

Translating words, worlds and cultures

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A brief mention of literary translation as we continue our search for analogies with good scientific communication

In our last editorial, FBK Magazine editor Claudio Ferlan had drawn a parallel between effective scientific communication and translation, understood as the transposition of a concept from one language to another while also reworking the cultural context so as to make it “digestible” to the target reader.

Translation, in fact, cannot and should not just be a repetition of words or sentences expressed in a source language (L1) in a second target language (L2). It almost never is, not even in so-called technical translation, i.e., the translation of scientific, legal or medical texts: in these cases adherence of the original text to the translated one is almost total, and in fact, the various machine translation software programs work well in this area, saving translators a good chunk of work, who work more on the editing and proofreading part of the text.

The case of literary translation, however, is different, that sort of magic that allows us to approach texts originally written in the most disparate languages. Indeed, a literary text does not contain within it just a series of words that, put together one in a row, acquire meaning; it encompasses entire worlds, generations, cultures, societies, emotions, fears, sometimes even prejudices. So how can one face the translation of such a rich and varied universe?

First of all, it is essential for the translator to know very well the context in which the text is set, and thus the historical period in which it was written, the geographical place where it was set, the social setting that provides the backdrop (race, milieu, moment, as Hippolyte Taine put it). This first stepping stone, which often requires real focused research and in-depth study preceding the act of translation, allows the translator to avoid falling into anachronisms, inaccuracies or outright errors.

Once the context is clear, it is also good to read up on the author of the text: who he or she is (or was), what his or her time is, what his or her work is, what his or her interests are. A writer, in fact, is often present within the words he or she writes, even if apparently the worlds he creates are distant from the one in which he or she lives. Paradoxically, even in a fantasy novel it is possible to discern the sketchy footprint of the author’s step, even if only in the description of a character or a place. It will be a pleasure and comfort to glimpse it between the pages and make us feel more “in control” of the text.

Another important thing, if possible, is to read the text in its entirety before you start translating it, so that you do not run into initial misinterpretations and find that you have to change everything in

light of something you discover, perhaps, only halfway through the work!

Now, finally, everything is ready, and here begins the hardest – but also rewarding – work for a translator: to transpose an entire world into one's own language (one should always translate into one's mother tongue, or at any rate into a language that has become one for you!) and make it understandable and accessible to the final reader. To do this requires implementing a "suspension of judgment," removing the glasses forged by one's culture and personal experiences, and grasping the text with one's bare hands. Generally, there are two types of translation approaches, which can either be adopted throughout the translation or alternated: the foreignization strategy and the domestication strategy. The former takes the reader by the hand and leads him or her to the text, i.e., makes him or her make the effort to understand something different, learn something new that at first may appear "strange" or even tough. A trivial example of this approach is to leave, in the Italian rendering, banana bread instead of translating it using the Italian words for banana and cake: the lazy reader might turn up his nose and get annoyed at something he does not know and does not feel like delving into, while the curious reader might do a brief search and find out that this is a typical American dessert, made with very ripe bananas and containing baking soda instead of yeast as a leavening agent. And maybe – why not – this second type of reader might even decide to try his or her hand at the recipe!

It follows that the domestication strategy instead involves forcing the text toward the target language and culture in order to meet the reader's needs and make the reading easy and smooth, but inevitably flattening the final text and causing it to lose color and nuance.

The mention of the two approaches just described brings us back to the importance of good communication but also stresses another aspect, often overlooked: the relevance of reader types. Translators and science popularizers share the arduous task of giving the end user a text or information that was only partially accessible or not accessible at all at the outset, while maintaining consistency and adherence to the original text. However, much also ultimately depends on how much the reader or user will be willing to open his or her mind to take in the new information, on what comprehension or reading effort he or she will be willing to make, on how far he or she will stray from his or her "comfort zone" to push into uncharted territories, be they literary or scientific ones.

Learning new things inevitably requires curiosity and a good dose of dedication, which modern information media such as social media tend to discourage, churning out content that is only hastily scrolled through by often distracted users. An effort is therefore needed from both those who generate information and those who receive it.

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