

The Translators behind *In Translation*

A Conversation with Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky

Arthur Dixon

In May, Columbia University Press released the collection [In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means](#). With eighteen essays from contributors including Peter Cole, David Bellos, and Haruki Murakami, the book offers a behind-the-scenes look into the mindscape of the literary translator. It tackles questions of the translator's identity and the nature of translation, providing both a detailed discussion of specific issues and a wide-ranging overview for newcomers to the field.

Prolific translators Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky compiled and edited the new collection, and in this week's edition of Translation Tuesday they answer questions regarding the book and their own perspectives on the craft of translation.

On In Translation

Arthur Dixon: How did this compilation of essays come about? Why is it particularly important to write and read about translation at present?

Esther Allen: We've both been teaching translation workshops for years and are always seeking out writing about translation by translators that can help frame the practice for students. When our editor, Philip Leventhal, suggested putting together an anthology of essays by translators, we agreed it was a great idea. While our book contains previously published material that is of particular pedagogical and artistic value, more than half of the essays appear here for the first time; we sought them out from people we'd seen delivering excellent papers or people whose work we know well.

You're very right that the book appears at a particularly interesting moment. There was a huge shift toward translation in the aftermath of 9/11—just think of the wave of translation-focused initiatives that have emerged since then, including Words Without

Borders, which just celebrated its tenth anniversary, any number of translation-oriented publishing houses and academic translation centers, the Heim Translation Fund, more recently the Best Translated Book Award, etc. In 2011 the MLA established its guidelines for translation as scholarship, making translation safer for professors everywhere, and last year saw the first best-selling book about translation: *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* by David Bellos, one of our contributors. Meantime, and perhaps not coincidentally, the portion of the Internet that is in English has plummeted from a high of 90 percent to its current level of about 25 percent. English speakers are going to have a harder and harder time sustaining the illusion that translation isn't relevant to them.

On translating and time

AD: Michael Emmerich's essay touches on the fact that a translation is inevitably a reevaluation of a text at a later point in time as well as a switch from one language to another. What impact does this temporal difference have on translation?

Susan Bernofsky: Michael is speaking there about translations of older works (which not all translations are, of course). It's definitely an issue: what to do with the temporal gap between original and translation. Some translators think it's desirable to stick to current language use regardless of the age of the text. I'm in the other camp. I think it's important for a translation's language to honor the temporal gap whenever possible. The goal isn't to create a "fake old" text but rather to write in a way that points to the oldness of the original by using the occasional old-sounding word or locution, but knitted into the texture of the translation such that it doesn't stick out as anachronistic. To this end, I have gotten into the habit (for my older translations, e.g. Walser, Gotthelf, Schleiermacher, etc.) of looking up all the words I use in the *Oxford English Dictionary* so as to rule out words that were not yet in circulation in English at the time the original was written. This is a lot of work, but it produces a translation with a texture that feels more appropriate to me than that of a translation that disregards chronology. Older authors tend to be older in more ways than just vocabulary, and if you plop them in a linguistic time machine, they can easily wind up sounding naive or just plain foolish.

AD: Eliot Weinberger suggests that the political scene of the early twenty-first century greatly impacted the prevalence of translation. What elements of the present global political, social, or cultural scene do you see as particularly significant for literary translation?

EA: The translation of science is a question that has intrigued me for a long time. During the second half of the twentieth century, English became the global language of the hard sciences, and most scientific articles worldwide were published in English no matter where the scientific journal happened to be based (with notable exceptions such as the former Soviet Union). In other words, all science was self-translated by its authors or their associates, to be published in a single language. This trend spread to the social sciences as well, which was dismaying to many and gave rise to the [Social Science Translation Project](#) of the American Council of Learned Societies, spearheaded by Michael Henry Heim in the mid-2000s.

However, it would appear that the monolingual tendency in science has begun to abate. Among the many reasons for the change that might be hazarded is the fact that the Internet, dominated by English in the 1990s, has now expanded to such a degree that English accounts for only 27 percent of its content, a percentage that continues to dwindle. Be that as it may, no less an entity than the US Department of Energy has responded to the increasingly polylingual nature of scientific discourse by creating a website—[worldwidescience.org](#)—that bridges scientific databases and portals across ten languages. If the hard sciences themselves are retreating from monolingualism, it will be interesting to see what larger consequences that entrains. Of course [worldwidescience.org](#) relies on Microsoft translation software to bridge its different languages, and so far my attempts to use the translation tool have been entirely futile. But at least the site's very existence acknowledges linguistic plurality in a field that tends not to.

On foreignness

AD: Is David Bellos correct that a novel translated from French to English should give the English reader “the vague impression of having read a novel in French”? Is it part of the translator’s duty to preserve some element of the original language, and how can that be accomplished?

EA: Translation is a situational form of knowledge; that’s what makes it so endlessly interesting. Each text, each paragraph, each sentence contains a world of possibilities, and the translator must be attuned to all indicators, external theoretical and political contexts and nuances internal to the text itself. To give an example, when I translated *Rex* by José Manuel Prieto, I rarely used anything but English. *Rex* is narrated by a man so obsessed with Proust that he believes all knowledge is embodied in Proust’s work. This conviction leads him to dismiss the study of foreign languages as pointless, for Proust’s text will remain inviolate and true no matter what language one reads it in. But when I translated *Encyclopedia of a Life in Russia*, an earlier novel by the same author, the text itself was already chock-full of linguistic diversity, and its internal logic required even more of that in the translation, which ended up including long passages in French, Spanish, Japanese, Hebrew, etc. Two novels by the same author, both bearing the unmistakable hallmarks of his style—yet each demanded a very different approach in this respect. Incidentally, Prieto’s contribution to our anthology, a meditation on his translation of Osip Mandelstam’s *Epigram Against Stalin*—which includes the poem in its Russian original, in Prieto’s Spanish translation, and in my English version, based on Prieto’s Spanish, has been described to me by two Slavicists as one of the best things they’ve ever read about Mandelstam’s famous poem.

But yes: in general, if you’re translating a book deeply rooted in a given place and language, there’s no reason not to incorporate words and phrases from that other language in the translation, as authors who seek to root their work in linguistic spheres outside of the language they’re writing in have long done. The first writer to use the word *sushi* in English glossed it as “rice sandwiches,” but half a century or so later the need for a gloss

disappeared: this is how languages and cultures evolve. As Jason Grunebaum notes in his piece on finding an English for the translation of Hindi, the English literature of India provides wonderful models for how to incorporate linguistic diversity in an English text with maximum elegance and fluency.

Forrest Gander takes this possibility even further. He writes that while reading from his translations of Mexican poet Coral Bracho, “I found my eyes sliding across the gutter of the en face edition—as though I were reading the inside margin as a caesura in one of my own poems—and plucking Spanish lines from the left page as I read the translations in English on the right. I developed a strategy for including Spanish lines as part of a performance that allows an audience to hear the original language in conversation with English.”

Meanwhile, keep in mind that there are a number of brilliant discussions of translation in the volume—Richard Sieburth’s extraordinary piece on translating Maurice Scève, Clare Cavanagh’s gorgeous meditation on loss, Elizabeth Bishop, the villanelle, and Polish poetry—that don’t even allude to the possibility of incorporating the original language in the translation. What can work wonderfully in one context might not even occur to the translator as a possibility in another context.

AD: Ted Goossen writes in his essay on Murakami: “For English readers, it appears books need to be dubbed, not subtitled.” Is it true that English-speakers are especially averse to evidence of the original “foreignness” of translated works? What does this mean in relation to David Bellos’s suggestion that translation should give the reader some flavor of the source language and culture?

EA: That space on the Venn diagram where two languages overlap or intersect has a very different size and topography when we’re talking about an East Asian language and English than it does with the languages I work in, French and Spanish, which are much more closely intermingled with my target language. While Bellos advocates the use of foreign words in a translation, he’d be the first to say that there isn’t a single blanket approach that will fit all languages and all works.

That being said, it's also clear publishers and editors are often afraid readers will feel put off by foreign words (just as Orhan Pamuk tells Maureen Freely that he fears that the use of Turkish words in the English translation of his work will make readers condescendingly perceive it as "folkloric") and therefore work to prevent translators from using polyglossia as a translation technique. This may be particularly true for an East Asian language like Japanese. Anglophone publishers used to be deeply, albeit groundlessly, convinced that all book buyers dislike foreign languages and that their best approach was to disguise translations to look as if they were originally written in English. (Eliot Weinberger addresses the perception that translation is a "lamentable necessity" that should be kept out of sight as much as possible in his essay.) That fear kept translators' names off book jackets and kept those damned foreign words out of translations. As recently as a year or so ago, a colleague of mine who had a book coming out in the UK was told that her name could not appear on the book jacket, as the supermarket chains that sell a great many books in the UK literally refuse to carry anything with a translator's name on the cover, on the grounds that readers won't buy it.

However, there is a superabundance of evidence against this view. English-language readers are not averse to translation or to the use of foreign languages in a text, if it's done with skill. For example, here's a line plucked at random from the gigantic best-seller *The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy:

"*'Aiyyo kashtam,'* Velutha said."

Not speaking Malayalam, I Googled "*aiyyo kashtam*" and found confirmation in a chat room of what I'd already figured out from the context: it's an exclamation of pity.

One of my favorite recent novels is Vassilis Alexakis's *Foreign Words*, written in French and then translated by its author into his other language: Greek; I read it in Alyson Waters's great translation into English. The novel tells the story of how its narrator learned Sango,

an obscure and endangered language of the Central African Republic; as you read it, you, the reader, learn Sango as well. The last paragraph is entirely in Sango.

Anglophone publishers seem to have begun to evolve on this point. A Literary Translation Centre has become a major feature of the London Book Fair in the past three years, and we've just had word that Book Expo America is planning to make translation the subject of its Global Market Forum for 2014, so there are a lot of encouraging signals right now. Alas, it doesn't sound as if the publishers Goossen is dealing with have made it there yet. Incidentally, a really interesting feature of Japanese-English translation in the past half-century is the way globalization has brought a lot of Japanese words that were once headaches that had to be "dubbed not subtitled"—words like *futon*, which used to be glossed as "quilts" or, my favorite, "quilt-like puffs"—into the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

On the translator-author connection

AD: Maureen Freely's essay is about her work with Orhan Pamuk (see also *WLT*, Nov. 2006, 30–31). How common is it for translators to develop special connections to specific authors? Is such a connection always helpful?

SB: It wouldn't make sense to say we'd only ever want one translator's version of a given author (imagine if the only Thomas Mann we had was by Helen Lowe Porter and the only Chekhov by Constance Garnett). On the other hand, it can be useful to have the work of an author, particularly a contemporary one, translated consistently by a single translator. Think of William Weaver's relationship with Italo Calvino—he translated the bulk of Calvino's work and became his "English voice." In time, as Calvino becomes a classic author of an earlier age, there might be room for other translations of key works of his, but I know that I for one will probably never want to read the books Weaver translated in any other translation, since I love how Calvino sounds filtered through him. And translators who work for years with an author's books develop their own specialized vocabulary for that author's work and particular ways of dealing with certain key stylistic traits, not to mention

intertextuality between the books. Translating multiple books by Jenny Erpenbeck (I'm just starting my fourth by her) has been like that for me. On the other hand, I know that Natasha Wimmer and Chris Andrews, who have each translated quite a bit of Roberto Bolaño, say that they admire each other's translations and learned from reading them.

On dialect:

Arthur Dixon: How do you deal with questions of dialect in translation? For example, Esther, if a book were written in distinctly Argentine Spanish, would you take that into account when translating to English?

Esther Allen: Spanish is an interesting and unique case. American English is so steeped in it at this point that, as Forrest Gander's poetry translation technique suggests, you can do things with Spanish you might not be able to do with other languages—at least in the US. I recently had an argument with a colleague from the UK as to whether the word *campesino* can be used in English; he said not, and I pointed out that it's used frequently in the *New York Times*.

My road map for this kind of thing is Francisco Goldman's magnificent novel *Ordinary Seaman*, written in English, yes, but interwoven with half a dozen regional varieties of Central American Spanish slang, each with its own nuances, explored and discussed in the text. There also tends to be a lot of preexisting polyglossia in regional Latin American fiction, which often incorporates indigenous languages. My translation of Rosario Castellanos's *Book of Lamentations* needed to include a glossary of the novel's Tzotzil terms at the end, which made it easy to incorporate characteristic bits of Mexican Spanish into the English as well. My current project, Antonio Di Benedetto's *Zama*, involves regional Southern Cone Spanish—how did you guess?—but it's eighteenth-century colonial Spanish to boot, with a lot of Paraguayan indigenous languages thrown in. The problem there was having the characters use a somewhat formal period language without making them sound British. I tried looking at accounts by anglophone travelers who visited the region in the late eighteenth century, and found an early-nineteenth-century translation by John Adams

of Ulloa's account of travel in South America particularly helpful as a guide for how to work Spanish into the fabric of the text without making it sound like, well, Francisco Goldman.

AD: Referring to Jason Grunebaum's essay on "choosing an English for Hindi": in your experience, which specific variety of English is best to use for translation? Should translators be concerned with dialectical differences or simply translate into English as they speak it, or should they translate to a deliberately blank dialect of English (as David Bellos mentions)?

Susan Bernofsky: Jason is in a unique situation because he's so conversant in the varieties of English spoken in India as well as those of the US, and these differences are crucial in his translations from the Hindi because he has to assume an Indian readership as well as readers in other parts of the English-speaking world. The question of dialectical differences comes up a lot for me because I've translated a number (seven!) of books by Robert Walser, who often inflects his German with a Swiss accent to ironic or humorous effect. One might look for cultural "equivalents" and slip into Cockney, say (for a UK translator), or some sort of US regional slang. The playfulness of Walser's using dialect has to do with the traditional marginalization of Swiss language and literature within the dominant German context, so you would have to look for the dialect of a somehow marginalized group in English also. But every instance of marginalizing has its own history and its own cultural specificity, so a translation that uses a dialect automatically "layers" the history of one marginalized group over another, and that is almost always inappropriate. So instead I try to approximate the effect Walser is going for by slipping in "folksy" or "quaint" expressions, or sometimes I even keep the Swiss words with glosses (since Walser often glosses his Swiss words for his German audience—sometimes intentionally inaccurately!). As for the "deliberately blank" dialect of English Bellos speaks of: yes, I think he's onto something. It's impossible to eliminate all traces of American or British inflection from one's English, but I do take pains to avoid outright Americanisms whenever possible, since I want to do everything I can to maintain the illusion that I am writing German in English.

On women and translation

AD: In a recent [article](#) for Words Without Borders, Alison Anderson observed that “over the last two years, an average of 26 percent of the books of fiction or poetry [in translation] published in the United States were by women.” Is the underrepresentation of women an institutionalized aspect of literary translation?

EA: Alison Anderson’s excellent and very pertinent article points out that the problem of female authorship isn’t limited to translation: women writers working in English get short shrift in the anglophone literary marketplace in a variety of ways, as documented on Vidaweb.org and other sites.

Ruth Franklin in [The New Republic](#) looked at Fall 2010 catalogs from thirteen US presses, large and small, and found that only two had a ratio of books by women above 30 percent. Three were at 30 percent, and in the remaining eight catalogs 25 percent or fewer of the books were written by women. Only 15 percent of the books in the Harvard University Press catalog were by women.

It’s probably a safe assumption that women writers in most of the rest of the world are having an even tougher time publishing their work than anglophone women. At that point, the fact that 26 percent of the books we’re translating into English are written by women starts to look pretty good; we’re giving women in the rest of the world parity with what women writers in English have achieved.

It’s a global issue and one we need to remain acutely aware of. It is shocking to learn that the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize has never in its history gone to a book by a woman—and time to add that prize to the many lists on one of my favorite [blogs](#), “100 Percent Men.”

However, we should also remember to celebrate our triumphs. Anderson’s article doesn’t mention her spectacularly successful translation of Muriel Barbery’s *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*—a book by a woman that sold more than a million copies in English translation.

On technique and meaning

AD: Here's the classic translation question. Which is more important: fidelity or transparency?

SB: The thing about “fidelity” is that the more you talk about it, the blurrier it gets as a concept. When most people use the word, they mean “faithfulness to the semantic content of each sentence,” which is exactly what Helen Lowe Porter was after when she chopped up Thomas Mann’s long sentences into bite-sized pieces. (I count up to ten English sentences for each German one in her translation of the story “Disorder and Early Sorrow,” for example. Whose idea of fidelity would that be nowadays?) When most people talk about “transparency,” they mean taking stylistic oddities of the original into account and re-creating them to some extent in the target language. But obviously you can’t have the one without the other. Literary texts are never just “about” their informational content. I think it’s more useful to set this dusty old duality off to one side and begin to think about all the aspects of a text we might think about asking a translator to render, keeping in mind that the mix will look different for every author and every work. I like Anthony Appiah’s suggestion that a translator strive to communicate what about the original text made it worth teaching. Not a simple formula, a complex one.

AD: Alice Kaplan writes, “Like a simple melody on the piano, a simple prose style in the original exposes the translator. It can be much harder to play.” Is it really harder to translate simple language?

EA: In language, nothing is simple—if it were, then human life wouldn’t be what it is, and Google translate could dictate our every communication. Think of the word “get”—a very simple three-letter word, yet its meaning is virtually unlimited (get off, get up, get out, get along, get with, get away, get to, get over, etc.). The longest entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is for the verb “put.” If you print it out from the online version, it’s 203 pages. 203 pages!

One of our contributors, Eliot Weinberger, has a marvelous book I'm very fond of called *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, which takes a number of different approaches to the translation of a four-line Chinese poem written 1,200 years ago about a glimpse of a mountainside and a ray of sunlight that, in its extreme simplicity, lends itself to infinite interpretation. The greatest challenges in any translation are not obscure words or convoluted syntax (though those can pose extreme difficulties), but the simple locutions with a precise and perfect meaning that you grasp very well yet cannot find a way to fully convey in the target language.

AD: Susan, your essay deals with the revision of syntax, rhythm, and other technical literary elements in translation. How much time does a translator devote to these matters compared to simply capturing meaning?

SB: I'm sure this is different for every translator. For me, "capturing meaning" is only around 10 percent of the translation process, except in cases where a passage is particularly knotty or hard to figure out. Of course, if you're working with something like a very dense, hermetic poem, you're going to spend much more time just trying to figure out exactly what's going on semantically as well as on other levels. There's a "massaging" part of the process that lasts a very long time for me. What I mean by that is that you keep changing a sentence or line around—putting words in different sequences, trying out different synonyms or phrases—until you arrive at something that both sounds interesting in a way appropriate for the work and author *and* says what it's supposed to say. This part of the translation process is a bit mysterious, or might seem so until you start asking the same questions, say, of a musician ("How do you figure out the right way to play a phrase?") and realize that the challenges faced in many different sorts of art-making aren't all that different from each other in the end.

On the translator's status

AD: Several of the essays in your book touch on the issue of hierarchy between translators and authors, with translators typically on the lower rung. What are your thoughts on the difference in status between translators and authors? Why is the translator's status lower in Western countries than in certain other places, like Japan?

EA: Translators in the anglophone world are sometimes *perceived* as being on a “lower rung.” The essays in our book certainly don't subscribe to that view. Would we say that an actor is on a lower rung than the screenwriter who wrote the lines the actor delivers? Or that the literary critic is on a lower rung than the writers whose works she analyzes? The contributors to our book all write and translate and have made careers that conjoin the two practices—that conjoining is what many of the essays we've included are fundamentally about.

As Ted Goossen describes it in his contribution, translation is an integral part of Japanese literary culture because “the founders of Japanese modern literature tended to be either scholars of Western literature or translators.” This tendency is rooted in the earlier centuries-long efforts by Japanese scholars who struggled to match Chinese characters and Japanese words, and labored over legal documents written in Dutch to defend their territorial rights. While it remains rarer for translation to be a fundamental component of a literary career in the anglophone world, there are nevertheless many examples of such careers. Lydia Davis, just awarded the Man Booker International Prize, is an excellent one. She is our domestic parallel to Haruki Murakami—an internationally renowned and best-selling writer who also translates prolifically. We were privileged indeed to include his essay on his translation of *The Great Gatsby* in the book.

On technology and the future

AD: What tools do you find more useful for translation? What impact do you think online language tools will have on literary translation?

SB: I have come to make heavy use of online tools as a translator, but I caution my students about depending too much on them. I think having grown up translating only with the help of paper dictionaries and reference libraries has made me a more discerning user of online tools than someone who starts off using them right from the start. First of all, online dictionaries tend to offer many fewer options (both in terms of synonyms offered as potential translations of a word and in terms of the various shades of meaning of the words in the original language). The information also tends to be randomly presented, whereas a good old-fashioned paper dictionary will offer an organized overview of a word's subdefinitions and then list some English-language synonyms for each. The Internet offers us huge masses of data, but it isn't sorted and organized, and often the organization is crucial when it comes to finding the right words in English. Similarly, I have never found an online resource as helpful as a good *Roget's International Thesaurus* with an index, i.e. *not* the one in dictionary form, but the one that sorts words by categories and lists verbs and adjectives right after the nouns associated with them. This is a highly powerful and refined tool. The one thing the thesaurus doesn't do for you is sort the words chronologically (by the date they entered the language), but for that there is the "historical thesaurus" now incorporated into the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, easily my favorite online tool. Speaking of history, if you're translating older works, you absolutely need older paper dictionaries because words go out of fashion and get dropped from dictionaries, and the synonyms you'll find in a nice old *Webster's New International Dictionary* (that's the second edition of the biggest one Webster's makes) are a useful reminder of how people talked eighty or a hundred years ago. Speaking of which, I'm a big fan of GoogleBooks as a tool for checking the idiomaticness of phrases, especially since you can limit your searches by dates to see when a certain phrase started popping up. It works for lots of languages, especially English. And Google Images and Wikipedia are great at finding out what plants, pieces of furniture, etc. are called in various languages, especially once you start using the language tabs along the left-hand edge of each Wikipedia page to toggle you to and from the language you're translating from. The Internet keeps giving us more and more tools to add to our arsenal. It's just important not to throw away the old tools as we add the new ones, since the functionality of good, big dictionaries has still not been replaced.

EA: That's great advice and a superb list of tools, to which I'll add just two. First, the Google Ngram viewer, which graphs and compares the frequency of various terms over time, and which is also really useful for charting British English against American English. If you compare the usage of "bloody" and "damned" in British English from 1800 to 2000, you can see that "bloody" generally occurs far more frequently in the corpus, except from 1925 to 1930 when the two terms are neck and neck. If you do the search with American English, the two terms are in largely the same relation except that the period when their usage is about equal is 1930–40. It could be really useful to know that! Of course, you also have to keep in mind that "bloody" is not only an expletive attributive but a simple descriptive adjective, as well, and the Ngram machine is incapable of distinguishing between those two usages. Another tool that my translation students for whom English is a second language find particularly indispensable is www.linguee.com—which takes a phrase in one language and locates the myriad ways it has been translated in an endless number of different contexts. It's incredibly helpful for determining which preposition is required and how various prepositions alter meaning, how precisely the word is generally used in a sentence, etc.

AD: As the world globalizes, will there be more or less translation?

EA: Well, that's the big question, right? We're obviously arguing for more. Lots of people seem to disagree, in favor of the option memorably described by Michael Cronin (in a passage we cite in our introduction) as "the dystopian scenario of the information-language nexus [that] would see everyone translating themselves into the language or languages of the primary suppliers of information and so dispensing with the externality of translation."

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