

Translators and Translation

By Cecilia Santamarina

The introduction to *Translators through History** published under the auspices of the International Federation of Translators (FIT) says: “Translators have invented alphabets, helped build languages and written dictionaries. They have contributed to the emergence of national literatures, the dissemination of knowledge and the spread of religions. Importers of foreign cultural values and key players at some of the great moments of history, translators and interpreters have played a determining role in the development of their societies and have been fundamental to the unfolding of intellectual history itself”. What a high call for the role and responsibilities translators bear in today’s globally interconnected society!

To translate is “to put into words of a different language” (Webster's College Dictionary). More explicitly, to translate is to transport meaning from the Source Language (the text in the original language) to the Target Language (the language into which the text will be translated). The translation of spoken communication is referred to as “oral interpretation”.

Perception takes place in context and within a cultural framework. Hence, the process of rendering meaning from one language to another does not only involve the linguistic portion, but it must consider cultural connotations as well. For this reason translators have also been called cultural mediators.

The translation should be faithful to the author's ultimate motive and to the original text. Yet, literal translation often lacks clarity, and the content is not accessible to the reader. Therefore, the role of the translator cannot be that of a looking glass and a translation is never an exact reproduction of a text. Instead, the subjective elements of the language come to play in the process of translation, and additions, adjustments and substitutions are necessary to facilitate comprehension. Often, translations are subjected to multiple interpretations.

According to Jiri Levý, translation is a decision-making process. There are two types of decisions: one related to the various interpretations of the text in the source language, and the other one related to the diverse possibilities of expression in the target language. The translator becomes the link between the source text and the final reader. The translator has produced a good translation when the reader cannot guess that the original text had been written in a different language.

There are three basic steps in the translation process:

1) *Interpretation*. The translator analyzes the text to identify its purpose, its message, and the author’s intention. In so doing, the translator tries to answer the following questions: **When** was the text written? (different times have different cultural influences); **Where** was it written? **Who** is it written for? (the ultimate goal is to reach the target audience); **What** is being translated? **How** is the text written? (Is the tone formal, familiar, involves regional language?).

2) *Creation*. The translator recreates the original text in the target language; he/she will make a stylistic decision in the translation of the document. This requires thorough control of the target language, which is often the translator's native language, including: knowledge of grammar rules and conventions, good writing patterns (e.g., avoiding the use of dialects, paying attention to grammar).

3) *Editing*. The editing process involves various successive reviews. First, the draft translation and the original text are compared from the stylistic point of view: spelling, words or expressions left without translation, misinterpretations, etc. Towards the end, it is always advantageous to have the translation read by a reviewer, who does not need to know the source language. In the case of a technical document, this final review should be conducted by an expert in the field.

Outstanding translators share several qualities. They are careful writers, cautious readers with well developed critical reading skills, and meticulous editors. They have a thorough control of the languages they work with. They are avid readers of well-written literature, remain well informed, possess a broad general culture, and actively seek to continue developing their field of knowledge.

From the decision-making process approach, translating is an activity that joins interpretation and creation. It is an art and a profession constantly evolving with the times. As disseminator of knowledge, importer of foreign culture and key player in the unfolding of intellectual history among other responsibilities, the translator and his/her translation represent the bridge that brings together cultures in this ever globalizing world.

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The September 1996 issue of the ATA magazine "Chronicle" published Alexander Cross' discussion on this book.