



A NEWSLETTER FROM JENNY BHATT
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WE ARE ALL TRANSLATORS

FOCUSING ON THE ART & CRAFT OF LITERARY
TRANSLATION & THE TRANSLATING LIFE.

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Dear Reader,

Words that sound like the things they describe. Onomatopoeia. You'd think they'd be the easiest to translate, right? Well, no. Because there's a strong relationship between sound and language. The father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, wrote about how onomatopoeia is different from language to language because we perceive the sounds we hear through the languages we know best.

Non-English languages are filled with, it seems, even more onomatopoeic words than English. I have no study to back this up but I can certainly say this is true of Gujarati, the language I grew up with and translate from. Also, I asked the hive mind on Twitter earlier this week and got a treasure trove of [responses](#).

You might also enjoy this brief video.



So, this week, as I worked on my translation projects, I paid even closer attention to onomatopoeic words and whether they'd make sense in English as they were or whether I'd need to find the English equivalents. I would have loved to stay with most of the Gujarati versions, to be honest, because, to me, they sound cool alongside the English. A **Gujlish** dialect. But, sadly, I wasn't able to keep them. Here's a sampling:

-- रज्ज्विष -- Rebjheb -- meaning profusely (used to describe how one might perspire)

-- उथलपाथल -- Uthalpaathal -- meaning topsy-turvy

-- फफध्व -- phaphadvu -- meaning to make a flapping sound or tremble (e.g. when lips tremble)

-- जलजलियु -- jhaljhaliyu -- meaning tears welling up in the eyes or eyes glistening with tears

I mean, any editor will balk at this (made-up example): "She was rebjheb with perspiration as she watched her entire world turn uthalpaathal. Her lips went phaphadphaphad and her eyes became jhaljhaliya."

Beyond the foreign words, it doesn't sound "literary" enough. Although, of course, we mean dominant western literary traditions there too. So I must write it as: "She was perspiring profusely as she watched her entire world turn topsy-turvy. Her lips trembled and her eyes glistened with tears." Not as interesting as the Gujlish above, no?

And yet, think about how much English has borrowed from Latin and other European languages. Even from South Asian ones like Hindi and Urdu. And haven't they all made the language that much richer? Also, if William Carlos Williams can use "soft coal, soft coal" to signify the chuffing of a coal fired steam train (watch the above video) ...

Ah well. Just a bit of Friday fun and food for thought.

Here are some interesting links:

[READ: Hearing the 'Ramayana' Again \(a book review by Wendy Doniger; NYRB; paywalled, I believe\)](#)

[READ: New generation of Korean literary translators brings more diverse voices to English market \(by Park Han-sol at Korea Times\)](#)

[BOOK RECO: The Greatest Invention: A History of the World in Nine Mysterious Scripts by Silvia Ferrara \(Author\) Todd Portnowitz \(Translator\)](#)

[BOOK RECO: Catching Fire: A Translation Diary by Daniel Hahn](#)

[WATCH: City Lights Live! Seagull Books @ 40 \(with Seagull founder Naveen Kishore joined by Nancy Naomi Carlson, Alain Mabanckou, and Khal Torabully; hosted by Peter Mavelis and Paul Yamazaki of City Lights\)](#)

Over to you. Tell me about an onomatopoeic word or phrase you like (in any

language.) Please let me know via the social media links or in reply to this newsletter. Or, if you're on Twitter, in reply to this [thread](#).

Until next week.

Warmly,

[Jenny Bhatt](#)

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