

A Uniquely American Declaration?

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WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT, THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL, THAT THEY ARE ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS, THAT AMONG THESE ARE LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.

These ringing words have inspired people from around the world – but do we all understand them in the same way? Relying on a popular online automatic translation program, we explored this question. (All translations were created using Google Translate <http://www.google.com/translate_t>.) The results were startling.

Consider, for instance, what happens when we take Jefferson's language and translate it into German and then back into English:

We hold these truths, in order to be natural, this all men are caused on an equal footing, which, which they are equipped by their creator with certain untransferable rights, which are under these lives, liberty and the pursuit of the luck.

The Declaration's elegant and uncluttered prose suddenly assumes a Teutonic ponderousness, a Hegelian penchant for obscurity and indirection. At first we were prepared to chalk up these opaque constructions to the limitations of our translating software, but then we noticed certain shocking cultural and political differences revealed by the German document. Consider, first, the poignancy of the German substitution of "luck" for "happiness." Buffeted by a century of wars both hot and cold, Germans characteristically view happiness as a matter not of destiny but of chance and fortuity. More astonishing still is the German replacement of "equal footing" for "created equal." Here we find an emphatic rejection of America's dedication to equality of starting conditions in favor of a radical equality of outcomes. Our Founders' rugged Yankee individualism thus finds itself, in translation, supporting the robust and generous German welfare state! The whiff of socialism could not be stronger.

A translation into French and back reveals astonishing differences of another kind:

We hold these truths for obvious in oneself, the this all men equal are created, that which they are equipped by their creator with certain right-hand sides unalienable, which among the latter are the life, freedom and continuation of happiness.

The French fascination with the *éminence grise* whispering into the ear of his Cardinal has led to the ouster of the American’s *unalienable rights* and its replacement by nefarious talk of *right-hand sides*. Also, in place of our right to *pursue* happiness, we have the French, the *bon vivant* pioneers of the 35-hour work week, demanding a right to the *continuation* of happiness! For us, happiness is not a given, but for the French, well, the only question is how to keep it coming!

Translating into closely related Italian and back is equally revealing:

We think this truth manifest, those all the men equal we are generated, what they are equips to you from their creator with determines to you straight unalienable, than between these are duration, the freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

The great Italian nation betrays its vestigial spirit of machismo as it understands the Creator’s gifts to us in terms of equipment. And we can’t help but detect an element of sexual insecurity in the egregious understanding of the rights in question as the unalienable right to being straight.

A back-and-forth into Japanese is more instructive yet:

As for us because it is self-explanatory these truths it is that all person, were drawn up the same 輩, they the life of happiness among these, are freedom and pursuit, that it is contributed by the originator of transfer impossible right of a certain specification you keep.

Here again the differences are dramatic. Our pursuit of happiness becomes for the Japanese the happiness of pursuit: a bold expression of the fierce Japanese work ethic and aggressive spirit of competition. Even more telling, in the place of the Founders’ invocation of a universal “We,” the Japanese insert a parochial “As for us”—a stark reminder that even today, a hundred and fifty years after Admiral Perry strove to open the closed society, Japan remains a remarkably insular nation, reveling in its homogeneity and separateness from others. Note in this connection, the automatic translator’s inability to render into English one of the Kanji characters, leaving the full meaning of the Japanese translation somewhat inscrutable.

Finally, we come to a translation into Arabic and back:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The near-perfection of the translation is startling. Is it possible that our respective values are far more mutually intelligible than we've been taught to believe? Still, certain differences must be noted. Our Founders' quaint use of "men" as a metonymy for humankind can be dismissed as a rhetorical convention of the 18th Century. Can the same be said of the aggressive capitalization of "Men" in this translation? And what can we say about the shocking absence of any reference to God? Is it possible that the Arabic version expresses a spirit of secularism that marks an advance over our "sacred" document of founding? If so, perhaps our precious Declaration could use a fresh translation from English into English.