

The Role of the Translator

According to the UNESCO database, the Index Translationum, roughly 100,000 books are translated into other languages every year and this number is increasing. While the number of translated books in worldwide circulation grows, so do the varying strategies and approaches to translation, which are as diverse as the authors and translators. There are two main approaches to translation. The first, instrumental translation, seeks to reproduce the text as close to the original work as possible. The second, hermeneutic translation, focuses on translating the source text into something that is readable and understandable by the receiving readers. While these two approaches are the main organizing forces in translation, there are many other factors to address in any translation project.

A simple and bland translation simply transfers literal meaning from the source text to create a scientific one-to-one equivalent in a new language. However, this seemingly direct translation technique loses many of the variations in the original language. Colloquial speech and slang do not translate literally and it is the work of a good translator to convey original meaning and temperament in the new language. Additionally, translating in this way retains some of the rhythm and form of the source language that adds meaning to any text. It is the role of the translator to communicate the unspoken meaning of cultural acts and words into something that helps the reader better understand the text they are reading and the context in which it was created.

Translation theory is not new, these same arguments extend back for thousands of years starting with the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in 300 BCE. From Chaucer's translations in the 14th century, Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible in the 1520s, and Jorge Luis Borges in the 20th century, the discussion and debates around translations have existed for centuries. In translation debates tend to arise often with few definitive solutions. Martin Luther, for example, presented the idea that one only translates satisfactorily toward one's own language, a debate that remains contested and is addressed still today.

A translation done well does not create a mere approximation of the source text, it takes risks to create a work that represents and explains the source to a receiving culture. The choices of the translator are of the utmost importance and can change, enhance, or degrade the quality of a translated text. Translation simultaneously creates a new reading and exhibits an old work.

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