

PLATFORM

STEPHEN BURGEN

“The English as she is wrote in public”

Shortly after you enter the Forum you come across a sign that reads in Catalan *Plaça de les Trobades*, which in English would be rendered “Meeting Point”. Except it’s not: the English translation reads “Plaza of the Gatherings”, which somehow conjures up the image of a meeting of the Mohawk nation somewhere in upper Manhattan. If you go there by bus and sit near the front, you will see above the door where you enter the admonishment *No passeu* but, rather than the everyday English “No Exit” this is given as “No pass”. And above the seats reserved for people who in English one would describe as having “special needs” is a notice that reads: “These seats must be given to people deserving special attention”, from which one must conclude that the remaining passengers are barely worth the time of day. Of course no one could reasonably expect such cash-strapped organisations as the Forum or the Autoritat del Transport Metropolità to engage the services of a professional translator, especially when they can get the job done for less by their nephew’s girlfriend, fresh back from working for six months as a nanny in Weybridge and who speaks very good the English, but you’d think they just might, if only so as not to risk future embarrassment, ask a native English speaker to cast their eye over it just to make sure it was OK before publishing it on thou-



sands of buses. Anyone who has studied languages for more than five minutes will be aware of what are known as “false friends”, words that, while being almost identical in both languages, have radically different meanings. Thus, for example, *compromís* in Catalan means a commitment, not a compromise. Someone should point out to the Forum’s press people that collaboration is in general a negative con-

cept in English, in which case their website would not report that Joan Clos had “launched a stable collaboration proposal” nor exhort us to “Collaborate with the Forum! Why not participate in the cooperators programme”. Why not indeed?

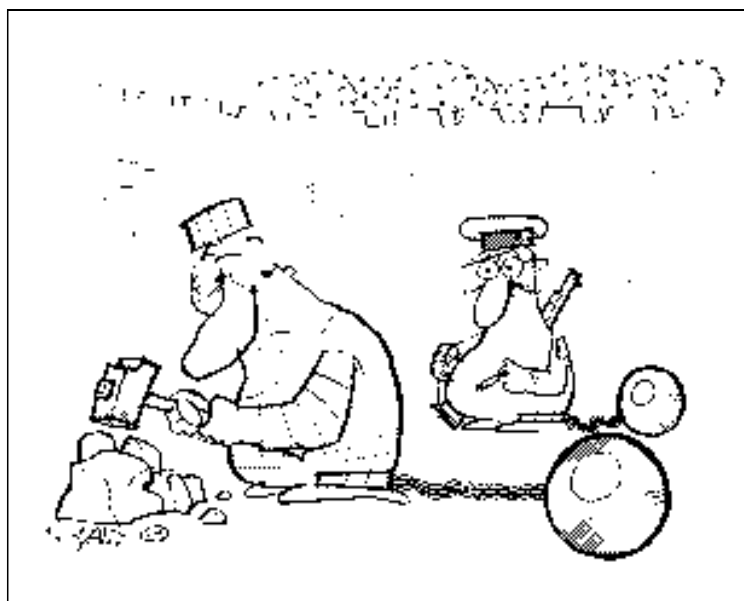
On the website of the aforementioned Barcelona transit authority, if you click the tab marked “Tourists” the page says “How to move you”. Any hope that this might be

an invitation to a soul night is dashed by the assurance that “It plans your displacement by Barcelona in bus or metro” adding that it will help you “to travel without limitations”.

Tourist offices, who you would think would see the value of investing a little in quality translation, are in general no better. Without naming the culprits, one of them invites you to visit their city with the words: “If there is something we can tell you about our city is that here you will thrill to emotions, feelings and experiences that will not leave you indifferent.” (A prize to anyone who can guess the city in question.) Another attempts to whet your appetite for the local cuisine by saying: “When springtime arrives to the geographical location where we have our roots” while the website of a third suggests that hearty, outdoors types might like to “walk through the natural spots”.

Given the proportion of English speakers among the millions who visit Catalonia every year, and in the light of Barcelona’s pretensions as the capital of the Mediterranean, these linguistic infelicities, so easily and inexpensively avoided, make the place seem hopelessly provincial. Bearing in mind that you can hire a decent, professional translator for 15-20 euros an hour - about as long as it would take to translate every single one of the signs at the Forum - one wonders what the obstacle is. Arrogance? Surely not.

THE STING BY JAP



VIEWPOINT

CARLES RIBERA

Learning new languages

We are told that we should learn other languages, and our teachers, governments, mothers, fathers and grandparents, all exhort us to sign up for English classes. Particularly English, though there are also other important languages which they claim will open up doors to us in the future - and if they do not open any doors in the present, then this is because learning languages takes time. However, a recent study claims that being multilingual makes us wiser and more alert, even the more dull-witted and dozier of

us. I can speak more than one language, which I suppose is the minimum that can be expected, and so it is no great achievement. But the point is that as I am tired of studying the languages I do speak, they are turning irretrievably rusty owing to the lack of opportunity I have to practise them with anyone but a few tourists in my town, but as they are only interested in finding the way to the bullring, I pretend that I don’t understand a word. The other language I speak is Spanish, though far from being an advantage, my coun-

try’s laws have turned it into a dead weight. Not because of the language itself, but because you always end up thinking: hey, if you can speak Spanish then why dub films in Catalan, serve people in Catalan, etc., etc. Meanwhile, down at the Forum they are preaching multinational multiculturalism, with just a hint of exoticism so that in 50 years we will all recall that at the Forum everyone called what we had always known as a large tent a *haima*, and that in 50 years they will be calling it an *entoldado* marquee.



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