
Reviews of Books

David Bellos. *Is that a Fish in your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2011. Paperback ISBN: 978-0-86547-876-3. 373 pp.

“The Babel fish is small, yellow, leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the universe. It feeds on brain wave energy, absorbing all unconscious frequencies and then excreting telepathically a matrix formed from the conscious frequencies and nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain, the practical upshot of which is that if you stick one in your ear, you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language: the speech you hear decodes the brain wave matrix.”¹ The title of Bellos’ book sends us to the image (mental or visual, for those who watched the movie) to Douglas Adams’ book and cult movie *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Arthur Dent, one of the protagonists, was given this instant language decoder fish by inserting it in his ear to help him understand Vogon poetry. A very inspired title for a book which deals not with recipes or prescriptions of how to translate, but, as the author himself put it in the introduction, “the real issue – understanding what translation *does*” (p. 4, the author’s emphasis), and, we would add, what it *does not*. David Bellos, a translator and professor at Princeton, gives a tongue in cheek description of one of the oldest trades of humankind, and addresses, over thirty-two unorthodox chapters, issues ranging from the meaning of translation, native language, dictionaries, formal equivalence, translatability, and so on.

From a translator’s viewpoint the author argues that, given the large number of languages and the limited capacity of the human brain to store an ever-changing volume of language, translation is more or less a necessary evil, but that it is more to it than meets the eye. Equivalence between language is not just replacing one word from the source language (SL) with its dictionary equivalent in target language (TL); it has also to do with form, context, intention, culture, time and so on. In some cases, due to the complexity of the message in the SL, it fails to transfer all the “layers” of source text into the target language. As Culler pointed out, “if language were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, it would be easy to translate from one language to another. One would simply replace the French name for a concept with the English name” (1976, p. 21). However, despite such hardships as isolationism, language unification, and confusion caused by extreme diversification of word meanings in certain languages, Bellos claims that communication is possible even outside speaking or writing.

The author begins his argument by discussing the word “translation” in various languages and finds that in Japanese there are twenty-two words, or hyponyms, which denote different varieties or stages of translation, and that the hypernym “hon’yaku”, which is most often used when referring to the process and the product of the process, fails to satisfactorily cover the whole range of separate meanings conveyed by each of the twenty-two terms.

As if meaning transfer was not problematic enough, the translation of certain kinds of communication requires different strategies and priorities in order to get the meaning across. Sometimes, the author says,

1 Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

translation expresses itself through gestures, whereas other times it is the “music” of the language, in what the author calls “sound translation” (homophonic translation). Some loan words that are used nowadays, such as “bungalow”, “cocoa”, “tomato”, or “potato” are examples of adaptation of words to match the English sound system. Moreover, other words bear little or no resemblance to their original meaning. For example the Japanese “smaato”, which is a borrowing from the English “smart”, means neither “intelligent” nor “elegant”, but “svelte”.

Can translation substitute the original? Translation should not be understood as a “surrogate” of the original. Nothing can actually replace the original masterpiece which is unique and inimitable, Bellos says, and adds that it is like comparing instant coffee and “espresso made from freshly ground beans”. Nevertheless, he says, those who have tasted both can tell the difference; moreover, preferring one to the other is a matter of personal taste. Similarly, he says, only those who understand both the source language and the target language can appreciate whether the original is better than its translation. Paradoxically, sometimes the translation may be better received than the original itself. The reason is that most readers of translations cannot read the masterpieces in their original language. Should a translation read like an original, or like a translation? Sometimes writers have tricked their readers into believing that their original works were translations or their translations were the originals. Horace Walpole claimed that his masterpiece of Gothic literature, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was a translation of an Italian story from 1529, but he was not able to provide proof of this and had to admit that he had written the novel. It has also been claimed that Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* was a translation from the Arabic.

Does a translation have to sound foreign in order to be more convincing? The author seems to think so. A translation should recreate a certain atmosphere, he says, in which such artifices of language render it more credible. French characters in a French setting should not be “forced” to speak in flawless English. He quotes mathematician and philosopher Jean D’Alembert who, in 1763 wrote that a good translation should retain “the genius of the original and [...] the added flavor of a homeland created by its foreign coloring” (p. 45). The use of words from the source language is a common device. German soldiers who speak English in Hollywood movies appear more credible when they occasionally use German words like *Jawohl*, *Gott im Himmel* and *Heil Hitler* in their conversation. In some cases the foreignness, and not the meaning is all that matters. The famous examples of the Italian/French/Spanish-like gibberish used by Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936), and the fake English used by Italian singer Adriano Celentano in his song “Prisencolinensinainciusol ol rait” are used to exemplify the idea that, although we may not understand the meaning of the discourse, they provide a note of European frivolousness and lightheartedness (Chaplin) or American “cool” (Celentano).

The “native language or mother tongue” is another issue discussed in the book. Is a native speaker better than a non-native speaker? The author tries to explain the differences between “native language” versus “working language”, and points out that one’s “native language” is not a birthright, or something that one has automatic mastery of, but is merely the language which was acquired the earliest, and that there is no way to distinguish between two speakers, one native and the other non-native provided they both produce perfectly acceptable sentences.

Meaning is a problematic aspect of translation. That translation is not word-for-word transfer between SL and TL has been discussed many times in the literature. Moreover, the multilayered information contained by some utterances is not confined to meaning only. Bellos discusses the example of an American newspaper headline reading “*GOP VEEP PICK ROILS DEM*”. Linguist Eduard Sapir noted that “language is a guide to social reality” and that “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (Sapir, 1956, p. 69). Therefore, in order to decode this apparently incomprehensible string of letters, one needs to be familiar with current issues in American society and politics. GOP and DEMS refer to the two main political parties. GOP is an acronym for

Grand Old Party, the nickname of the Republican Party, while Dems is short for Democratic Party. The Veep is short for Vice President (VP). At that time (summer 2008), Sarah Palin was appointed the Vice President of the Republican Party. Rewritten in normal English, this headline would read “The Choice of Palin as Candidate for Vice-Presidency by the Republicans Irritates the Democrats”. Translation is not even about transfer of meaning, the author says. Sometimes it is a formal adaptation of a SL text to a TL. For example, in every culture there are specific genres of discourse, such as recipes, greetings, court proceedings, etc., which are highly formulaic and whose translation, no matter how accurate, is not acceptable. A Chinese cooking recipe is not translated into English, but into recipe, using the appropriate language and form specific to English recipes. The specialized language of such texts is something that the translator must have detailed knowledge of, and it cannot be acquired from dictionaries alone. Dictionaries are usually not the source, but the result of the work of translators (especially bilingual glossaries of specialized terms). Their task is not always to inform, but rather to confuse the poor translation aspirant with the sheer number of senses and combinations words come in. Their purpose is not to teach translation, but to regularize the process of translation. Since language is incessantly evolving, a complete dictionary would be a daunting task, since the numbers of entries in one language are virtually infinite.

Literal (word-for-word) versus free (meaning-for-meaning) translation has preoccupied translators since the times of Cicero and Horace. St. Jerome, who is credited with translating the sacred scriptures, is partial to the sense-for-sense, or literal, translation, while relying on the literal translation only when translating from the Greek, where, he says, “even the order of the words is a mysterium” (p. 104). Here he may have referred to the impenetrability of the Greek word order; and not to a particular mystery in the biblical sense. Literal translation, widely practiced nowadays in schools, is in fact translation centered on writing (literal = letter), which flourished at a time when writing or reading were not widely spread, and when the study of languages such as Latin, Greek or other modern languages was done mainly in writing (p. 114).

What about interpretation (or oral translation)? For centuries, spoken word and oral translation have been the only instruments used for communication across borders, although always used with care and regarded with suspicion. Because of its orality, interpreting is more prone to mistakes or oversights; therefore it is less trustworthy than written translation. However, we find, oral translation is almost never left to chance. All the important discussions which involve politicians, heads of state, and official negotiations are usually scripted, and few declarations or statements are made ad-hoc. Government officials and heads of state bring along their own interpreters; conference interpreters are usually provided with the manuscript of the meeting and the final report drafted after each UN meeting, the so-called “verbatim” is actually rewritten from the script which was used during the debate. Moreover, historically speaking, translators and interpreters have long been regarded as lacking in loyalty not only towards the text to be translated, but also to their employers.

So, what gets lost in translation, and what is gained? The author argues that while original poetry might be lost, there is still a ray of hope – that the translator is a poet himself. He also makes it a point of stressing that the great poets of universal literature would not be known without the aid of great translators. We ultimately form attachments for a particular verse or piece of poetry sometimes without knowing or caring whether it is the original or a translation. Albanian writer Ismail Kadare encountered *Macbeth* under a different title and in translation in his childhood. The book inspired him for life, and this is what Bellos says is more important than whether a verse is well translated or not. Despite skeptics and critics claiming that a good translation is impossible, Bellos ends his book on an optimistic note, saying that, in spite of all problems it might encounter, translation “provides incontrovertible evidence of the human capacity to think and to communicate thought”. A witty and dynamic account of translation through the history, the present book might not bring new insights to the translation theory, but will convince the uninitiated of the

tremendous value of translation and its contribution to universal culture and communication.

Reference

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