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The Craft of Decision-Making

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Panel: At Language's Edge. The author discusses what it means to translate, and to have their work translated into other languages.

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The Craft of Decision-Making

By Natasha Tiniacos (Venezuela)

To know is to translate, says Mexican writer Juan Villoro. When we translate, we travel to unknown places. What we are reading establishes a relative relationship with what we already know. The text and its context force us to understand it in order to file it in the slow archive of culture.

When did this craft start? According to the story of the Tower of Babel, people that intended to build a tower that reached into heaven were punished for their arrogant project; they sought to elevate themselves instead of honoring the Creator, who “confused the language of all earth” as a punishment. He took the truth from them. The city and the tower name was Babel, which means *confusion*. Babel from *babbling, blablabla...*

Translation became necessary 4,000 years ago.

Nevertheless, translation doesn't have just one purpose. Besides being a discipline that brings the truth of one language to another one, delivers a text to an equivalent version in another music and allows us to understand each other, it is also a craft that expands our knowledge of the world.

Translating literature is not the same as translating a TV instructions manual, or the IKEA catalogue. Literary texts require profound and multiple readings. Novels and poems are subject to several interpretations, and their way to secure a place in the archive of culture depends on the different readings they raise. Italo Calvino says: “A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say”. Literature is bound by a never-ending task towards language: Literature tries to invigorate language by creating new meanings in its daily catalogue. If we are translating into Spanish an experimental poem written in English, we have to study the context in which the piece was created, and its author's ambition with the language. Language is a plastic medium; authors have creative ambitions towards it that go from visual to semantic elements. For example, what Emily Dickinson did with the English language hasn't been translated into Spanish without losing the arbitrary distortions she used. Sometimes, translators' priority is to make a literary text “understandable”. You want to make a novel available to a vast number of readers, but doing so, without carefully studying language as a medium, may cause some distinctive factors of the text to be lost.

Translation is then a craft of decision-making. The translator has to decide what the right word is or choose the word that best suits the original version. The translator has to consider the context in which the literary piece was created, and the context of the translation language. The translator has to choose the sound that corresponds better to its original. But, what is better and what is original? Is there such a thing as better or correct in translation?

As Maureen Freely said about her Orhan Pamuk translations in her recent visit: “My aim was to evoke in English what I felt in Turkish”. She also said to “Translate with the instinct of a novelist”. I will add, if translating poetry: translate with the instinct of a poet.

I have been translating the work of prominent African American poet **Terrance Hayes**. His themes deal with identity, African American culture, the masculine, and pop culture. I am a woman from Latin America. We are from different cultures and languages. I had to go to

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specialized books about slavery in order to do justice to his poems when translating them into Spanish. Searching for some of his poem titles on Google I found out that some of them are pop songs. The poem "God is an American" takes its title from a David Bowie piece, "Whatever Happened to the Fine Young Cannibals", from a rock band. I came to understand the profound meaning of some of his phrases by watching films. There are so many challenges and some impossibilities. For example, I haven't found a way to translate the title of his last collection of poems. *Lighthouse* has no equivalent in Spanish. Translating his work has expanded my knowledge of his culture and, subsequently, of this world.

In my writing I like to explore the Language-game philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein based on the concept that the rules of language are analogous to the rule of games. The relationship he establishes between language and games is inspired by the fact that words take on different meanings depending how they're used in day-to-day life.

The colloquial refreshes language, it produces new meanings. The translation of its spontaneity sometimes requires more work than a convoluted piece. I have been working with Kelsi Vanada, an MFA student from the Writers' Workshop in the translations of my poems. So far, she has worked on two of my poems. We have had intense sessions when both of us trying to find a good English equivalent to some of my phrases. One of my goals as a writer is to propose new meanings by distorting the syntax order and use verb conjugations that do not correspond to the subject... I like to play games with language. It has been a challenge in translation for that reason, and we decided not to lose this "languages game" but to bring them to English too. In this case, we both made decisions and exchanged translations in order to find a consensus.

When translating, we have to keep in mind that Literature overcomes the explicit and represents the desire that the words we use in our daily life express our truth in a different way. Paul Eluard said: "The world is blue like an orange". That phrase condenses two truths: That the world is blue, and that the world is round like an orange. Those two meanings merge for a maximum truth: the poetic invention.

The translator is and isn't alone, is a reader and an author that works with him/herself and against him/herself. Translation is a craft that requires practice and character. Translation asks us to meditate about cultural power and the historical development of languages. A translator is a philosopher of the language and working at language's edge produces vertigo, but the view is a worthy reward.

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