

REFLECTIONS

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LOST IN TRANSLATION II

About fifteen years ago I did a column headed “Lost in Translation,” in which I discussed some of the problems of converting one language to another, noting, among other things, that if doing so is such a hard task on one small planet, how plausible is it going to be that we will ever develop handy translating devices that will let us communicate with the inhabitants of alien worlds? Since then I’ve had some further thoughts on the subject of translation, and here is a sequel to that first column, with some quotations from the original text in case you don’t happen to have the April 1999 issue of this magazine handy at the moment.

You can forget about that translating gizmo for alien languages. The ingenious writer who called himself Murray Leinster was, I think, the first to dream one of these things up, in his classic 1945 story “First Contact,” and it’s been a standard part of SF furniture ever since. (“We’ve hooked up some machinery,” said Tommy, “that amounts to a mechanical translator.” After some plausible-sounding engineering talk about frequency modulation and short-wave beams, Tommy goes on to tell his captain, “We agreed on arbitrary symbols for objects, sir, and worked out relationships and verbs and so on with diagrams and pictures. We’ve a couple of thousand words that have mutual meanings. We set up an analyzer to sort out their short-wave groups, which we feed into a decoding machine. And then the coding end of the machine picks out recordings to make the wave groups we want to send back. When you’re ready to talk to the skipper of the other ship, sir, I think we’re ready.”)

But actually creating such a device would be easier said than done. It would take a very special kind of skill to be able to analyze the sounds of a previously unknown alien language and make any sort of sense out of them; and the sense it might make is unlikely to be very sensible sense. Consider Kim Stanley Robinson’s 1990 story “The Translator,” which pokes lethal fun at the whole translating-machine concept: a hapless Earthman meeting with two alien species at once has one group tell him things like “*Warlike viciously now descendant fat food flame death*” while the other comes through the translating gadget with sounds that can be translated, the machine says, as “*1. Fish market. 2. Fish harvest. 3. Sunspots visible from a depth of 10 meters below the surface of the ocean on a calm day. 4. Traditional festival. 5. Astrological configuration in galactic core.*”

It happens that my own work, like that of most well-known modern science fiction writers, is routinely translated into fifteen or twenty foreign languages: invariably French and German and Italian, often Spanish and Portuguese, and on and on, through Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Russian, Hebrew, and the various Scandinavian languages, to the occasional Thai, Korean, and Greek edition. Now, my style is reasonably straightforward and lucid; but I often wonder how closely the translated versions resemble what I’ve written.

Some of it must be pretty close. I’ve met many of my translators, and they speak English easily and well. They also are often willing to question me by mail or even telephone about words or passages in my books that they find obscure.

Even so, problems inevitably arise. I often wonder whether my foreign editions resemble in anything more than general outline the ones that I wrote. I can hardly expect the characteristic flavor of my style to be carried over into Bulgarian or Turkish or

Czech; but what if small distortions of meaning have crept in progressively, chapter by chapter, accumulating until, by the midway point, the story itself is incomprehensible? How could I tell? I am able to make myself understood fairly well in Italian and can manage, slowly, to cope with written French, but I don't pretend to be fluent in either language, and Bulgarian, Turkish, and Czech are beyond me entirely, so I have no way of judging the competence of a translation. Sometimes, when a new edition of one of my books is published, the overseas publisher tells me that it is being translated anew, because the earlier translation was badly done—but that's generally the first knowledge I have of that.

Translations pose all sorts of odd problems. Recently I've been reading a lot of the Maigret detective stories by the great Belgian novelist Georges Simenon. I've never been much of a detective-story fan, but Maigret is an interesting character, and Simenon's Maigret books provide a charming, moody portrait of low-life Paris of the 1930s and 1940s that I find very appealing. So when I heard that Penguin Books was going to reissue the whole lengthy Maigret series in shiny new translations, I picked up the first of the new series, *Pietr the Latvian*, and read it right away.

The new translation turned out to be *too* shiny, though. *Pietr the Latvian* was first published in 1930; but very quickly I came upon references to "body language," "money-launderer," and "gourmet meals." Professional killers were spoken of as "hit-men." A gangster was described as the "capo" of a major crime ring. And a sleazy scheme was called a "scam."

All of these seemed anachronistic to me. "Body language," I was sure, was a phrase that went back only to the 1960s. Likewise "capo," a Mafia term, popularized by fairly recent American crime novels and movies. A gourmet, in France, is someone who has fine tastes in food; in modern American English, the term has become an adjective applied to the food itself, as in "gourmet meals." "Hit-man" is surely a phrase that came into our language in the last fifty years or so. Likewise "scam" and "money-launderer." All of these, having come into use in English decades after publication of the original book, jolted me out of the illusion that I wanted the book to create. Simenon, of course, wrote in French, so the question is one of appropriate equivalence for the terms he used. Since *Pietr the Latvian* was written more than eighty-five years ago and is set in the world of that time, it seemed jarring to me to encounter these modern locutions in the translation. I checked an earlier translation, one that Penguin had published in 1963 as *Maigret and the Enigmatic Lett*. Indeed, the "gourmet meal" was simply a "delicious" meal. "Hit-men" were referred to only as "killers." That "capo" was merely the "leader" of the gang. "Body language" was "gestures." The gang's "money-launderer" was merely its "treasurer."

I'm not sure the translator can be faulted for introducing these terms, which to me are anachronistic but to a reader whose grounding in our language doesn't happen to go back seventy-some years, as mine does, are perfectly untroublesome usage. The translator's job is to make the translated work understood by the reader. Everybody knows what a hit-man is, or a scam, and few Americans are bothered by the use of "gourmet" as an adjective. If the translator had slipped references to cell phones or iPads into the text, or had had Maigret's police lab use Photoshop on a picture, those would, of course, have been unacceptable transgressions. But in this case the only reader offended was one who was aware that certain phrases used were era-inappropriate for this book. It's a delicate issue.

A recent translation of the *Histories* of Herodotus makes that chronicler of 2,500 years ago use the phrase "power-brokers," where earlier translators spoke of "men who held power" or "leading men." The lotus-eaters of North Africa "munch" the plant, but Herodotus simply said they "eat" it. And so forth. Sometimes a translator goes too far out of the way to make a book comfortable for modern readers.

On the other hand, some translations can be incomprehensible if they follow the text too literally. Consider the adjective “cool,” which nowadays is a term of approval. “She’s really cool” can mean that a woman is highly attractive—but so can “She’s really hot,” semantically the direct opposite of the term. What is the translator to do? (Especially when “cool,” in an earlier sense of the word, can be taken to mean “indifferent,” “remote,” “chilly.”) And in his book, *Experiences in Translation*, Umberto Eco, the author of that fine medieval mystery story *The Name of the Rose*, cites a passage from one of his books in which the characters go for a drive and glimpse “boundless horizons beyond the hedge.” That is a reference to a nineteenth-century poem by Giacomo Leopardi, in which “beyond the hedge” is a metaphorical way of indicating an infinite vista. Most literate Italians know the poem, but hardly anyone else does; and so the English translator of the novel changed the line to read, “We glimpsed endless vistas. Like Darien . . .” The reference now is to Keats’ sonnet, *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* (“Silent, upon a peak in Darien . . .”) He has provided, not a literal translation of Eco’s line, but a literary equivalent; but he did so with Eco’s approval: “I told my various translators that neither the hedge nor the allusion to Leopardi was important, but I insisted that a literary clue be kept at all costs.” Arguments could be made on both sides here. Eco’s translator manages to convey the meaning, what Eco calls the “deep” sense of his story, while rewriting his actual text, and Eco was pleased with the result. The Simenon translator maintained the “deep” meaning also, but at the cost of offending a reader who wanted what he was reading to preserve the flavor of the era in which the book had been written and in which it was set.

And then we have the case of the translator who vastly rewrites the original and produces something that, while far from an accurate rendering, has literary value of its own. The classic example is Sir Thomas Urquhart’s joyous, exuberant seventeenth-century translation of Francois Rabelais’ sixteenth-century *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—a translation that is half again as long as the original! As though Rabelais’ text were not rich enough, Urquhart uses it as the takeoff point for a wildly fantastic expansion—as in Chapter 25 of Book I, where a string of twenty-eight insults becomes forty with the addition of such purely English epithets as “slabberdegullion druggels” and “doddipol joltheads.” In Chapter 13 of Book III, a catalog of nature’s noises disturbing the peace of a reclusive philosopher is amplified beyond “the baying of dogs” and “the yelping of wolves” to include dozens more: “the buzzing of dromedaries,” “the frantling of peacocks,” “the snuttering of monkeys,” and on and on and on. Is it a literal translation of Rabelais? Certainly not. Is it faithful to the spirit of his great work? Yes, indeed. Urquhart has produced something that is Rabelaisian without exactly being Rabelais, a work that has given immense pleasure to many readers for three and a half centuries.

I seem to occupy all sides of this discussion on the art of translation. The anachronistic bits of contemporary terminology in the translation of Simenon’s 1930 novel bother me. The vast expansion of Rabelais’ text by Urquhart gets my enthusiastic applause. And Umberto Eco offers his approval of the substitution of a reference to an English poem for an Italian one in the translation of his own novel.

The purpose of a translation is to make a text available to readers who otherwise would have no access to it—a virtuous goal, one that has enriched the lives of all literate persons. But there appears to be no one criterion by which the merit of any particular translation can be judged. Some translations work, some don’t, and the reasons are different in each case. I suppose we should simply be grateful that it is possible to convey the approximate meaning of words of one language in another, and let it go at that.