Délires simultanés: Lost and found in interpretation

A review of a thought-provoking work on conference interpreting, at once fiction and non-fiction, co-created and (self-) translated by Enis Batur & Yigit Bener.

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- **Authors**: Enis Batur et Yiğit Bener
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Readers of French, LOOK OUT! What you have now available in French is a brilliant performance, a real gem on conference interpreting. Whether you are an insider to the profession or a complete outsider, *Délires simultanés* will lure you deep into the world of interpreters – the seemingly non-present entities of communication who might actually have been omnipresent all along.

A literary feat that defies the straitjacket of categorization, the book is a co-creation and a (self-) translation by Enis Batur and Yigit Bener who have conspired to weave together an uncommonly entertaining, but at the same time thought-provoking work on conference interpreting that is at once fiction and non-fiction.

The book is essentially a dialogue between Batur and Bener. A highly acclaimed poet and essayist in Turkey with over 150 books to his credit, Enis Batur has been fascinated by simultaneous interpreting, mostly from observing his friend Yigit Bener at work. The object of interest, Yigit Bener, is a writer-translator-conference interpreter with long years of experience, working between French and Turkish in meetings of all types and levels. Both writers clearly share a love for languages and literature and both are French-speakers.

As an outsider who is deeply curious about the profession, Enis Batur raises some provocative questions on interpreters, bringing his intellectual and literary prowess into play: How does it feel to be another speaker’s voice? Can an interpreter ever ensure ‘absolute equivalence’? Why is cognitive talent so grossly underpaid when compared to, for instance, athletic talent? Do interpreters feel like they are going crazy being stuck with the speaker’s words? Do they ever feel the urge to speak out against the blatant untruths they are asked to re-enact in another language? Would they ever attempt to confiscate a speaker’s discourse and shout out the truth? Can interpreters lose their mind the way a diva can lose her voice and a football player his physical fitness? With these questions, Batur starts
weaving his fiction on an interpreter who has indeed lost his mind, embodying the voice of Mr. President…

Yigit Bener – a masterful insider to conference interpreting – willingly takes the bull by the horns. His response to Batur reveals the workings of deep self-reflection and incisive observations from numerous interpreting moments. He offers vividly depicted flashbacks and razor-sharp reflections on the presence and performance of interpreters, leading us through twists and turns in the narrative, to realize that the very interpreter in delirium is Bener himself.

Mixing facts with phantasy, Bener proceeds with an account of how he lost his sanity, as he listened to the same mediocre speech cooked up for the ever-changing but ever-mediocre politicians year after year, reaching a self-diagnosis of post-simultaneous stress disorder that results from interpreting blatant lies; as he noticed his audience's reaction to his split personality, being called a ‘traitor’ after interpreting a critical speaker, or observing their disapproving looks after a live film interpretation where he ‘just’ voiced the obscenities pronounced by the actors. There are also accounts of moments of action when he livens up a terribly dull relay from the French booth for Fidel Castro, his imagined comrade-in-arms, or when he concocts a speech for an Ozbek speaker whom he cannot possibly understand or run away from… Interpreters, does all this ring a bell with you?

The creation of the book has been delirious in itself. Enis Batur starts writing the book in Turkish. Bener then drafts a conference paper along the same lines in French, which he then back-translates into Turkish to merge into a dialogue with Batur. This is how the book comes to life in Turkish. For the French version, Bener not only translates Batur’s parts into French in consultation with Batur, but also self-translates his own (including the ones he had initially self-translated into Turkish) back into French. Even more of a feat for translation scholars, each self-translation turns into a rewriting of the text.

While keeping the reader on the leash with a gripping exchange on all aspects of the profession, from its ethics to its primary mode of speaking in the first person of another person, Délires simultanés has much more to offer: an absorbing read of a hybrid literary form that interlaces memoir, satire, humor, essay and short story, an in-depth, insightful exploration of the work and minds of interpreters.

For ardent bibliophiles and literature lovers, the book is full of hidden secrets. A careful eye will catch all of Almodovar’s film titles and Edgar Allen Poe's “The Raven” in different translations and mutations interspersed in the text, not missing the numerous instances of Derridean wordplay that defer meaning and question originality, truth and representation in language -- hence interpreting.

For interpreters, the book offers lively flashbacks on one’s own experience as well as critical musings on professional deontology and a terrific account of how challenging and fun the profession can be. It even heals wounds by sharing the pain of past agonies as well as providing a good laugh on all its absurdities. For translation and literary scholars, it is a treasure of intricate thinking on a wide range of postmodern concepts. And finally, for all, how about reading Délires simultanés like a thriller to find out what really happened when the interpreter lost it (in interpretation)? In short, whatever your special interest, this is a book not to be missed!

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Recommended citation format: