Fred A. Reed

DECIPHERING BABEL: TRANSLATION AND COMMUNICATION

Lister Sinclair
I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas.

Reader
"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said, Go to, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

Lister Sinclair
God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden to punish them for biting into the apple. Generations later, he expelled mankind from the city of Babel for the sin of pride, for building a tower that would reach unto heaven–the tower of Babel. God destroyed the tower and condemned mankind to wander like helpless dogs beneath a sky whose constellations no longer reflected the universal order of creation. Ever since, we've been trying to piece together the ruins of that primeval ziggurat–not to rebuild it, but to try to make sense of the curse of Babel, the confusion and scattering of tongues. There are people who do this as a full time task. We call them translators. Theirs is an ancient trade and a thankless one, sometimes even a dangerous one. They've been called traitors, double agents, prestidigitators. They've been compared to procurers and their work has been likened to women who are beautiful but unfaithful. But translators persevere, trying to transmit messages across the chasms of time and through the walls of language. Why they do this is the subject of tonight's Ideas program. It's called Deciphering Babel and it's by Montreal writer and translator Fred Reed.

Fred A. Reed
Translation is impossible. I admit this may sound like an extreme position, coming from a translator. But let me make it clear that what I'm not talking about is the back of the cereal box or the French we learned in high school, things like "la plume de ma tante", or, in a more utilitarian vein, the operating instructions for electrical appliances made in Taiwan, or the names of the more obscure pasta dishes at a trendy restaurant. It's a more complicated question than that. A lot more complicated. Believe me; if you can't trust a translator, who can you trust?

Reader
"It is impossible to translate because language itself cannot ensure communication, even within the same mother tongue. The essence of each thing is unknowable. Each word is itself an unknowable thing. A word is only that which each subject believes it to be. Every

civilization is impenetrable for another."

Fred A. Reed
This statement by the late French writer, André Malraux, seems to indicate that we have a serious problem on our hands. We all belong to one unique mammalian species called homo sapiens, but that doesn't mean we all speak one language, or half a dozen, or even twenty or thirty. In fact, there may be as many as 5,000 languages in use in the world today, and some linguistic theories say each one is hermetically sealed off from the others by its uniqueness. Benjamin Lee Whorf, a leading contemporary linguist, put it this way.

Reader
"Every language is a vast pattern system, different from all others, which contains the culturally ordained forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning and builds the house of his consciousness".

Fred A. Reed
Geneva may very well be a modern day version of the tower of Babel. It's one of those international cities where there are four official languages and dozens of unofficial ones, a perfect place for George Steiner. Steiner is author of the definitive book on translation, After Babel, and probably the leading authority on the subject. He teaches and writes here, and takes his coffee in a sidewalk cafe of a sunny afternoon.

George Steiner
Every single poet, dreamer, metaphysical thinker agrees that different languages make different worlds. He agrees intuitively because that's how he works. You ram him up against the wall and say "Prove it", he says, "I know I can't prove it. It's probably erroneous". But poets, thinkers, dreamers have always believed. When Nabokov says only a Russian vowel can speak the taste of an orange, I am prepared to believe him on the spot. Who am I to doubt

him for a moment? And if he believes it, then I know his writing will reflect that belief. And when the linguist comes along and says that's completely counter-factual, I don't believe that for a minute, but I can't reject it.

Fred A. Red
Poets, dreamers and thinkers aren't the only people to have affirmed that each language world is unique and therefore untranslatable. Long before linguists strapped language to the procrustean bed, religious and mystical visionaries had been grappling with a terrible dilemma: the impossibility of translating holy books. Could sacred things be said in a common language? Could the word of God, once spoken, be repeated, much less translated, in any other tongue?

George Steiner
The taboos which surround that in the Western tradition are as old as the Old Testament. For example, that the name of the name of God–and people always get this wrong. It isn't the name of God that's forbidden; it's the second degree. It's the name of the name in Hebrew that is not to be pronounced and not to be even known by outsiders. A very primitive, very archaic, very understandable taboo. It is a feeling in many, many totemic religions that if you start translating, the totem will leave you. He will in a very moving way walk away into the translation.

Fred A. Reed
The taboos were intense. Breaking them could shake the universe. When the Old Testament was translated from sacred Hebrew scripture into worldly Greek, darkness covered the world for three days. That's what a medieval tome called The Book of Fasting said. Even today, the strictly orthodox Hassidic Jews consider Hebrew as the inviolable, sacred language of scripture and refuse to use it in everyday life.

George Steiner

There is a higher, more mystical vision which says that the inner genius of every language is finally untransferrable. Its identity is inviolate. It is a sanctum proper to itself. And even as all over this earth it is an ancient taboo that you do not deliver into a visitor's keeping your real name, your tribal name, you clan name, lest he do violence to it, so I have deep sympathy with the religious thinkers, the visionaries, the prophets, the metaphysicians who say this is not for translation. It is ours, we live by it and through it. It is not to be turned into the great soapsuds detergent of international superficial understanding. But careful, that is of course a mystical point of view, and while one respects it deeply, its practical limitations are very obvious. I have yet to meet even the purest of great poets who, when offered the chance of appearing in other languages, would say no, absolutely forbidden, it's too pure, you mustn't translate it. That would be the acid test. There may be such, but they must be infinitely rare.

Fred A. Reed
I guess it's time to confess that I've been perpetrating a tiny deception. Translation isn't really impossible after all. It just seems to be. The theories are elegant and the examples are touching, but none of it has stopped mankind from translating for one single minute and it hasn't stopped poets from wanting to be translated. Oh, well. Some people say translators are devious by nature, and if it's any consolation, according to strict scientific calculations, bumblebees can't fly. We've come a long way. Today, we don't see translation as an instrument of metaphysical betrayal. It's become a discipline, a process, something we prod and study and analyze. Sherry Simon teaches translation history and theory at Montreal's Concordia University.

Sherry Simon
Translation only became an object of scholarly study as a specific operation in the '60s. Before that, translation belonged to philology and then to comparative literature. One was interested in looking at literary texts and comparing them and seeing who did the best translation, and what these translations reflected of national spirit, romantic translations of

Shakespeare in France versus classical translations of Homer in England. This was the kind of thing that was done. In the '60s, all of a sudden–and this was really very new–linguistics all of a sudden became a discipline which could look at the process of translation rather than the literary text as a fact. So this became the new focus of interest in translation and there was a tremendous excitement about the kinds of truths that linguistics could tell about translation in the '60s. And people were very keen to know, in Québec, in Canada, and elsewhere, where translation was also a practical thing. They weren't terribly interested in knowing how the translations of Homer had evolved through thirteen different editions. They wanted to know how to translate, and linguistics seemed to offer the tools to understanding this. But the limitations of this approach became very quickly evident. You know that it's impossible to look at the translation of simply bits of phrases, or what is the correct translation of a bit of phrase. It's impossible without the context. Then you look at the context and you realize that the context is not a linguistic thing, it's a textual, a cultural thing, and translation studies has gone a long way since the '60s to open this up. I think now we realize that we can use some of those insights and they were helpful, but we must go to larger textual and cultural considerations to understand in fact how the process works.

Fred A. Reed
Translation, whether we call it the process or the act, the craft or the art, is a part of our culture. We do speak of the world and to one another. Maybe this defence of translation isn't as sophisticated as the linguistic proof of its impossibility, but it has the advantage of abundant vulgar fact. Translation is an impossible job, but a job–that must be done. From his table at the Geneva sidewalk cafe, George Steiner.

George Steiner
Even the most linguistically gifted and learned of men or women, and there are fantastically gifted people–there was the great linguistic, Roman Jakobson, with about 15 languages at his command, and there have been those with more–even they will resort to translation for many things which you and I would regard as of the alphabet of human culture and perception. I

want to read the Bible and I almost certainly do not have the Hebrew or the Aramaic needed to do so. And I want to read Tolstoy, Dostoievski, and I don't have the Russian. I may want to read Racine without the French, Goethe without the German, Dante without medieval Italian–God knows how difficult that is. Of course I know that this is a compromise. Of course I don't fool myself. Of course the most wonderful thing would be to be able to do it in the original. Of course. But we live a short lifespan. Our means, the economies of our perceptions are limited. Without translation, we would inhabit a very narrow room of closed windows. So on the common sense basis, Western civilization has, since the Hebrew and Greek and Latin of its past, made translation the constant and necessary instrument of the commerce of sensibilities and of minds.

Fred A. Reed
Translation is a compromise, but without it, civilization itself is impossible. If there were no translation, we would not have the epics of a certain blind Greek bard, the sacred books of ancient Middle Eastern tribal sects, the works of a medieval Italian poet, or an English Tudor playwright. Without translation, the works of a German philosopher or a Russian insurrectionist could not have become world instruments, instruments which gave people the most potent of all weapons–ideas.

George Steiner
Shakespeare belongs more or less to the whole of humanity, to give the most obvious example. So do the great thinkers, the historians. Lenin is now available in almost 2,000 languages, so is Agatha Christie, who runs him a close second. And so without any doubt, a tremendous lot gets across. And I don't think we should think of this in very remote or mystical terms. Two human beings who get to know each other intimately will have misunderstandings, and the extent of their intimacy and of their shared echo chambers of reference does not guarantee against even serious misunderstandings when they are clearly using the same word in rather grimly different ways.

Fred A. Reed
Misunderstandings like this are what make translation more than just a matter of rewriting old books in new languages. In the broadest sense, translation is an enormous part of a larger process, the process of communication. Every day, when we speak our own language, we translate automatically into the appropriate idiom or dialect. We have one for our family and friends, for public occasions, for law courts. One for our pets, for love affairs, for all the occasions of life. When we move between two languages, a message passes from one into another via a peculiar process of transformation. There has to be a kind of interpretative transfer, a cutting and pasting to match the contours of our culture. Whenever we read or hear anything from the past, even in our own language, we're really translating.

George Steiner
For us to read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Shelley, is already translation. In fact, we get something rather astonishing. We get these curious time warps. At the moment, the texts of the 1920s becoming wonderfully available to our students. They really pick them up fast. 1920 music, drink, dance, slang, novels. The 1930s are like the other side of the moon. The hunger, the fascism, Stalinism, the whole context, is so alien to their language, dictionary and grammar than that which is slightly nearer, fifty years ago, is more remote than that which is sixty. We get these fascinating spiralling overlaps within the same language. In popular editions of Shakespeare today, almost every phrase has to be annotated. Now, there is a case for saying the hell with that, we will have a small elite, so well educated they will not need to have it explained that Denmark is a little country of which Hamlet is a prince or that Venus is the goddess of love. And against this, you have the democratic, the deeply committed view: better explain, explain, explain, better do even a comic book version with good balloon texts than to lose it altogether. And that is one of the most difficult battles now being fought in the Anglo-american and Canadian climate of populist democracy.

Fred A. Reed
This is only a part of the dilemma. Much of the struggle to decipher Babel has been the effort

to overcome linguistic chaos. Cabalists, metaphysicians and later linguists tried for centuries to create a language of fundamental universal symbols, what they called a meta-language. They claimed such a meta-language, such a master language, would make all languages understandable. Linguists want to use computers to devise such a thing, but even they must ultimately use language to describe their objectives. They can no more step out of their own language than they can leave their shadow in the closet. The dilemma reminds me of a short fiction by the Argentinian author, Jorge Luis Borges. In this story, a court cartographer sets out to make an exquisitely detailed map of the realm at the king's behest. But in his quest for prefect accuracy, he finds that his map must reproduce every pathway and brook, every rock and shrub. It must cover the kingdom completely. It must "become" the kingdom. The linguist's meta-language would have the same problem, says George Steiner. It would be beyond the reach of the linguists and their computers.

George Steiner
They can't do it, and no computer can. There is a very famous theorem which shows that in order for a machine to distinguish between "the pen is in the box", meaning your fountain pen, or "the playpen is in a huge shipping crate", the amount of surrounding context needed reaches almost the linits of the galaxies, that is to say, potentially an inexhaustive logic. In order to refine a message to a single possible meaning, you have to know the universe. A sentence of Flaubert in Madame Bovary means not only the whole novel, that's a perfectly silly and obvious remark. It means the history of the French language or the French novel. It means the history of the poems and plays which it is not and does not wish to be, because that which is left out in a semantic act is as important as that which is included. No, I think we're perfectly safe from the nightmarish thought of a titanic context machine.

Fred A. Reed
Jorge Luis Borges wrote short fictions which cultivated a keen sense of the paradoxical. Just the man we're looking for to guide us in our search for the key of Babel. Borges devised a metaphor for just such a monstrous context machine. In a story called "The Library of

Babel", he sets up a universe in the form of a library. This library is made up of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. Each of these galleries holds books of uniform format, written in an incomprehensible language, like what George Steiner calls "the formally boundless unity that underlies the fragmentation of tongues". Various hypotheses abound among users of the library. It holds all knowledge, all languages. Some volumes may hold the key to the impenetrable alphabet. Most probably, Borges' library is the interior of the great tower of Babel.

Reader

"The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us turns us into phantoms. I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into banditry have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned the suicides, more and more frequent with the years. Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species, the 'unique' species, is about to be extinguished. But the library will endure, illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret. If an eternal traveller were to cross it in any direction, after centuries, he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder, which thus repeated, would be an order: the order. My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope".

Fred A. Reed

Early in the 16th century, French author, Francois Rabelais, wrote that "All speech utterances are conserved intact, somewhere". The sum of everything said before changes and alters whatever is said today. This in turn affects all possibilities of future speech, but what is said today exerts a powerful influence on our reading of the past. It's like the snake that swallows its own tail.

George Steiner
I tried to show what Borges means when he says that for us, at the moment, Joyce's Ulysses is earlier than Homer, that we come to Homer after Joyce. It's a wonderful joke, but it's a very deep and very important joke because we now read Homer because we have read Ulysses and we cannot artificially exclude the Joyce from the Homer. All that, yes; that's what the history of constant translation and retranslation is about.

Fred A. Reed
Babylon in 2,000 B.C. was a cosmopolitan city of hanging gardens and massive ziggurats, and probably the model for the Old Testament tower of Babel itself. Babylon was a polyglot empire. Much of its official business was handled by scribes who translated royal edicts into various languages inscribed on clay tablets. But the most famous translation of the ancient world was the Rosetta stone, dating from the 2nd century B.C. This stone provided the key to unlocking the secrets of Egyptian hieroglyphics. It placed them side by side with a translation into Greek. As for the ancient Greeks, those brilliant creators of democracy, tragedy and comedy, they cared little for translation. "All those who are not Greeks are barbarians. Let them learn our language", they said. So when the coarse, uncouth Romans conquered Greece, they had to translate to get culture. Hence the first literary translation from one language into another. This happened in around 250 B.C., when the Greco-Roman poet Livius Andronicus turned Homer's Odyssey into Latin for use as, what else, a textbook. At about the same time, in Alexandria, a committee of 70 rabbis, the Septuagint, was translating certain books of the Hebrew scripture into Greek. That's when the sky went dark for three days. Two hundred and fifty years later, Jerusalem became the site of an extraordinary gathering of tongues. It sounded almost like a reversal of the scattering of languages at Babel and it portended signs and wonders.

Reader
"Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together and were confounded:

because every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying to one another, Behold, are not all these which speak Gallilean? And how hear we every man in our own tongue? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia and in Judea and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia. We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were amazed and were in doubt, saying one to another: What meaneth this?"

Fred A. Reed
Out of this remarkable confluence of tongues emerged Christianity. The new faith used Aramaic and Greek, the common tongues of Palestine. But it was also the religion born of translation.

George Steiner
Christ's Aramaic goes into Hebrew almost immediately, then into Greek, which becomes the world instrument of its victory, and then chooses Latin as its triumphant and militant tongue. So a four-language move attends upon the very beginnings of Christianity, and that is what the word "ecumenical" very precisely means.

Fred A. Reed
The authors of this ecumenical gospel were engaging depicted as smooth-talking PR men by Nikos Kazantzakis in The Last Temptation. Perhaps an exaggeration, but they were certainly not above using a pun to make a point. "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church". Well, in this sentence, Peter comes out as Petros in Greek, Petrus in Latin, Pierre in French, all meaning rock. Thanks to this down-to-earth approach to language, there was scarcely a moment of hesitation when it came to translating the sacred books of Christianity. Some early theologians, like St. Augustine, argued that the Greek version of the Old Testament, translated by the 70-man committee, was divinely inspired. But the man who translated the Christian canon into Latin vulgate, Eusebius Hieronymus, more commonly known as St. Jerome, made no such claims. Here is his letter to Pope Damasus, who

commissioned the work in the year 385.

Reader
"You have urged me to make a new work out of an old and to sit in judgement, as it were, on the copies of the scriptures which are now scattered throughout the whole world. This is a labour of piety, but at the same time, one of dangerous presumption, for in judging others, I will myself be judged by all. And how dare I change the language of the world's old age and carry it back to the days of its childhood? On the other hand, there are two considerations which console me. In the first place, the order comes from you, who are the supreme pontiff. Secondly, even those who speak against us have to admit that divergent readings cannot all be right. If we are to search out the truth by a comparison of many, why not go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced either by inaccurate translators or by the blundering emendations of self-confident but ignorant critics, or the additions and changes made by copyists who are only half-awake".

Fred A. Reed
St. Jerome is, of course, the patron saint of translators. But like any translator, and unlike most saints, he made some mistakes. Jean Delisle is professor of the history of translation at the University of Ottawa.

Jean Delisle
St. Jerome translated all that from Hebrew and also Greek, two sources, and he himself made many mistakes, and one of the famous mistakes is when he put horns on the head of Moses. Did you ever ask yourself why Moses, when he came down the mountain, has two horns on his head? Well, this is just an error of translation made by St. Jerome. He translated the word "acumeran", if I remember, meaning that Moses has a brilliant face, you see, illuminé. And he thought it meant the word "horn", which has the same radical, the word has the same radical. So he said that Moses, when he came down the mountain, has two horns on his head, and this is simply an error of translation. He should have said his face was brilliant. And

Michaelangelo sculptured that error of translation in his famous "Moses", and you have in marble an error of translation sculptured by a great artist.

Fred A Reed
The European West slumbered through centuries of intellectual and cultural obscurity–the Dark Ages. But during these centuries, the Byzantine empire kept the ancient Greek spirit alive. The spirit brought a new vitality to the expanding Islamic empire. In the 9th century, during the reign of the Abbassid caliphs, a school of translation called the House of Wisdom flourished in Baghdad. Muslim and Christian scholars translated the cultural heritage of ancient Greece as set down by the Byzantines into Arabic. Herman Landolt is a professor at the McGill University Institute of Islamic Studies in Montreal.

Herman Landolt
Actually, there are two important periods of translation, two translation movements to be distinguished. One, the transmission of the Greek heritage to the Arabs, basically in the first half of the 9th century, and the other the transmission by the Arabs of a similar body of knowledge, enriched, meanwhile, by the Muslims themselves, to the West, in Spain basically, in the 12th century. Most of the translators were, by the way, Christian Arabs. The importance of this movement, of this phenomenon, cannot be underestimated. It was the basis for a whole tradition of philosophical thought, philosophical, scientific, medical and other aspects of basically Greek culture that had already been transformed by the Christians.

Fred A. Reed
Islam has also had its share of problems with translation of its sacred book. Muslims believe the Koran was dictated to the prophet Mohammed, who was himself illiterate. In fact, "al Qur'an" means "the reading" in Arabic, and is considered to be the unmediated word of God. An English Muslim named Marmaduke Pickthall translated the Koran at the beginning of the 20th century, but he was torn by doubt.

Reader
"The aim of this work is to present to English readers what Muslims the world over hold to be the meaning of the words of the Koran, and the nature of that book, in not unworthy language, and concisely. However, the Koran cannot be translated. That is the view of old-fashioned sheiks and the view of the present writer. The book is here rendered almost literally, and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Koran and, per adventure, something of the charm, in English. It can never take the place of the Koran in Arabic, nor is it to do so".

Herman Landolt
Certainly there is a controversy about whether the Koran should be translated because the Koran, being the sacred book of Islam, it cannot be imitated by anything. It is absolutely miraculous. So to translate it into any vulgar, profane language is already considered by some to be sacriledge. However, it has been translated from pretty early times. The earliest known Perisan translations are in the 10th or 11th century already. First of all, not everybody agreed that the Arabic Koran, the way it is written as the traditional formula has it, between the two covers of the book, is as such the word of God. It is only the material form of it, some would say, whereas the word of God has sort of an other level of existence. And if you agree with that, then of course you can also translate. In fact, it is being translated, even if there is some feeling about the untouchability. And of course, there is some reason to that also because the Arabic language of the Koran is indeed very ambiguous sometimes. So depending on how one interprets, one can come to quite different conclusions, and therefore it is touchy.

Fred A. Reed
For some in Islam, the word of God is hermetically sealed and allows of no translation. And as the word is hermetically sealed, so also is the world of each individual culture. Jorge Luis Borges, the translator's faithful companion, takes up precisely this question in an elegant

parable called “Averröes’ Search”. In it, the great Islamic philosopher, Averroës, is writing a commentary on Aristotle in his castle in Andalusia.

Reader
“His pen moved across the page. The arguments entwined irrefutably. But a slight preoccupation darkened Averroës’ felicity. It was caused by a problem of philological nature related to the monumental work which would justify him in the eyes of men, his commentary on Aristotle. This Greek, fountainhead of all philosophy had been bestowed upon men to teach them all that could be known. To interpret his works as the ulima interpret the Koran wa Averroës’ arduous purpose. Few things more beautiful and more pathetic are recorded in history than this Arab physician’s dedication to the thoughts of a man separated from him by fourteen centuries. To the intrinsic difficulties we should add that Averroës, ignorant of Syriac and of Greek, was working with a translation of a translation. The night before, two doubtful words had halted him at the beginning of the Poetics. These words were ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’. He had encountered them years before in the third book of the rhetoric. No one in the whole world of Islam could conjecture what they meant. These two arcane words pullulated throughout the text of the poetics. It was impossible to elude them”.

Fred A. Reed
Averroës seeks the counsel of learned friends to try and unravel the dilemma of these two concepts, which have no equivalent in his culture. One of his friends is a traveller who had visited faraway China. There, he tells Averroës, he once saw a terrace on which some twenty persons in crimson-coloured masks could be seen praying, singing and conversing. They suffered prison, but no one could see the jail, he tells Averroës. They travelled on horseback, but no one could see the horse. They fought, but the swords were of reeds. They died and then stood up again. What the friend had seen was, in fact, a theatre, the place where tragedy and comedy are brought into being. But theatre, like other arts of representation, is discouraged in Islamic culture, and so, tragically, Averroës misses the point. And yet he imagines he’s understood these two elusive words–comedy and tragedy.

Reader
"The muezzin were calling the faithful to their early morning prayers when Averroës entered his library again. In the harem, the dark-haired slave girls had tortured a red-haired slave girl, but he would not know it until the afternoon. Something had revealed to him the meaning of the two obscure words. With firm and careful calligraphy, he added these lines to the manuscript: 'Aristu'–Aristotle–'gives the name of tragedy to panegyrics, and that of comedy to satires and anathemas. Admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the pages of the Koran and in the Mahalacas of the sanctuary'. He felt sleepy. He felt somewhat cold. Having unwound his turban, he looked at himself in a metal mirror. I do not know what his eyes saw because no historian has ever described the forms of his face. I do know that he disappeared suddenly, as if fulminated by an invisible fire".

Fred A. Reed
It wasn't all opacity and fading images. Throughout history, there have been wonderful cases of cross-cultural translation and transmission. One particularly bizarre example is a legend called "Liber Gestorum Barlaam et Josephat". Like many legends, it tells the story of young princes and their good works. But this particular tale originated in the Far East and worked its way through the Islamic world and into the West. By the 12th century, it had become wildly popular among the common people of Europe, so popular that the church was forced to promote Barlaam and Josephat to sainthood.

Herman Landolt
"Josephat" is just a misreading of "Buddha Bodhisattva". And of course the story of how this story of Buddha Bodhisattva came to the West via varoius intermediaries is a long story. There were Armenian versions, there were Syriac versions, there are many Arabic versions, and so on. But I only want to point out that there was a giving and taking.

Fred A. Reed
The pace of give and take was speeding up. In the 12th century, Muslim, Jewish and Christian

scholars at Toledo translated Greek philosophical and scientific works from Arabic into Latin. One century later, at Monte Cassino in Italy, a similar school flourished. Translation gave enormous impetus to Europe's rediscovery of its Greek and Latin past. Sure enough, the church sniffed a threat to its monopoly of divine interpretation. But it was too late. It's always too late. The Council of Konstanz in 1414 forbade all vernacular translations of the Bible. Too late again. Forty years later, Gutenberg began to use moveable type, and soon printed translations in clandestine editions starting pouring off the presses. Books in translation quickly became the main vector of subversive ideas, and many of the chief subversives were Bible translators. The first Bible to be printed in English was the work of one William Tyndale. Translation had its first martyr–Tyndale himself.

Jean Delisle
Translators paid the cost of their life, paid for their translations at cost of their life. Tyndale, for instance, was burned at the stake. Many translators were imprisoned. They were just trying to translate the Bible to make it more accessible. The church said that since the Bible was the word of God, it has to remain in Latin, and they feared that the translator would interpret wrongly the message of God and then would create a schism.

Reader
"It shall hereafter appear to the King's Highness that his aide people do utterly abandon and forsake all perverse, erroneous and seditious opinions with the New Testament and the Old, corruptly translated into the English tongue, now being in print. And that the same books and all other books of heresy, as well in the French tongue as in the Dutch tongue, be clearly exterminated and exiled out of this realm of England forever".

Fred A. Reed
That's what King Henry VIII said after he'd burned Tyndale and his books in 1529. But the king's reasons were probably more personal and political than religious. The truth is, Henry really wanted to prepare his own version of the Bible. The Reformation had arrived. The

Protestants believed that the faithful should have direct access to the scriptures. No need for priests and Popes to interpret for them. But in order for the faithful to have access, the Bible had to be translated. First came Martin Luther's translation into German. Later, a series of English Bibles: the Geneva Bible, which Shakespeare used, and ultimately the authorised version. January 14, 1693. King James I summoned the clergy to a conference at Hampton Court.

Reader

"I profess, I could never yet see a Bible well translated in English. I wish some special pains were taken for a uniform translation, which should be done by the best learned men in both universities, then reviewed by the bishops, presented to the Privy Council, lastly ratified by royal authority to be read in the whole church, and none other".

Fred A. Reed

Three groups of scholars called "companies" took up the king's commission at three separate venues: Oxford, Cambridge and London. As each group of books was finished, it was submitted to the other two companies for scrutiny, criticism and final approval. In case of some special obscurity, the revisors could request the aid of "any learned man" in the land. The reasons are hard to pinpoint, but they produced a literary masterpiece. Readers then and since have experienced a feeling of "at homeness" in this Bible, a native presence in a remote, entirely alien world. The translators created a life form that seemed to come straight from a vivid English past and not from the Hebraic, Hellenic or Ciceronian tradition. The King James Bible became a new pivot of an emerging English consciousness.

By the beginning of the 16th century, the study of Hebrew and Greek had been revived throughout Europe. Through translations, scholars now had direct access to the ancient world. They called it "the new learning".

Sherry Simon

The Renaissance, we know, was a period in which translation was at the centre of all

intellectual activity, not of only literary activity, but of intellectual activity in general. And then, in France for instance, you go from the Renaissance to a period that's the classical period, where translation in France, in particular, was an essential literary activity, and these translators were the most important writers of their time. Translations were the mode by which literature was generated.

Fred A. Reed
The age of Shakespeare was England's first great age of translation. Translators displayed the political practices of Greece and Rome, all the better to compare them with the brilliance of their own enlightened realm. Shakespeare and his contemporaries drew freely on ancient sources, all in translation, of course. It gave their work a ring of authenticity, demonstrated what their genius could do with the bone-dry raw materials of history.

Reader
"I will tell you, the barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold, purple the sails, and so perfumed that the winds were luft with them. The oars were silver, which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made the water which they beat to follow faster, as amorous of their strokes. For her own person, it beggared all description. She did lie in her pavilion, cloth of gold of tissue, o'er picturing that Venus where we see the fancy outwork nature. On each side her stood pretty, dimpled boys, like smiling cupids, with divers coloured fans, whose wind did seem to glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool and what they undid, did".

"Oh, rare for Antony".

Fred A. Reed
That bit of Antony and Cleopatra is Shakespeare's adaptation of a translation of a translation. In 1559, a French clergyman named Jacques Amyot published a French version of Plutarch's Lives of Famous Romans. Amyot's work was in turn the source for an English translation by Sir Thomas North, twenty years later. This is the piece that found its way into Antony and

Cleopatra.

Reader
“She resolved to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sounds of the music of flutes, howboyos, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon the barge. And now for the person of herself. She was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparalled and attired like the goddess Venus, commonly drawn in picture. And hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys, apparelled as painters do set forth god Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with which they fanned wind upon her”.

Fred A. Reed
Nice, but no cigar. This was the dross from which Shapespeare made purest gold. But without Lord North, would there have been such an Antony? And without Jacques Amyot, could North have delivered Plutarch to the bard? Meanwhile, here we are back in Geneva, sipping coffee with George Steiner.

George Steiner
Very great translators are among the supreme creatures in the history of our culture. The anonymous 70 or whatever who did the Old Testament in the Greek, the people who did the King James, you know we know only very few of their names. They are among the supreme writers of all times. Whoever translated “looking through a glass darkly” or the Book of Job or the Psalms is of a Shakespearean dimension, and even if it was a collective work, then I say oh, miracle. But the proof is there. Great translators are very great creators of a peculiar kind. They may be the same, as you say, as the poets, or they may not. They may be specialists in that strange craft, in that strange panderer’s craft, in that strange brothel craft of bringing the right people together in the mystery of communion and intimate commerce.

Lister Sinclair

Tonight on Ideas, Deciphering Babel by Fred Reed Readings, Griffith Brewer and Earl Pennington.

PART II

Lister Sinclair
I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas.

Reader
"Therefore is the name of it called Babel, because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth".

Lister Sinclair
The Old Testament tells us that once we all spoke the same language, but to punish mankind for the sin of pride, God destroyed the great Tower of Babel and cast us into a wilderness of tongues.

Reader
"Therefore is the name of it called Babel, because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth".

Lister Sinclair
Ever since then, translators, like a kind of cultural courier service, have been trying to deliver the messages of civilization, across time and through the barriers of language. And that's what tonight's program is about–translation. Some religious dogmas, as well as linguistic theories, claim translation is impossible. But no matter what they say, it happens. In fact, without it, we'd have no exchange of ideas, none of the great cross-fertilization that creates civilization. But how can we be sure that we're really getting the message, that translators are telling it like it is? Can translations be faithful and beautiful at the same time? Or to be true, do they have to be plain and dowdy? Tonight's program is the second and concluding hour of our series, Deciphering Babel. It's written and presented by Montreal writer and translator, Fred Reed.

Reader

> "Ah, my beloved, fill the cup that cheers
> Today of past regrets and future fears
> Tomorrow, why tomorrow I may be myself
> With yesterday's seven thousand years.
> Lo, some we loved, the loveliest and best
> That time and fate have all their vintage pressed
> Have drunk their cup a round or two before
> And one by one, crept silently to rest".

Fred A. Reed

If you guessed the Rubayyat of Omar Khayyam, you're right. But wait. Some say it's the translator we're hearing, that Edward Fitzgerald transfored an obscure Persian poem into an English masterpiece. More often, it happens the other way around. Translators reduce masterpieces to piles of rubble. Perhaps that's why people don't trust us. Did you ever ask yourself, in a whisper, of course, "Would I buy a slightly used book from this man?"
George Steiner is the author of After Babel, the definitive study of language and translation. I talked with him at his favourite sidewalk cafe in Geneva, where he lives and teaches. Steiner is a man with a keen sensitivity to the most intractable dilemma a translator can face.

George Steiner

The basic ambiguity is that you end up in this demanding, ill-paid, terribly criticized craft where every idiot knows better than you, where the one reason why your peers read you is to find errors, which is one of the saddest of all publics. One enters on this because you love the original so much that you want it to be available to those who don't read it. Fine. It's an act of love, it's an act of self-suppression. After all, you could be writing your own book and you give your heart, soul, time, energy to this terribly exacting and unrewarding pursuit. And one half the balance is to say "I am the servant". The most wonderful thing would be if the translation were anonymous, if I disappeared behind the original. I am its servant. At my very

best, I am performing the Beethoven Sonata with my violin. He composed it and the most wonderful thing would be if in a cunous sense, I was nameless, behind a screen. But of course that isn't humanly true. As you get into your work, you begin saying to yourself, first of all, well, there are things here I would have done perhaps a little better or differently, a natural human impulse. And, because the task is so profoundly challenging, because it's so profoundly a task of the metamorphic, of the transforming–trans-forming–you may, unless you're very careful, very scrupulous, find yourself stepping into the author's shoes in a more direct sense. That is why I distinguish a very peculiar class of translations, which I have named transfigurations, which are better than the original, more powerful, stronger, more appealing. For instance, I understand that Fitzgerald's Rubayyat beats a lot of the original hollow. I do know that Rilke's translations of a wonderful but very humble French woman poet of the Renaissance, Louise Labbaye, are infinitely more glorious and throat-gripping than the original. I suspect that a good many of Ezra Pound's fantastic translations leave the original far behind in intensity and virtuosity. I think transfiguration is one of the deepest betrayals because it means you don't return to the original. You have ingested and eaten up the original.

Fred A. Reed

There's a modern novel which must strike terror into every translator's heart. It takes this idea of transfiguration to an even more sinister degree. It's called "If on a Winter's Night a Traveller" and it was written by the late Italian writer, Italo Calvino. One of the protagonists of Calvino's book is a globe-trotting translator named Hermes Marana. His namesake is Hermès, the Greek god of commerce and trickery. Marana is like him, a wheeler-dealer, a master of deceit and disguise. In the book, the narrator discovers Marana's ploy. Marana breaks off the translation at the moment of greatest suspense and starts to translate another novel, which he then inserts insidiously into the first. The whole novel is a tissue of bogus translations.

Reader

"Little by little, you will manage to understand something more about the origins of the translator's machinations. The secret spring that set them in motion was his jealousy of the invisible rival who came constantly between him and Ludmilla, the silent voice that speaks to her through books. Always, since his taste and talent impelled him in that direction, but more than ever since his relationship with Ludmilla became critial, Hermes Marana dreamed of a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches. If this idea had succeeded in imposing itself, if a systematic uncertainty as to the identity of the writer had kept the reader from abandoning himself with trust–trust not so much in what was being told him as in the silent narrating voice, perhaps externally, the edifice of literature would not have changed at all. But beneath, in the foundations, where the relationship between reader and text is established, something would have changed forever. Then Hermes Marana would no longer have felt himself abandoned by Ludmilla, absorbed in her reading. Between the book and her, there would always be insinuated the shadow of mystification, and he, identifying himself with every mystification, would have affirmed his presence".

Sherry Simon
Calvino's novel is just a brilliant formulation of the kinds of ways in which the translator has been characterized throughout history as a devious, secretive, suspicious character, crossing boundaries. All kinds of metaphors of contraband and other kinds of illicit activities have been attributed to the translator.

Fred A. Reed
Sherry Simon is a Montreal historian and professor of translation.

Sherry Simon
And Calvino does this particularly well because he uses the triangle in his novel. The triangle that the novel is based on is the love-jealousy-suspicion relationship between the Author, with a capital A, the Translator, with a capital T, and the Reader, who is female. And the

Translator is engaged in a series of fraudulent activities which aim at denigrating the authority of the Author. So the Reader is trying to read a book, finds certain pages are missing, finds that the versions of the book that she's reading are not correct, don't correspond to the "real" thing, the real original. And the Translator hopes that his devious tricks are going to lead the Reader to lose confidence in this Author, who she has been under the seductive powers of.

Fred A. Reed
The triangular relationship that Calvino pulls from the literary closet has always been a part of translation. The skeletons of William Tyndale and Etienne Dolet are lurking in that same closet. Both men were burned at the stake, Tyndale for retranslating the Bible, Dolet for an error in translation. Their gruesome end reminds us how the high and mighty of this world once dealt with translators. We don't do it that way any more, of course. We've mellowed. Translators aren't burned, they're just called into the editor's office and told "this isn't what we wanted at all". Today, we're prepared to look with some detachment not only at individual translations, but at translation as a body of knowledge.

Sherry Simon
Translations, for one thing, help us to understand when we look at translations, bodies of translations–and that's another new focus in translation studies, is looking not at one text or one translator and whether that translation was good or not, but looking at bodies, corpuses, of translations, and saying, "What is the general thrust of those translations in a certain period and what do they tell us about the cultural understandings of a society towards another society?"

Fred A. Reed
It's not a one-way street either. Of course translations help us understand other societies, but they also tell us about the things we value in our society and in our language. In the West, every age has tested the vigour of its language by translating the Bible, and every age has

translated the essential works of Greece and Rome, what we call the classics. In fact, until recently, no proper education was complete without a knowledge of Greek and Latin nor was it complete without the ability to translate, something generations of poets and non-poets undertook, often with reckless abandon.

The late 17th and early 18th centuries in England were an era of great richness in translation, second only to Shakespeare's day. The romantic cult of the lone, inspired author had not yet taken root. Poets made them reputations and burnished their poetic art as classical translators. They were particularly fond of what they called "imitations", very free renderings of the classical original with all the emphasis on elegance, style and language.

Reader

> "Hand Homer and Virgil, their meaning to seek
> A man must have poked in the Latin and Greek
> Those who love their own tongue, we have reason to hope
> Have read them translated by Dryden and Pope".

Fred A. Reed

The Restoration poet, John Dryden, translated two lines of verse for every line he wrote himself, and he wrote many lines. As was the custom of the age, Dryden explained his method in a preface. Here are his comments on translating Virgil.

Reader

"On the whole matter, I thought fit to steer betwixt the two extremes of paraphrase and literal translation, to keep as near my author as I could, without losing all his graces, the most eminent of which are in the beauty of his words, and those words, I must add, are always figurative. Such of these as would retain their elegance in our tongue I have endeavoured to graft on it, but most of them are of necessity to be lost, because they will not shine in any but their own. Such is the difference of the languages, or such my want of skill in choosing words. Yet I presume to say that, taking all the materials of this divine author, I have

endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken, if he had been born in England and in this present age."

Fred A. Reed
Alexander Pope succeeded Dryden as England's chief poet and satirist. Like hundreds before and since, Pope tried his hand at Homer. His version of the Iliad got him embroiled in a bitter dispute with the influential playwright, John Addison. Addison, for political reasons it seems, preferred a translation by one of Pope's competitors. He did all he could to block Pope's efforts. The anti-Pope version has not survived, but here's a bit of Pope's translation from the taunting speech of Diomedes to Paris. There's a feeling of self-assuredness here. The diction and language give us a sense of themselves as the culiminating point of a tradition–which they were.

Reader

> "He, dauntless, this: Thou conqueror of the fair
> Thou woman warrior with the curling hair
> Vain archer, trusting to the distant dart
> Unskilled in arms to act a manly part
> Thou hast but done what boys or women can
> Such hands may wound, but not insense a man
> Nor boast the scratch thy feeble arrow gave
> A coward's weapon never hurts the brave."

Fred A. Reed
Just for the sake of comparison, let's listen to these same lines, translated into verse by Richard Lattimore, a modern American translator. The rhetorical elegance and richness that came so naturally to Pope seem out of place in our age. Today, the extraordinary has become banal. Words like "love" and "heroism" sound sardonic. Instead, translators, like poets, try to recreate the rhythm of emotion in more subtle ways.

Reader

> "You, archer, foul fighter, lovely in your lock's eyer, of young girls
> If you were to make trial of me in strong combat with weapons
> Your bow would do you no good at all nor your close-showered arrows
> Now you have scratched the flat of my foot and even boast of this
> I care no more than if a witless child or a woman had struck me
> This is the blank weapon of a useless man, no fighter."

Fred A. Reed

Not many of the hundreds of brave souls who have tried their hand at Virgil or Homer are Drydens or Popes or Lattimores. How many pedants have struggled with Greek or Latin particles and infinitives? How many poetasters have wrestled with optatives and subjunctives of these dead languages? Only the god of translators knows. Canada's own Stephen Leacock was no mean classicist himself, and he had a devastating eye for the dull, heavy-handed literalism that dominates the academic industry. Here's his version of Homer.

Reader

"Then he too Ajax on the one hand leaped (or possibly jumped) into the fight wearing on the other hand, yes certainly a steel corselet (or possibly a bronze undertunic) and on his head of course, yes without doubt he had a helmet with a tossing plume taken from the mane (or possibly extracted from the tail) of some horse which once fed along the banks of the Scamander (and it sees the herd and raises its head and paws the ground) and in his hand a shield worth a hundred oxen and on his knees too especially in particular greaves made by some cunning artificer (or perhaps blacksmith) and he blows the fire and it is hot. Thus Ajax leapt (or better, was propelled from behind), into the fight".

Fred A. Reed

For centuries, France led all other countries in the number and value of translations. French translators aimed at more than a simple restoration of balance between the original and their

translated version. For them, translation was an attempt to repair what God had shattered at Babel. This was the assumption underlying the debate on how to translate and on the role of the translator. They carried on this debate in prefaces, where they explained and defended their methods. Etienne Dolet was one of the most prominent of these erudite preface writers. He was also burned at the stake for an error in translation. But, on a happier note, Dolet was the first European to use a preface to spell out his theory of translation.

Reader
"The translator must understand perfectly the content and intention of the author whom he is translating. He must also have a perfect knowledge of the language from which he is translating, and an equally excellent knowledge of the language into which he is translating. The translator should avoid the tendency to translate word for word, which destroys the meaning of the original and ruins the beauty of the expression. The translator should employ forms of speech in common usage. Through his choice and order of words, the translator should produce andoverall effect with appropriate tone".

Fred A. Reed
How simple. How straightforward it all sounds. But Dolet's rules were only the first salvo in the conflict between the literalists and the free translators–the faithful lackeys and les belles infideles. In areas like medical translation, where the subject is the human body, the dispute hardly ever raised a ripple. But in translating literature, and particularly poetry, the two frères ennemis, the two eternal rivals are still going at it hammer and tongs today.

Reader

> What is translation? On a platter
> A poet's pale and glaring head,
> A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
> And profanation of the dead.
> The parasites you were hard on

Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
Oh Pushkin, for my strategem.
I travelled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza, patterned on a sonnet
Into my honest roadside prose –
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

Fred A. Reed
Vladimir Nabokov was the Russian emigré author of Lolita. He wrote these lines as a commentary on his translation of Alexander Pushkin's epic poem, Eugene Onegin. Nabokov saw the Onegin translation as his life's work and he devoted years to it.

Reader
"Can a rhymed poem like Eugene Onegin be truly translated with the retention of its rhymes? The answer, of course, is no. To reproduce the rhymes and yet translate the entire poem literally is mathematically impossible. But in losing its rhyme, the poem loses its bloom. Should one then content oneself with an exact rendering of the subject matter and forget all about form? Or should one still excuse an imitation of the poem's structure, to which only twisted bits of sense stick here and there, by convincing oneself and one's public that in mutilating its meaning for the sake of a pleasure measure rhyme, one has the opportunity of prettifying or skipping the dry and difficult passages?"

Fred A. Reed
Nabokov's answer was to apply a strictly literalist approach. He would try to match the exact contextual meaning of the original. At the same time, he devised an elaborate English equivalent for Pushkin's free-flowing Russian rhyme scheme. Only this could be true

translation.

Reader
"To my ideal of literalism, I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage and even grammar), that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth. Pushkin has likened translators to horses, changed at the post houses of civilization. The greatest reward I can think of is that students may use my work as a pony".

Fred A Reed
But Nabokov was aiming higher than that, much higher. Critics quickly saw through his guise of self-effacement. One of his few longtime friends and admirers was the American novelist, Edmund Wilson. But Wilson wrote a sharply critical review of the Eugene Onegin translation, calling Nabokov "the least modest of men". The review put an end to the friendship, as these things will. In it, Wilson accused Nabokov of producing:

Reader
"A bald and awkward language which has nothing in common with Pushkin. One knows Mr. Nabokov's virtuosity in juggling with the English language, the prettiness and wit of his verbal inventions. One knows also the perversity of his tricks to startle or stick pins in the reader, and one suspects here that his perversity has been exercised in curbing his brilliance. But he seeks to torture both the reader and himself by flattening Pushkin out and denying to his own powers the scope for their full play."

Fred A. Reed
Nabokov's literalism is one extreme. At the other extreme stands Ezra Pound, that cantankerous fascist and supporter of Mussolini. Pound was also a brilliant poet and an even more brilliant translator. He described his non-literalist leanings this way.

Reader

"The poetry of a far-off time or place requires a translation not only of word and of spirit, but of accompaniment, that is, that the modern audience must in some measure be made aware of the mental content of the older audience and of what these others drew from certain fashions of thought and speech. I believe in an ultimate and absolute rhythm, as I believe in an absolute symbol or metaphor. The perception of the intellect is given in the word, that of the emotions in the cadence. It is only then, in perfect rhythm joined to the perfect word that the two-fold vision can be recorded."

Fred A. Reed
Pound does this best in the Cathay poems, his translations from 8th century Chinese. Actually, these poems are more what George Steiner calls transfigurations. They were created on the basis of detailed notes on the Chinese characters by the scholar, Ernest Fenelosa. As for Pound, he himself understood not a word of the language. But in these translations, he utterly convinces us that he has made the world of the poet Li Po his own.

Reader

> "While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
> I played about the front gate pulling flowers.
> You came by on bamboo stilts playing horse,
> You walked about my seat playing with blue plums.
> And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
> Two small people without dislike or suspicion.
>
> At fourteen, I married My Lord, you.
> I never laughed, being bashful.
> Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
> Called to a thousand times, I never looked back.
> At fifteen, I stopped scowling.
> I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever
Why should I climb the look-out?

At sixteen, you departed
You went into far Ky-to-yen by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone for five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the west garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kliang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa."

Fred A. Reed
It's clear by now that there are no universally accepted principles of translation. Literal translations do violence to the language into which they are translated. Non-literal versions betray the meaning of the original. But what do do? The only people qualified to formulate such principles are translators themselves, and they have rarely been able to agree on anything. A quick survey of the rules drawn up by translators gives us these basic propositions, not to mention dozens of variants and subvariants.

Reader

"A translation must give the words of the original."
"A translation must give the ideas of the original."
"A translation should read like an original work."
"A translation should read like a translation."
"A translation should reflect the style of the original."
"A translation should possess the style of the translator."
"A translation should read as a contemporary of the translator."
"A translation should read as a contemporary of the original."
"A translator may add to or omit from the original."
"A translator may never add to or omit from the original."
"A translation of verse should be in prose."
"A translation of verse should be in verse."

Fred A. Reed
Translators here in Canada face the same on-going dilemma. After all, Canada is a bilingual country with a federal translation bureaucy and several thousand practicing translators. We have two lively national literatures. Both are driven by powerful creative personalities. And we have an abundance of cultural misunderstandings to match. It should be a great place for translators, and sometimes it is. David Homel has lived on both sides of the fence. He's a novelist in his own right and he's also translated and offbeat Quebécois novel by Jacques Renaud called Le Cassé.

David Homel
When I came across this book, which after all was written in 1964, so it's not as if it was the hottest new thing. Now, I called it Broke City. It so happened that this book was written by an angry young man who was living in a furnished room back in 1963, in a certain Montreal that's lost now. But there was a kind of an energy to it that I responded to immediately, and it's the kind of book that, in a way, it was tailor-made for me. There are books like that, and when that happens, I mean, you can just practically translate it with your eyes closed. Now

I'm a bit too old now to be an angry young man, but I identified with that feeling of being broke. Whether this guy was broke in the money sense or whether his life was broken down, which is what was happening, or whether the fact that he was living in a whole city that was broke and busted. And it's rare that you can do that with a translation. Sure, I had a kind of intellectual curiosity involved with that book too because it was really the first book that was written in joual or this kind of Montreal middle class or working class dialect, and it's been much made of, thanks to Michel Tremblay and other people like that, who've turned it into totally respectful literary language. But let us transport ourselves back to the early '60s, when to write a sentence in joual was like something totally unheard of, because first of all, the language was thought of as being totally spoken and never written, because it had no support in writing. That is, no one had ever thought of writing down these strange sounds that were coming out of people's mouths, and second of all, on a more moralistic sense, it was thought of as being not worthy even of the dignity of print. In other words, it was only the underclass that spoke this language and therefore the hell with them, literature doesn't belong to them anyway. Remember, Québec was a very conservative place back in those days. Dupleissis had only been dead a few years. But this kind of language had a kind of energy and anger that said something to me very personally.
(passage read in French)

David Homel
The first thing that you have to understand when you do joual is that you can't do it, really, in the sense that you can't translate it. Joual is this kind of mishmash of a lot of English words, a lot of English words that sometimes mean the same thing as they do in English. Sometimes the English words are kind of hijacked out of English and made to mean other things in French. It's made up of all sorts of odd French expressions and I suppose that maybe somebody who'd popped out of France from the 1600s could maybe identify with the sounds that it makes because the phonetics of it are rather strange too. I'm not a grammarian, really, or a linguist, but there's a lot of dipthongs, there's lots of strange elisions, words that seem to run into each other that are really four or five separate ones, and then there are

vowels that are all stretched out like Turkish taffy. And the thing is that joual is a kind of expression of linguistic colonization and it represents the then dominance, and I say "then" dominance of English over French in Quebec. So you can't really recreate this in English because no language, certainly not in North America and probably not in the world anywhere, no language dominates English in a kind of colonial situation. English is always on top. And in these days of Bill 101 and so forth, it's hard to imagine how complete was its domination over French in Quebec in the early '60s. So if you're writing in English or translating into English, you can't recreate that effect of one language being totally invaded and dominated by the other. So I threw out all the attempts to kind of recreate the power relations which are active and which are happening within joual because you can't do that in English. So what I tried to do instead was go back and capture the intensity and anger of someone who has a lot of things to say but doesn't really own the language to say it with, the language of the underclasses, and that's the language I worked in. And I think it succeeded because it got across what was happening in the lives of these characters in this book, even though it did not translate what joual does.

Reader

"He showed him the fucking light down at unemployment. Who the hell did they think they were? He told them eleven bucks wasn't enough to live off, what with a ten bucks a week rent to pay.

'You know the rules. We go by stamps. That's how we add it up. Sure, you worked a year and a half, but you only paid thirty-eight cents a week.'

'Is that my fault, huh? I was only making twenty-six bucks a week, dammit. I wasn't working in no office. I was pouring coffee at the counter.'

'Of course, but there's nothing we can do about that.'

'You'd better. Eleven bucks ain't enough. You want me to eat my mattress for breakfast? My super'll probably charge me for that too. Listen, mister, I ain't mad at you personally, but I gotta eat. A buck a week ain't much. What kind of shit you think I eat anyway?"'

Fred A. Reed
David Homel's translation of Le Cassé is full of the anger and vigour and aggressive excitement of Jacques Renaud's original. It also shows how translators in Canada approach the very distinct societies that they're translating. Of course, this doesn't only apply in Canada. Translators everywhere have a social function.

Sherry Simon
Translators are not transparent media, and that's one of the reasons, for instance, why, when reviewers forget to name the translator or the name of the translation it's always a great source of frustration to translators and to translators' associations. Because we know that a particular translation does not fall from the sky but is the product of a particular society and a particular individual, and it's also the result of what I like to call a project. A translator doesn't sit down to translate a work in a vacuum. It's in the context of values, of thinking the work is good, of wanting it to be understood and appreciated by the receiving culture, and moulding his or her work in terms of those values. I think that prefaces, for instance, are undervalued. I think the translator's preface is an excellent tool to remind the reader that he or she is reading a translation and to understand some of the conditions which have brought about that translation and the desire for that translation. What is the investment of the translator in the work and what is the kind of orientation which the translator is hoping to give to that work? Because there is orientation. Now that doesn't mean that the translation is tendentious or not faithful, but there is orientation. There are always choices and a good translation has a clear focus to it. You understand what the translator is trying to do and where the translator is trying to bring the work to, to what end.

Fred A. Reed
Translators seem to agree among themselves on this point, at least. Translation should have some sort of focus. And then, sometimes a translator encounters problems which cannot be solved easily. Words or concepts in what we call the "from" language may simply have no equivalent in the "to" language. Bible translation working into Inuktut solved the problem

of "lamb of God" in a culture where there are no lambs. They used "seal" of God. But how do they deal with the parable of the Good Shepherd? How can Hamlet's "to be or not to be" be translated into languages without an infinite? Translating the French "tu" and "vous", the familiar and polite forms of "you" into English is another dilemma. With our all-purpose "you", we miss the wonderfully complicated social subtleties of the French original. The names of fictional characters in Russian literature and in Homer somehow reflect their attributes. How do we translate them? Imagine a translation of Finnegan's Wake, which is itself a translation out of English, into a multi-layered pun language devised by James Joyce.

Reader
... the vivid girl, deaf with love, (ah, sure, you know her, our angel being, one of romance's fadeless wonder women, and sure now, we all know you dote on her even unto date) with a queeleetlecree of joysis crisis she reulited there disunited, with ripy lepes to ropy lopes (the dear o'dears!) and the golden importunity of allofer's leavetime, when as quick is greased pigskin, Amoricas Champius, with one aragan throust, druve the massive of virilvigtoury flshpst the both lines of forwars (Eburnea's down boys!) rightjinbangshot into the goal of her gullet.

Fred A. Reed
Finnegans Wake is an extreme example, I admit, but it does what some translators feel every translation ought to do. They claim a translation has to acknowledge its origins. It has to send out subtle, or not so subtle, signals which identify it as a translation, which reveal its foreignness, its otherness. Things like foreign words in the text or footnotes, or strange grammatical constructions.

Sherry Simon
I wouldn't try to define a good translation in terms of a literalist or a non-literalist approach. I think that those two tendencies exist and there is a school of thought that attributes value to one kind of translation, saying that all translation must be of the literalist type in that you

must be aware as you read the translation that the work comes from elsewhere. Yes, I would give a kind of value to a translation which has signs of its origins. That I believe because that's one of the reasons why I want to read a translation. But at the same time, I believe that the force of a translation comes from the kind of emotional investment that the translator puts into that work. And if that results in a work that is clearly signed by the translator and really situates a translator, in some cases, I think that's an excellent work.

Fred A. Reed
But other translators say the language of translation must be pure and limid, an invisible element, nothing more that the medium of thought and feeling. And above all, it should never attract attention to itself.

David Homel
At all costs, well, at almost all costs, the translations has to be a pure and purely readable work unto itself. It has to do with my idea of why people read. People read for escape, to go into a new place, to get into somebody else's skin, to lose yourself for as long as possible in the book, and the reason to read a translation is absolutely no different. You just happen to be wanting to escape into a world which speaks a different language than you do, so therefore you have to depend on the translator. Well, you want this book to give you that escape. You want to take that ride, you want to seek that escape, and therefore you want a perfect read. And I think that really is behind a lot of the choices I make in translation. I don't happen to go along with the idea that you must always be signalling with little grimaces or grins or winks to your reader that what he or she is reading is a translation. This sends disagreeable chills up my spine. It's really a moot point to talk about making sure that the reader knows that it's a foreign book by little cues in the translation. The fact is that number one, the reader has chosen to read a foreign book because the reader wants its foreignness. We consume translations because we want something from somewhere else. In other words, the reader is already on our side. We don't have to remind him that, by the way, you're reading a translation. And number two, the foreignness or the strangeness of a work will

always appear in a hundred thousand different ways, no matter how seamless your translation is. And in fact, that's not a cry of despair, that's a good thing. After all, we're looking for that strangeness. That's part of the whole process of escape. So what the translation must do, it must give the reader a pure experience of literary escaping, just as though it was happening in the reader's own language.

Fred A. Reed
David Homel has fashioned his credo from experience in the hand-to-hand combat of translation trench warfare and lately as a novelist whose own works is now in the process of being translated.

David Homel
You have to have the idea that you can recreate at least the effects of the original and most, if not all of its meanings, otherwise you just flounder into despair. And in fact, I have those feelings of despair when I start with page one, chapter one of any translation. Here I am, limping ineffectually after the author's meanings, and the author seemed to have just sprayed out, if you will, all these wonderful meanings and it just seemed to be fairly transparent. There it all is on the page. And then I'm just sort of saying well, what does this mean and why this word and not that word, and why did he put it here, and why did she put this in back of that, and I sort of feel like a one-legged man running the marathon. I mean, I fell like it's totally unfair. And that's funny, because when I began to write myself, that was one of the pleasures, compared to translation, that I could just make meanings almost instinctually and with great pleasure and seemingly effortlessly, compared to my translator. And we get together. We're great friends and we get together and I can see, for example, the agony that this poor guy has gone through, all the decision making over one simple verb. And that's the agony of translation, and now that I've seen it from both sides, is to be constantly trailing and limping after the author's intent.

Fred A. Reed

There is a small but determined school of thought which falls between the two extremes of literality and free translation. It claims that in some rare cases, there can be almost total convergence between an original and its translation.

George Steiner
The miracles of exact correspondence, not in the mechanical sense, but of a work which falls short of the original and yet somehow makes of that falling short a circle around it, a luminous circle. The miracle of translations which shows you what was there, even though the original did not fully realize it itself, is very rare. It exists, of course. It's crazily difficult to understand how it can happen and it's a sheer wonder, and it's what people like you and I watch for, live for and rejoice infinitely when we come across it. I was in China, so I asked them, like everybody else of course, about three of the Pound poems which are among the greatest poems, I think, in literature, The Bowmen of Chu, The River Merchant's Wife and Cathay. And they said they are by far the greatest translations ever made from Chinese, though they know he could not read a single character. And Arthur Walley, whose scholarship in Chinese they deeply revere, who knew more Chinese than they did, his translations, are so much cold mutton, and no explanation of this has ever been forthcoming or will ever be forthcoming. But I am perfectly comfortable in the domain of the miraculous. For me, it's very often a daily piece of a hot croissant.

Fred A. Reed
The Argentian author, Jorge Louis Borges, has written the ultimate parable of perfect and miraculous translation. It's a story called "Pierre Ménard, Author of the Quixote". Ménard was an obscure early 20th century poet. His only claim to fame was a book dealing with the famous paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. But Ménard's most illustrious work was a special kind of translation, and like the best translations, it was invisible. It consisted of fragments of Cervantes' masterpiece, the Quixote. Not a version of the Quixote, which would have been the easiest solution, but the Quixote itself. His intention was nothing less than to write an already extant book in an alien tongue. Ménard, says Borges, set himself a

task which was exceedingly complex, and from the very beginning, futile.

Reader
"The first method he conceived was relatively simple. Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918. Be Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Ménard studied this procedure. I know he attained a fairly accurate command of 17th century Spanish, but discarded it as too easy. Rather as impossible, my reader will say. Granted, but the undertaking was impossible from the very beginning, and of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting. To be in the 20th century a popular novelist of the 17th seemed to him a diminution. To be in some way Cervantes and reach the Quixote seemed less arduous to him and consequently less interesting than to go on being Pierre Ménard and reach the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Ménard".

Fred A. Reed
It's unlikely we mortal translators will ever realize such a sense of identification with our author. But Pierre Ménard had an advantage–he didn't exist. First, we'll have to decipher Babel. We'll have to learn to recreate the luminous language of Adam and Eve in the garden. Until then, all of us will be at the tender mercy of translators. And in the meantime, we can only hope to stumble on that rare, felicitous moment of perfect equivalence and parity. At his sidewalk cafe in Geneva, George Steiner.

George Steiner
There is in the actual act of translation like a similitude to the erotic. There is a penetrative inrush, and many of the images used by great translators have a powerful mastering sexuality. The penetration, the becoming one, the fusion with the original, the embracing of it more and more closely, the attempt to become it, for it to become you. Then there is a very complex stage of stepping back from the object, the beloved object, when you realize that, as you do in love also, the integrity, the strangeness, the quidity, the it-ness, the specificity,

the density of autonomous being of that which you love and are grappling with is also immensely important and that you may be the loser if you absorb it too closely, if you seek to master it too completely. And thus, in a very great relationship of eros and agape, of love and of love, of desire and of love, in a very real and profound penetration that also leaves the penetrated object mysterious, more integral, more closed than it was, as if virginity could return after intercourse. Some image like that leads, I think, to the model of exchange of parity, in which like two stars dancing around each other in a field of magnetic force and tension, the scientists tell us every micro-micro-micro neutron influences every other–and yet that influence is not a taking captive. It is a dynamic, intense equilibrium in a very complex system. The image I used in my book was that of a string quartet, which may be the most complex single phenomenon we have on the face of the planet–the interplay in a quartet.

Lister Sinclair
Tonight on Ideas, the concluding hour of our two-part series Deciphering Babel by Fred Reed. Readings, Griffith Brewer and Earl Pennington. Production assistance, Phillip Szporer. The program was produced in Montreal by Jane Lewis.
Transcripts by Multi-Media Transcriptions, Toronto.

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Source : «Deciphering Babel: Translation and Communication», *Ideas*, Feb. 27, March 6. 1989.