

POTENTIAL TRANSLATION PROBLEMS PRESENTED BY METAPHORICAL  
DESCRIPTIONS OF HUMAN GESTURES (WITH ENGLISH INTO RUSSIAN EXAMPLES)

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Over the past nine months I have been reading my local newspaper, which is one of the major papers in the US and collecting all the idiomatic uses of English found in articles about our current presidential campaign. By the time this is published, I will surely have more than 6000 of them. One of the most interesting type of common usages in my data and one I can find very little discussion of, is the use of descriptions of human gestures, or call it body language, as a metaphoric way to suggest a person's or group of people's emotional reactions (*jumping up and down, wringing their hands*), attitudes toward something (*gritting their teeth, turning up their noses*) or some other aspect of behavior that almost certainly does not involve the literal use of that gesture (*kicking the cat, off the top of his head, bending a knee*). Such usages are quite common in the newspaper data I have been examining.

Since the human body is a shared element across cultures and physical actions and reactions are constrained by biology, with the exception of subtle nuances, physical descriptions of any of these gesture phrases<sup>1</sup> can be translated literally and will certainly be understood in physical terms. However, the fact is that many and possibly the large majority of these literal translations will not have the same meaning and function in the target as they do in the source text. Furthermore, in general writing a large number of gesture phrases in the language are used without the actual physical gesture having been, or even postulated as having been, performed. Their description in discourse has an idiomatic meaning only. And yet only the most common and straightforward or the most opaquely idiomatic of such phrases find their ways into idiom dictionaries.

It seems to me that, from the standpoint of translation, the treatment of gestures or body language descriptions can be divided into at least the following categories.

1. Universal human gestures, with the same clear meaning in both languages: *smile, have tears in one's eyes, sigh in relief*. The translation of these can certainly be literal, and at the same time will be metaphorically correct. When these gestures are referred to they generally have actually been made.

1a) There are also gestures which may correspond in the target and source language but, although they seem natural, are not universal or evidently biologically determined, for example, *nodding one's head yes and shaking it no*. These too can be translated literally, though some care needs to be taken that the verb typical for the appropriate meaningful gesture in the target language is selected. (*кивать not клевать, which is nod in качать not трясти*).

2) The source language may refer to a gesture that is both physically and in meaning similar in the target, but which is described in terms that are not a literal translational equivalent. Although the conveyed meaning of the English *shrug* is appropriately translated by the physical translation *пожимать плечами*. Another Russian gesture *развести руками*, involving

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<sup>1</sup> I know gesture is not the ideal term to cover such usages, but hope the reader will tolerate my using it throughout this paper.

shoulder movement, but focusing on accompanying movement of the arms, is used metaphorically just as frequently. When gestures unlikely to be actually performed are used metaphorically to convey some reaction or attitude even very different physical gestures can be considered nearly universal translational equivalents. For example to *bend over backward* and the certainly more dramatic *из кожи лезть вон* (*crawl out of one's skin*).

3) Target and source languages may differ as to whether a universal gesture that can express a variety of emotions needs to have the emotion specified or simply conveyed by context. (e.g. *sigh of relief*, *вдох облегчения*.)

4) Some references to human gestures are not physically possible (*twist oneself into a pretzel*, *put your foot in your mouth*) or are based on animal rather than human body language (*wagging one's tail*, *getting one's back up*) and are of course always used metaphorically when referring to humans. These may be translated literally (physically) if that rendering is common enough to be understood in the target language as a metaphor or by translating the conveyed meaning, i.e., emotion or reaction. It should be remembered that, even if an animal gesture idiom in the source is likely to be understood in the target as a metaphor conveying mood or attitude, if it is not in common use in the target it may be interpreted as more disparaging than it is in the source.

5) A particular pitfall for translation are groups of similar gesture phrases that differ only slightly in phrasing but have quite different meanings and connotations. These may confuse even the most competent translators. For example: 1) *grit one's teeth* (do something despite the distress it causes one - *стискивать зубы*), *grind one's teeth* (physically but covertly express or experience stress that you cannot do anything about - *скрежетать зубами*), *gnash one's teeth* (demonstrate to others frustration and rage, as in the Biblical *wailing and gnashing of teeth*, also translated as *скрежетать зубами* though the distinction is important in English). 2) *Crossing one's fingers* (a supposed magical gesture to make something hoped for happen) and *having one's (hidden) fingers crossed* (a child's way to make a lie not really a lie or a promise not really a promise).

6) Similar to the complication above is the use of different verbs/nouns to convey different connotations or assessments of essentially the same gesture: smile (*улыбаться*)-*smirk* (*ухмыляться*); *wink-blink* (*подмигивать*, *моргать*). Here a smile is just a smile, but a smirk is a smile of evil or at least reprehensible offensive self-satisfaction, even if the difference is all in the eye of the beholder. A wink is an intentional gesture suggesting friendliness, or romantic invitation, or used as a covert signal of complicity. A blink is simply the involuntary or physically induced analog. Both the latter terms enter into a number of idioms and set phrases with different conveyed meaning. *In the blink of an eye* (very short time, *в мгновение ока*), *didn't even blink* (showed no reaction, *глазом не моргнув*), *wink at certain behaviors* (pretend not to see, *смотреть сквозь пальцы*), or the parenthetical (*wink, wink*) (giving a sign of complicity or insincerity to collaborators; perhaps, *Перемигиваться* in Russian. )

8) A real translation difficulty is posed by actual identical or very similar gestures that have different culturally established significances in the source and target. Lynn Visson in *What Mean?* (Русские проблемы в английской речи: Слова и фразы в контексте двух культур: Москва, Валент, 2011, p. 189.) cites an incident in which a Russian gesture meaning "*I am fed up with this*

*situation*” (с меня хватум) was interpreted by the person it was directed at as a “*throat slashing*” threat of violence. A translator in such cases must be sure to translate what the gesture referred to means rather than its physical nature or the Russian phrase describing a physical analog.

9) Descriptions of gestures that touch or are directed at another person frequently are meant to convey the gesturer’s attitude to the “gesturee”. When the description of a transitive gesture is used metaphorically, the phrase itself may convey an attitude even more unambiguously than an actual physical gesture would. For example the phrase “*patting someone on the head*” virtually always conveys a patronizing attitude if the object is a adult. *Погладить по головке* with its pejorative diminutive may be a good equivalent here, though Katzner translates this as *pat on the back*. *Pat on the back* in English has no such patronizing connotation and oddly today seems to be most used in the phrase “*Pat yourself on the back.*”

10) Some gesture descriptions, while straightforward in themselves, (e.g., *bite off*), may be included in larger idioms (*bite off more than one can chew*). One Russian equivalent idiom offered for this is *не по плечу*, which refers to someone confronted with a task that is too hard or great for him. However, the Russian does not convey the idea that the person has chosen the unperformable task himself. This additional information can easily be added. Or a non-gesture translation such as *не рассчитывать своих сил* might be used.

10a) One characteristic of the use of idioms in English is that they are very often not just cited in their canonical form but elaborated on, altered, turned into “anti-idioms,” or alluded to. In such cases, the meaning is highly likely to be expanded or altered as well. Here is just one of many examples in my newspaper collection alluding to *bite off more than one can chew* and referring to the methodical step by step approach of Hillary Clinton: “*she wants everyone to make sure to chew their manageable bites of progress carefully.*” A paraphrase of the meaning conveyed would not be anywhere near as vivid a description of the approach as the original. Unless the gesture translation was highly similar in both languages translation of such elaborations retaining all nuances would seem to be virtually impossible. Although in this case, perhaps not; Svetlana’s suggestions of “*Клинтон хочет, чтобы прогресс наступал не сразу, а с удобоваримой скоростью в час по чайной ложке*” seems quite satisfactory

11) Because many parts of the human body have multiple functions, different idioms referencing one of them are likely to focus on different aspects. It would thus be a mistake to assume that the aspect focused on in one idiom referring to a body part is the same as in another idiom citing that part. For example, consider the idioms in the database using the word “finger:” 1) to perform (or here not perform) useful work—*lift a finger to help*; 2) to deliver minimal physical blow (*did not lay a finger on-* 3) as a sensor, (*finger on the pulse, finger in the wind*); 4) as a tool for applying pressure for diverse purposes (*put a finger on the scale, finger on the button*); 5) to make a sound in a conventional percussive gesture, (*drumming the fingers, snapping the fingers*, the latter in a commanding gesture, the former in a conventional and actually physically occurring sign of boredom); 6) to serve as an aid to computation (*you can count on your fingers*), 7) to grasp or attempt to grasp (*slip through their fingers*); 8) to designate, especially in order to blame (*point a finger at*) and 9) to make three separate stabbing type gestures differing in degree of aggression—*wagging one’s finger* (admonition), *jabbing one’s finger* (provocation), or the

obscene *give the middle finger* (a strong provocation, both offensive and dismissive). Even though gestures referred to are used as metaphors, it is truly important for the translator to recognize both their nature and their tone and match them to the appropriate target phrase. Good correspondence to Russian finger phrases exist for: *point a finger*= *Показывать пальцем*; *not lift a finger* - *Палец о палец не ударить*.

Although the English equivalent is not part of my data, it is interesting that two (near) literal translational equivalents convey somewhat different meanings in the two languages: *To have someone twisted or wound around your little finger* means in English to have the person under your complete control, while the Russian equivalent (*Обвести вокруг пальца*) means to deceive or dupe someone. It is further amusing that the phrase “*finger-licking good*,” which I have always thought was coined in an advertisement for fried chicken, has a very close Russian equivalent “*Пальчики оближешь*.”

12) When translating English body language phrases into Russian and, even more important, translating in the other direction, one has to work around intrinsic differences in the obligatory distinctions the two languages make.<sup>2</sup> Conceivably a R>E gesture mistranslation might occur through the use of the wrong English article, although I cannot think of an example. More important here is the failure in Russian to distinguish routinely between arms and hands, legs and feet, and toes and fingers. Luckily, in some cases the context makes it clear. However, for example, *wave one's hands* and *wave one's arms* are quite different gestures in English both physically and metaphorically, and might well be confused going into Russian.

13) Idioms often contain phrases in which a gesture is negated; *didn't even blink*, *didn't lift a finger*, *did not turn a hair*, *nothing to be sneezed at*, *don't sweat*. Some Russian analogues are: *Не покладая рук*, *Руки не доходят*, *Не выходит из головы*, *Не брать в голову*, *Не отводить глаз*. If these are not positively known to a translator they are even harder to interpret without help than are the positives. After all sneezing, or sweating, or blinking can at least be visualized, while not sneezing, sweating or blinking might mean anything. The existence of positive counterparts (e.g. *I was really sweating that exam*) may or may not help with translating a negative.

When a gesture is referred to only or primarily in the negative, e.g. *didn't lay a finger on* (either never attempted the slightest violence or tried and failed, as for example, a boxer, in attempts to do violence) or the Russian *Палец в рот не клади*-(don't stick your finger in his mouth, i.e., don't trust this guy) if not positively known, are likely to require an authoritative dictionary or expert unless the context is clear. Negative gesture that seem to be near translational equivalents physically may have quite different conveyed meanings. For example, *didn't raise a hand to someone* means in English, never attempted to strike another, showed no violence; while a similar Russian expression *Рука не поднимается*, means, does not have the resolve or courage to kill or beat someone. Consider the consequences of a native English speaker confusing this phrase with very similar *Руки не доходят*.

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, English lacks the complicated Russian set of prefixes that can be used to make subtle modification in the characteristics of an action when describing it.

14) Finally, there seems to be a new trend in English to use adjectives based on reactions to describe phenomena (on the model, say, of the established *breathhtaking*) that are considered striking. Some of the common ones are *jawdropping*, *eyepopping*, and *cringeworthy* —it matters little that such reactions are seldom called forth by the objects of these descriptions (which are most frequently used to attract a reader's or buyer's attention). I know of no analog in Russian and suggest that normal terms for astonishing, appalling etc. be used. The Russian analog to *finger-licking good*-- *Пальчики оближешь* may be suggestive of ways to translate these more idiomatically, if the need to do so is felt.

Examples of different ways to translate gesture phrases.

Near identical body language description, analogous meaning. Actual gesture may or may not have been performed: *sigh of relief*, *вдох облегчения*, *couldn't take my eyes off*, *не отводит глаз*, *wave off*, *отмахиваться*, *point a finger at*, *тыкать пальцем*.

Somewhat different gestures described and used metaphorically, same conveyed meaning. *Wink at*, *глядеть сквозь пальцы* (literally: gaze through one's fingers.)

Different gestures used metaphorically with the same or very similar meaning: *rolling their eyes (making a face) when someone wasn't looking*, *кукиш в кармане*.

Descriptive gesture used metaphorically limited to one emotion or attitude in one language, but used variously to refer to a number of them in the other. *Throw up one's hands* means in English to refuse to continue in frustration or despair, where the analogous gesture *всплескивать руками* can be a reaction to any number of strong emotions, including delight. The English would have to be translated with a specification of emotion.

A gesture based phrase in the source may frequently need to be translated by an idiomatic phrase that does not correspond to any gesture, position, or physical reaction *head over heels in love for example*, is best rendered as, *любить без памяти*. How then might one handle the ironic "heart over head in love" used in a newspaper story (perhaps, *без памяти и без мозгов*).

Gestures may be the same or quite similar in target and source but in one language clearly obscene but merely rude but not indecent in the other. This is the case with the gesture described by *to give someone the middle finger (actually or metaphorically)*, which is used not completely absent in my newspaper data. I have seen this translated as *Показать фигу/кукиш*, a negative Russian gesture involving the same finger and readily interpreted visually as suggesting a sexual act that is rude and dismissive but not obscene, signifying a very strong no. The actual analogous obscene Russian gesture involves chopping a hand against the opposite elbow.

If, as may happen not infrequently, there is no gestures or idiom in the target that matches the source it should virtually always be possible in the target either to use a non-idiomatic description of the gesture meaning, or to describe the gesture and specify what it conveys in the source culture.

Even a quite interpretable target language metaphor used to translate a well-established source idiom may overemphasize the gesture description. Literal (physical) translations of gestures that have established metaphorical significance in the source should not be used if they are extremely unusual in the target. For *kiss someone's ring* we suggest *низкопоклонничать*, not a physical description of the ritual gesture—possibly unknown to Russians. Of course the actual physical gesture would need to be physically described.

Sometimes, even with both physically and metaphorically equivalent gestures, a slight adjustment needs to be made in the translation. In English about multiple people asking for money you would say *with their hands out*, but in Russian you would still use the singular *с протянутой рукой*.