Translation and the Meaning of Linguistic Diversity

An Interview with David Bellos

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A translator of twentieth-century writers into English, David Bellos has recently devoted an entire volume to his trade, *Is That A Fish in Your Ear?* Where does linguistic diversity come from? Can we trust automatic translating machines? Is English a hegemonic language? David Bellos offers insights afforded by his familiarity with "the extraordinarily subtle business of English as an international language."

The Language of Translation

Books and Ideas: You have translated many authors who wrote in French or have been translated into French, such as Georges Perec, Romain Gary, and Ismail Kadare. When do you consider that you have been successful at translating a book? How do you make that judgment? Does it imply putting yourself in the place of the reader; if so, how do you imagine your reader?

David Bellos: I guess you could say that my translation of Perec's *Life A User's Manual* is successful in the sense that it has hundreds of thousands of readers. That's very gratifying. If you work into English, just getting an audience for foreign literature, especially French, is really difficult. I am not working for a niche, but for this mythical thing called the general public—which keeps disappearing. *Life A User's Manual* has found that position: it is on the bookshelf of every 18-to-25-year-old who wants to appear educated—along with *Doctor Zhivago*, *The Master and Margarita*, and other modern classics of that sort. On the other hand, *W*

and *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, which are more taught at university, do not have this appeal to a whole age group— they do fit more of a niche of students of things French.

I am quite pleased to have written biographies of Tati, Perec, and Romain Gary. The three of them are of the same cultural generation, 1945-1980, and they are among the marvellous things that France has given to the world, much more representative of the vitality and inventiveness of French culture than most of the authors who are taught in this very narrow curriculum that gets you as far as Marguerite Duras and Annie Ernaux, who exist for me in a much more Franco-centric space. Tati, Perec, and Romain Gary have a slightly external relation to French culture, and maybe that is why I am more able to project myself in them. They are deeply buried in French culture and yet also out of it. I am also always one foot in and one foot out. It is sometimes uncomfortable, but it keeps you alert.

As for my status as an author, you have to keep in my mind that things in the English-speaking world are very different from what they are in France. I have an agent, a publisher, an editor and a copy-editor; I also have people I trust with whom I share things. And I have my own ear. Nothing actually gets into print unless it has been through many, many hands. There is an awful lot of polishing, and backing and forthing, and judgment and thinking that's going on in dialogue with other people. English books are collective works. When I was working for Harvill Press, my editor, who was also my publisher, rang me up once and said: "David, be kinder to your reader." Sometimes the same man would say: "You have gone too far," implying that I should not over-explain the text. Only rarely have I disagreed with my editors.

But in the English speaking-world, it is not so much *the* reader that you are thinking about, it is this extraordinarily subtle business of English as an international language. Most books translated into English are not going to be printed twice, and they are going to be read in all parts of the English speaking-world. They need to be translated into a very carefully honed version of English which is not too heavily marked for Britishness, Americanness, Australianness etc., and which is in that—fairly large—register of English that is not susceptible to misunderstandings. There is a list of one hundred, two hundred words that you have to know

your way around. What we, as translators, are trying to do is make this English appealing and enjoyable without being regionally identifiable. That is something that does not affect France, Germany, Japan, or the Arabic world. Standard English, in my mind, is the language not of books written in English, but of books translated in English. English does not have a standard version except in the language of translation. So it is very helpful when I am working for an English publisher to have an American copy-editor, or vice-versa. I have not finished learning English. I do not think one ever does. And that is why for *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*,[1] we made two separate editions, one for the USA and one for the UK, where there is hardly a sentence which is completely identical. The Americans wanted a different edition, which meant changes of spelling and punctuation and new type-setting, and we thought we would copy-edit it a little more, and took away some idioms and cultural references that were specifically British, and put American ones in. (That puts me in the same league as Harry Potter! Did you know Harry Potter was not the same in the US and the UK? The books even have different titles.)

So the hegemony of English that the French complain about so much makes us laugh, because English is not the same everywhere. People read British books in America without difficulty, but sometimes they are irritated: "These old Brits think they write English properly and it's wrong!" It is a fascinating world of only half-explicit, intra-lingual prejudice and strangeness. I must say in my work as a translator I have learned a lot about France and French, but I have learnt even more about the English language and its uncountably many varieties.

Translating Works That Contribute to A Planetary Conversation

Books and Ideas: Over the years have you attempted to choose the works you translated, or did you mostly do what publishers were interested in for their own reasons? Have you ever decided *not* to translate certain books, or on the contrary, to translate them for political reasons?

David Bellos: I am not aware that my translations are at all political. I am extraordinarily privileged to be able to translate books that I like, but that is because I have a day job as a

[1] David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*: *Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, London: Particular Books, 2011; New York: Faber & Faber, 2011.

professor. Most English-language translators cannot live by translation, the pay does not add up. It has a lot to do with personal taste. Personally, I am fascinated by writers who have encyclopaedic ambitions, who have an *oeuvre* of which the parts are connected. I was a specialist in Balzac in the earlier part of my life. One of the things that really enchant me about Georges Perec is that *Life A User's Manual* has the same kind of huge ambition as Balzac to talk about the whole world. This is the sort of ambition that attracted me in Kadare originally.[2] Besides those authors, I have had a go at other things in between, but that is mostly what I have done. These wonderful authors have made me into a translator.

The thing you have got to keep in mind is that you are as likely to find works of merit or interest on the pulp fiction shelves as among books published by Éditions de Minuit. Increasingly, I have been struck by how small a range of French literature is made available to American students even at the highest level, particularly for the twentieth century and the post-war period, which is the period that I know best. It is a great pity to give very intelligent young people who are willing to learn the idea that France produced Bataille, Blanchot, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Lacan, Derrida, and not much else. Because France also produced Jacques Tati and Pierre Boulle—authors of world stature—as well as Romain Gary.

Gary was enormously important in the English-speaking world thirty years ago, but I have not been very successful at bringing him back. It has partly to do with generation and taste; it is quite difficult to reinvent an author once he has dipped over the edge. In America, of course, where the sensitivity to frauds and hoaxes is very high, he was completely destroyed by the Ajar affair.[3] *White Dog* remains in print. It is an important American book,[4] an extraordinary comedy of political correctness, at a very important moment in American social history. Somebody who

[2] See also David Bellos, "The Englishing of Ismail Kadare Notes of a retranslator," *Complete Review*, Vol. VI, Issue 2, May 2005, http://www.complete-review.com/quarterly/vol6/issue2/bellos.htm

[3] In 1974, trying to reinvent himself, Romain Gary started signing books as Émile Ajar, and under this persona received in 1975 the Prix Goncourt which he had already been awarded in 1956 as Romain Gary. The secret of this double literary personality did not surface until his death in 1980.

[4] The English version of *White Dog* was written by Gary himself, and has many significant differences from the French text. The two versions appeared within weeks of each other.

makes it quite clear that he is a Jew sides with and also mocks at the struggle of American Blacks. This nexus is really quite key.

As I get older and I am not looking for promotion, I am freer to do provocative things like teaching *La Planète des singes* with exactly the same methods you use when teaching Molière. I am going to teach a seminar on *Les Misérables* next semester. This book has been repeated, adapted, rehashed, redone in so many languages and media, from strip cartoons to musicals—so you might as well read the real thing. *Les Misérables* has huge amounts of rubbish in it, but every story ever told is in there somewhere. I am interested in works that come from a certain place but become part of a planetary conversation. It is extraordinary what France has given to the world in that respect. A teenager from Mumbai and a teenager from Santiago de Chile have very little cultural stuff in common. But if they do have anything in common, it is likely to be *The Count of Monte Cristo*, some version of *Les Misérables*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Seas:* something from the great French tradition of popular fiction. If you have seen *Slumdog Millionaire*, you must have been struck by that fact: the story turns on knowing and not knowing the names of Dumas's three musketeers — on a television show in Mumbai in 2009! This is not degradation or abasement of French culture. This is as good as you can get.

Books and Ideas: Is it your job as a translator to help in this process of making works rooted in specific national contexts accessible, even transparent to the rest of the world, to denationalize them somehow?

David Bellos: When I read *Life A User's Manual*, I thought: "At last, here is a French novel that is as much an English novel as a French novel." It is a world novel. Bartlebooth does indeed do a *tour du monde*. The text is a resetting of bits of Freud, Thomas Mann, Lawrence Sterne, Borges, Calvino. It is written in French by a mind that lives in a world of literature that starts in Paris but encompasses something much larger. So I was not aware of denationalizing *Life A User's Manual*, because of this already global ambition.

Kadare, on the other hand, is quite explicitly, self-consciously and self-proclaimedly a writer of world literature. If you are starting from Albania, I suppose you have to be. The writers he is interested in are Homer, Goethe, Byron, Shakespeare. That is why, even through the double translation, he is easy to translate. From the start, he works in terms of myths that go beyond Albania. In some ways, though, he is less global than Perec. His culture is a very specifically West European one. The fact that he writes in Albanian is an additional, not a fundamental fact about him.

Of course, I am not the one to say whether his works mean more for Albanian readers than for French or English ones. To some degree, because I worked with Vrioni's translations in French, which are very Frenchified, I actually made him a little more Albanian in English. I restored the Albanian names, instead of the semi-phonetic French versions, and the actual place names. Where Kadare uses foreign languages, as he often does, I put the original Turkish or Russian back in. These small signals of where the text comes from make the English version a little more Albanian than Vrioni's French. In the English-speaking world, we generally try to say foreign names as they are said in the foreign language. It is the convention for representing foreignness in English. Because I am English, I tend to find it a little more respectful. That respect does not extend to all aspects of the translation.

I do not want to be theoretical about this. What interests me in talking about translation in general is not to say how it should be done. I am interested in what it does, how it has been done. Within the vast number of techniques that arise when we write, it is sometimes appropriate to be respectful of what is foreign; and sometimes it is appropriate to replace it with something with the same force in the target language. To my mind, there is no point in being respectful of a hidden allusion to Hugo, like the line I turned into a Churchill quote in my translation of Fred Vargas's novel, *Have Mercy on Us All*.[5] Not every French reader knows that "*S'il n'en reste qu'un je serai celui-là*" is a line from Hugo, especially when it is not written as verse and is buried in a sentence. But everybody hears the echo of something grandiloquent about it. So in

[5] Fred Vargas, *Pars vite et reviens tard,* Viviane Hamy, 2001.

English you have to try to make another echo. It does not always work. A critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* was very cross with my replacing Hugo with Churchill!

Books and Ideas: At Princeton, you have experimented with new ways to teach French, and in doing so you started offering a course in Jewish authors who wrote in French, or French authors of Jewish extraction—it is not easy to know what the right phrase would be. What has been your way of going about it?

David Bellos: Princeton has a Program in Judaic Studies, and the idea arose that something ought to be done about France which has, and has had, the largest Jewish population in Europe, and a very special and distinguished relationship to Judaism. The course I designed is called "Jewish Identities in France since 1945" and it deals with the history of the Jewish community in France, with some of the extraordinary ins and outs of Jewishness in French philosophy, from Sartre's *Semite and Anti-Semite*[6] to Benny Lévy, and with important books like Elie Wiesel's *La Nuit*, Schwartz-Bart's *Le Dernier des Justes* and Perec's *W*. It tends to stop around 1980—a sign that I am getting older. The *Trente Glorieuses*[7] are definitely a period of great changes in France's relationship to Israel and the meaning of Israel for French people, so I teach about Aron, Sartre, De Gaulle, the different communities of Jews in France.

There were Jews in the territory of France long before there were any Frenchmen, but it is also a really fascinating part of French contemporary history, with the complete transformation of the French Jewish community from essentially Ashkenazi Holocaust-survivors to second-generation Sephardi immigrants with very different positions in French life. The course offers a basic history and sociology of the Jewish community in France, and the moments when Jewishness is really part of French politics and life, like in 1967, together with a study of books that attracted attention —getting the Prix Goncourt, or else displaying the awfulness of being Jewish, like *La Vie devant soi*. I teach the course from time to time, but always have great difficulty in titling it. I

[6] *Réflexions sur la question juive*, 1946
[7] "The Glorious Thirty", the expression used in French to refer to the period of almost uninterrupted economic growth that started after World War Two and ended in 1973.

do not like the term "Jewish Literature in French," nor do the authors I include. Perec hated the idea of being called a Jewish writer; André Schwartz-Bart hated it so much he ran away to Guadeloupe and became a Caribbean author. But those authors are more than just a minority in France—they are a presence that is worth knowing about. If all you read was Bataille, Blanchot, Butor and so forth you would not even know it existed.

Language's Primary Function Is To Be Different, Not To Be The Same

Books and Ideas: Shall we turn to your most recent work, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*, which is a very erudite, but not at all theoretical book about translation, and has just been released in French? What questions were you trying to address within the vast field of translation studies?

David Bellos: It is a book about the world of translation that deals with everything, from the language rules of the European Union to oral translation and retranslation of classics—and it does not once mention Walter Benjamin! A truly revolutionary book within the field of translation, because that very confused piece by Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator,"[8] is everywhere. A central thesis of my book is to take issue with the idea of an originary, primal language, an idea that so many twentieth-century thinkers trip up on. My last chapter is called "After babble", and it is an attempt to persuade the reader that we have spent quite long enough being misled by Genesis 11 and its mythical explanation of the origins of linguistic diversity. The Bible says, "In the beginning, all the world was of one speech." There is no earthly reason to believe this! In this view, linguistic diversity came about as a falling away and translation arose as a merely compensatory strategy for making up for the dreadful world that we are in. But if you observe people's actual language behaviour, and the fact that they speak different languages, you cannot but notice that language's primary function is to be different, not to be the same.

In my book, I use the example of English dialectology, but you could use Japanese dialectology—or French, if you did not have such a ridiculously powerful educational institution

[8] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," introduction to a Baudelaire translation, 1923, translated by Harry Zohn, 1968: http://www.totuusradio.fi/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Benjamin-The-Task-of-the-Translator.pdf

that teaches you how to speak right. In Britain, the moment somebody opens their mouth, they reveal social and geographical facts about themselves that are unmistakable and that they themselves feel unable to control except in special and usually ritualized circumstances. Everybody is bi-dialectal to some degree. There are no physical, intellectual, psychological, muscular determinants that everybody should have a different voice print—it is completely different from finger prints. Plenty of people work in the music-hall and adopt the voice of someone else. It would be simpler if everybody spoke the same. But we do not want to. Speech is a way of saying: "I am not you, I am me", just by opening your mouth. The idea that in the beginning we were all of one speech is completely silly. Obviously, I was not there, so I cannot say this is a matter of fact. It simply seems really implausible that, having invented a single language, people suddenly decided to start pronouncing it differently. You would have to find some pretty peculiar motivation, if that is the story. Although many anthropologists and many linguists far more learned than I am remain at the moment wedded to the idea of the monogenesis of language, there is no special reason to believe in it. Language behaviour may have arisen in different ways in different places, just like writing, which was invented four times independently.

That changes things for translation. If linguistic diversity is the very condition of the existence of language, then translation is integral to the existence of language. Translation is not a secondary thing; it is the beginning of civilization. Think of what linguistic diversity would be without translation: there would be no trade, no diplomacy, no communication—a pretty miserable life. One should try to understand the world from translation outwards rather than constructing grand theories about what was in the beginning, and then assigning translation its position. It just makes everything much more interesting. In the book, I want to lay the groundwork for a science of translation that is empirical, historical and not essentialist. If you are a historian, you know that if you get enough data, questions of definition do not matter: "What is war, what is society, language, translation," etc. If you go into the material, and try to understand it without presupposition, these merely terminological issues dissolve like the mist. The question is: when you take a text, what allows you to say that X is a translation of Y?

Whenever people come up with statements about translation, they are really talking about something else: *les belles infidèles* (translations that are "beautiful but unfaithful"), that is only about misogyny. Why people continue to talk about translation as a form of treason is a complete mystery to me. It is not as if the people who use this expression have first-hand experience of treason and dealing in state secrets. The fact is that translation arouses emotions in people. It had become very unpleasant to live in world where you cannot say "this means exactly that"—probably the education system is responsible for this. People get scared about the fact that everything said could always be said some other way, that meanings are not exact things. There is no magic super-language, either up there or back there, in which words and things have exact correspondence and where everybody knows what everybody means. How do we know how anybody else means anything in their language? That should be the subject of linguistics. It remains an extremely difficult and murky subject: how human beings have developed extraordinary tools to achieve intercomprehensibility.

Putting The Digital Tools to Good Use

Books and Ideas: Overall, you sound very optimistic about the translating work.

David Bellos: It is true, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* is a rather optimistic book, partly because of the way I am, and partly because so much about translation is of the negative and gloomy kind. I am quite excited by what is happening in artificial intelligence and machine translation at the moment. Tools of great sophistication have been developed and I am sure more will be coming soon, and there is no reason to be frightened of them. The existence of high-speed automatic devices will not put translators out of a job, because the demand for translation is always vastly more than the supply. No way will it diminish the diversity of human language. I would like people to take an interest in what these very smart young people in California are coming up with—which go beyond Google Translate. They will assist certain levels of intercommunication. They will allow people on board the language-learning machine. I do not reference any particular website in the book, because these things come and go, while the book is destined to sit on a

shelf. But there is something very interesting called Duolinguo,[9] which is simultaneously a language teaching service for free and a crowd-sourced translation project run by Luis von Ahn, who invented ReCaptcha.[10] Who knows what will come next? But the power of the digital devices we now have makes all sorts of things possible. What is more interesting, however, is that no successful translation machine program works on the presuppositions of standard translation studies theory. They are statistically-based, not meaning-based. Of course you should only use an automatic translation device to translate *into* a language that you know well, because then you can tell whether it is garbage or not. Maybe a lot of the opposition to machine translation comes from that misunderstanding. You have to have a human checker just to make sure it has not gone off the rails.

I am not sure of the social impact that could have, but I can well imagine that having a more reliable translation engine will allow young people all over the world to get an idea of what the documents they are interested in on the web are about. There are 7,000 languages spoken on this planet. Of those, maybe about a hundred are used on the web. In a city like New York, the court system services 140 languages; in London, it is about 120. But you know how many translations directions there are between a hundred languages? 9,900. You could not possibly service that with humans. Neither can web services, at least not directly: they have to use a pivot language like English, or French, to allow them to simulate those 9,900 language directions. It is not very high quality but it is enough to allow people to get the right idea—or the wrong idea, but that happens with human translation too. Mistakes are not the privilege of the web or Google Translate. Can this contribute to a process of democratization? Obviously you need to be literate and to have access to a computer. It leaves out a large amount of the world population, but within these constraints, that *could* bring a degree of democratization.

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[9] http://duolingo.com/
[10] http://www.google.com/recaptcha