, discrimination was a good thing, discrimination meant knowing right from wrong, knowing the good word from the bad word, this sense from that sense. Education was a matter of learning to discriminate. Now we have a sense of discrimination that turns that on its head, and says that we should not be involved in discrimination. We should be involved in some kind of unisex, some kind of uniform society. Of course this only is a swing of the pendulum in order to get rid of major injustices that we have had in all cultures, but which appear to have been most acutely felt by the Anglosaxons, beginning, I think, in the United States. People in the United States began to see this, and it began with the conscience that white America began to have about black America, and then other people got in on the act with them and said, well, if we are so marvelous now in recognizing the rights of blacks, don't let's forget that women are not treated on an equal footing with men, that is the law, that is the fact that the wife's property is her husband's, and so on and so on. And so, all kinds of things started to happen which are all part of this same democratization, this same cultivation of a single sense of humanity, and this resulted in an inclusionary language. This may give you as translators a certain amount of problem. My impression is that in Latin countries what I've been saying about this linguistic sensibility is not quite much true, and if that is correct, if I am right in thinking that these things are not as high on your social agendas, as translators that's all the more reason why you've got to watch this one. Because we no longer find ourselves able to use the unmarked male, the unmarked masculine as a pronoun or as a generalization in noun phrases. We can no longer talk about the postman, or the policeman, as typical of the law enforcers, one can no longer say, "any student who wishes to come here must bring his passport with him". You may say, well this is just a lot of Anglosaxon rubbish. And you may be right. But don't let's laugh at the inclusionary language. This is real, it is real in the sense that it is now law, every trade union in Britain has sets of regulations which tell you what you may and may not say. And the law is stepping into this, and national law is stepping into this as well. So that you've got to watch it as you translate.

You may regard this as just a certain kind of pedantry, a neo-pedantry, but I have to say that the feminists have got a point. When the feminists say, if you say "we are going to have an election for a chairman", even though we all "know" that a woman might be elected, the expectation, the linguistic orientation, is towards electing a man. And you may say, well, this is just propositional. No, it is not. I will read to you a quotation that was written, was put in print, by an anthropologist whose name I will not give you, but he's deeply ashamed of ever

having printed it: "The vital needs of men are food, shelter, and access to women."

Of course you can guess it was a male, from the linguistic code. He was trying to make a serious if rather elementary generalization, and quite clearly in the first line or so, he is making a general observation. He is saying human beings. Now, if he had said that, if he had said "the vital needs of human beings, are food, shelter...", he would not have added that third word, he would have said "access to the opposite sex", or "access to sex". But that is in fact what he wrote.

So this is one of the little bits of textual evidence that underpins a justification for the move which I warn you is really rather strong in Britain and even stronger in America. And at least for the next ten or fifteen years everything that is written has got to be well aware of these questions. I say over the next ten or fifteen years because I believe that this is something which is necessary as a clearing out of the stables. And when the stables are clean, if we can get them clean, then we can sink back into a more rational mode.

The expression "nigger", however, is another case, another issue. Not merely is it bad taste to talk about nigger, not merely is it bad taste to say "who was that wog I saw you with last night", or "I'm not going to have my sister marrying a wog", or "a dago", not merely is it bad taste, it is illegal. And you can be prosecuted and fined for excitement to racism. To finish up I just want to show you the penetration of this inclusionary language aspect upon people in the United Kingdom, never mind in America.

Jenny Coates is a former student of mine, she's now a university lecturer. She read a review on a book in English by a German scholar. That German scholar is a young man, 30-35 years, something like that, and this was his doctoral thesis, a very good doctoral thesis. She admits it is a good book, but she was irritated throughout, and she says it like this, by his use of the so-called "generic he" throughout the book, it's a constant irritant. It was a review published in an American journal, as it happened.

This is the kind of thing I wanted to draw your attention to. This German scholar, writing in excellent English, who was obviously unaware of this and had not tuned himself to these sensibilities, as you need to be tuned. So that at the moment we have a situation in which, if you have the sentence:

"if \_\_\_\_\_ hoped that \_\_\_\_\_ purchase of the book would solve all \_\_\_\_\_ problems, \_\_\_\_\_'d be dissatisfied",

there are 5 different ways in which the slots can be filled.

Traditionally, when I was brought up and the way in which I still tend to speak if I weren't disciplining myself to do otherwise, would be to say, "if anybody hoped that his pur-

chase of this book would solve all his problems he'd be disappointed". The "generic he": that is the one that I urge you to avoid.

The alternative that is probably the commonest at the moment, the neutral pronoun being unavailable in the singular but available in the plural, is: "if anyone hoped that their purchase of this book would solve all their problems, they'd be dissatisfied".

I tend to react against this because of the false concord. So the one which is very common therefore, despite the clumsiness of the his or her, he or she, is the alternative: "if he/she hoped that his/her purchase of this book would solve all his/her problems, he/she would be dissatisfied", because it doesn't offend any grammatical principle and doesn't make offense to the inclusionary languages either.

The fourth example down in the scale ("if she hoped that her purchase of this book would solve all her problems, she'd be dissatisfied") is how many women actually write. Unbelievably? Well, it isn't unbelievable. Many politically conscious women insist on making the feminine the generic. Again I see this only as a swing of the pendulum, it just reminds, it's a bit of defiance to say, well, what's wrong with it, what's wrong with the fourth version. Tell me what's wrong with it. And you say, "well, I mean, it implies that the person who'll buy this book is only a woman". "Ah!", they say, "exactly!, number 1 version is not any better."

And then I read an entire book, by a man, where every generic was religiously switched, from masculine to feminine and viceversa. Because they cannot pluralize as I do to avoid all these problems. My solution to that is to say "if people hoped that their purchase of this book ...". Instead, they used this version number 5, where they alternate between the two: "if anyone hoped that his purchase of this book would solve all her problems, he would be dissatisfied".

This may seem to you to be very way out from your daily concerns, and some of these things are a bit way out. But the principle is there, that you people as translators, particularly translators of legal material, you have got to be aware of the throb, the social linguistic throb that is going on in a society, and although social throbs tend to go around the globe, they do affect different societies at different speeds and at different times, and of course, given that certain languages have got grammatical gender, and English does not have grammatical gender, gender is of less importance to you in words than it is for English speakers.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm aware that I have gone along longer than I should have done, because it is such a pleasure to be talking to you and you've seemed so receptive that I have taken advantage of you. Thank you very much.