



The art of translation

John Boyle, who is doing his doctoral dissertation in linguistics at the University of Chicago, translated a Hidatsa recording of the story of how the Water Buster Clan regained its lost medicine bundle. Here are the four steps Boyle took to translate the account. The result is a series of four-line word groupings, somewhat like the stanzas of a poem. This example focuses on the first “stanza,” line:

TEXT V THE WATER BUSTER ACCOUNT

- A — wá:ra í:piraká:ci é:raha:ru watawa:ʔa:htú:ʔaš wiripa:tí watawa:ʔa:htú:ʔaš wahku:ciwa:wá:ha:ʔac
B — wá:ra í -piraká-aci é:rahaa-ru watawaaʔaahúaʔaš¹ wiripaati² watawaaʔaahúaʔaš
C — year INST-ten -APPROX then -LOC our.skulls Water Busters our.skulls

wah-kuuci-waa -wáa-hee -ʔa -c
1A -get -INDEF-1 -want-PL-DECL
- D — About ten years ago, we Water Busters wanted to get our sacred skulls back.

A: The translation begins with phonetic written Hidatsa. The phonetic reproduction is broken into lines, usually sentences but sometimes long phrases, all in the order given by the speaker.

B: Boyle breaks the sentence into what are called morphemes, the smallest meaningful linguistic unit, such as a word (*dog*) or a word element (such as *-ed* in *walked*) that can't be divided into smaller meaningful parts.

C: Boyle writes down the meaning, in English, of each word or other linguistic unit, as given in the original Hidatsa.

D: Boyle rearranges the literal, word-for-word translation of the Hidatsa into an English gloss, an arrangement that sounds more natural to the ear of an English speaker.