

Translation & Gray Hair

Shin-Hee Yim (gdap@orgio.net), a freelance translator and interpreter with publishing experience, gives a personal glimpse into the translator's task.

That one was especially tricky. Again, it had slipped out of my grasp. I wondered whether to try again or just give up. The writer of the book I was translating used her words in a simple but delightful way. I wanted to render her ideas simply and was doing well until the problematic sentence appeared. I had to come up with an effective Korean equivalent. There has to be one! I murmured and reproached my slim Korean lexicon. I could not sit idle at my desk; the pressure of the blinking cursor grew till I felt I could not breathe. I pushed the chair back and began walking around the room. Staring at my long face in the mirror, I spotted a white hair glistening on the top of my head.

I can name a few reasons for difficulties in translation. The first is the difference between the cultures of the source language and the target language. People's indigenous culture is reflected in their language, which can include words and concepts that are not present in other languages. For example, in times past Koreans did not use beds, but slept on the floor. Therefore, Korean ancestors developed *ondol*, a unique

heating system that conducts the flue gases of a fire under the floor. *Ondol*, roughly translated as "warm stone," is a word with rich connotations, and many secondary words are derived from it. Compounding the difficulty of translation are the linguistic differences between languages. Even with English and French, which are more closely

not get easier over time. Rather, for the most conscientious translators in some ways it gets tougher. It requires perseverance and humility. It might take days to trace the right translation for a single word, to research the background of the book, to capture the author's intent by reading between the lines. Faithfulness is necessary for all these elements in translation.

Good translation must integrate linguistic knowledge with the specific area. It takes more than 10 years to become a competent and reliable translator. To acquire a foreign language requires many years of diligent study.

In addition, a translator should have a broad understanding of the world. Translation generally requires some interdisciplinary knowledge, whether this involves literature, business, science, history, religion, or more. A translator once rendered "jesting Pilate" as "a jocularity pirate" in Korean.

This translator confused "Pilate" with "pirate," due to his ignorance of the Bible. Ideally, Christian books should be translated by believers.

On starting the process of acquiring foreign rights, an editor should consider the translation element. What is the

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related to each other than to Korean, it is not easy to translate certain texts, especially poetry.

Translation can be done by anyone who has knowledge of a foreign language. It has a low entry barrier. Unlike other skills, however, translation does



"I appreciated the time to think about translation again," says Shin-Hee Yim. "This was a good opportunity for me to realign my views on the subject."

subject of the book? Will the translation require literary skill? Who are the target readers? Are they children? Are they seminary students? In Korean, the translation style to be used varies depending on the readers' age, because Korean has developed many high terms of respect for elders.

Many publishers just sign a contract with translators and leave everything to them. However, it is helpful for an editor to provide the translator with a list of the specific requirements for the book so that the translator can keep them in mind from the start of the translation. This will avoid any confusion and lead to greater satisfaction with the finished product.

Translators appreciate receiving information about the author. Such information allows them to review other books written by the same author. If the book to be translated contains academic information, an editor can arrange for opportunities for consultation and supervision prior to the start of the work, to improve the communication between the editor, the translator and others involved in the project.

Translators are often so involved with the intricacies of a text that they fail to notice any farfetched expressions in their translations. Because of this, after finishing a translation, I recommend a translator dedicate a couple of days to reading other books written in

the target language. After this period of immersion, the translator can return to polish the text. When a publisher wants to print the second edition, he or she may give the translator an opportunity to revise the text. In my case, I often find some lines that I want to correct.

In Korea, the number of new book translations increased to 28.5 percent in 2004 from 15 percent in 1995. Since 1882, when John Ross, an American missionary, translated Luke into Korean for the first time, Korea has accepted Western civilization together with the Gospel. Now, we have Korean versions of the Bible, including translations directly from Hebrew.

Publishers, editors, and translators all are booklovers. We are creators of new words. We are honored in living with books. We offer value to readers. We constantly pursue better expressions to communicate knowledge and other cultures to our readers.

There will never be a perfect translation. Christian translators, nevertheless, benefit from having a powerful Ally, the Holy Spirit. Even when the perfect translation seems to be just outside our grasp, or we catch sight of a gray hair in the mirror, we can be confident that we are "being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that [we] may have great endurance and patience." (Col. 1:11) v

A Long History

The oldest references to translation are found in papyri dating some 3,000 years before Christ, writes Japanese author Yumi Tsuji, whose book, *The History of Translation*, was published in Korean by Kungree Press in 2001. As early as 2600 B.C., the Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia already had a kind of dictionary.

Religion has been a significant motive for translation. In the third century before Christ, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, now known as the Septuagint, because Hebrews were dispersed outside Israel. Roman rule over Israel eventually led to the Vulgate, Jerome's fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible.

On the other side of the globe, in 200 A.D., China and ancient Korea were introduced to Buddhism through a translation. In the fourth century, Dao An, a Chinese scholar and monk, developed a comparative study on translation.

In the Middle Ages, Western civilization blossomed thanks to professional translators such as Hunayn ibn Ishaq, who introduced Greek medical, philosophical and mathematics books to the Islamic world. Closer to our times, Etienne Dolet and Jaques Amyot, French translators of the Renaissance, and more recently André Gide, author of *La Porte Etroite* (Strait is the Gate), translated English literature into beautiful French.

"Languages change slower than the world; human experience cannot automatically be reflected in the language," wrote Georges Mounin in *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*. Translation's long history does not guarantee accurate translations. Ever since people have used translation to introduce foreign culture and knowledge to their own cultures, controversies and rumors about mistranslation have existed.

—Shin-Hee Yim