

Translation as Literature, Translation as Practice
By Michele Rosen
Presented at RAW: The UTD A&H Graduate Symposium
March 24, 2012

The title for this panel – Why the Humanities Matter – highlights the monumental challenge faced by the humanities today, because I think it is fair to say that no recent academic conferences have included a panel entitled Why Physics Matters, or Why Accounting Matters, or Why Engineering Matters. In other words, the title of this panel begs the question because it implies that the question inherently demands to be answered.

And yet the humanities are increasingly faced with headlines such as “In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth” (Cohen) and, depressingly and succinctly, “Why Bother?” (Dames). Whether or not humanists believe that we should need to justify our field, there are clearly elements of society in the United States and elsewhere who are asking the question, and who do expect answers.

Similar questions have often been leveled at translators. Despite the indispensable work that translators have performed for centuries to disseminate literary, historical, philosophical, and other important cultural texts, translators are still treated as invisible, second-class citizens in both the publishing world and in academia. At times, translators have even helped to perpetuate negative stereotypes about their own craft. For example, in an impressive display of self-deprecation, John Ciardi, acclaimed translator of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, once said that practitioners could try for “no more than the best possible failure” (qtd. in Rosen). In a direct parallel to this panel’s title, one of the only truly professional translators (in the financial sense of the term) working in the United States today, Edith Grossman, published a book in 2009 entitled *Why Translation Matters*, in

which she marvels at the fact that “of all the interpretive arts... only translation has to fend off the insidious, damaging question of whether or not it is, can be, or should be possible. It would never occur to anyone to ask whether it is feasible for an actor to perform a dramatic role or a musician to interpret a piece of music” (12). Among the broader community of humanities scholars, the practice of translation has often been dismissed as derivative and the value of reading literature in translation has often been regarded with skepticism, despite the fact that, without translation, millions of readers would be deprived of the ability to read Shakespeare, Proust, Kafka, and dozens of other canonical writers.

In his recently published book *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, award-winning translator and Princeton University translation scholar David Bellos presents an intriguing explanation for this tendency to dismiss the value of translation as literature. He considers “the circumstances in which translation first emerged” (118), and concludes that the generals, diplomats, traders, and explorers who have employed translators for millennia were forced to rely on the accuracy of their translations because there was no way to record what had been said. And, as Bellos says, “there’s nothing like dependency to foster resentment and fear” (117). Bellos believes – reasonably, I think – that “residues of the older oral order persisted for millennia, and persist even now” and that “They affect our feelings and fears about translation quite directly” (118).

In his book, Bellos explores these feelings and fears about translation from a variety of perspectives. But I would like to argue that one need look no further than the unexpected intertextuality of the book’s title – specifically the word ‘fish’ – to explore “the role of translation in cultural, social, and human” affairs (4). Although *Boston Globe* book reviewer

Richard Eder has asserted that the word refers to the “nickname given to the earphones that simultaneous translators wear” (Eder), I am thoroughly convinced that it refers instead to the Babel fish described by the late science fiction writer Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. A comparison of Adams' universe, in which the Babel fish exists, and Bellos' description of translation in reality, demonstrates that human culture – the very heart of the humanities – is immeasurably enhanced by the existence of translators and that translation is indispensable to the dissemination, preservation, and even to the ongoing creation of literature.

Adams' novel begins with the destruction of Earth, from which one human, Arthur Dent, is saved by an alien researcher who was visiting the planet to collect information for a travel guide entitled *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Just after escaping Earth's destruction, Arthur asks the researcher, who has adopted the 'human' name of Ford Prefect, what he should do now that his home planet has been destroyed. Ford responds:

"You'll just have to come along with me and have a good time. The Galaxy's a fun place. You'll need to have this fish in your ear."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Arthur...

Ford was holding up a small glass jar which quite clearly had a small yellow fish wriggling around in it. Arthur blinked at him....

Suddenly a violent noise leaped at them... He gasped in terror at what sounded like a man trying to gargle while fighting off a pack of wolves.

"Shush!" said Ford. "Listen, it might be important."

[...]

"But I can't speak Vogon!"

"You don't need to. Just put this fish in your ear."

Ford... clapped his hand to Arthur's ear, and he had the sudden sickening sensation of the fish slithering deep into his aural tract. Gasping with horror he scrabbled at his ear for a second or so, but then slowly turned goggle-eyed with wonder...

He was still listening to the howling gargles, he knew that, only now it had somehow taken on the semblance of perfectly straightforward English.

(Adams 39-40)

One of the most interesting features of the science fiction genre is that it enables the author to speculate about how humans will react to the highly improbable and the truly impossible. In order to survive in Adams' universe, Arthur Dent needs one highly improbable if not impossible thing – a Babel fish in his ear – an accurate universal translator that will allow him to replace the howling, gargling, terrifying alien speech of the Vogons with “perfectly straightforward” and infinitely more comfortable speech in his native English.

The Babel fish is so amazing that even Adams' horrified homebody of a protagonist becomes “goggle-eyed with wonder” as it begins to work. At first glance, the ability to communicate with everyone in the galaxy (or even just everyone on Earth) seems inherently useful and beneficial, especially in light of the violent and bloody results of miscommunications and failures to communicate that litter human history. But the absurdity of Adams' description of how the Babel fish works indicates that an accurate

universal translator is almost certainly impossible to create and possibly even undesirable to have.

Adams explains the Babel fish's abilities via an entry in the *Hitchhiker's Guide* (please bear with the pseudo-techno jargon for a moment):

"The Babel fish... is small, yellow, and leechlike, and probably the oddest thing in the Universe. It feeds on brainwave energy received not from its own carrier but from those around it. It absorbs all unconscious mental frequencies from this brainwave energy to nourish itself with. It then excretes into the mind of its carrier a telepathic matrix formed by combining the conscious thought frequencies with nerve signals picked up from the speech centers of the brain which has supplied them. The practical upshot of all this is that if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language... (41-42)

Accurate universal translators are a standard trope in science fiction. However, unlike Adams, most science fiction writers do not bother to explain how these translators work. In most written science fiction, the author serves as the universal translator, thereby obviating the need for an elaborate solution to the "translation problem." However, the problem is harder to avoid in television and film. The creators of *Star Trek* addressed the issue by creating a universal translator, which is widely used but only vaguely described as an "extremely sophisticated computer program" (Sternbach and Okuda 101). Other science fiction media simply elides over the difficulty of language acquisition and translation. In the

Star Wars universe, for example, most people speak a common language. At the same time, however, the uneducated Han Solo speaks at least six languages (“Han Solo”).

Instead of avoiding the translation problem, Adams not only provides a specific solution but also explains how it works. He does so precisely because the Babel fish is so utterly absurd. The lengths to which Adams has to go to explain how a fish in one’s ear can allow one to “instantly understand anything said” demonstrates the near if not complete impossibility of creating or finding such a device. Let’s take another look at how the Babel fish works. It consumes and digests thoughts from speakers close to its carrier and then transmits a translation of these thoughts to its carrier telepathically (via excretion, just in case the absurdity was not already sufficiently heightened). In other words, Adams is saying that, for an accurate universal translator to work, it would not be enough for any device, living or mechanical, to take in speech sounds, translate them, and deliver them to the listener. In order for automatic, accurate translation to take place, the listener needs access to more than the speaker’s words – he needs access to his very thoughts – that is to say, to the context of the spoken words, without which words have no fixed meaning (Bellos 74).

One can argue, as George Steiner does, that the need for extensive context in order to fix the meaning of any word indicates that all human communication is translation, whether that communication is taking place between speakers of the same or different languages (49). Given this premise, we can say that we are all translating all the time – that you are in fact translating my words right now. Let’s return to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide* to illustrate this point. Everyone in this room understands English well enough to grasp the general meaning of the aforementioned excerpts. But those of you who are quite familiar

with the story can enhance these short excerpts with additional context from your memories of the novel and/or its various adaptations. For example, you may remember that Vogons are the aliens in Adams' universe who run the galactic bureaucracy and that they were directly responsible for the destruction of Earth. You may also remember that the Vogons like to write what is galactically considered to be very bad poetry. That said, in this case one does not need this context to get the gist of the excerpts. A reader (or listener, in this case), can simply skip over the word. But this is one of the key differences between reading or listening and translating – translators, as Bellos puts it, “are not granted the right to skip” (105). Bellos calls this “one of the few things that sets a problem for translation that is almost unique to it” (105). The degree of anguish that this rule can cause for translators may be difficult for non-translators to grasp. While the best scholars strive to completely understand each word in a text before engaging in commentary and criticism, these scholars always have the option to choose a different detail, to focus on a different passage, rather than struggle with a single word or phrase that may be relatively insignificant in the context of their argument. For example, Bellos argues that “Nobody knows the meanings of all the French words in *Les Misérables*, but that’s never stopped anyone from enjoying Hugo’s novel” (105). Now we can certainly debate what Bellos means by the word “meanings.” But it is nonetheless indisputable that when Charles Wilbour produced the first translation of Hugo’s masterpiece only months after it was released in French, he could not leave blank spaces in his English version – he had to recreate the original using what Steiner calls “a complex aggregate of knowledge, familiarity, and re-creative intuition” (29). Whether or not he was successful, it seems to me that the effort to bring a masterpiece to an audience that could not otherwise understand it is a noble one.

The fact that many translators have succeeded in doing so is a testament to the human drive and ability to communicate. To anyone whose life has been enriched or changed by reading a work of literature in a language they do not understand – to most people who have read *The Iliad*, *Don Quixote*, or the Bible – it should be crystal clear exactly why translation matters. If not, it's possible that you need to put a fish in your ear.

Works Cited

- Adams, Douglas. *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide*. New York: Random House, 1996. Print.
- Bellos, David. *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2011. Print.
- Cohen, Patricia. "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth." *The New York Times*. 23 Feb. 2009. Retrieved from <http://nyti.ms/eb13G> on 19 Oct. 2009.
- Dames, Nicholas. "Why Bother?" *n + 1*. 13 Apr. 2011. Retrieved from <http://nplusonemag.com/why-bother> on 22 March 2012.
- Eder, Richard. Rev. of *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* By David Bellos. *The Boston Globe*. 11 Dec. 2011. Retrieved from <http://b.globe.com/GHlryo> on 22 March 2012.
- Grossman, Edith. *Why Translation Matters*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2010. Print.
- "Han Solo." *Wookipedia*. Retrieved from http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Han_solo on 24 March 2012.
- Rosen, Michele. "Translate This: A Man, A Plan, A Canal, Panama! Or Was It Paraguay?" *The New York Times*. 25 July 1998. Print.
- Steiner, George. *After Babel*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975. Print.
- Sternbach, Rick and Michael Okuda. *Star Trek: The Next Generation Technical Manual*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991. Print.