



## LOST IN TRANSLATION

BY DAVID LOWE

I find it quite touching how you French adopt an English word into your beautiful language without quite getting it right. Take *baskets*, for example. "Basket" in English means *panier*. "J'ai mis mes baskets" sounds to us like, "I put my shopping bags on," which is peculiar, to say the least. "Baskets" is derived from basketball shoes – shoes for playing basketball in. You kept the word "basket" and lost the word "shoe", which is understandable as "shoe" to you sounds like *chou*. It is just as ridiculous to put cabbages on your feet as it is to put baskets. You assume this use of *baskets* without complex and without an ounce of irony, so that it sounds rather charming. And while I'm at it, the word "jogging" means *petite course à pied*. It's not an article of clothing – we call that a tracksuit. A *footing* is not English, but if I were pushed to give it a meaning, it sounds rather like a visit to the chiropodist. "Sweat" is that wet stuff that comes out of your pores when you make an effort; it's not an article of clothing either. To further confuse matters, you pronounce sweat as "sweet" – i.e. *sucré*, which, I am sure you'll readily admit, is a step in the wrong direction as "sweat" is rarely "sweet". The origin of your sweat is "sweatshirt" – a sports shirt in which we sweat. Just as with *baskets*, you've dropped the essential part of the original word "shirt" (*chemise*). "Je mets mon sweat, mon jogging, et mes baskets pour faire un footing" sounds very strange and quite meaningless to English ears.

I'm pointing this out, but don't worry about it. Said with an adorable French accent, these little idiosyncrasies are what makes you so irresistible. Technically, these words are what you call *faux amis*, or *faux anglicismes*, and I don't want to embarrass you, but there are lots more of them. For example, *un brushing* is a "blow-dry" – you've kept the "brush" (*brosser*) part, but forgotten the more important "blowing" part from the *seche-cheveux*. *Un smoking* is a "dinner jacket". "Smoking" sounds rather quaint in a cocktails-in-the-colonies-with-Noël-Coward way. In British English, *chips* are "crisps" and *frites* are "chips". A *caddie* isn't a supermarket trolley, but somebody ("caddy") who carries your golf clubs. For *parking*, we say "car park". *Parc* is originally a French word which meant "a place to keep animals". We borrowed (stole?) the word, put a "k" on the end, threw out the animals,

then put cars in and called it a "car park". The French re-imported this word, took off the "car" bit and added an "-ing" to get *parking*. You do this quite a lot actually, putting "-ing" on the end of a word, as if this makes it English: e.g. *fooding, dancing, forcing, living, pressing, camping, dressing*. Can you undress in a *dressing* or die in a *living*, or not smoke in a *smoking*?

Words like "bacon", "sex", "fair play", "cool", "strip-tease", "fun", "surf", "low cost", "playboy" and "thriller" have been imported into the French language *tels quels*, since these concepts didn't seem to exist in France. They are, however, often pronounced with an accent that makes them incomprehensible to our Anglo-Saxon ears – *un triller, Streep* (as in Meryl)-tease, for example. Sometimes you take a word and, in order to bluff the Académie Française, try to pretend it's French by changing its spelling: *bifteck* (beef steak), *bol* (bowl), *bouledogue* (bulldog). This last one is a bit of an insult, as you have taken the "bull" (*taureau*) out of our national symbol to give this most characteristically British of animals a *boule*. *Fioul* is just a phonetic spelling of "fuel", like *paquebot* (packet boat), *redingote* (riding coat), or *rosbif* (roast beef).

My favourite, which really gives the game away, is *talkie-walkie*, as you so charmingly say. We Anglo Saxons say "walkie-talkie". The French, a more Latin people, put the emphasis on "talkie" rather than "walkie", while we Anglo Saxons, a less voluble people, put the accent on "walkie" rather than "talkie".

All this is "lost in translation", a phrase which even when not translated loses its meaning, as it's a quotation from the American poet Robert Frost: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation".

