

An Easy Translation Job

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The client who claims the job is easy just wants a discount and quicker turnaround. There is no such a thing as *an easy translation job*. This does not mean the guys are lying: they may believe their own words. However, whatever people say, no matter why or how they say it, there is no such a thing as an *easy* translation job. Often the translator is unable to identify the difficulties posed by the job—but that is altogether another story, and often a tragic one.

Identified difficulties are my best ally—experience my worst enemy

Many years ago I met a doctor who worked with kids that were unable to feel pain due to some strange neurological ailment. From him I learned that pain is in fact an ally, a friend that tells us something is wrong with our body and requires attention.

The same goes for difficulties in translation: an identified difficulty is a sign that something requires attention, that there is the danger of doing something wrong. And any warning that there is danger ahead should be welcome.

It is a fact that, because I have been translating the same thing for over thirty years, I can now go on autopilot and toss off a decent job without much difficulty. Very impressive, no doubt.

However that is exactly the problem with old translators like me: we are too prone to go into I-have-done-this-before-mode and produce translations that lack blood and life. Those are the guys who think they know it all, whereas they merely can no longer learn anything. They shun research on the grounds that over their life as a translator they have already done all the research there is to be done, whereas in fact they have only done all the research their arrogance permitted. They apply the same solutions over and over again, confusing intellectual laziness with technical competence.

Experience certainly has helped me solve many translation problems. But it has also helped me identify many others, which I did not notice when I was a novice. And I try to deal with them as they come up. Experience should not lead to complacency.

Heraclitus and the edition of 100% matches

Complacency is the main danger of using translation memory software. Don't get me wrong: I use TM software intensively and recommend it to all and sundry. However, TM just rehashes old translations. Unless the translator (or the client/agency) understands that even 100% matches may take some editing and improvement, heavy use of TM software will result in translatorial Frankensteins put together from bits and pieces of old jobs.

Some of us believe 100% matches only require attention when done by someone else, on the grounds that we cannot assume the responsibility for a job done by another guy. Yes, that is true. It is also true that, as Heraclitus would say, all translations were done by another guy. Pity he never wrote anything about translation.

Translating should be an enriching intellectual experience and you should end a job as a different person. So the next time you find a 100% match, you should assume someone else did it, even if it is signed by a guy who happens to carry the same social security number as you.

This does not mean that each and every sentence should or could be altered every time we translate it. I have found a very limited number of translations for *current assets* over thirty years' translating that expression. It does mean that if you translated a thousand words' worth of text a couple months ago and have a fresh look at it today you should find room for improvement.

What we so often perceive as errors in our old translations only reflect our increased awareness of difficulties and ability to deal with them. A reason for rejoicing: we are still intellectually alive.

The advantages of a deadline

The chances of identifying new difficulties—and new solutions—usually increase with the length of the text. That is why long translations are so difficult. The client who asks for a volume discount may not realize that the longer a job is, the more difficult it becomes.

I have always thought we should receive a bonus for longer texts. Get a 500-pager and it will never be done. The more you edit it, the more you feel you need to edit it. You keep finding new difficulties, new problems crying for attention, things that looked OK when you did them but now appear to require a change.

That is the greatest advantage of a deadline: unsatisfied or dissatisfied as you may be with the job, you must deliver it on the agreed date and that is often the only reason why you finish it. Otherwise, you would keep editing it till kingdom come.

The ability to identify difficulties

The ability to identify difficulties is second in importance only to the ability to understand the original (which I labeled the *stylus* in a previous article for the TJ). If I were a teacher, before asking my students to translate a text or to prepare a glossary of difficult words, I would ask them to identify difficulties.

The highest grade for this particular exercise would be awarded to the student who discovered the worst difficulties or even evidence that the text was totally untranslatable—and then started translating it, of course. Translation may be impossible, but this does not make it the less necessary. Goethe apparently said something of that sort, but I could never locate the correct reference. Perhaps you can. If you succeed, don't forget to write me, please.

Bach, Mendelssohn and the translation of literature

Too many discussions on the difficulties of translation focus on literature and are conducted by individuals with a strong background in the humanities. Most of them seem to assume that the more important the text, the more difficult it is to translate. Nonsense. The assertion derives from the love of literature, not from any knowledge of translation problems and techniques for translating. Second-rate authors and non-literary texts can be as exacting a task as translating The Great Books.

Advertising slogans and jokes, for instance, may be of scant literary value, but anyone who has ever tried to translate them knows how difficult they are to deal with. At the bottom of the ladder, the misbegotten corporate and technical reports that constitute the daily fare for so many of us, devoid of literary quality as they are, are as difficult to translate as any Great Book.

One of the things those people cannot see is that literary fortunes change: we think we know all about literature, but many of our "great books" were considered "lesser books" in the past and will revert to their humble positions in the future. The reverse is also true: books praised as excellent in the past are considered of little importance today and may become important again tomorrow when they are "rediscovered" by some critic. However, their literary fortunes reflect our perceptions of their quality, not the difficulties involved in translating them.

Let me draw a parallel with music: J. S. Bach, in his own time, was highly regarded as a performer and virtuoso, but not as a composer. After his death, his work remained half-forgotten—to the point that a great part of it was simply treated as so much garbage and destroyed accordingly. Very few played Bach and never as "works of art": Bach's work was just something you used for teaching purposes and played in the bloodless matter-of-fact way reserved for works devoid of emotional content.

Then, came Mendelssohn, who "discovered" Bach and conducted one of the Passions in great style, creating a great furor about the music of the former Kapelmeister of the Thomaskirche. Following that performance, critics of all persuasions started finding beauties in Bach's music, music that thereafter became a permanent feature of the concert programs of the world.

Please, notice, that the beauties were there all the time—it was the critics that failed to see them. The same goes for the difficulties of translation: they are there, only some people cannot see them.

Returning to literature, if the critical fortune of an author's work had any influence on the difficulties involved in translating it, Coelho Neto, a Brazilian author who was considered the prince of writers during the late 19th century and is now held to be a bit second-ratish, would have become easier to translate—an assertion that is not very easy to defend.

Soiling one's hands

People who claim translating high literature is necessarily more difficult than translating "low" literature or technical documents are merely stating that they are unable to identify the difficulties in translating, say, pulp fiction or reports written by half-literate mechanics or executives.

They probably have never soiled their hands with the junk the way I have. If they had, they would either have changed their opinion or botched the job. For, as you well know, *unidentified difficulty* is just a fancy name for what we call *a trap*, and people who cannot see traps very often fall into them.

This article was originally published at Translation Journal (<http://accurapid.com/journal>).