

Labor of Sisyphus?

Olga Kuzmina, the principal editor and translator for Grace Publishing International (www.russianbook.com), shows why translation could be likened to the work of Sisyphus, a king who in Greek mythology was condemned to forever roll a huge stone up a hill in Hades, only to have it constantly roll down again.

Labor of Sisyphus... The other side of the tapestry... Creative work... Treachery... Art... Feeble copy of the original... Enrichment for national literature... These and many other contradictory epithets are given to one and the same realm—the realm of translation.

What is translation? The simplest definition is that it is rendering a message in another language. It seems an interpreter only needs to know the two languages (source and target) and he or she is ready to translate. However, that is not enough. Translation, in fact, is a complex process.

Just think of a word. It not only has an external form (sound and spelling), but also an internal form (meaning and grammatical function), an emotional tinge, and belongs to a certain layer of vocabulary (such as slang, neutral, literary). Most words are poly-semantic, that is, they have several meanings. For instance, “message” can be rendered in Russian as “communication,” “epistle,” “commission,” “main topic,” etc. The meaning depends on the context, because communication is generally not limited to single words, but consists of utterances and texts.

Because the internal and external characteristics of a word rarely coincide with all the characteristics of a word in another language, the interpreter must usually sacrifice something, especially when we speak about non-kindred languages like English and Russian. I have used the word “interpreter” rather than “translator.” Why? The process of translation greatly depends on interpretation.

Consider the simple phrase, “How are you doing?” To answer, you must interpret what the speaker means while considering the context, that is, the situation, time, and place of that utterance. If you were greeted like that by a close friend who is very interested in your life, at a café after a long day at work, you might start sharing your joys and sorrows. If it is an acquaintance that you meet, or a friend but you are in a hurry at that moment, to the greeting you would likely answer, “Fine, thanks.” And if a person you have never met greets you this way when you are introduced, you might return the very same greeting, “How are you doing?” Thus, your answer greatly depends on the context. This applies also in translation. The interpreter must first comprehend the message (meaning) well in order to render it in another language.

Another matter is that every text has subjective and objective aspects. The topic under discussion is an objective aspect, but the way an author delivers it is a subjective aspect. An interpreter must comprehend not only the topic, but also the way the author presents it, and try to preserve this in translation. This must be done even if the culture of the author and that of the interpreter are vastly different.

Besides that, it is always good to remember that three—not two—parties are involved in the processes of translation and interpretation. They are the author, an interpreter, and the recipient. The third party cannot be dispensed with—it is for that person that the translation is done. Thus, not only is the

background of the author, and that of the interpreter, important, but that of the recipient must be taken into consideration. The purpose of the translation is that the audience understand the message. Only then is communication successful.

There are many aspects to translations, all which must be taken into account. Yet even if the interpreter pays attention to all of them, the translation will still be “a copy of the original.” Indeed, Dr. Eugene A. Nida, a premier linguist who worked with the American Bible Society for over 50 years, states, “There can be no fully exact translations. The total impact of a translation may be reasonably close to the original, but there can be no identity in detail.” He is right. “Then, translation is indeed a labor of Sisyphus,” you might conclude. Well, I cannot agree. The process of translation is not easy, though it is gratifying.

Boris Pasternak, the Russian poet, novelist, and translator, once said that “Translation is very much like copying paintings.” Many people have a basic knowledge about painting landscapes. However, not so many would try to copy Claude Monet, and you know that copies differ. In translation, one is not creating something new, but re-creating. Thus, it is not enough for the interpreter to know both source and target languages; he or she needs a little bit more. Translation is an art. ▾