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Translation and Authenticity in a Global Setting



Bellos David, Is that a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything.

Karen Seago

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David Bellos. *Is that a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*. Particular Books. Penguin Books: London. 2011. Pp. 390. £ 20.00. Hb.

The Babel fish, which the title of this book alludes to, is an invention by Douglas Adams in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. When you insert this little fish into your ear, it converts sound waves into brain waves, giving immediate access to other languages, simultaneously and automatically translating them. The instantaneous and unconscious access to another language through automatic translation or telepathy is, apart from a postulated *lingua franca* across space, one of the main devices with which science fiction authors sidestep the problem of how to communicate not only across languages but also across species.

It is also one of the shaping popular assumptions about translation which Bellos takes issue with in his wide-ranging book. In thirty-two chapters of varying length and depth, he covers such broad topics ranging from 'what is translation' and 'what is language,' or 'does your native language really *belong* to you,' to more specialised questions about human rights translation, language parity in the European Union and news translation. As Bellos himself says, it is not a book which is trying to tell anybody how to translate but it is asking questions about translation: what we can learn from it, what is specific about it, and what is different in translation from other kinds of writing and speaking. Answering these questions, he tells 'stories' about translation, gives "examples and arguments that circle round what seems to me to be the real issue —understanding what translation *does*" (2).

Such an understanding of the functions and necessity of translation is a thread which runs through all the chapters. They engage with the widespread refusal in the English-speaking world to acknowledge the linguistic other, the increasing tendency to mono-lingualism (i.e. the dramatic drop in foreign language teaching in schools) and, linked to it, the distrust aimed at translations and fear of translators, driven by the need to rely on a mediator to communicate on your behalf. He unpicks the idea that translation is inferior to the original with examples from the history of pseudo-translations where readers were unable to tell from the text whether they were reading an original or a translation.

Questions related to translation hierarchies, pivot languages and translation flows form another thread running through the book. Asymmetries in which languages are translated out of and into (80% of all books between 2000 and 2008 were translated out of English, but only 8% were translated into it); the ways in which these differences between central and peripheral languages and cultures determine not only the volume of translation but also translation strategies; whether the translation adapts to the receiving culture; and to what extent languages are changed by translation. These are some of the questions considered in several chapters under different headings. These are all topics familiar to translation theorists but they are introduced in a way that makes them accessible and interesting for non-translation specialists.

While this is a book which is aimed at a general reader interested in translation and in languages, it is also suitable for dipping into rather than a concentrated read-through following an argument. Bellos, though, does have an argument which emerges in more and more assertive form as the book proceeds: he engages with "false platitudes" about translation (such as the myth of literal translation, the illusion of dictionary equivalence or that words name things, the notion that 'poetry is what gets lost in translation,' untranslatability or the belief that a translation is either right or wrong) and challenges them, often by providing historical background and context (330). Here is an example, describing what a translation is: "A match may be found through all or any of the means that we have for rephrasing something in our own or any other tongue. What counts as a satisfactory match is a judgement call, and is never fixed. *The only certainty is that a match cannot be the same as the thing that it matches. If you want the same thing, that's quite all right. You can read the original*' (32; emphasis added). His passionate belief in and respect for translators and their ingenuity, creativity and ability to deal with apparently insurmountable difficulties and constraints shines through and is one of the features I enjoyed most in this book.

Bellos covers the central questions about translation: he discusses word meaning, symptomatic meaning, context-specific meaning; equivalence, style, what is typical about literary translation (it is unique in itself and does not conform to text conventions as non-literary texts do, chap. 27), systems, norms, conventions; the smoothing out of non-standard language use, dialects and quirks in

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translated texts; translating rhyme, humour, subtitles and comics; translation decision processes and which factors shape translators' choices; multilingual drafting and authentic language versions. These topics are approached not so much from the perspective of translation theory (indeed, very little contextualising and reference to established work takes place—for example the discussion about the asymmetrical relations in translation is conducted without reference to polysystems at all), but from the perspective of a linguist and a literary translator. His often no-nonsense approach to translation conundrums is refreshing and my students will appreciate the many excellent examples which illustrate and beautifully explain the abstract points raised.

As a linguist and historian, Bellos often contextualises discussions through detailed historical background; for example, in his chapter on “The issue of trust,” he talks about the high status translator-diplomats in the Ottoman empire who used highly adaptive translation, and he traces the origin of the English word ‘dragoman.’ This is a rich book and if one does not look for highly theoretical new contributions to Translation Studies, it will be a rewarding read for translation scholars. It is a good, complementary introduction to translation practice for students, but its most important contribution is its assertion of the value and importance of translation, making the case passionately and persuasively for the general reader.

Karen Seago
City University, London