
Experiences in translation.
Umberto Eco. Trans. Alastair
McEwan. Buffalo: University of
Toronto Press, 2001, 135 pp.

Experiences in Translation, by Umberto Eco, novelist and semiotician, is based on the Goggio Public Lectures the author gave at the University of Toronto in October 1998, with the subsequent addition of some material he was unable to present at the time. The book is divided into two parts of about equal length: "Translating and Being Translated" deals with Eco's personal experiences and practice in translation, while "Translation and Interpretation" considers the theory of the relationship between the many levels of translation. Each one of these parts is then, in turn, divided into small sections that address different aspects of the topic, such as "Translating from Culture to Culture," "Translating Rhythm," and "Rewording as Interpretation."

Wishing to relate his own experiences "in the light of a 'naïve' concept of translation," Eco places the section of the book concerned with practice before the one that

discusses theory. In this first practical part, he attempts to speak "not as a translation theorist or as a semiotician interested in translation, but as a translated author and as a translator." And it is from this idea that the section gets its name, "Translating and Being Translated."

Eco begins with a discussion of the meaning of "faithful translation," a concept that permeates the first half of the book. Always thinking like a semiotician, despite his professed attempts not to, he addresses many important and controversial topics within translation theory, such as the question of complete synonymy of words, the cultural differences between languages, the tension of "foreignizing" vs. "domesticating" and "archaicizing" vs. "modernizing" a text, as well as the sacrifice of a literal translation for the sake of preserving style, meter, or imagery in the translated version.

The section "Can a Translator Change the Story?" is an example of these more specific topics. Here, the author introduces the difference between the "deep" story and the "shallow" story of a text. He illustrates this difference with a passage from his novel *The Island of the Day Before*, in which the main character finds himself before a myriad of colors as he encounters

a coral reef for the first time. Eco explains that what is important in this text is not the specific colors, but rather the variety and uncommonness of the adjectives, none of which appears more than once. This sensation, then, this “deep” story, is what Eco’s translators had to express in their renditions of his work. As he does in many places throughout the book, Eco gives the original in Italian and its translations into, among others, English, French, and German. Then he goes on to point out the particular merits and shortcomings of each version, and how they dealt with the lexical obstacles to create their own kaleidoscopic effect. In the end, each translator had to sacrifice part of the “shallow” story, part of the literal translation, in order to recreate the sensation and the scenery brought out by the “deep” story of the original text.

In the second half of the book “Translation and Interpretation,” Eco shows his purely academic side as he discusses several theories of classification of the different types of translation or interpretation. He starts with Roman Jakobson’s three categories of intralinguistic, interlinguistic, and intersemiotic translation, but soon finds faults

with the system’s organization and confusion of the terms “interpretation” and “translation.” He discusses many relevant topics such as rewording, definitions, and social context and their role in interpretation. At one point, he even amuses himself and the reader by replacing words in a poem by Baudelaire with their definitions so as to create an utterly absurd parody of both the poem and the theory of propositional equivalence.

Still, the most lasting result of this theoretical part seems to be Eco’s classification of the different levels of translation. With Jakobson’s system as a starting point, Eco devises his own more detailed method, based in large part on Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev’s theories of content and expression. With help from these finer distinctions, Eco manages to stratify this classificatory system to include all forms of translation, from translation proper to rewording to performance to film adaptation of literature. The system itself is solidly presented and supported, and should prove an important contribution to translation theory.

With his background as a novelist, Eco’s writing is clear, engaging, and succinct. The only problem that might present itself to

the monolingual reader is the fact that he makes very frequent comparisons between translations in up to six different languages.

Eco points out the most important differences, so that comprehension is not entirely lost, but still, most readers will have to deal with the inconvenience of accepting these observations as an article of faith. The theoretical half of the book, on the other hand, could prove difficult to non-linguists, as, for example, Eco does not even bother to explain Hjelmslev's complex terminology before diving into a discussion of its intricacies.

Despite these difficulties, *Experiences in Translation* is a well-written and informative work, interesting to linguists and non-

linguists alike. He discusses all of the major obstacles of translation, from foreignizing to rewriting, in a way that can be applied by other translators and understood by the inexperienced. Difficult as it may be to overcome, almost everybody can comprehend the problem behind translating, for example, "I like Ike" as "*J'aime bien Ike*." In the end, translation, says Eco, "is like the paradox of Achilles and the turtle. Theoretically speaking, Achilles should never reach the turtle. But in reality, he does. No rigorous philosophical approach to that paradox can underestimate the fact that, not just Achilles, but any one of us, could beat a turtle at the Olympic Games."

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