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Found in Translation

August 4, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The great works of literature can be called more than a collection of masterfully crafted words. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is more than a rhythmic story about a dour prince. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is more than the well-written tale of a suicidal woman. Great writing can convey the culture, dreams, norms and challenges of a society, but making sure the message is clear can depend upon the right translation.

How can a reader find a “good” translation of literature? Several Illinois Wesleyan University faculty members recently weighed in on the subject of translations.

“Translation is a work of art,” said Marina Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies. “It is more than choosing the right words. It’s an art form that definitely requires the soul of the artist.” Balina worked with Professor of English Emeritus James McGowan on the translations of poems by German poet Wolfgang Borchert. “Translation is like a sculpture, basically shaping up the material like it was clay, and then refining it,” agreed McGowan, who is known for his translations of the French poet Charles Baudelaire. “Just because the words are similar from one language to another, it does not mean the meaning is similar.”

The art of translation may begin with finding the English equivalent, but it then requires going a step beyond, said Balina. “You can build from a beautiful sentence that is close to what the writer is saying, but the cultural barrier remains,” she said. “A translator can be blinded by his or her own knowledge of literature and culture.” Balina remembered reading sonnets of Shakespeare in English for the first time. “I thought, ‘This was not the Shakespeare I have read in Russian translation,’” she said. “I read writers in Soviet Russia, who were translating because they could not get their own work published because of the harsh censorship by government. They have used the art of translation to convey their own frustration and ideals through Shakespeare’s works.”

McGowan suggests when choosing a translation to understand something of the person doing the actual translating. “More than knowing the language, it’s best if a translator knows the genre in which he or she is working. Poets have a better understanding of poetry,” he said, adding that it takes a certain temperament to be a translator. “On the one hand you have to be arrogant enough to do it, and on the other hand be humble enough to realize that the author is the one who created the great work.”

According to Associate Professor of French and Italian Scott Sheridan, the greatest challenge to selecting translations is overcoming the assumption that every word is correct. “The truth is that even the best translations are only approximations of their linguistically rich and culturally specific originals,” said Sheridan, who added, “I am reminded of the Italian maxim ‘Traddutore, traditore,’ which means ‘Translator, traitor.’”

Recently, scholars have attacked the standard translations of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky by Victorian-era translator Constance Garnett, saying she often lost the brilliant subtlety of the Russian authors’ works. “Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are two of the hardest writers to translate because they are so dense and multilayered,” said Balina, who suggested finding the most recently published work when looking for translations. “Newer works are often updated, breaking through cultural and generational differences.”

For her classes, Professor of Greek and Roman Studies Nancy Sultan said she looks for beauty *and* utility in translations. “I select translations that are beautiful, true to the original and accessible to modern students.” She noted using a translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* for a Humanities 101 course in which the students use a version taken from the cuneiform written on tablets. The original tablets have many blanks where the clay has crumbled. “It’s scary for an undergraduate to read a text that stops in the middle of a verse and picks up forty or more lines later, but once they get past their shock, they enjoy playing ‘fill in the blanks,’” said Sultan. The same students later travel to Chicago with Sultan to view the original tablets at the Oriental Institute of Chicago.

Reading literature in another language is often a doorway to understanding the culture from which it came, said Associate Professor of German and Eastern European Studies Sonja Fritzsche. “Those who wish to travel to another country need to pick up a work of literature in translation,” she said. “The complex life in that culture comes alive with the challenges and contradictions that the characters must face.”

Reading language is one thing, but hearing it can be another piece of the puzzle to understanding a culture, Balina believes. In her classes in Russian Literature and Culture in translation, she will read the original Russian texts, and has students follow along with translated versions. “You have to have a feeling of how it sounds in the language. It’s a different flavor to acquire,” Balina said. “Even if they don’t understand it, they can feel the heartbeat of the writer when they listen to the language in which it was written.”

When looking for a good translation, Fritzsche and Sheridan suggest looking to the experts, such as the list of Nobel Prize for Literature winners, the *New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement* or the *New York Times Book Review*. “Since the reading experience is so subjective, it is also good to read a few pages of the work,” said Sheridan. Sultan adds that a translation should also match the needs of the reader. “Do you just want to read [the work] for fun? Choose a very accessible, popular translation from a good reputable press. If you want to study the text, then do a bit more research,” she said.

“Read as many translations as you can,” advised McGowan, who calls translation, “a delicate balance. You know if you translate something and I translate something each one would be different. ”

Sheridan says “good” is a subjective term when it comes to translations. “No translation is perfect,” he said. “Translations give readers of one language access to important texts that they would otherwise not be able to appreciate.” The importance of translation is that they offer people the opportunity to explore other cultures through the language of literature, said Sheridan. “Language is a contextual compass for expressing life and the lived experience. Language assumes a cultural perspective with historical, socioeconomical, political and philosophical references,” he said.

“Translations are always a beginning in the exploration of other cultures,” said Balina.

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