

# Tick tapes

## They were taken at their word

By HELGA SILVA 10-20-81-1B  
Herald Staff Writer

In any language, the slang of the drug trade is hard to understand.

But when it's literally translated from Spanish to English, the results can be laughable.

For the past two months, county translators have been transcribing and translating the wiretaps from Operation Tick-Talks, a nine-month investigation of cocaine dealing in Miami.

Consider their task.

Suspected drug dealers talk constantly of *perico*, in Cuban slang, cocaine. The English translation: parakeet.

After a police raid on a suspected dealer's house, the wiretap picked up a conversation describing the chaos that followed. The literal translation: "They have formed one there of hell."

Other idiomatic uses are even trickier.

The Spanish equivalent of "unreal" becomes "of the movies" in the translations.

Suspects go to "little cows" in the translated transcripts, not to Farm Stores, which is what Cubans mean when they go to *la vaquita*.

A favorite Cuban dish is roasted pig, especially the hind quarters. Many of the sus-

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## Tape translators were literally speaking

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pected drug deals overheard on the Tick-Talks' tapes were made at parties, where roasted pig was the main dish.

Making a comment about one of the parties, a suspected trafficker described it this way in the translated version:

"If you would have come, you would have eaten tremendous legs."

Making deals is a matter of moving fast, but not as fast as the translations would have you believe. The Spanish equivalent of "I'll get going," turns out to be "I'll get motorized" in the transcripts.

And so it goes. Religious expressions, colloquialisms and curse words — the idiomatic nuances of the language — have become tortured expressions that make little sense in literal English.

"It is not for the translators to interpret what they hear or to say what they think was said, but to translate it exactly as it was said," said Circuit Judge Gerald Kogan, who is hearing the case.

"If somebody else wants to interpret what was said, it is for other parties to do and for the court to listen. That the translations are literal is a commendation to the official court interpreters who did the job," he added.

The translation and transcript of more than 1,000 or so cassettes of Operation Tick-Talks by official court interpreters cost the court \$169 per tape — a bargain compared with the \$500 private translating firms sought to charge.

Defense attorneys involved in the case are looking closely at the translations.

"There is reason to believe the translations will be an issue," said Ed Carhart, who represents suspended director of Little Havana Activities Center Rafael Villaverde. "The translation by police for the wiretap orders and the transcripts — they are something we are going to look at carefully."