

Lost in Translation

By Ryder Guido

A human named Brandon sits in a shiny metal chair aboard an alien spacecraft. He is sitting opposite a large snakelike creature, Gornax, who is reviewing papers. Brandon is attempting to make casual conversation.

Brandon: So... you speak English?

Gornax: Yes.

Brandon: How?

Gornax: The same way you are speaking right now, with vocal cords.

Brandon: But how did you learn it? Was it from kidnapping people?

Gornax: No. I learned it in college.

Brandon: They have alien colleges?

Gornax: Humans are not the only species that seek to further their knowledge.

Brandon: Sorry, that was insensitive of me.

Gornax: It is quite alright.

Brandon: So where did you go to college?

Gornax: U.C. Berkley

Brandon: What?

Gornax: I went to the University of California at Berkley

Brandon: Oh. Did you have to wear a disguise?

Gornax: I attended online.

Brandon: I didn't know they offered that.

Gornax: They started during Covid.

Brandon: Ah...

An awkward silence persists as Gornax uses his tail to shuffle some papers around before clicking a small tape-recorder and speaking into it. His yellow slitted eyes glance periodically at Brandon. He ends the recording with a specific turn of phrase.

Gornax (Phoneticized): [Ignied Kneckem Filushiant]

Brandon: What did you just say?

Gornax: [Ignied Kneckem Filushiant]

Brandon: Right. But what does that mean?

Gornax: It would be hard to explain.

Brandon: But you just told me you know English. Can't you just translate it.

Gornax: No.

Brandon: What do you mean no?

Gornax: I cannot translate it.

Brandon: I think I have Google Translate on my phone if that would help.

Gornax: It is not that.

Brandon: Then what is it?

Gornax: There are no human words equivalent.

Brandon: You can't even describe it?

Gornax: I suppose I could try.

Brandon: Okay.

There is a long stretch of silence where Brandon looks at Gornax expectantly, and Gornax continues to shuffle papers around, seemingly oblivious.

Brandon: So...

Gornax: What?

Brandon: Are you going to try?

Gornax: Oh, you want me to?

Brandon: What? Yeah. That's why I asked.

Gornax: Okay. I suppose it would be best to start with the words themselves. [Ignied] is one of our words for life. Specifically, it is the word for life that does not exist in eternal form, the finite life.

Brandon: Finite life as opposed to what?

Gornax: The infinite life.

Brandon: Like immortality?

Gornax: No.

Brandon: Then what is the infinite life?

Gornax: The life of the non-finite.

Brandon: But that would be immortal right?

Gornax: No.

Brandon: What is the difference between immortal and infinite?

Gornax: Immortal contains [Ignied], infinite does not.

Brandon: That tells me nothing.

Gornax: I tried to tell you.

Brandon: Okay, we'll come back to this. What do the other words mean?

Gornax: [Kneckem] is our word for sky.

Brandon: Okay, that's simple enough.

Gornax: It does not mean sky in this sentence though.

Brandon: Why not?

Gornax: Because it is paired with [Ignied] and [Filushiant]

Brandon: What does that change?

Gornax: It is no longer [Kneckien], that is infinite.

Brandon: So, it's "finite sky"?

Gornax: That could be a translation, but it would be more accurate to have [Kneckem] mean infinite.

Brandon: So, it would be the "finite infinite"?

Gornax: No, that would be [Ignied Kneckien].

Brandon: What's the difference?

Gornax: [Kneckien] is not [Kneckem]. [Kneckem] contains the sky.

Brandon: Um... okay. What about "Flushnat"?

Gornax: [Filushiant]

Brandon: Sorry, [Filushiant].

Gornax: It means “I burn”.

Brandon: That’s it?

Gornax: What do you mean?

Brandon: No special rules for this one?

Gornax: It means what it means.

Brandon: So, the whole sentence is: “The finite infinite sky burns.”?

Gornax: As a literal translation that would be acceptable.

Brandon: That sentence makes no sense.

Gornax: Not in your language, no.

Brandon: But how does it make sense in yours?

Gornax: The language fulfils an important role. It is both the content and the subject of the sentence. In thinking the sentence, you fulfill it.

Brandon: But I have thought the sentence.

Gornax: Not like one of us.

Brandon: Would I have to learn your language?

Gornax: You would have to learn our thoughts.

Brandon: How can I do that?

Gornax: I could share them with you.

Brandon: Like telepathy?

Gornax: No.

Brandon: Like mind control?

Gornax: No.

Brandon: Like...

Gornax: Please stop.

Brandon: Then how do you share them?

Gornax: I would let you think your thoughts with my mind.

Brandon: You've lost me.

Gornax: I can show you, if you like.

Brandon considers the offer for a moment before coming to a firm conclusion.

Brandon: I feel like at this point I have to.

Gornax: Very well.

Gornax inserts the tip of his tail into Brandon's ear. At first Brandon feels nothing but discomfort. Then he begins to think, and his thoughts are wide. He is the child of his father and the father of his son. He is the bridge between physical and mind. He is both the walker and the street. The thoughts overwhelm him. He is lost.

Then he remembers the sentence. He thinks it to himself, mouthing the words: [Ignied Kneckem Filushiant]. He is surprised by what comes up. He sees a memory he had forgotten. It is Christmas day, 1996; he is ten years old. He sits on the ground holding a present, it is the last one, the one that will end the celebration. After this moment is to come dinner and joy. Five months from this moment his grandfather will pass away, and his grandmother will follow soon after. Fifteen years from this moment he will propose to the girl of his dreams by putting a ring in her stocking. Three decades from this moment he will be sitting in the same room with his own ten-year-old, the age his parents are now. These moments are to come, but they are not yet. For now Brandon sits on the ground with his present and re-thinks the thought that he remembers thinking all those years ago. "I will never be here again."