

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley is
certainly not lost in
translation.

'Translation is that which openeth a window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel ...'

(Preface to the King James' authorised version of the Bible, 1604)

Since the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, humankind has needed to find ways for people using different languages to communicate. One way was to learn the other language. Another was to learn a 'global' language, like Latin or English. But there is an even more time-honoured solution to the problem: translation. Of course, the whole question of the value or otherwise of translation in language learning continues to fuel controversy and debate. However, the books I am reviewing here are not closely concerned with teaching or learning languages, nor teaching translation as a skill; they are about translation in its own right, as a specific form of human activity. I have, however, added a few classroom books at the end of this article.

After Babel

This must surely be one of the most influential books on translation ever

written. George Steiner was a remarkable scholar – both polyglot and polymath – and interested in the big questions about language and culture, which intersect at many points with translation issues. It is impossible to do justice to this 500-page book in a few paragraphs, but these are some of the key issues Steiner explores:

Why are there so many different languages when they offer no adaptive evolutionary advantage? Can linguistics solve the riddle of a universal underlying language versus linguistic relativity? Is translation possible? How is communication – and translation – possible when everyone has a private language with uniquely personal meanings, even though social pressures force meanings into fixed moulds? Can translation be confined to inter-lingual texts, when every act of communication, even in the first language, involves interpretation, and is therefore a form of translation? Do polyglot bilinguals have different kinds of brains from monolinguals? Does translation in its widest sense involve 'transmutation' – texts in multitudinous versions, representations of written texts in other modes – in art, music, dance, drama, film, etc? If this is the case, is what we call 'culture' a gigantic network of intertextuality? (Or, as Steiner asks, 'Is culture the translation and re-wording of previous meaning?')

He deals with these and other questions in highly complex arguments, drawing on a mind-stretching range of reference, from neuroscience to psychology, from classical to modern literature in at least four languages, from linguistics to literary criticism. He takes a rather dim view of the kind of mathematical linguistics which seeks to establish linguistic universals, quoting Dell Hymes: 'Most of language begins where abstract universals leave off.' His exploration of the Universalist/Relativist issue is detailed and finely nuanced – and he returns to it repeatedly throughout the book. If there is an underlying common semantic framework, then translation is possible. But if all languages see the world in uniquely different ways, then translation is impossible. In fact, he finds little firm evidence for either position. He concludes that translation is a paradox: it is theoretically impossible, yet practically – and miraculously – feasible. The greatest translators manage to balance the 'resistant difficulty' of texts with their own 'elective affinity' for those texts, and manage to produce new texts which deepen our understanding of both languages: 'to produce a text which the foreign poet would have written had he been composing in one's own tongue.'



Is That a Fish in Your Ear?

The most exciting recent book on translation is David Bellos's *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* It covers virtually every issue raised by translation and is written in a highly entertaining and accessible style. He writes of 'the irresistible desire of words to mean something else'. Yet for him, this is normal: 'Using one word for another isn't special, it's what we do all the time. Translators just do it in another language.' In one chapter he dismisses the myth of 'literal translation', pointing out that 'a translation that makes no sense without recourse to the original is not a translation'. He also puts forward a spirited case for the use of translation in language learning. In Chapter 6, he offers a brilliant example of 12 stages in the translation of a four-line, seven-character-per-line Chinese *shunkouliu*, which gradually assumes the shape of English verse forms. As he comments: 'When you have to pay attention to more than one dimension of an utterance – when your mind is engaged in multi-level pattern-matching pursuits – you find resources in your language you never knew were there.' He draws attention to translation *up* (from a small to a dominant language) and *down* (from a dominant language to a smaller one). This helps explain the dominance of writers translated from English on the shelves of bookstores throughout Europe. He continues with this theme in Chapters 19 to 21, where he discusses the relatively few languages ever translated and the regrettable dominance of English – in publishing, in international law, in the EU. Ironically, the regulations put in place to give linguistic parity actually led to a reinforcement of English predominance because of the need to use it as a pivot language. In the later chapters – 26 to 31 – he discusses the translation of literature and issues of style and 'match'. He prefers 'match' to 'equivalence', and illustrates what he means by neatly translating the pun from French: *Adolf Hitler – Fourreur* into an English 'match' – *Adolf Hitler – German Lieder*.

I have only been able to touch on

some of the most interesting chapters but the whole book is fascinating – and can be dipped in and out of, unlike Steiner!

The Third Language

Alan Duff's *The Third Language* takes us into the mind of the translator at work. Duff argues that often the translation reads not like English but like a third language – 'translationese'. In this book he explores why this is. Each chapter examines in detail different aspects of the problem: words themselves, words in grammatical structures, and idioms and cultural context. The book is a treasure-house of carefully-chosen examples, drawn mainly from French, German, Serbo-Croat and Hungarian. There is detailed and insightful analysis of each example. In Chapter 5, *The Translator and the Text*, Duff tries to show 'what goes on in the writer's mind while he is working', for, as he states at the outset, 'whatever goes on in the writer's head must go on in the translator's head as well'. For anyone interested in the nuts and bolts of how meaning is carried over from one language to another, this is essential reading.

Other titles

Susan Bassnett's book, *Reflections on Translation*, I found very disappointing. It is cobbled together from articles previously published in *The Linguist Magazine* and the *ITI Bulletin*. Although some of the articles are interesting, the book lacks cohesion. Not so with Edith Grossman's *Why Translation Matters*, which is an eloquent and passionate plea for greater respect to be given to translators as creative writers, not mere anonymous hacks. And as the translator of *Don Quixote*, she knows what she is talking about.

For literary titles dealing with issues related to translation, I would recommend Brian Friel's play *Translations*, about the clash of cultures and languages in 19th-century Ireland. Also Diego Marani's novel (brilliantly translated from Italian by Judith Landry) *New Finnish Grammar*. This is about a man who has lost his language after a severe head wound. It is an anguishing account of his failed attempt to recover Finnish, presumed to have been his lost language, and his pathetically tragic fate.

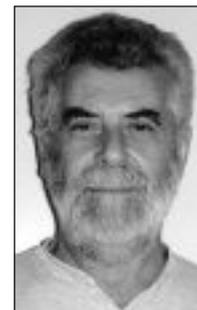
There are relatively few practical books on using translation to teach language. Three of the best are Alan Duff's *Translation*, Françoise Grellet's *Apprendre à Traduire* and Maria Gonzales-Davies's

Multiple Voices in the Translation Classroom. All contain stimulating and productive activities for classroom use. I should also mention Peter Newmark's *A Textbook of Translation*, though this is more related to training translators than teaching language. For more theoretical discussions, Guy Cook and Wolfgang Butzkamm and John Caldwell are in the vanguard of a movement to restore translation to its proper place in language teaching after a century of monolingual domination.



All too often, the judgement is made that something has been 'lost in translation'. These books show the contrary, namely that much is to be 'found in translation'. **ETP**

- Bassnett, S *Reflections on Translation* Multilingual Matters 2011
 Bellos, D *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* Particular Books 2011
 Butzkamm, W and Caldwell, J A W *The Bilingual Reform: a Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching* Narr Studienbücher 2009
 Cook, G *Translation in Language Teaching: An Argument for Reassessment* OUP 2010
 Duff, A *The Third Language: Recurrent Problems of Translation into English* Pergamon 1981
 Duff, A *Translation* OUP 1989
 Friel, B *Translations* Faber and Faber 1981
 Maria Gonzales-Davies *Multiple Voices in the Translation Classroom: Activities, Tasks and Projects* John Benjamins 2004
 Grellet, F *Apprendre à Traduire* Presses Universitaires de Nancy 1990
 Grossman, E *Why Translation Matters* Yale University Press 2010
 Marani, D (translated by Judith Landry) *New Finnish Grammar* Dedalus 2011
 Newmark, P *A Textbook of Translation* Prentice Hall 1988
 Steiner, G (3rd edition) *After Babel* OUP 1998



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