

Found in translation

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

January 24, 2016

On a brutally cold and foggy Friday afternoon, our local sponsorship group welcomed our new Syrian friends to our city in Canada. Several times as I was driving them from the airport to the home we had prepared for them, I wondered what must have been going through their minds as they looked out on the frosty white scenes that greeted them. *Have they dropped us off at the North Pole?!*

I couldn't *ask* them what they were thinking, of course, because I speak zero Arabic and they speak next to no English. It is incredibly frustrating to be unable to communicate.

A few of our dear Muslim friends had been at the house on that first day to translate, and this was immensely helpful. But on several occasions since, I have dropped by on my own to see how they are doing. Once we get past "hello" and "how are you?" and "was the house warm enough last night?" we often end up just sitting and smiling at each other. My new friends always insist that I stay for coffee. And so we sit around the table, smiling and struggling together across a chasm of incomprehension. Sometimes, through a combination of Google Translate on my phone and hand gestures, we can make a bit of headway. But at least as often we just end up grinning and shaking our heads at how the app has translated our speech. *No, that's not what I meant. Not even close.*

And even when we do have translation help from Arabic-speaking friends, I often fear that there are things lost in translation—things that I *mean* that either do not come through or fail to be communicated in the way that I mean them. Sometimes the answer to the question bears only a slight resemblance to what was originally asked. Sometimes I want to know more, but it's hard to talk beyond shorter spurts of communication. And it's hard to maintain a normal conversational *feel* when there is an extra stage of translation inserted into every few sentences.

There is so much that I want to know. I want to hear about these families' lives in Syria before the war. I want to know how the war affected them and their children. I

want to know how they made a life for themselves in Lebanon for three years. I want to hear about their hopes and fears now that they are here in Canada. And I'm sure there is much that they would love to be able to say to me as well. *Is it always this cold? When will our kids go to school? What do I do with these forms they gave me in Toronto? When will I be able to work? Are there people in this country who consider us to be a threat? Why?*

These questions and answers will probably have to wait for a while. At least the full conversations that we would like to have will have to wait. We will keep trying, though. Of course. What else could we do?

But I am also finding that the difficult process of translation comes with gains as well as losses. At the most basic level, being in the same room as other human beings that cannot understand what I say and whose words I cannot understand forces me to be a bit more creative, to resort to nonverbal communication. Warmth and love and kindness must come through gestures and touch and facial expressions rather than words. Throwing a ball or sharing a candy with a child, for example. Or looking at photos of our families on our phones. There is much that can be said without words. Which is probably a good thing for wordy people like me to remember.

And beyond that, the inability to reliably communicate carries along with it the basic (and crucial!) reminder that there are people whose experience of the world looks and sounds and feels nothing like my own. To inhabit a different linguistic space than another person is a big thing, a massive divide to cross. But what are words but carriers of experiences and impressions and *lives*? Words always point beyond themselves to the human beings who speak them, the human beings whose perceptions of reality have been shaped in contexts that are in many ways unlike my own. My own way of apprehending and communicating the world is not the only one or the default one. Imagine that. It's probably good and necessary to bump up against this reality from time to time.

To struggle with translation is not just about making sense of sounds or characters on a page or a screen. It is about creating space in our brains and in our lives for that which is "other." It is to be open, always, to the bare truth that my way of understanding and expressing the world is not the only one. And it is to be open to having my own perceptions and understandings and ways of expressing the world expanded or nuanced or changed by being in contact with another's. This is no small thing. Indeed, the world could probably use a lot more of this. I could, at any rate.

I am looking forward to the day when our new Syrian friends can speak English and we can have long, leisurely conversations. But until then, I want to not only pay attention to what might be lost in translation, but to the equally important things that might be found.

*Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)*