

# Tuning into translation

Ellen Bialystok relishes a journey across the porous borders between languages.

If you have ever despaired about the possibility of meaningful communication, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* may reignite your anxiety.

British translator David Bellos begins his journey through the fascinating history and convoluted present of translation with questions that seem simple, but swiftly enter complex territory. Language, he tells us, is a malleable thing. The boundaries we naively draw between languages are permeable, and all communication is interpretation.

Translation encourages us to reconsider such issues as culture, nationalism, ethics and, above all, the part played by the mind — the precision and artistry that make translation a creative process. Yet it is the mind, ironically, that is given the least attention in this otherwise wide-ranging description of translation.

Bellos takes us through the meaning of the word 'translation' in different languages and times; the special case of biblical translation and its influence on religious following; translation in a modern industrial world where products are distributed internationally; and technological innovations that increasingly assign the task of translation to computers.

Bellos explains why even the designation of your mother tongue is not a simple judgement. The language of home can be supplanted, for instance, by that of education as the 'most native' of one's languages. Neither is the choice of source and receiving languages for a translation straightforward, as exemplified by the French passages in the original 1869 Russian version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* that are sometimes translated, sometimes not. Add to this the widespread absorption of words from one language (particularly English) into another, together with the changes in language usage arising from texting and tweeting, and the very concept of a fixed language dissolves.

In the absence of set structure and stable reference, how is translation possible at all? To answer this conundrum, Bellos ranges across linguistic theory, historical linguistics, personal experience and a deep knowledge of literature. Three of his examples shed light on the process of translation by describing the practical basics of the task, the politics that surround language choices and the systems used to get the job done.

First, to understand the challenge of translation fully, we must look to poetry, the

subtlety of literary forms. A good translation must be a good match, but which of a poem's many dimensions need to be preserved? Meaning? Form? Metre? Rhyme, assonance or alliteration?

Second, decisions on which languages get translated into which others, and which social style of speech is used, are inherently political. Only a small number of the world's languages ever get translated, and an even smaller number make up the receiving languages; English wins again here. Bellos writes of the belief "that only some languages were suited to civilized thought" — a relic of nationalism and colonialism that continues to exert an insidious influence.

Finally, there is the business of translation. How does the United Nations, for instance, provide simultaneous interpretations of proceedings for its entire assembly? The answer is an ingenious system that combines technology with economics, and overcomes the complexities of the task by deploying limited numbers of translators on strict rotas.

Bellos has little to say about how



The complexities of simultaneous translation are a challenge at United Nations assemblies.



**Is that a Fish in Your Ear?**  
**Translation and the Meaning of Everything**  
DAVID BELLOS

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languages are learned, but makes several allusions to a critical period in childhood for learning a second language. Although some theorists continue to endorse that notion, it is incompatible with the book's dynamic view of language and the latest research. In my view, Bellos is incorrect in his claim that no child develops lan-

guage without being exposed to it. In 1977, a community of deaf children in Nicaragua with no exposure to language spontaneously created Nicaraguan Sign Language, a perfectly systematic and rich system. A more detailed consideration of the role of the mind in language and translation would have been welcome.

Concepts of language have evolved from twentieth-century structuralist and generativist theories — which explain language in terms of grammar — into one in which language seamlessly integrates into the cognitive, social and emotional lives of the humans who use it. Almost 40 years ago, psychologist Roger Brown coined the term 'rich interpretation', describing the need to consider both what a child is doing and what he or she is saying in order to understand what the child is trying to convey. Although Bellos makes no reference to Brown, he implicitly extends Brown's idea, arguing that all meanings are embedded in dimensions outside language, and that a good translation captures many of them. He correctly identifies the central role of the mind in the process of interpretation that moves information between languages.

So don't despair: human communication is possible, as is the translation of meaning across the shifting boundaries of language, even though the translation and the original are never identical. Any translation can signify a rose; an excellent one will convey its fragrance. ■

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