Language in the news

Translators and interpreters as literary creations, language and identity, how to read a translation, what email and interpreting have in common, freelance writers on strike, and Chinese slogans for a score of situations.

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The translator as protagonist

It cannot be mere coincidence that translators and interpreters have starred in so many recent books and movies. Is it simply that we stand out more in global village society? Are we convenient symbols of rootlessness and/or communication? Back in 1998 in his essay on The Translator as Hero, Ian Barnett said that "The twentieth century has been called ‘the age of translation’, so perhaps it comes as no surprise to learn that three of the novels to appear in Argentina in 1998 have all had as their focus translators or interpreters. In fact, this is actually quite surprising. I, for one, can think of practically no precedents in any language for this sudden spate of interest in the workings of translators' minds."

If anything the phenomenon has picked up momentum. Here we offer a few more examples to go along with those covered in Ingrid Kurz's book.

First in Spanish - this from the Ideal website: Justo Navarro (Granada, 1953) presentó y firmó ayer en la Feria del Libro su última novela, 'Finalmusik', protagonizada por un traductor y ambientada en Roma en el año 2004. (Ideal) "El protagonista de la novela es un traductor. ¿Es también un 'traidor'?' (JN) "No. Como buen traductor, es fiel."

Next we offer this one, even though we are tired of the hackneyed title: "When Alice Mannegan receives a phone call from an American archeologist seeking a translator, what begins as a trek into the remote deserts of north-west China in search of archeological treasure turns into a journey of the heart." Lost in Translation by Nicole Mones.

"The Translator (by Leila Aboulela) is set in two contrasting cities, Aberdeen and Khartoum, both reflecting the states of mind of the main character: the cold of the Scottish city makes her feel hibernated inside, the hot weather in Sudan makes Sammar feel alive." From a review on erasing clouds. Read another account on LitNet.

Our last selection is Le livre d'Emma by Marie-Célie Agnant: "Emma ends up in a psychiatry ward in Montréal... accused of having murdered her daughter.... Since Emma is absolutely not willing to answer the questions... in French, though she knows this language, a
Haitian interpreter named Flore is called, a woman as intelligent as understanding."

Language and Identity

Author David Hoon Kim and interviewer Cressida Leyshon discuss language and identity in this Living Language column of the New Yorker. Hoon says: "I've always been obsessed by languages, perhaps because I don't really have one that I can claim wholly as my own. It might have something to do with the fact that, having lived in Korea until I was eight, and then in the United States and France, I don't really have a native language - at least, not the way most people define a native language."

Translation and Journalism

I've often wondered how the media interpret interpreters (e.g. I have never liked the preference for foreign accents in voiceovers on some US television and radio news programs.) Here's a take on how one NY Times journalist thinks about us: "There is no way that a paper as serious about international news as The Times can operate without interpreters.... A good translation can convey the charisma of a rabble-rouser, the egotism of a tyrant, the wit of a poet, the heartbreak of a victim; a bad translation can deny us the sense of character."

Featured Site: Words Without Borders

"Words Without Borders is dedicated to opening doors to the world's best writing. Here you'll find a select collection of unique materials designed to deepen and enrich your international reading experience."

"To read a translation as a translation, as a work in its own right, we need a more practical sense of what a translator does. I would describe it as an attempt to compensate for an irreparable loss by controlling an exorbitant gain." Lawrence Venuti's How to Read a Translation."

Words Without Borders: The World through the Eyes of Writers: "a rich and impressive anthology...This collection opens with an astonishing fact: ‘50 percent of all the books in translation now published worldwide are translated from English, but only 6 percent are translated into English.’ In conjunction with the well-known ignorance of most Americans about global politics - or even global geography-that statistic is reason enough for this absorbing book." (from Kirkus Reviews)

The advantage of looking each other in the eye

"The brain's social circuitry mimics in our neurons what's happening in the other person's brain, keeping us on the same wavelength emotionally. This neural dance creates an instant rapport that arises from an enormous number of parallel information processors, all working instantaneously and out of our awareness." Sounds likes an interpreter talking, but this is an excerpt form a NY Times article on the ease with which e-mail can lead to miscommunication.

Freelancers in a brave new world - strike!

Labor unions may seem like an endangered species, but freelance strikes have gotten attention in the American press. An overdose of reality shows may be one side-effect of a strike of cinema and television writers. This NY Times page will give you an overview of the conflict (much of it about intellectual property rights) with many links to related sites. For a view closer to the picket line:
Writers Guild of America (West).

Freelancers walk out at MTV covers another such row. Angry full-time employees hired as freelancers have taken to calling themselves "permalancers." The City Room blog follows up on the story, with reader comments that make for interesting reading: "They DO have actual freelancers, you know - people who only submit things once a week, or who write or edit occasionally. Know what MTV calls them? Vendors." Perhaps job classification does make a difference!

BBC

In case you haven't seen it, the BBC has a photo + text essay about interpreting in an enlarged European Union. BBC News Online spoke to Philippe Gratier, an interpreter at the European Commission for over 30 years, about the ensuing changes in professional life.

Contemporary Chinese slogans

Is it a system of one slogan, two translations? Have some fun with these photos and English versions of poster slogans with unique Chinese characteristics.

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