Lost in Translation? Found in Laughter!

European Day of Languages • 26 September

What do falling apples, flying cats and dogs, and flies in your nose have in common? They all make perfect sense — in the right language!

Every year on 26 September, the European Day of Languages celebrates linguistic diversity and encourages people of all ages to learn languages. Established in 2001 as an initiative of the Council of Europe, it reminds us that even a few words in another language can help us connect.

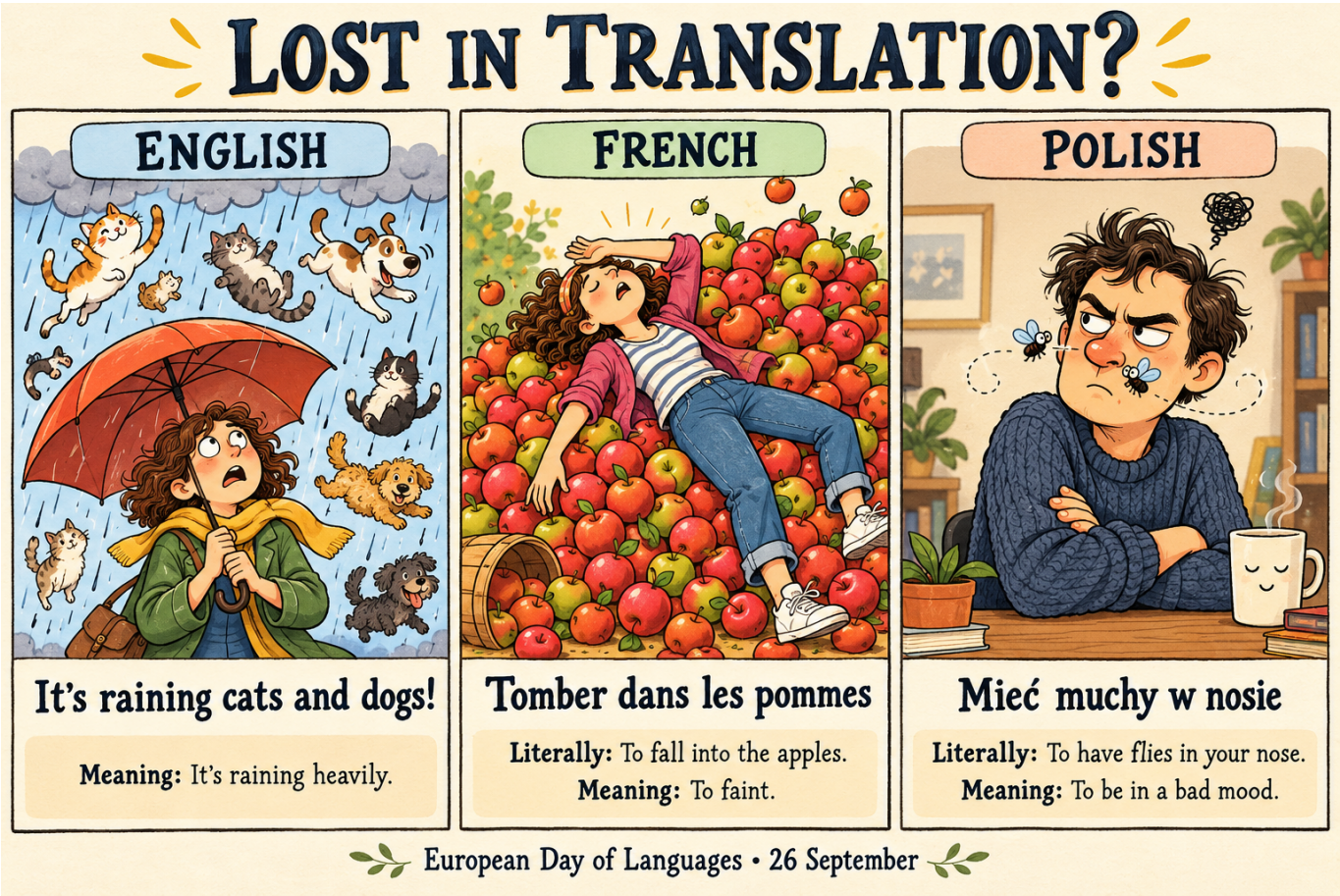
Learning a language also means discovering expressions that sound wonderfully strange when translated literally. In English, heavy rain can mean “it’s raining cats and dogs” — an excellent reason to carry a very strong umbrella! In French, “tomber dans les pommes”, literally “to fall into the apples”, means to faint. In Polish, “mieć muchy w nosie”, or “to have flies in your nose”, means to be in a bad mood. No insect repellent required!

Behind the humour is a useful lesson: understanding individual words does not always mean understanding the message. Context, culture and curiosity matter too.

At university, languages help us exchange ideas, study abroad, make friends and collaborate across borders. For future healthcare professionals, they also offer a way to listen to patients and understand their concerns.

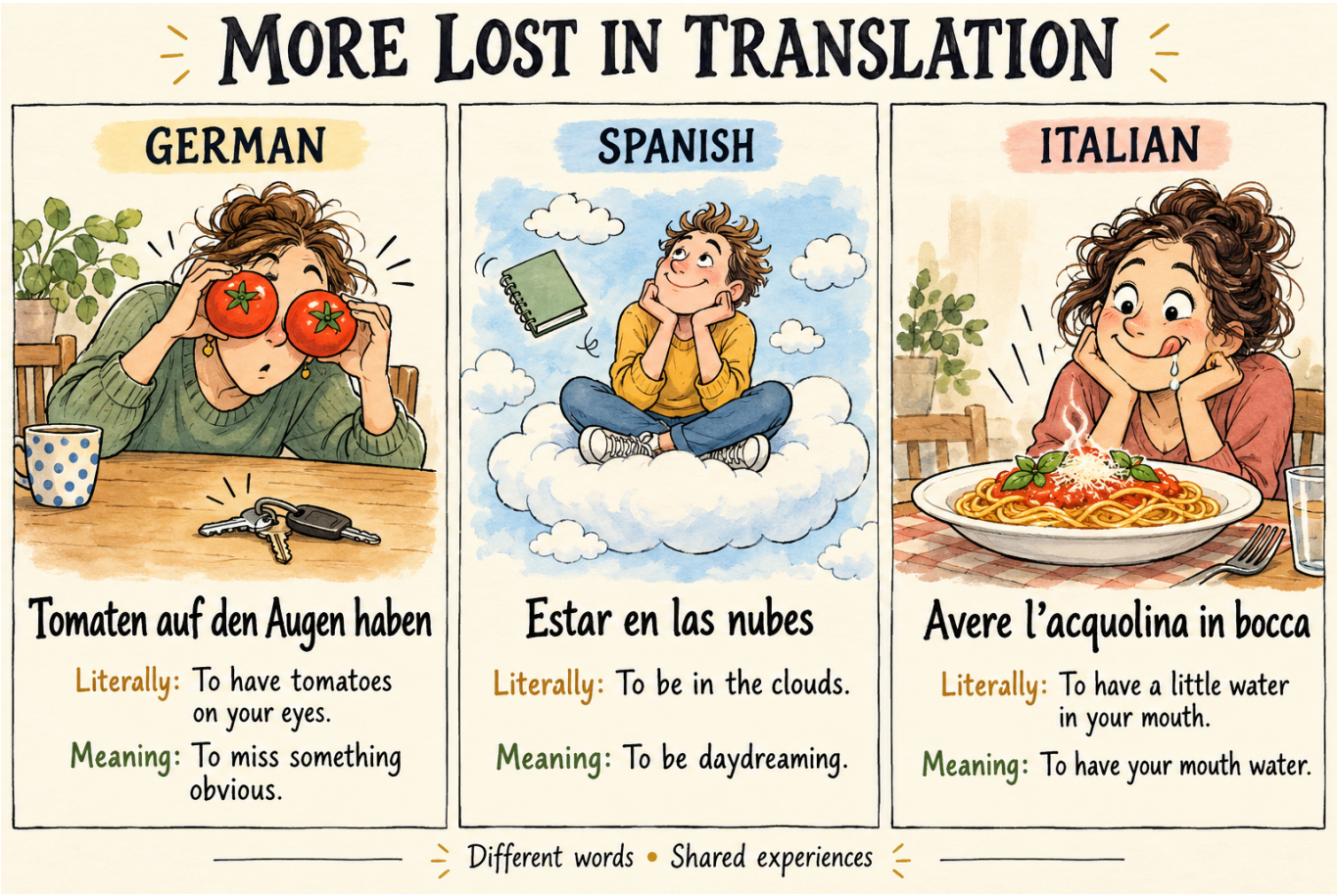
So why not celebrate today by learning a new greeting, sharing a favourite expression or starting a conversation in another language? You do not need perfect grammar to take the first step.

Be curious, have a go — and enjoy the occasional misunderstanding!



More expressions to make you smile

Three more languages and three wonderfully literal cartoons



German and the missing keys

"Tomaten auf den Augen haben" means failing to notice something obvious. Looking for your keys when they are right in front of you? Perhaps it is time to remove those imaginary tomatoes!

Spanish and a wandering mind

"Estar en las nubes" describes someone who is daydreaming or distracted. You may be sitting in a classroom, but your thoughts are already enjoying a holiday among the clouds.

Italian and a tempting meal

"Avere l'acquolina in bocca" describes your mouth watering at the thought or sight of something delicious. Some expressions need very little translation when lunch is involved!

Which expression would you use today?

Share an idiom from a language you know. Translate it literally first and let someone guess its meaning. Would it make a good cartoon?

About the celebration: Council of Europe, European Day of Languages.
https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/european-day-of-languages

Arabic and Mandarin Chinese

Two more languages with a sense of humour

The European Day of Languages is also an invitation to be curious about languages spoken around the world and in our own communities. These two expressions turn familiar experiences into unforgettable pictures.



Arabic and the enormous problem

جعل من الحبة قبة

Transliteration: jaʿala min al-ḥabba qubba.

Literally: He made a dome out of a grain.
Meaning: He exaggerated a small matter — like “making a mountain out of a molehill” in English.

One small typo in an email? Annoying, perhaps. A complete international disaster? That might be a dome made out of a grain!

Mandarin Chinese and the overdecorated snake

画蛇添足

Pinyin: huà shé tiān zú.

Literally: Draw a snake and add feet.
Meaning: Spoil something by adding unnecessary extras.

Your presentation is clear and finished. Then you add twelve animations, five sound effects and a dancing banana. Does your snake really need those feet?

Expression references: Arabdict, Arabic entry حبة; Taiwan Ministry of Education, Dictionary of Chinese Idioms, 畫蛇添足.
https://www.arabdict.com/ar/حبة/عربي-عربي
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