

Translating Voynich

By Thomas van Kalken

Carly. Hola! Soy Carly! That's Spanish for, "what's up listeners it's your girl Carly Q, with another episode of your favorite secret podcast" roughly. In case you couldn't tell, I got a new app on my H-dad device to help me learn Spanish. Did you know Spanish is spoken in more than twenty countries? I love the way they put the question mark in front of the sentence. I love getting a heads up that a question is coming my way!

(Soundbite of app dinging.)

Carly. Oooh, that's my reminder to start today's lesson. And here's your reminder that I'm Carly Q, and this is Who, When, Wow Mystery Edition.

(Theme Song)

Carly. When I arrived at BUTTHED HQ that morning I had just completed a five-day streak on my new language-learning app and so was pretty much fluent in Spanish.

H-dad. Al caballo le gustaría ir al supermercado.

Carly. (butchering it) Al caballo le gustaría ir al supermercado. The app's mantra was 'understand everything.' And I was starting to feel it. Even if SOME people weren't.

Lewis. Hey Carly Q.

Carly. Hola Lewis.

Lewis. Hola?

Carly. Tengo una naranja.

Lewis. What?

Carly. Es para la biblioteca.

Lewis. Wow Carly Q, you've finally done it. Now you can say weird things in another language.

Carly. Me gusta el melón!

Lewis. We all love melon Carly Q. Look, management needs you to file those events away from the Byzantine Empire. You think you can handle that?

Carly. Si! I mean, yes Lewis. I'll do it straight after my morning lesson, en español!

Lewis. Don't wait too long Carly Q, they need it for the meeting later today.

Carly. Adios!

(Lewis fades out as Carly walks away and heads down to the basement.)

Carly. Lewis didn't understand a word I was saying, so I decided to take a couple of extra lessons on pronunciation before lunch.

H-dad. Tor-tu-ga. Tortuga.

Carly. Tor-tu-ga. Tortuga. I was working on my pronunciation of marine animals when something made me drop my perfect score.

(Soundbite of time-sealed event comes flying out the vacuum tube.)

Carly. Aghhh! My face!

(Soundbite of incorrect buzzer.)

H-dad. Incorrect pronunciation! Please try again!

Carly. Awww mumblecrust! My perfect score! It was a time-sealed event. Ok, this better be worth it.

Audio File. Event (beep) The Voynich Manuscript (beep) Untranslatable (beep) England 1912 (beep).

Carly. Untranslatable? Like a whole manuscript that nobody could understand?

H-dad. Time for a new lesson! Understand everything!

Carly. Sounds like a challenge.

H-dad. Start lesson now!

Carly. Ehhhh, one more can't hurt.

H-dad. The potato has escaped the enclosure. La patata se ha escapado del recinto.

Carly. Ok let me try. La patata se ha escapado del recinto! Sometimes when you're

learning a new language you can get so caught up that you lose track of time. And before I knew it.

H-dad. That rhinoceros is quite attractive.

PA Voice. Attention BUTTHED employees! Happy Lunchtime! Today's cafeteria specials are tuna ice-cream and vanilla sushi. Bon appétit!

Carly. Oooh gotta run.

Odie. Woah! Easy there basement companion. You almost made me drop my Sinigang.

Carly. The what?

Odie. My lunch.

Carly. It smells delicious? What even is it?

Odie. It's like a sour soup.

Carly. Odie, I love soup too. We are the same.

Odie. You're a little late. Where were you?

Carly. I was practicing my Spanish.

Odie. ¿Estás aprendiendo español?

Carly. Uh si. It's this new app. I'm totally obsessed with it. I missed my bus stop this morning I was so into it.

(Soundbite of Odie slurping soup.)

Odie. You got to be careful with that Carly Q. You don't want to get so invested in your screen that you forget to look up and see the world around you. Someone might spill their soup.

Carly. Sorry, what were you saying Odie? I was just completing a lesson.

(Soundbite of app ding.)

Carly. Boo-yah! 95%! Ok 95%!

Odie. (sighs) And how are the lessons going?

Carly. Well I'm on a five-day streak, so I'm on the hunt for a new challenge and

guess what?

Odie. You found one.

Carly. Bingo. A new time-sealed event!

Odie. (reading) Voynich Manuscripts. Untranslatable. What is this?

Carly. A challenge! The app says that it'll help you understand everything. I'm hoping that everything includes this Voynich Manuscript thingy.

Odie. Huh England, 1912? That's a tough spot to get to at this time of day. Closest I can probably get you is 1922.

Carly. Uggh really?

Odie. Hey, don't blame me. It's that inter-dimensional highway traffic.

Carly. Alright, fine.

Odie. Will you even have time to get back? How much lunch break do you have left?

Carly. Lemme check.

H-dad. Lunch break concludes in... 9 minutes and 42 seconds... 41 seconds... 40 seconds.

Carly. Yeeeah, it'll be fine. In and out. Nine minute adventure.

Odie. If you say so.

(Soundbite of footsteps approaching.)

Lewis. Carly Q! Where are those Byzantine empire files? You were supposed to get them to management before lunch!

Carly. Ah Mumblecrust!

Lewis. Let me guess. Distracted by your new little toy?

Carly. It is not a toy Lewis, it's a language learning app!

Lewis. It's a distraction.

Carly. It's fun!

Lewis. It's not your job!

Odie. Come on, in the elevator. You don't have much time today.

Lewis. What? Where are we going? Lunch time's almost over.

Carly. England, 1922. We still have almost nine minutes before lunch is over! Plenty of time for an adventure!

Lewis. Carly I really don't think this is a good idea.

Odie. No time for arguing now. Now come on, tell me the rules.

Carly. No altering the past.

Lewis. Be back by the end of lunch, which is now in about eight minutes.

Odie. And remember (Soundbite of wind chimes.) Don't get so lost in what you're doing that you lose track of where you're going. (laughing)

Carly. Next time can we go somewhere that I can test out my spanishhh. Por favor.

(Soundbite of elevator travel noise.)

Carly. OK. This is it. London 1922. Time to start translating.

Lewis. Well, as soon as we find the thing we're supposed to translate.

Carly. Good point, Lewis. If you were a Voynich Manuscript... where would you be?

Lewis. Maybe in a store called Voynich's Rare Books and Antiquities?

Carly. Well, that would be convenient but where would we find —

Lewis. Look behind you Carly Q.

Carly. Huh! Voynich's Rare Books and Antiquities!

Lewis. Will you look at that?

Carly. Come on, let's check it out.

(Soundbite of bell of door ringing as it opens.)

Carly. Hello?

Lewis. Ughhh, it doesn't look like this place has been cleaned in years.

Carly. You afraid of a few cobwebs and dust bunnies?

Lewis. No. Achoo!

Nibbles. Ughh, what's that smell? Did we fall into a damp sewer again?

Carly. Nibbles I didnt know you were in my backpack.

Lewis. Oh great the talking rat is here.

Carly. Play nice you two.

Nibbles. Seriously, what is that smell? Ohhh.

Lewis. It's books, Nibbles. Lots and lots of very, very old books.

Nibbles. Aaaand what are we doing in the creepy abandoned bookstore again?

Carly. Looking for a manuscript.

Lewis. The Voynich Manuscript.

Carly. Apparently it's untranslatable. By mere mortals anyway.

Nibbles. Well good luck finding it, Carly Q. This place is more of a messier than my Aunt Linda's place, and she lives in a trash can. Lemme have a look around.

Carly. There's a lot of loose paper lying around here, huh?

Lewis. Yeah, looks like the scrawlings of a madman.

Newbold. Whom are you calling mad, sir!

(Sounbite of everyone yelling.)

Newbold. Are you quite done?

Carly. Agghhhhhh! We're done.

Newbold. Can I help you?

Carly. Are you Voynich?

Newbold. I'm afraid not.

Carly. Mumblecrust.

Newbold. He's my employer. My name is William Newbold. Mr. Voynich employed me to decode a rather challenging manuscript he purchased in 1912. Some say it's untranslatable.

Lewis. This wouldn't happen to be the Voynich Manuscript, would it?

Newbold. Well, the manuscript has had many, many owners over the centuries, but yes, he is the current owner and that is what it is known as to some people.

Carly. Bingo! Good detective work, Lewis. We are making great time.

Lewis. Uh-huh...

Newbold. I do believe it's around here somewhere, excuse me.

(Soundbite of papers rustling.)

Newbold. Ah! Here it is.

Carly. Woah, It's so weird!

Lewis. What language is that?

Carly. Well I'm 90% sure it's not Spanish.

Newbold. Certainly not Spanish, my friends, and perhaps not even a language at all. Here, take this magnifying glass.

Carly. Alright.

Newbold. Now take a look at these ink smudges here and here.

Carly. Uhhhh, okay?

Newbold. My hypothesis is that these smudges are, in fact, an anagrammed micrographic shorthand code.

Carly. Yeah. That's what I was going to say. What what are you saying?

Newbold. I believe that there is a code hidden in these smudges and that THAT is the secret to decoding this thing once and for all.

Lewis. You sure it's not just, y'know, ink smudges?

Newbold. I'm fairly certain. And I'll be able to prove it in a few months. I'm on the

verge of a breakthrough, I can feel it. I have to be. I've dedicated a decade of my life to this project, it can't all be for naught.

Nibbles. Well, I didn't find anything in this pile. How'd you guys do? Hey, who's the old guy?

Newbold. R...rr..raaaaaaat!

(Soundbite of Newbold running out of the store.)

Nibbles. Was it something I said?

Carly. Well, looks like it's all up to Carly Q to decode this bad boy now!

Lewis. You don't really think you can translate this manuscript just because you learned a couple of phrases in Spanish, do you?

Carly. Uh, Lewis the app says you can 'Understand Everything'. Last time I checked, creepy old manuscripts were included in. 'Everything.' Ok, let me see here. I was locked in. I felt my translating skills bubbling up to the surface. It was as if the rest of the world melted away. Look at this? Doesn't that look like an 'E'?

Nibbles. Ah! Sorry, that was me. I think I stepped in an ink well or something'. Sorry, kid.

H-dad. ALARM SOUND! Lunch break over! ALARM SOUND.

Lewis. Okay Carly Q wrap it up. We gotta get back.

Carly. This smudge could be-

Lewis. Uhhhh, hello! Earth to Carly Q!

Nibbles. It's no use, kid. She's locked in.

Lewis. Carly Q!

Carly. And right then that I had a brainwave. I got it!

Nibbles. You solved it?

Carly. Not exactly but I have an idea.

H-dad. H-dad, Pooooowering up!

Nibbles. Hey, that's cheating.

Carly. Shhhhhh! H-dad, analyze and translate the text in this book.

H-dad. Translating! Writing emoji. Detective emoji. Magnifying glass emoji.

Lewis. Carly Q we don't have time for this. We're already late thanks to your obsession with this book.

Carly. This'll only take a second, Lewis. H-dad is loaded up with every single written language that's ever existed. This'll be a piece of cake for H-dad.

(Soundbite of incorrect buzzer.)

Carly. WHAT?!

H-dad. The following text does not match any language on file. Sad face emoji. No entry emoji. Crying emoji.

Lewis. Okay, great. Mystery solved. It's still untranslatable. Can we go now?

Carly. How is that even possible?

Lewis. What part of untranslatable do you not understand, Carly Q!

Carly. But Newbold said he was on the verge of a breakthrough!

H-dad. Additional information found on Newbold. Professor William Newbold born 1865 died in 1926- attempting to translate the Voynich Manuscript.

Carly. What?!

H-dad. His work with translation and cryptography became, obsessive.

Carly. Well that checks out.

H-dad. Dark lighting conditions impeded his eyesight. Newbold became wholly occupied by the singular task of translating the Voynich Manuscript. Stressed face emoji. Writing emoji. Cross-eyed emoji!

Nibbles. Yikes. Looks like this guy got a little obsessed huh? Blocking out the world like that, no good! But fascinating.

Lewis. Remind you of anyone?

Carly. Hey! Maybe that's what Odie was trying to say this morning about my language learning app?

Lewis. Yeah! That's what I've been trying to say! Now can we please get out of

here. We're going to get Odie in trouble if we're not back!

Carly. But what about Newbold?

Nibbles. Oh please, that dude is three blocks away from here by now.

Carly. Alright fine, let's get out of here.

(Soundbite of everyone running and panting.)

Carly. Nibbles pick it up!

Nibbles. How many times do I have to tell ya my legs are short?

Carly. Alright everyone, hop in.

Lewis. Right behind you Carly Q.

(Soundbite of elevator travel noises.)

Odie. Nice of you to finally show up! What took you so long?! Lunch ended two minutes and fourteen seconds ago! Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.

Lewis. Ask your basement companion.

Odie. Carly.

Carly. OK, yes. I got a little carried away with my translation challenge. I apologize.

Odie. Did you at least solve the mystery? What did the manuscript say?

Carly. No luck. Turns out that text really is untranslatable. Even H-dad couldn't crack it.

Odie. That is surprising.

Carly. We even met this guy who'd been trying to crack it for like ten years! It consumed his whole life!

Lewis. It was like looking into Carly's future.

Carly. It's like you said.

(Soundbite of wind chimes.)

Odie. Don't get so lost in what you're doing that you lose track of where you're

going. Yes Carly, take a look around. Don't forget about the real world.

Carly. I hear that. I wish Newbold was able to figure out that lesson.

Lewis. So does this mean you're finally going to get those files for me and management?

H-dad. New Spanish lesson available! Vocabulary. Lamp shades and light fixtures.

Carly. Ooooooh!

Lewis. Carly!

Carly. I know, I know, I know. I was able to get Lewis those files in the end. And not only that, I caught up on all the other work that I'd let pile up over the last five days. Turns out I'd gotten pretty far behind. So. I decided to limit my Spanish lessons to my bus ride home. The only place I can afford to get sucked into my conquest of the Spanish language.

H-dad. This is your stop.

Carly. Esta es tu parada.

H-dad. No. Really. You need to exit the bus.

Carly. No en serio. Tienes que bajarte del autobús.

(Soundbite of bus stopping.)

Carly. This is Carly Q signing off another episode of Who, When, Wow - edición misteriosa!

H-dad. You have missed your stop.

Carly. Has perdido tu parada. Wait, what?

H-dad. What was I trying to tell you?