

Sample Translation

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CONTENT

Setting the Tone: A Fairy tale Mirror	9
PART I: WHEN SUCCESS BECOMES A PROBLEM	11
Chapter 1 What Is Wrong With Me?	
Feeling Fake	20
The Odd One Out	26
A Wide Spread Phenomenon	30
Chapter 2 A Multi-Layered Problem	34
Layer One: Our Perceptions	35
Layer Two: Our Assessments	39
Layer Three: Our Emotions	45
Layer Four: Our Behaviours	49
Chapter 3 Origins of the Impostor Phenomenon	56
Is There An Impostor Personality?	58
How Do You Become an Impostor?	65
Playing a Role That is Too Big for You	68
It’s All My Parents’ Fault – Or is it?	74
Social Media – a Hotbed for Impostor Feelings	76
Chapter 4 Where’s the Exit?	79
Welcome to the Labyrinth of Mirrors	81
Once an Impostor, Always an Impostor?	83
You Very Own Impostor Circle of Hell	93
PART III THE WAY OUT OF THE MAZE	97
Chapter 5 Sharpen Your Perceptions	98

Looking Away Doesn't Work	115
Collect Your Counter-Evidence	121
Chapter 6 Don't Give Power to the Inner Critic	121
Spotlight on the Inner Critic	122
There's a Purpose to Your Negative Thoughts	126
Start Doubting	132
Get You Inner Backup	138
Chapter 7 Master of Your Own Emotions	146
Why Our Emotions are Vital to Our Survival	147
Everything Is In Your Head	154
Chapter 8 New Experiences – But the Right Kind!	162
Strategies To Overcome Procrastination	164
How to Deal with Blocks	170
Don't Overprepare	175
The Right Kind of Focus	178
PART III RISE ABOVE YOURSELF	
Chapter 9 I'm an Adult – So Why Do I Need to Please Everyone All the Time?	192
The Importance of Disappointing Others	194
Shadows of the Past	195
Step by Step from Child to Adult	203
Chapter 10 Rewrite Your Life Story	208
What You Can Learn from the Past	209
Unusual Solutions	217
Your Life from a Very Different Perspective	220
Chapter 11 Your New Life Starts Now	225
The Basic Impostor Multiplication Tables	228
Epilogue	233

SETTING THE TONE

A FAIRYTALE MIRROR

Once upon a time, there was a farmer’s son who lived in a village at the foot of a castle. One fine day, as he was working in his father’s fields, he found a glittering object in the soil. “What is that?” he asked himself in wonder. – “I am a magic mirror”, he heard the object say. And indeed, it did turn out to be some kind of mirror. The mirror was able to speak because it had been ensorcelled by a resentful witch in order to drive a princess to madness and eventually to her death, through deceit and trickery. But her evil deed had been discovered. And so the unfaithful mirror had been buried deep in the earth so that it would never see the light of day again. It rested underneath the soil for a hundred years until the farmer’s boy discovered it accidentally in his field.

The boy became curious and looked into the mirror. However, what he saw there frightened him. “But that’s not me!” he exclaimed. “I’m suddenly so small and ugly!”. In his distress, he nearly dropped the mirror. – “Careful!”, the mirror growled. “You nearly broke me there! Let me tell you: this is exactly what you look like.” – “But all the other mirrors I know show me a very different image. I’m actually much taller! – “They’re all lying to you”, the mirror asserted. “They’ve been made to please you, you can’t trust them. Only I can show you who you really are.”

And so the farmer’s son gave his trust to that mirror. The years passed. The youth became a strong and handsome man, but he never knew it. Several times a day, he looked into the magic mirror to make sure he knew who he was. And he never noticed that he had begun to change. He felt smaller and smaller, and less important. He withdrew from others because he began to fear them. They seemed much taller and more capable. He became increasingly unhappy and rarely left his own estate, so ashamed was he to show himself to the other villagers. No one else knew about the mirror and no one had any idea what had caused this strange change in his behaviour.

Until, one fine day, a young woman from the village began to spy on him. She had been secretly in love with the handsome farmer for a long time. But all her attempts to get closer to him had been futile, and, to her distress, she watched the man of her dreams becoming more sad and withdrawn all the time. Driven by curiosity and compassion, she wanted to find out what the reason for his strange behaviour might be. So she sneaked up to the farmer’s hut and, through a window, she saw him taking the mirror out of its hiding place and looking into it.

“What are you doing?” she cried out in astonishment, so loudly that he could hear her. “And what are you hiding behind your back?”

After first denying everything and making useless excuses, the farmer finally told her about his find. “Let me look into it!” she demanded. But when she saw her own image, she had to laugh. “That mirror is lying!”, she shouted. – “No, it’s not. It has always proved to be right. It is a wise counsellor.” – “I’m telling you, it is lying!”

With all her strength, the girl tore the mirror out of his hand and smashed it into a thousand pieces on the hard stone floor.

PART I

WHEN SUCCESS BECOMES A PROBLEM

Why did I start this book with a fairy tale? There are no witches in our world. And certainly no magic mirrors. But is that actually true? I can confidently tell you: these deceptive mirrors do indeed exist. But they’re not buried deep inside the earth, they’re buried in the events of our childhood. And we don’t carry them in our hands but in our heads.

As in my fairy tale, we often perceive ourselves and our achievements as small and insignificant while our mistakes and weaknesses seem enormous. The image we have of ourselves is just as distorted as that of the farmer’s face in the magic mirror. No wonder we lose our self-confidence over time. We feel inadequate, no matter what we do. And even if we get awards or promotions for special achievements, we tend to think that we were just lucky, and so we don’t really deserve the award. We’re afraid to be exposed as fraudsters. And when that happens, everyone will see how incompetent we really are.

This way of perceiving ourselves so very differently from everyone else has a name. Psychologists call it the impostor phenomenon, but apart from this professional description (which I prefer) the term ‘impostor syndrome’ has become just as common. Although this phenomenon can be frequently observed and has been researched for around forty years, many of those who are affected have never heard of it. They often mistake it simply for self-doubts or feelings of low self-worth. In the following pages, I will therefore explain what the impostor phenomenon is all about. I will show you the components of your inner (distorting) mirror and how it came into being. Marla and Oliver, both affected by the phenomenon, will accompany you on your way out of this labyrinth of illusions, and you will learn what steps to take to recognize your own errors and get rid of your false beliefs as you go on. This book will be at its most useful when you don’t just read it but also engage with it as a workbook. It contains many exercises and questions. They are there to invite you to engage with yourself and your impostor phenomenon. So make the time to answer the questions and perform the exercises. Just by reading them you won’t be able to change all that much. Look at this book as a guide.

It will support you in your efforts to free yourself from the mesh of faulty thinking, distorted perceptions and fears.

Are you ready for your journey into the realm of internal mirrors? Then let me introduce you to Oliver, who suffers from impostor phenomenon.

CHAPTER 1 WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

Beyond the open window, the world is silent. Only now and then, Oliver can hear the muted sound of a passing vehicle. Very few people travel at this hour. Oliver is lying in bed, motionless. It's already his fourth sleepless night in a row. In his mind, the same thoughts are constantly running in circles. "I have to sleep now. Tomorrow I'm going to have a difficult conversation with Mr Schwarz, so I'll need to focus as much as I can. Why can't I sleep?" He carefully rolls over onto his other side. Just the thought of tomorrow's meeting gives him stomach cramps. "How could I let myself be pulled into this? I should have continued working as an administrator!" Not for the first time, he's cursing his decision to accept his boss' offer.

It's nine months now since he was promoted to Departmental Director and since then, Oliver has felt increasingly worse. He used to love his job but now he's going to work every morning feeling uncomfortable, he's lost his appetite and can't find restful sleep at night. At first, he wasn't worried about this change. After all it's normal to have to get used to a new position. But instead of diminishing, his feelings of being overwhelmed and the pressure to succeed were getting stronger. And that was in spite of getting good feedback from his boss. Every task he succeeds at, every positive feedback make Oliver feel even more stressed and overburdened.

"What can I do?" he asks himself. He feels desperate. "I can feel I'm getting worse every day. If I don't do anything about it, I might get sick. I can't go on like this! But I can't disappoint my boss. And if I leave my job, what will my mother and my wife think of me? I would disappoint them too. Nobody knows how I really feel. Everyone thinks I'm confident and resilient. I couldn't bear to tell them the truth."

Oliver, too, carries a distorting mirror inside. No matter what he achieves, how often his work is acknowledged or how quickly he was promoted, deep inside he's convinced that he doesn't deserve the recognition. Even worse, with every affirmation, his fear of being exposed is growing. The more successful he is, the worse he feels. Because one of the most significant traits of the impostor phenomenon is that success doesn't lead to increased confidence but rather to fear of failure and self-doubts.

That's not logical, of course. We usually tend to learn from our experiences and the consequences of our behaviour. Behavioural psychologists call this 'learning through success'. So if we're afraid of

giving a talk, but rise to the challenge and are well received by the audience, our fears slowly diminish. We experience that our worries about embarrassing ourselves or disappointing others were unnecessary.

But that’s very different for people who are affected by the impostor phenomenon. As it is for Oliver. He’s been doing his new job for a sufficient period of time and so far, he’s been able to perform all his leadership tasks very well. His boss is happy with him and his co-workers accept him in his new role. He should have learned by now that he’s good enough. So why don’t Oliver’s problems get smaller but bigger every week?

It’s because Oliver’s problem – and perhaps also yours – isn’t just a lack of self-worth. Of course he thinks too little of his own worth and skills, or he wouldn’t constantly doubt himself. But that’s not enough to explain his disorder. People who ‘only’ suffer from low self-worth will eventually learn from their experiences and enjoy recognition and affirmation. Positive feedback and success nurture their self-confidence so that it grows and thrives.



Note: With the impostor phenomenon, success doesn’t lead to an alleviation of the fear of failure. On the contrary, it makes it worse.

But people struggling with the impostor phenomenon seem to be allergic to this ‘food for self-worth’. It doesn’t nurture them, on the contrary, it worsens their self-doubt. They can’t store their affirmations and successes in order to call them up again later. Their brains process positive recognition in a very different way. When they have successfully met a challenge, they don’t think: *“I’m good. I can do this and other people think so too.”* Something very different happens inside their minds instead. *“I was lucky that I managed to pull this off. It could easily have gone wrong. And it’s probably going to go wrong at some point. But now everyone expects me to make it work next time, too. What if I can’t do it then? At some point – maybe even tomorrow – I will be found out!”*

If you think that Oliver’s successes, and those of others affected by the impostor phenomenon, were so far simply too small and insignificant to convince them of their abilities, I’m afraid I’ll have to destroy this misconception. Celebrated keynote speakers with an audience of millions, top earners and award winning actors are also members of the ‘Impostors’ Club’. One of the best known is Jodie Foster. When she won her first Oscar in 1989, she couldn’t believe it. In her own mind, she was fully prepared to have the trophy ripped out of her hand again, with apologies for this regrettable mistake. In her view, she didn’t deserve that Oscar, Meryl Streep did.

Caution, Distorting Mirror!

A good performance doesn’t mean that a similar performance is expected of you every time and that people will be disappointed if you can’t deliver it.



And what about you? Do you think Jodie Foster is a great actor who deserved her Oscar? Many people share your opinion. Except, it seems, Jodie Foster herself. Like the farmer in our fairy tale, she believed the distorted image in her mind more than millions of fans. Success, you see, however big it might be, doesn't necessarily help to alleviate or even remove the impostor phenomenon. Because people affected by this phenomenon process their successes very differently from what you would expect. For them, they are not so much affirmations of their abilities rather than fortunate accidents, and so they worry that they might not be so lucky next time. Praise and recognition don't help them to slowly believe in their abilities but put them under extra pressure. And because they don't want to disappoint anyone, the bar of the expectations they feel they need to meet rises every time.

But there's a lot more to the impostor phenomenon than the constantly increasing pressure of success. We believe in our own distorted perception so much that we assume everyone around us will share it eventually. If we receive praise or recognition instead, we are convinced that the others must be mistaken. Or, even worse, that *we* were able to deceive them. Therefore we always feel like the impostor who gave his name to the phenomenon. We feel guilty about this deception and are afraid that the people around us will un-cover is, or, to be more precise, that they will be dis-illusioned. Our biggest worry is that our own mirror will be held up to us one day and that, suddenly, everyone will see that terrible image we are so very ashamed of already. The fear of being suddenly exposed as a fraud enhances our fear of failure and prevents us from being proud of our successes. Because, in our own eyes, they only prove one thing: we are very skilled at manipulating others.

Caution: Distorting Mirror!

If you were successful, it wasn't because, once more, you had more luck than sense. Of course it's possible that there is an element of luck in your success sometimes. But if you handled more than one situation well, then it's not a fluke, it's proof of your abilities. Even if you can't recognize them yourself right now.



FEELING FAKE

Marla's heart is beating fast as she clicks on 'send'. She hopes her boss won't find fault with the presentation she just sent him. Someone else would probably have finished the assignment in three days. But she's been working on it for two weeks, deep into the night. And that's although she really should be used to doing this by now! She feels exhausted and depleted. She lays her tired head on the table. "I just don't understand all this stuff", she sighs quietly. "I need to read up on everything laboriously so that I don't make any stupid mistakes. If the others knew how inadequate I really am, I would have been fired a long time ago."

Two years ago, just after her graduation, Marla applied for the position of assistant to the editor and was hired. She's still grateful for the trust that her boss put in her right from the start. And so she threw herself into every task with great enthusiasm. But that backfired. By now, everyone in the department thinks she works well under pressure and is very competent. No one realises how overwhelmed she feels.

When her boss tells her, an hour later, how happy he is with her work, Marla takes a deep breath. But her relief is short-lived. “Everyone thinks I'm a power woman, that I can keep turning things out just like that, and that their work is in good hands with me. But they're wrong. They don't have the faintest idea how long it takes me to do something like this. Until now, no one's found out that I'm not very good at all and that I'm just pretending. But I won't be able to keep up with this workload for much longer. And then I'm going to make mistakes. And then, at some point, I'm going to really mess it up and then everyone will be shocked and disappointed!”

Like all owners of an impostor mirror, Marla reacts very differently to approval than you would expect. Instead of being happy with the praise and accepting it, after a brief phase of relief, it starts to feel unpleasant. Because she is convinced that she doesn't really deserve these accolades. After all, she had to work far too long for her success and had to put in a disproportionate amount of effort.

Here, Marla succumbs to an error that often goes hand in hand with the impostor phenomenon. She thinks that you're only competent or intelligent if you don't have to work extra hard for your accomplishments and only if your success comes easily to you. As soon as she doesn't understand something immediately and has to research it, she feels incompetent. She doesn't realise that every success comes with a lot of sweat. In this regard, Marla still has a very child-like idea of what it means to be talented. You can either do it or you can't. So if she has to invest time or effort into something, for her, that's proof of her incompetence.

With this assumption, Marla belongs to the ‘natural talents’, a subtype of the impostor. Since research has shown that certain specific patterns of thinking – if not indeed faulty thinking – always re-occur in people who are affected by the impostor phenomenon, the researchers used them to classify the phenomenon. According to this classification, Marla is also a perfectionist, and so she has two reasons to feel like an impostor. Perfectionists assume that you're only competent if you managed to come up with a perfect solution. Good is not good enough if something better is possible. Even if they're complimented on their work, they can't accept it as long as they themselves can still find a tiny mistake or weakness in it. Because of their high expectations of themselves, perfectionists will of course take longer than others to complete a piece of work. While most people are happy with a good presentation, everything needs to be just right, every single phrase and all formatting. This extra work doesn't just create a mental overload, it also creates further issues. After having invested so much time,

perfectionists feel as if they were cheating. Particularly if they, like Marla, belong to the group of the ‘natural talents’.



Note: There are five different types of impostors. Natural talents, Perfectionists, Super Heroes, Experts and Loners. The difference between them is the difference in their concept of competence.

Oliver, on the other hand, belongs to the group of experts. He was promoted because of his achievements and abilities but still doesn't think he's qualified enough for his position. This is why he constantly educates himself further in his free time. He attends seminars and reads specialist publications. Meanwhile, he has indeed become an expert in his field, something he can't recognise himself, however. In his opinion, an expert needs to know everything or at least have a very high degree of knowledge and abilities. But the more he learns, the higher he sets the bar – the point where you can call yourself an expert – and always in such a way that he falls short. If someone else calls him an expert, he feels under pressure and even more like an impostor.

Oliver is also a little bit of a loner because he assumes that you have to achieve your success all by yourself. He would never ask anyone else for help because that would show that he's not as competent as they think, and then his achievements would be worth nothing. He keeps to this attitude even when it's obvious to everyone that his workload is far too high for him to be able to deal with all of it – which means he can only achieve a suboptimal result. Whether he asks for help or not, either way he'll only prove his incompetence. He's trapped himself inside his own thoughts – and there's no way out.

And then there's the category of the super heroes. They're something like the perfectionists' perfectionists. They expect top performance from themselves in all areas of life, not just at work. Their flat is perfectly decorated, their household is in tip top shape. Their kids are well brought-up and always well mannered. Their circle of friends is distinguished, their finances are well-ordered. They're keeping many balls in the air at the same time and at a very high level. As soon as even one area of their lives doesn't live up to their own standards they feel they've failed.

All these subtypes have one thing in common: they have an exaggerated idea of what you have to achieve to be truly competent. This faulty idea of competence is based, on the one hand, on expectations that are so high that they can never be met, and on the other hand it is so deeply rooted in their minds that it can no longer be questioned. Even if they have a lot of success and are admired by many.

The following table shows the different types of impostors and their ideas of competence:

THE NATURAL TALENT

**You're only competent if everything comes to you easily
and without making an effort**

TYPICAL STATEMENTS

- ▶ When I'm praised for an achievement, I immediately think:
 - ▶ “If they only knew how much time I spent doing this.”
- ▶ If you're truly talented, everything comes to you easily.
- ▶ I often feel I have to work too hard for my success.

THE PERFECTIONIST

You're only competent if you deliver flawless results

TYPICAL STATEMENTS

- ▶ When I'm praised for my work, I can't accept the acknowledgement if I notice a mistake in my performance.
- ▶ I spend a lot of time trying to deliver a flawless result and I get annoyed if it was only average after all.
- ▶ I'm afraid that someone might think of me as incompetent if I make a mistake.

THE SUPERHERO

You're only competent if you do well in every area of your life

TYPICAL STATEMENTS

- ▶ I often despair because, however much I strive, something always goes wrong somewhere.
- ▶ When I see someone who has all the areas of their life under control, I feel small and pathetic by comparison.
- ▶ When someone admires me I think: “If you only knew what my private/professional/financial life looks like.”

THE EXPERT

You're only competent if you know everything

TYPICAL STATEMENTS

- ▶ I'm attending many seminars and I'm reading a lot, but the more I learn, the more I become aware of the gaps in my own knowledge.
- ▶ I admire people with comprehensive knowledge of their field. I'm nowhere near that level myself.
- ▶ When I can't answer someone's question, I worry that they will think badly of me.

In conclusion, I would like to add one more important message. If you work through the exercises in this book and leave your impostor feelings behind, step by step, you won't just change your perception of yourself. As soon as you no longer let your fears and thoughts of incompetence dominate your life, new desires can surface that you never dared to dream about.

While working intensively on yourself, you may have realised that you're leading a life that would make many people happy – but not you. It's possible that you're now questioning some aspects of your life and feel some regret about missed opportunities. That can result in a feeling of discontent, but at the same time you now have a chance to develop a life that meets your needs more fully.

And that is good. As long as you live according to your old patterns and mostly focus on fulfilling other people’s expectations, you’ll always be in danger of slipping into a role that doesn’t fit you any more. No wonder you feel like an impostor all over again. But if you start to match your everyday life more closely to your own needs, it will become much easier just to be yourself.

But even in a life that’s tailor made for you, the old impostor thoughts will sometimes emerge again and make you feel insecure. This is what I experienced, too, when I started writing this book. It’s normal, don’t worry about it.. What’s crucial is how quickly you can free yourself from the influence of your distorting mirror again. And I’ve got a few final tips for you:

THE BASIC IMPOSTOR MULTIPLICATION TABLE

I still remember learning the basic multiplication tables in primary school. We had to repeat them, out loud, again and again until our answers became automatic. Today, I don’t have to think for a long time when I’m asked how much 8x4 makes. And that’s necessary since many calculations rely on it. If we didn’t know these basic rules, many of our calculations would be wrong.

The impostor phenomenon is also based some basic statements that you should memorise. They will help you not to fall into the trap your internal distorting mirror is setting for you. I purposefully simplified these statements in order to make them more memorable. Repeat them many times until you can reproduce them even in the middle of the night, and without having to think about it.

GOOD ENOUGH IS BETTER THAN PERFECT

Forget all your thoughts about perfection. First of all you will never reach it and always be dissatisfied with yourself, and then it also takes a disproportionate amount of time to improve things that are already perfectly good. If you’ve found a mistake again and are wrestling with those thoughts, remember that you’re not a machine but luckily a human being.

THE ODD ONE OUT

If several people tell you that you’re performance was good, then simply believe it, for once. It’s a lot more likely that *you* were wrong than that everyone else was wrong. You may think that you can assess your own performance best, but that’s not true. You are more biased than everyone else. So let yourself be outvoted by the majority, even if your own impression is different.

NEVER BLINDLY TRUST YOUR INNER CRITIC

We often doubt our own abilities and other people’s feedback, but we very rarely question our inner critic. If he says that we weren’t good enough and need to strive to become even better, we believe him unconditionally. However, our self-criticism isn’t based on real facts but on our fear of

rejection or other negative consequences. This means that you’re constantly doubting your own assessments. Instead, try to observe the evidence for and against.

THE WORLD ISN'T JUST A COLLECTION OF DOG TURDS

A beautiful meadow can gladden our hearts with pretty flowers but frequently we also find a few dog turds there. If you’re afraid of stepping into one of these you’ll only focus on the turds and overlook the beauty of nature. And it’s the same with your strengths and weaknesses. Be aware that you don’t just consist of inadequacies – just as the world isn’t just a collection of dog turds. Don’t only focus on the defects in your fear of making mistakes but look at both your successes and achievements.

PRAISE YOURSELF – YOU’RE RIGHT

Acknowledge your strengths and achievements even if you learned in your childhood that it isn’t appropriate to praise yourself. It will strengthen your confidence and reduce your self-doubts. So nurture the list of your successes and read it again many times.

FEAR IS A BAD ADVISOR

We often avoid challenges or over-prepare for them because we’re afraid of failure. But that means that we are not open to new experiences and may never find out how good we really are. We remain inside our fear and we even make it worse. So notice your fear but take care that it doesn’t take the lead.

EMOTIONS CAN BE WRONG

Don’t just be led by your emotions. Don’t trust feelings that attack your self-confidence. Don’t give them space. The best way to distance yourself from such emotions is to write them down and then tear up the piece of paper.

Just like regularly brushing your teeth, you should practise your anti-impostor strategies as part of your daily routine. If you have to think about them, they’re not present enough in your life and you’re probably going to stop using them sooner or later. Get used to writing down, every evening, all the things you coped with well today, what kind of positive feedback you got, and what you feel you can be proud of. You will find the exercise that covers this in Chapter 5. The more you incorporate it into your evening routine, the stronger this mindset will get until it becomes second nature to you. Look at it as a kind of prevention strategy and as a daily workout for your mind. This exercise will usually only take a few minutes but the way you see yourself and value yourself will be changed by it significantly. Also continue reading through the Basic Impostor Multiplication Tables until you can

repeat the individual phrases in it by heart and you can apply them immediately if you doubt or criticise yourself again.

The Basic Impostor Multiplication Tables are the best tool for discovering yourself and the world around you in a new way and to be astonished at yourself again. I can tell you from my own experience how liberating it is to no longer feel you’re an impostor. You will become more and more confident and realise how good you really are.

Thank you for following me through the various stages of this book. I’m curious what you’re going to encounter on the path towards yourself. Please do write to me at info@coachingazur.de and tell me about your experiences with my exercises and perhaps also about the issues you’re still struggling with. I also offer support in the form of individual coaching if you’re looking for someone who can help you to break your internal distorting mirror.

Now go and live! I wish you all the best

Regards

Michaela Muthig

Translator’s Notes Anette Pollner

1. Geisterfahrer – this evocative German term isn’t nearly as evocative or elegant in English. I suggest changing the title of this segment to ‘The Odd One Out’, a commonly used phrase that conveys the same meaning
2. Das kleine Einmaleins – I translated this with ‘basic multiplication table’ which is the English primary school equivalent. The issue here is that, even in German, this doesn’t work very well as a metaphor because the segment is mostly about memorising, not so much about maths.
3. The entire semantic field around words like ‘success’ and ‘recognition’ is distributed very differently in English, so in some cases the translation is not very literal in order to achieve a good transcreation with the same overall meaning.