Interpreter: an ‘innocuous’ profession?

As I read Vargas Llosa's latest book, The Bad Girl (La niña mala), I wondered if Robert Burns was right when he wrote: "O wad some Power the giftie gie us, To see oursel's as others see us!" [i]

Conference Interpreters are often misrepresented in literature and in motion pictures. They are portrayed either as remarkable individuals (The Interpreter by Sydney Pollack), or as pathetic parrots who merely repeat words in another language. Neither of these extremes really corresponds to our day-to-day experience, perhaps simply because the interpreter is merely used as the pretext for a good story. It is unfortunate however that an astute, intelligent and renowned writer and politician like Vargas Llosa portrays our profession in such inaccurate or even contemptuous terms. Could he be settling some personal quarrel?

For those who haven't read the novel, Ricardo is Peruvian, a decent fellow, somewhat of a sentimental simpleton who becomes a translator, then self-appointed interpreter and is totally infatuated with a cynical, greedy and unscrupulous will-o'-the-wisp, the Bad Girl (la niña mala). Their chance meetings take place in London, Tokyo, Madrid and Paris, somewhat facilitated by the ‘innocuous’ profession of the book's hero who can travel to his fancy, earn enough money and get time off whenever he likes. [iii] The amorous suitor even accepts poorly paid conferences in England for the simple pleasure of being closer to his ‘Bad Girl' [iii].

The ‘Good boy', el niño bueno, had studied French and English in school and after some language study settled down in Paris as a translator. He then took night classes to become an interpreter while studying Russian on the side. At the end of this brief course of study he announces that he "knew enough to be a good interpreter because he knew the vocabulary although without necessarily understanding the meaning" [iv]! He starts interpreting from Russian while still studying, admitting that his mastery of the language is not as good as that of his other languages. He admits that he is only vaguely interested in current events and is totally immune to the fascination for the intellectuals of the day such as Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and others who are the talk of the town. [v]. Getting another colleague to replace him for half days enables him to while away the time in more pleasant pursuit. [vi] Yet this very same exceptional professional complains that it is so hard to get his first contracts as an interpreter because "this is a tighter network than that of translators, and the professional associations, real mafias, admit new members sparingly." [vii]

We professional conference interpreters know how difficult it is to learn a foreign language. Each language is complex and evolves continually thus making the mastery of a foreign language an endless task. But it is especially because a language is not just a concatenation of words but rather an entire universe of culture, history, customs and idiosyncrasies. Contrary to what many people may think, we never just translate words but rather the underlying meaning in relationship to a context, which requires the understanding of a set of cultural references. Good interpretation requires
understanding the discourse and transposing it into another linguistic universe. That is exactly the difference between true professionals and those who call themselves interpreters but really aren't qualified. Contrary to Vargas Llosa's hero, professionals keep up on current events and take a keen interest in major trends the world around. This insatiable intellectual curiosity is a source of pleasure as is the exercise of our profession. We are neither suffering from frustration nor unsuccessful writers; we are motivated by a love of language and communication.

The reader wonders why the novelist has one of the characters say that interpreters are totally useless although at least they do no harm: "Contrary to other professions where you can inflict major damage to the species, like doctors and lawyers not to mention architects and politicians, interpreters are totally innocuous." [viii]

Our profession, which has existed since time immemorial, is presented as negligible and yet the primary characteristic of human beings is to communicate. Such communication would be impossible without the 'dragomans'. The accused in International Criminal Tribunals - who entrust their fate to interpreters - the doctors who receive training through videoconferences interpreted live, the heads of state who negotiate with our help, rarely consider us superfluous.

As for the role of professional associations, it is far more positive than Vargas Llosa implies. AIIC negotiates working conditions and remuneration with international organisations thereby sparing colleagues the fate that Vargas Llosa refers to for some literary translators who, for the translation of Ivan Bounin "are paid just enough to buy a couple of cappuccinos!" [ix] AIIC defines strict and demanding admission criteria and in so doing guarantees the professional skills and code of conduct of its members. This is a guarantee both for members and for the users of professional interpretation. Someday, Mr. Vargas Llosa, when you are awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, it might just be in your interest that the pichiruchi in the interpretation booth be an AIIC member.

English version by Julia Delille-Gomory. [i] The Louse, Robert Burns (see previous use of quote in this article by Phil Smith)

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