American Translators Association Conference

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Chaise Yun, “How the bestseller ‘The Vegetarian,’ translated from Han Kang’s original, caused an uproar in South Korea.”

The Conference of the American Translators Association

This association was founded in 1959 and is now the largest professional association of translators and interpreters in the United States with more than 11,000 members in 90 countries.

One of its primary missions is to promote the professional development of translators and interpreters. Annually, the ATA organizes a conference, a four-day international event offering language professionals more than 150 continuing education sessions, seminars, and workshops.

This poster presents a selection of the sessions that I attended, including a summary of some of the dilemmas and questions that translators and interpreters face.

Session: Language and Politics

Undocumented immigrants or illegal immigrants?

How Do Political Preferences Influence Your Translations?

By Neil Graver

Political views per profession (US)

- Translators: 52 Democrats for every 18 Republicans
- Interpreters: 53 Democrats for every 28 Republicans

How do you avoid political bias when translating or interpreting? Although the examples were derived from a Dutch-American context, the questions pertain to all translations touching on politically sensitive issues.

Session: Forms of Faithfulness in Literary Translation

What does ‘faithfulness’ mean for the literary translator?

Inventiveness is risky for translators: we tend to restrain ourselves in the name of fidelity to the original. But to confront translational difficulty with inventiveness does not mean renouncing one’s devotion to the original. Inventiveness must arise from this devotion so that an ill-conceived sacralization of the original does not generate incoherencibility, or even untranslatability. This inventiveness, the translator’s imagination, has another function: it generates incomprehensibility, or even untranslatability… This is why the original is neither of those things, and also because that would prevent it from being beautiful. I decided that for me, the comparison was largely about speed, which meant I needed to specify that, but also a sense of majesty, of terrifying beauty, so ‘ice’ became ‘iceberg’. And because English has the particularly beautiful, unusual word ‘cave’ to describe a berg breaking from an ice mass, I jumped at the chance to work that in, so it came out as: ‘The dawn light was calved from the night slow as an iceberg’.”

A translator’s explanation...

“A critical approach to the English translation of a South Korean novel

“Smith [the translator] amplifies Han [the author’s] spare, quiet style and embellishes it with adverbs, superlatives and other emphatic word choices that are nowhere in the original. This doesn’t just happen once or twice, but on virtually every other page. [...] Smith’s embellishments create more suspense and interest for the English reader, but for those who can read the original, it can be quite jarring.”

Translation is interpretation and interpretation is subjective… Is beauty the right criterion in this context for a “good” translation? Is the translator faithful (enough) to the original? How do we evaluate a translation if we don’t understand the original? What about the length of the proposed translation?

Acknowledgments

At WMU, I have taught translation and translation-related classes for the past nine years. Attendance of this conference has given me the opportunity to gain a wealth of knowledge regarding the theory and practice of translation, including the dilemma’s that translators and interpreters face. Thus, the sessions and interaction with professionals provided valuable topics for the classes that I teach. Furthermore, the knowledge gained at the ATA conference also intersects with my current research projects on the topic of Francophone African literature translated into English. Many thanks to the Office of Faculty Development for their financial support.