

## El plumero

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Hace ya casi cuarenta años, cuando muchos medtraderos eran muy chiquitines o no habían nacido siquiera, Alexander Gode mantuvo durante años, bajo el título genérico de «Just words», una serie sobre lenguaje médico en *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA). A primera vista, se trataba de una serie sin grandes pretensiones, en forma de notas breves de prosa deliciosa sobre los aspectos más variopintos de la amplia superficie de contacto entre medicina y lenguaje. Lo que hace de ellas un auténtico tesoro para el traductor es, sin duda alguna, la formación enci-

1. Interlingua es le latino moderne con un vocabulario international e un grammatica simple. Interlingua es comprensibile a prime vista per personas qui son familiar con le vocabulario pan-occidental.

clopédica del autor y su extraordinaria capacidad para ir más allá de los vocablos concretos, trascender el provincialismo característico de muchos autores de lengua inglesa, y abrir los ojos del lector a cuestiones universales e intemporales. Buen ejemplo de ello es la nota que desempolvo hoy con el plumero. Gode aprovecha un neologismo en apariencia intrascendente, *calciphylaxis*, que podría haber sido cualquier otro, para esbozar en pocas líneas uno de los problemas centrales de la neología: el de la internacionalidad de los tecnicismos grecolatinos frente a la fugacidad y opacidad de muchos tecnicismos locales. No cabe duda de que mantener durante años una serie periódica del interés de estas *just words* no es en absoluto tarea sencilla. Pero es que este Gode fue, desde luego, un personaje singular donde los hubiera. Polígloto e impulsor infatigable de la interlingua<sup>1</sup>, catedrático de lenguas románicas y alemán en las universidades de Columbia y Chicago, Alexander Gode (1907-1970) es hoy más recordado como cofundador y primer presidente de la ATA (Asociación Estadounidense de Traductores).

## Calciphylaxis

If I were asked “Where does the word ‘calciphylaxis’ come from?”, I would answer “Montreal”. This, I assume, would result in the further question as to where Montreal (or, more specifically, Hans Seyle) got it, which question leads to a more interesting line of observation and argument.

The elements in “calciphylaxis” are Latin and Greek, but neither the Romans nor the Greeks had the word, nor could they have understood it. Since we know it originated in the head of Hans Seyle (a place excelling, linguistically and otherwise, by its system of multiple crops), we might take our query straight to the source, asking about origins where the origin occurred. But even Hans Seyle cannot know whether the word was conceived in French or English or German..., for the very question is wrong! “Calciphylaxis” is one of those thousands and thousands of words which from their very beginning are simultaneously French and English and German and Italian and Spanish, and so forth. “Nansen-passport words” I call them. Though we may come across them for the first time in an English setting (or French or German...), we know right off that no more than a slight rearrangement of their spelling garb is required to make them feel equally at home in any other language of the Western world.

The frequency of the Nansen words must not be allowed to dull our appreciation of their remarkable nature. They both symbolize and promote the intellectual unity of the Western world which persists over and beyond all its remarkable divergencies. The phenomenon is unique. I know of nothing quite like it in the history of human thought and human speech.

And now a concluding footnote: I chose the example of Seyle’s “calciphylaxis” because Seyle is also responsible for the medical term “stress”, which is English and nothing but English, and the rendering of which in other languages, within and without the Western community, has been accomplished only at great expense of argument, hot temper, and ill will (with the somewhat anticlimactic final result that the French now have “le stress”, the Germans “der Stress”, and so forth).

To my ear the sound of “stress” is much more pleasing than that of “calciphylaxis”. But “calciphylaxis” is a citizen of the world, while stress is an Anglo-Saxon who travels abroad (not always succeeding in making friends).

**A. Gode:** Just words. *JAMA*, 1962; **183**: 810.