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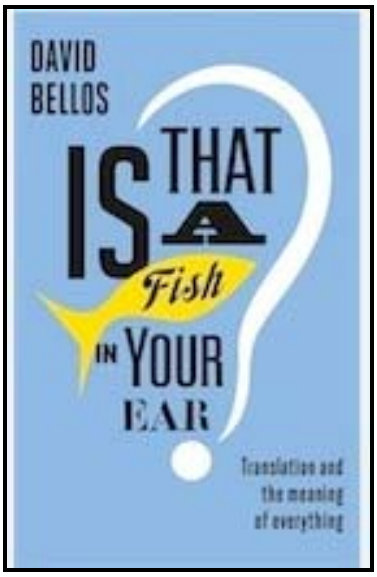
Review

THE JOYFUL SIDE OF TRANSLATION

The theory of translation is very rarely — how to put this? — comical. Its mode is elegy, and severe admonishment. In the 20th century, its great figures were Vladimir Nabokov, in exile from Soviet Russia, attacking libertines like Robert Lowell for their infidelities to the literal sense; or Walter Benjamin, Jewish in a proto-Nazi Berlin, describing the *Task of the Translator* as an impossible ideal of exegesis. You can never, so runs the elegiac argument, precisely reproduce a line of poetry in another language. Poetry! You can hardly even translate "maman." . . . And this elegiac argument has its elegiac myth: the Tower of Babel, where the world's multiplicity of languages is seen as mankind's punishment — condemned to the howlers, the *faux amis,* the foreign menu apps. Whereas the ideal linguistic state would be the lost universal language of Eden.

It's rarely flippant, or joyful — the theory of translation.



Is That a Fish in Your Ear?

Translation and the Meaning of Everything

By David Bellos, London, Faber & Faber, 2011, 373p.

David Bellos's new book on translation at first sidesteps this philosophy. He describes the dragomans of Ottoman Turkey, the invention of simultaneous translation at the Nuremberg trials, news wires, the speech bubbles of Astérix, Bergman subtitles. . . . He offers an anthropology of translation acts. But through this anthropology a much grander project emerges. The old theories were elegiac, stately; they were very much severe. Bellos is practical, and sprightly. He is unseduced by elegy. And this is because he is on to something new.

Bellos is a professor of French and comparative literature at Princeton University, and also the director of the Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication there (at which, I should add, I once spoke). But to me he's more interesting as the translator of two peculiarly great and problematic novelists: the Frenchman Georges Perec, whose work is characterized by a manic concern for form, and the Albanian Ismail Kadare, whose work Bellos translates not from the original Albanian, but from French translations supervised by Kadare. Bellos's twin experience with these novelists is, I think, at the root of his new book, for these experiences with translation prove two things: It's still possible to find adequate equivalents for even manically formal prose; and it's also possible to find such equivalents via a language that is not a work's original. Whereas according to the sad and orthodox theories of translation, neither of these truths should be true.

At one point, Bellos quotes with rightful pride a small instance of his own inventiveness. In Perec's novel "Life: A User's Manual," a character walks through a Parisian arcade, stopping to look at the "humorous visiting cards in a joke-shop window." In Perec's original French, one of these cards is: "Adolf Hitler/Fourreur." A fourreur is a furrier, but Perec's joke-shop joke is that it also resembles the French pronunciation of Führer. So Bellos, in his English version, rightly translates "fourreur" not as "furrier," but like this: "Adolf Hitler/German Lieder." Bellos's new multiphonic pun is a travesty, no doubt about it — and it's also the most precise translation possible.

The conclusions that this paradox demands are, let's say, bewildering for the old-fashioned reader. We're used to thinking that each person speaks an individual language — his mother tongue — and that this mother tongue is a discrete entity, with a vocabulary manipulated by a fixed grammar. But this picture, Bellos argues, doesn't match the everyday shifts of our multiple languages, nor the mess of our language use. Bellos's deep philosophical enemy is what he calls "nomenclaturism," "the notion that words are essentially names" — a notion that has been magnified in our modern era of

writing: a conspiracy of lexicographers. It annoys him because this misconception is often used to support the idea that translation is impossible, since all languages largely consist of words with no single comprehensive equivalent in other languages. But, Bellos writes: "A simple term such as 'head,' for example, can't be counted as the 'name' of any particular thing. It figures in all kinds of expressions." And while no single word in French, say, will cover all the connotations of the word "head," its meaning "in any particular usage can easily be represented in another language."

The misconception, however, has a very long history. Ever since St. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, discussion of translation has dissolved into the ineffable — the famous idea that each language creates an essentially different mental world, and so all translations are doomed to philosophical inadequacy. In Bellos's new proposal, translation instead "presupposes . . . the irrelevance of the ineffable to acts of communication." Zigzagging through case studies of missionary Bibles or cold war language machines, Bellos calmly removes this old idea of the ineffable, and its unfortunate effects.

It's often said, for instance, that a translation can't ever be an adequate substitute for the original. But a translation, Bellos writes, isn't trying to be the same as the original, but to be like it. Which is why the usual conceptual duo of translation — fidelity, and the literal — is too clumsy. These ideas just derive from the misplaced anxiety that a translation is trying to be a substitute. Adolf Hitler/Fourreur! A translation into English as "furrier" would be literally accurate; it would, however, be an inadequate likeness.

In literature, there's a related subset of this anxiety: the idea that style — since it establishes such an intricate relationship between form and content — makes a work of art untranslatable. But again, this melancholy is melodramatic. It will always be possible in a translation to find new relationships between sound and sense that are equivalently interesting, if not phonetically identical. Style, like a joke, just needs the talented discovery of equivalents. "Finding a match for a joke and a match for a style," Bellos writes, "are both instances of a more general ability that may best be called a pattern-matching skill."

Translation, Bellos proposes in a dryly explosive statement, rather than providing a substitute instead "provides for some community an acceptable match for an utterance made in a foreign tongue." What makes a match acceptable will vary according to that community's idea of what aspects of an utterance need to be matched by its translation. After all, "no translation can be expected to be like its source in more than a few selected

ways." So a translation can't be right or wrong "in the manner of a school quiz or a bank statement. A translation is more like a portrait in oils." In a translation, as any art form, the search is for an equivalent sign.

And for the inhabitants of London or Los Angeles, this dismantling of the myths around translation has peculiar implications. As Bellos points out, those born as English speakers are now a minority of English speakers: most speak it as a second language. English is the world's biggest interlanguage.

So two futures, I think, can be drawn from this dazzlingly inventive book, and they are gratifyingly large. The first is for every English speaker. Google Translate, no doubt about it, is a device with an exuberant future. It's already so successful because, unlike previous machine translators, but like other Google inventions, it's a pattern recognition machine. It analyzes the corpus of existing translations, and finds statistical matches. The implications of this still haven't, I think, been adequately explored: from world newspapers, to world novels. . . . And it made me imagine a second prospect — confined to a smaller, hypersubset of English speakers, the novelists. I am an English-speaking novelist, after all. There was no reason, I argued to myself, that translations of fiction couldn't be made far more extensively in and out of languages that are not a work's original. Yes, I started to cherish a future history of the novel that would be recklessly international. In other words: there'd be nothing wrong, I kept thinking, with making translation more joyful

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Reference: *The New York Times*, October 28, 2011.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/books/review/is-that-a-fish-in-your-ear-translation-and-the-meaning-of-everything-by-david-bellos-book-review.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&emc=eta1