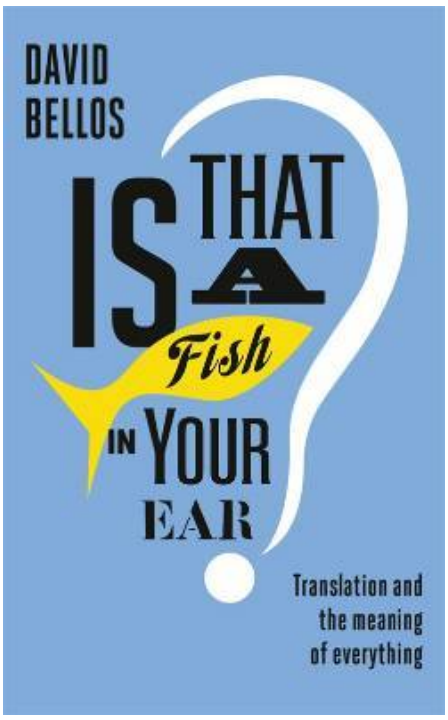

Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything

David Bellos

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Funny and surprising on every page, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* offers readers new insight into the mystery of how we come to know what someone else means—whether we wish to understand Astérix cartoons or a foreign head of state. Using translation as his lens, David Bellos shows how much we can learn about ourselves by exploring the ways we use translation, from the historical roots of written language to the stylistic choices of Ingmar Bergman, from the United Nations General Assembly to the significance of James Cameron's *Avatar*.

Is That a Fish in Your Ear? ranges across human experience to describe why translation sits deep within us all, and why we need it in so many situations, from the spread of religion to our appreciation of literature; indeed, Bellos claims that all writers are by definition translators. Written with joie de vivre, reveling both in misunderstanding and communication, littered with wonderful asides, it promises any reader new eyes through which to understand the world. In the words of Bellos: "The practice of translation rests on two presuppositions. The first is that we are all different: we speak different tongues, and see the world in ways that are deeply influenced by the particular features of the tongue that we speak. The second is that we are all the same—that we can share the same broad and narrow kinds of feelings, information, understandings, and so forth. Without both of these suppositions, translation could not exist. Nor could anything we would like to call social life. Translation is another name for the human condition."

Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything Details

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From Reader Review Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything for online ebook

MJ Nicholls says

David Bellos, famous for translating *Life: A User's Manual* and his compendious Georges Perec bio, writes a comprehensive, semi-scholarly and semi-accessible book exploring translation in its multifarious forms. Covering the complexities of literary translation—from verbatim likenesses to humour to style—into wider world areas such as legal and political translation (less captivating material for laymen), Bellos is a witty and super-smart writer who makes a convincing case for the importance of translation and its unsung participants. For those among you (that means Manny) still convinced a literary work loses too much in translation to bother reading—if this marvellous book doesn't persuade you, nothing will. Last word from David:

"A translation can't be right or wrong in the manner of a school quiz or a bank statement. A translation is more like a portrait in oils. The artist may add a pearl earring, give an extra flush to the cheek or miss out the grey hairs in the sideburns—and still give us a good likeness. It's hard to say just what it is that allows viewers to agree a portrait captures the important things—the overall shape as that special look in the eye. The mysterious abilities we have for recognizing good matches in the visual sphere lie near to what it takes to judge that a translation is good. But the users of a translation, unlike the friends of the portraitist's sitter, don't have full access to the model (they would barely need the translation if they did). That's probably why translation raises such passionate responses. There's no choice but to trust the translator. When it comes to speech and writing, people are an untrusting lot." (p331)

Julia says

Bellos' book is interesting and enjoyable. However, much of what he talked about was still a little too educated-linguist for me (a layperson). Additionally, he seemed too often to spend a chapter talking about all the confusing points of a particular aspect of what translation is or isn't, purposefully playing up the confusion, then pull a pat answer or glib remark out in the last few paragraphs that tied the chapter up in a bow.

Still, it was enjoyable. Just not four-stars enjoyable.

Tim Friese says

Bellos set out for himself the very high-minded task of writing a book about "translation and the meaning of everything" and mistakenly believed that he needs to include everything in it. There is not much of an argument or thesis, but instead the book consists of an older erudite professor talking about stuff he finds interesting: language equality within the EU, the history of simultaneous interpreting, how machine translation works, translating humor, the literary translation market, and so on. He has plenty to say, but his digressions and pot-shots lead him to try to make some questionable points:

There is no such thing as 'literal translation', just a 'one-for-one substitution of the separated written words'.

Well, Professor Bellos, that is exactly what people use that term to mean.

His peeving about cliches like 'les belles infidèles', 'lost in translation', and 'traduttore traditore' left me cold, with only an aftertaste of a more scholarly Andy Rooney.

He devotes a long passage to Ottoman Turkish 'tercüman' and seems to imply that the word was then borrowed into Arabic and Hebrew, while the latter certainly had this word before Ottoman Turkish even existed, all of which borrowed it from Aramaic.

Overall, the peeving tone, occasional misstatements, meandering style, and lack of an argument mean that this book does not merit a higher rating.

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jeremy says

the variability of translations is incontrovertible evidence of the limitless flexibility of human minds

is that a fish in your ear? is an accessible, yet remarkably erudite examination of translation's many facets. david bellos, acclaimed translator (perec, kadare, et al.), biographer, and professor, has composed a magnificent work likely to appeal to both academics focusing on translation studies as well as the general reader interested in language, context, and meaning. bellos considers translation's role in a variety of intercultural functions including international law, biblical scholarship, journalism, commerce, cinema, and, of course, literature, amongst others. *is that a fish in your ear?* often veers into the philosophical, questioning the very definition of translation itself and exploring the nature of what it means to communicate and understand another. bellos's book is informative, analytical, thought-provoking, and engrossing- an important title in a field often misunderstood, maligned, or dismissed altogether.

> *the solo contribution i feel confident of making is to say that assimilating all uses of language to translation on the grounds that all speech is a mental translation of thought seriously diminishes our capacity to understand what the practice of translation between languages is about.*

Charlotte says

This is a decent book about translation, but not, alas for the subtitle, much of a book about meaning.

Does that sound harsh? It's not a bad book. It talks interestingly and illuminatingly about the art of translation. It just refuses to go beyond the art and its technicalities into its politics and implications.

I wouldn't normally belabour the point, but it's really the elephant in the room. He talks about the difficulty and pitfalls of making a translation "sound foreign"; he talks about how, historically, conquerors have imposed their language on subject peoples. Except he doesn't talk about it. He mentions it and then veers off into technicalities, the *how* without the *why*. It's really very frustrating.

Bellow also talks without apparent self-awareness about "Chinese speakers": one hopes he isn't actually

under the impression everyone in China speaks the same language? It's a small thing but does undermine my impression of the book as a whole.

Cheryl says

From the title, I expected this to be friendlier, to be a good introduction to issues of translation. Instead, I found much of it to be nearly impenetrable nitpicking, and much of the rest to be obvious to any student of human nature, any auto-didact of modern psychology. I wanted examples, anecdotes, something a bit like They Have a Word for It: A Lighthearted Lexicon of Untranslatable Words & Phrases promises to be.*

Book-darts:

Author is guilty of saying "Chinese" language in every context, instead of acknowledging that there are actually many Chinese languages... the least he could have done is say "Standard Chinese."

There is a somewhat interesting bit about films & subtitles & voice-overs. For example, "Meryl Streep's German voice is that of Dagmar Dempe, for *all* her films."

The chapter about "Language Parity in the European Union" includes interesting bits**

I liked learning how Google Translate does (did? the book is several years old) it's thing. It looks through established translated documents for the the given text, often finding a "pivot" language between the two. Popular fiction, for example John Grisham, Harry Potter, is a good source of say, English->Farsi and English->Icelandic... giving a user the possibility of finding a match for Farsi->Icelandic. We all know it doesn't yet work wonderfully, but as of Bellos' writing it is the best available machine translation, at least in his opinion.

Good clue to whether a person is reciting a prepared lie or speaking extemporaneously - are they gesticulating? Most ppl can't help but use their hands to help their brain organize their thoughts and come up with words. Bellos gives interesting evidence.

I also noticed a distinct absence of So. African, Canadian & Australian mentions. I forgot to mark it, but to paraphrase from memory: "If you want your kid to be a highly sought-after and well-compensated translator [for the UN or EU, eg], don't raise him in Britain or the US. " Of course Bellos *meant* to say "don't raise him with English as his L1."

I dunno. Others may certainly get more out of the book than I. Probably not readers who already have studied translation, or readers who struggle with the writing of academics, but surely there's somebody who actually would enjoy, and learn from, this.

I'm going to try Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages next.

*Howard Rheingold's book was also a fair disappointment.

** I use the word 'bit' because Bellos doesn't explore ideas fully... he starts them out and then either digresses or truncates....

Patricia Highsmith's Snail says

David Bellos, the translator of Georges Perec's Life: A User's Manual, has a point to prove, and he makes it several times over. Translation is a substitute for the original, because most of us will never what the original is like. For those of us that can read something ‘in the original’ (a phrase I’ll never use again after reading this), we can only explain what’s untranslatable about it in one language. And that has to be translated in order to explain why it’s not translatable.

I sort of liked how much effort and historical knowledge he put into arguing that any assumptions about translation are largely wrong, and should be no obstacle to reading. This is why his chapters often end with a single line that amounts to ‘I told you so!’ but he reaches that point with such a critical mass of evidence that it's not annoying. The book liberated me - next time I read in translation I hopefully won't get stuck in that odd dissatisfied limbo where I wonder what I'm missing out on.

The book is as wide-ranging as you might expect from someone with Bellos' experience – going over the history of the European Union; the translatability of poetry; the problematic notion of a 'native speaker', early practices in translation; the concept of 'foreign-soundedness'; 'Dragomania'; Google Translate; the Soviet Union's fake poets, and the hierarchy between languages in translation, as reflected by the dominance of English, as both a ‘pivot’ language and a 'target' language.

He makes a convincing case for how common presumptions about translators have been tied with their shifting, vital role in historical exchange, with the many gendered truisms about translation reflecting the distrust and suspicion of their activities. On the way, there are so many great analyses from explaining how the English translation of Freud scientises Freud’s quite peculiar non-scientific German to revealing how in most cases a book must be translated into one vehicular language to reach another.

Good knowledge:

'Many now common words of English – ego, id, superego, empathy and displacement, for example – were all first invented in James Strachey’s translation of Freud, to replace the equally technical but less recondite neologisms of the original – Ich, Es, Überich, Einfühlung and Verschiebung.'

'Japanese literary translators have much the same status as authors do in Britain and America. Many author-translators are household names, and there’s even a celebrity-gossip book about them: Honyakuka Retsuden 101, ‘The Lives of the Translators 101’.

Another fascinating argument he makes is for the ‘third language’ of translation, where translators – keen to prove that they know the language – formalise it more than in 'the original'. But then such formalisations and Anglicisations (if in English) make it back into the first language (he gives the example of Swedish-language detective novels which have taken on the constructions of English sentences common in English-language translations of Swedish novels).

Anyway, here are a few quotes that stuck in my head, and perhaps convey Bellos' free-roaming, open-ended vision:

'We may all be born with the potential to acquire a language and a need to do so – with what some linguists

have called a ‘language-acquisition device’, hard-wired in our brains. But in practice, we are not born into any particular language at all: all babies are languageless at the start of life. Yet we use the term ‘native speaker’ as if the contrary were true – as if the form of language acquired by natural but fairly strenuous effort from our infant environment were a birthright, an inheritance and the definitive, unalterable location of our linguistic identity. '

'The truth of literary translation is that translated works are incommensurable with their source, just as literary works are incommensurable with each other, just as individual readings of novels and poems and plays can only be ‘measured’ in discussion with other readers.'

'...the practice of translation rests on two presuppositions. The first is that we are all different: we speak different tongues, and see the world in ways that are deeply influenced by the particular features of the tongue that we speak. The second is that we are all the same – that we can share the same broad and narrow kinds of feelings, information, understandings and so forth'.

Thomas Hübner says

http://www.mytwostotinki.com/?p=1288

When I have a bit free time, I love to browse blog posts of my fellow book bloggers. It is always interesting to see what the colleagues and friends are doing, which books I missed but should read soon, what they think about books I reviewed recently – and sometimes what they are thinking about other book-related topics.

As I have said several times before, I am much more aware now that translations matter and are extremely important. Even when you can speak and read five or six languages it will still widen your horizon beyond imagination when you have access to translated books. The availability and also the quality of translations are therefore one of the most important defining elements of an existing book market.

In an older blog post https://beautyisasleepingcat.wordpres... which I have just recently discovered, one of my favorite blogger colleagues, Caroline from Beauty is a Sleeping Cat https://beautyisasleepingcat.wordpres..., was writing about an interesting book by David Bellos, Is That a Fish in Your Ear? - Translation and the Meaning of Everything. Among other authors Bellos has translated the Albanian author Ismail Kadare into English – from the French, not the Albanian language. This is called “indirect translation”, contrary to the direct translation from the source to the target language. Depending on the question if the translator translates into his or her native language, or from his native language into the target language, direct translations are differentiated into so-called “L1” or “L2” translations. Many experts view L2 translations with skepticism or reject them completely, while some consider indirect translations as acceptable when there are no translators available for this particular combination of languages.

I think what counts at the end of the day is the quality of the translation, no matter if it is L1, L2, or indirect. Of course, chances that the translation is excellent are much higher with direct translations. When writers are sometimes using a language that is not their native one, why shouldn't some translators be able to do the same? (Since Nabokov grew up bilingual, I wouldn't include him in this list of writers, but there are plenty of them and not the worst) –

An indirect translation might be a kind of second-best solution in cases when there are really no translators available for this particular combination. For Kadare it shouldn't be a problem to be translated directly into

English, since there is not one, but plenty of literary translators for that combination.

But Kadare is a special case: he revised and rewrote all his books that were originally published in the time of communism in Albania when he prepared them for publication in France. That means that a translation of the same book from French to English contains a sometimes very different text than when you would make a direct translation from the Albanian version. And for the novels originally published before 1990 Kadare considers the French and not the Albanian version as the “real”, uncensored text. The revised editions of the pre-1990 novels of Kadare in Albanian language were published after the French versions, if I am not mistaken. For the past-1990 novels, the situation is different: as far as I see they are translated directly from Albanian to English because there is no need for a text revision.

There are also other authors we know mainly from indirect translations. The works of Israel Bashevis Singer are usually translated from English – there are even a lot of people that think Singer was an English-language author. Especially in the case of the translations of Singer to German that is a real pity: Yiddish is so close to German, so why not translate the books directly? (The result would be a very different text, much more close to the original, as I can say from practical experience when I made a sample translation of one of his stories once from the original text to German, comparing the result with the “official” translation from English)

Why do publishers choose to publish indirect translations instead of direct ones? One reason may indeed be a shortage of available translators for the respective combination – although this case may be much rarer as some publishers make us believe. But the problem exists: when I investigated for the possibilities to translate a book from Indonesian to Bulgarian, I realized that there is only one person who can do the job – now imagine if he would be not available for some reason: the only option remaining would be to work with an indirect translation. Otherwise the book would be never available for the potential readers whose native language is Bulgarian and who don’t read in other languages. Although an indirect translation might not be perfect, in the best case it could be a reasonable approximation of the original text. And that would be still far superior then the virtual non-existence of a book in that particular language.

Another reason for indirect translations may be that in some cases publishers can save money – it is cheaper to translate from languages where you can find plenty of competing translators than from languages where there are only a very few translators, or where possibly the translation rights might be cheaper to acquire (depending on the contractual relationships between the involved publishers, the author and the literary agency).

Also literary agents can play a role in this process. Agents try to increase the income of their clients (and by that their own income), so they try to redistribute money from other stages of the book value chain – mainly the publishing houses, but obviously to a growing extent also from translators – into the pockets of their writing clientele, by auctioning off book and translation rights, increasing the royalties for the author, etc., and by that forcing everybody else in the book value chain to decrease their income. There is nothing wrong with this in principle, as long as professional and ethical standards are respected, which is not always the case.

A particular vicious example is a recent case in which Egyptian bestselling author Alaa al Aswany and his agent Andrew Wiley (together with Knopf Doubleday publishers) are involved and that was made public by the Threepercent website of the University of Rochester: http://www.rochester.edu/College/tran...

A completely unacceptable treatment of a literary translator – and hard to believe but obviously true: a world famous author, the Godfather of all literary agents and a renowned publishing house use their combined power and leverage to cheat on a hard working professional, for reasons that are as it seems of exclusively

pecuniary nature.

By the way, I find it very interesting to see the approach of different writers to the question of translations of their works. While some authors take a great interest and discuss details of the translations with their translators, or even organize like Günter Grass (on their own costs) workshops for their translators to ensure a high quality of the translations, others like Thomas Bernhard show the extreme opposite approach. From an interview with Werner Wögerbauer, conducted 1986 in Vienna:

"W.: Does the fate of your books interest you?

B.: No, not really.

W.: What about translations for example?

B.: I'm hardly interested in my own fate, and certainly not in that of my books. Translations? What do you mean?

W.: What happens to your books in other countries.

B.: Doesn't interest me at all, because a translation is a different book. It has nothing to do with the original at all. It's a book by the person who translated it. I write in the German language. You get sent a copy of these books and either you like them or you don't. If they have awful covers then they're just annoying. And you flip through and that's it. It has nothing in common with your own work, apart from the weirdly different title. Right? Because translation is impossible. A piece of music is played the same the world over, using the written notes, but a book would always have to be played in German, in my case. With my orchestra!"

And for those of you who are familiar with Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt's books with the untranslatable titles Quand Freud voit la mer and Quand Freud attend le verbe, it may be not surprising that I am very sympathetic to Bernhard's opinion. A translation is indeed always a different book, and sometimes – as is the case with the terms created by Freud in the framework of psychoanalysis, the meaning and specific connotation of central words and expressions are so inseparably linked to the particular language in which they were created (in the case of psychoanalysis: German) that each translation is already an interpretation, over-simplification, reduction of ambiguity, and even falsification of the original text. – But I guess I am digressing a bit. The highly interesting books by Goldschmidt would deserve a more detailed review as is possible here.

Translations are a wide field – I have the feeling that I will return to the issue again sooner or later.

David Bellos: Is That a Fish in Your Ear? - Translation and the Meaning of Everything, Particular Books, 2012

see also Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt: Quand Freud attend le verbe, Buchet Chastel, 2006

Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt: Quand Freud voit la mer, Buchet Castel, 2006

Chad W. Post: A Cautionary Tale, www.rochester.edu/College/translation...

Chad W. Post: The Three Percent Problem, Open Letter, e-book, 2011

The interview with Thomas Bernhard was originally published in the autumn issue 2006 of Kultur & Gespenster, the English translation by Nicholas Grindell was published here: www.signandsight.com/features/1090.html.

Nikki says

This review sums up my problem with this book. For what it is, it's a well-written, informative and interesting book about the art of translation, its difficulties and the assumptions you have to make to translate. It reminded me of my experience in trying to translate Wulf and Eadwacer. To translate it, you have to decide what it means, to ensure that you translate it consistently. And there's four or five different readings of it, at *least* -- and ultimately I was left with the feeling that to translate it with any one of those meanings would be to translate it wrongly. I think the beauty of reading it in Anglo-Saxon, even if you need a glossary and ample help, is that all the meanings are there at once.

But as the review I linked says, it doesn't talk about the implications of translation -- the politics and force of it. That in its turn reminds me of a scene in Kate Roberts' Feet in Chains, a Welsh book (which, not coincidentally, I was only able to read in translation), in which a mother is informed of the death of her son in WWI via a letter in English, which she cannot understand.

There was a time, really not that long ago, where Welsh speakers were considered uneducated because they did not speak the language of their rulers, the English. Consider the Welsh Not or *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* (The Treason of the Blue Books) -- all of that is the reason that I, raised by two Welsh people, of a family that has been Welsh for generations (with the occasional addition of Romani and Irish blood, and probably some English, but we're ashamed of that one), do not speak my own language.

There's a certain arrogance to English. Take the Welsh word *hiraeth*: there is no English translation. The minute I say that, half a dozen English people pop up to tell me there must be. Oh, there *are* approximations, but they aren't as succinct, as specific. English doesn't hold all the answers.

Unfortunately, this book is that bit Anglo-centric, and it isn't the book I wanted to read -- I wanted to read a book which considered the above issues, the political meaning and applications of translation. It's not a bad book for what it is, but it's not what I was looking for.

Guillaume says

Ce livre est un essai sur l'acte et l'art de la traduction.
Très documenté, et basé sur de nombreux exemples, c'est passionnant, pour qui aime les mots, la sémantique, et le langage.
J'ai eu un peu de mal à rentrer dedans, mais assez vite, je suis passé(a travers de court chapitres) de découverte en révélation :
- dire que les esquimaux ont 100 mots pour décrire la neige, mais aucun qui indique la neige générique, c'est non seulement faux, mais aussi une sorte de mépris ("ces sauvages ne peuvent pas concevoir l'abstraction"=
- une devise du XVIIeme siècle, quand a la cour du Roi soleil, certains se sont mis) à faire des traductions des classiques respectant la morale du jour : "les traductions, c'est comme les femmes, si elles sont belles, elles ne sont pas fidèles, si elles sont fidèles, c'est qu'elles ne sont pas belles", qui est plus une manifestations

de misogynie qu'une vérité.
- la difficulté de faire des traductions en simultané (dire la traduction ce qu'on entend en temps réel), et de trouver des individus capable de cet exploit)
- le fonctionnement de l'Europe (l'entité politique) : chaque lois et textes existe dans les 24 langues officielles, mais tous sont considérés étant des documents originaux, et non une traduction.
- et d'autres considérations tel que comment faire confiance a un traducteur dans le cadre de négociation entre états, comment traduire l'humour, etc..
Au final, un livre érudit mais lisible, et interessant.

Sylvie says

I believe that everyone is interested in translation of one sort or another, so my interest and enthusiasm must have existed for some time. With wit and panache, David Bellos covers all the types of translation one can think of, from literary translation, which we are most familiar with, to international law, simultaneous interpreting, biblical translation, and even to translation machines. He discusses its pitfalls and problems, the interpretations, contradictions and controversies that face translators, and the curiosities and theories behind language. It is so packed full of interesting facts and ideas that it is impossible to do it justice. He maintains that it is not correct to say everything is translation, which I must confess to, though he does qualify this later on with the conclusion that "translation is another name for the human condition". There is a bit of a rant about how underrated translators are, which may be due to the fact that it is only when a translation is poor that it gets noticed - a good translation leaves the reader unaware of the fact. The book was published in 2011, and since then, translated works have been flooding the bookshops. More is now made of the International Man Booker prize for translated works. The fact remains that in many other countries, translators have more kudos and are better paid.

I have long been puzzled by how something as untranslatable as humour can be tackled. The chapter on this is the shortest. However Bellos does give good examples from his own books. You get over the difficulty, it appears, as best you can, by approximation and substitution, especially in the case of puns. It's a sound game. In a short talk Daniel Hahn, the translator of "A General Theory of Oblivion" a novel by Jose Eduardo Agualuso said: "I have only changed the words". Of course he was joking - or was he? His words made some sort of sense of the puzzle - how do you convert jokes in another language, from a different culture? He explained how one had to convey the feeling, the sound and the resonance of a novel; in short, what makes it a pleasure to read.

Capturing the inherent differences of a language in a translation is the subject of another discussion. It raises all sorts of questions about the way culture informs language itself, the way the milieu influences the way we use words. How do you transfer the feel of a place with its special language rhythms? Bellos offers a few examples, which reinforce my view that it's simplistic, and tedious to put down the way the individual words are pronounced and leave it at that. It only succeeds in excluding many readers.

Translation is therefore at the core of our language world. In fact, when there are two texts in languages I recognize or know, the meaning becomes much clearer. Here is what David Bellos writes:

"written and spoken expressions in any language don't have meaning just like that, on their own, by themselves, translation represents the meaning an utterance has, and in that sense translation is a pretty good way of finding out what an expression used in it may mean, in fact, the only way of being sure whether an utterance has any meaning at all is to get someone to translate it for you."

He raises interesting philosophical and psychological questions to do with thought, meaning, culture, and about the beliefs that inform people and nation. And then there is the matter of what words are. They are not merely stand-ins for things, as the Bible has long instructed us to think. A single word holds different meanings, and yet it may not do so in other cultures. The translator has to decide what to substitute in its place.

Poetry poses problems of form and rhythm of its own. The different ways translators deal with this are revealing. I don’t think I’ll ever read a translated poem without wondering how wildly it differs from the original. Still, in some cases I will never know, so I might just as well appreciate it as it is. He quotes film in one chapter, as being a good example of “translation”. After all, it may be a visual dramatisation of a novel, but it is a separate form and can never be an exact parallel. A translated poem is like a film. It does not reproduce the original poem exactly, literally. You would not want it to, unless you were studying a language with the help of a crib.

I already knew that the job was a difficult one. I wonder, now, why anyone undertakes it at all. It must be a labour of love. The works of Georges Perec, you would think, would defy translation, and yet Bellos provides us with a few examples. He has also translated works from the French translations of the Albanian writer Ishmail Kadare.

There are shortcuts, though, and even light relief in the life of a translator. In case you were wondering, this is how simultaneous interpreters get round a shaggy dog’s tale in the middle of a speech:
”The Soviet delegate has just made a joke “

Emre Sevinç says

If you're like me, that is, someone fascinated with the topic of translation for so many years, as well as this topic's connection to many other fields of human activities, you'll devour this book. After all, is it even possible not to fall in love with a book that starts to tell its story by referring to Hofstadter's "Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language"? Love at first sight, indeed!

Prepare your favorite drink, find a silent place, and get ready for an intelligent conversation that always keeps a sense of humor on how we're surrounded by the activity we call translation. As the author tackles famous myths about translation, you'll get to admire this human faculty, and learn more about the obscure corners of this intricate world, a world where silent victories of human intellect are celebrated by thankless readers.

The book will take you from building a perspective on the excruciating debate of poetry translation to how translators deal with the maddening constraints of comic books. But it will not stop there, and take you on a journey of international publishing and how politics and dominant forces shape the book market as we know it. As if that's not enough, you'll learn about unique linguistic state of European Union, and how it affects laws and funny things about legislation. You will smile and scratch your head in confusion. Sometimes at the some time.

In the end, will this book succeed in translating the beauty of such a uniquely human activity into a neural encoding for you indirectly? Well, it did, for me, to an extent. And I tried to translate some of my experience into signs on a computer screen. Consider this a brief "thank you" note.

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

4.5. How do I know when a book is really interesting? If a book is really interesting, I will be compelled to read it aloud to whoever has the fortune (or misfortune, depending on your point of view) of being around at the time. Usually it's my poor, dear husband who is the witness to these readings. Let's just say with this book, he got a lot of it read to him.

Guys, I'm a word nerd. What does that mean? I love the written word, I love the spoken word, I love languages among other things. I think the way that we communicate with each other is fascinating. David Bellos has an extensive background in translation. He takes us through what translation is and what translation isn't. Translations are really substitutes for reading something in another, more accessible to you language than it was originally written in. There are so many books that I would never have access to if it weren't for some really good translations (where would I be without my love, Murakami???).

I learned so much from this book. There's not one way to translate and a lot of times, it seems to be an iterative process to get to a true understanding of the original text. Who knew so much had to go into it?

I think this book is good for anyone who has ever read a translation of a book and wondered about if the book was really getting to the original author's true meaning? How do we know that Murakami or Tolstoy sound the same way that they do in Japanese and Russian as they do in English? It's truly awesome to think about.

Bottom line: This book is for my fellow word nerds.

Filip says

This book ended up on several Best Books of 2011 lists, yet I wonder if every reviewer read past the sexy title and consumed it from end to end. David Bellos is a professional translater (French to English) and has some very interesting and enlightening views on communication and translation. In this book, he doesn't shy away from radical overstatement (such as when he says that nowadays English is the only lingua franca that the various Belgian linguistic communities can still use to communicate with each other). But he is easily forgiven, because he really provides new insight on what a translation is or should be. Unavoidably, this leads to meta-meta-paragraphs about language which can be quite dense at first glance. Other parts are seriously theoretical (such as the Axiom of Ineffability), which make this book's position on the Best Books list rather surprising, as I doubt that many people are interested in this level of theoretical analysis (I am, so I enjoyed it).

Warwick says

In chapter fifty-two of Perec's *La vie, mode d'emploi*, a young man finds himself staring into the window of a printer's shop in Paris. The display is filled with examples of the printer's wares – fake letterheads and joke business cards. One of them reads:

ADOLF HITLER
Fourreur

A *fourreur* is a furrier; the joke, of course, is that it sounds like the German word *Führer*. As Bellos says, the gag is ‘a metalinguistic and self-referring one, provided you know who and what Hitler was, know in addition that a furrier and a dictator are different things, and are able to subvocalize the French word as if it were a German sound and vice versa’.

Now consider how you'd translate this into English – which is what David Bellos had to do. It's worth spending a moment thinking about what a suitable equivalent might be. His solution is under the cut:

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Impressive work! The exercise calls for extreme measures, but I like it because it highlights a key fact about translation: its goal is not to translate words, but to translate feelings, concepts, ideas, information. This seems obvious, but it often gets overlooked by people who want to pick holes in existing translations on the grounds that individual words have not reappeared in a new language with identical meanings. The success of the dreaded Pevear and Volokhonsky, for instance, has been built on their trumpeting about having ‘corrected’ the failures of previous Russian translators, who missed the subtle details that they have now restored, albeit in English prose that is to my ear decidedly unsatisfactory.

Alarmingly, P&V have said that the greatest translation of all time is Nabokov's famously tin-eared version of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. And it was deliberately tin-eared: Nabokov believed that an assiduous translator should render the precise meanings of every word at the expense of English style, coherence and grammar. This misses what is, to me, the essential principle: that the basic unit of lexical information is not the word, but the sentence. Words gain their full set of connotations from the context they are placed into, and from the other words that appear either side of them. The conclusion must be that considerable freedom from the original is needed, paradoxically, to make the same effects pop in the reader's brain. Or as Bellos puts it: a close translation isn't one.

> Translation presupposes not the loss of the ineffable in any given act of interlingual mediation such as the translation of poetry, but the irrelevance of the ineffable to acts of communication.

If you know a foreign language at all well, this is a hard lesson to take on. Once you understand the vast range of connotations held by even the simplest word in a given language, the idea of rendering it any other way seems unthinkable. ‘But that doesn't mean the same thing at all!’, one wants to yell. ‘So much subtlety has been lost!’ But take a step back and consider the whole paragraph, then think again. Good translators will convince you that they understand connotation and subtlety perfectly well, and have redistributed it accordingly, or allowed for new subtexts that fulfill similar communicative goals.

This book really helped me get a handle on some of the ideas about translation that I'd had for years and had been unable properly to articulate. I was never a professional translator, exactly, although when I worked in

France, translating news scripts was a part of my job. (Incidentally, I think all translators should work in broadcasting at some point – your version of a source text may look reasonable on the page, but having to say it out loud on television really brings its defects into focus.) The more I did it and the better I got, the further I found myself moving from the original on a word-for-word basis: eventually, whole paragraphs started changing places, and trains of thought would reorganise themselves entirely. In fact in my head, I visualise the ideal form of translation as one whereby you read a text, let its effects percolate on your mind, and then write a kind of independent piece that does the same thing to native speakers of your target language.

That sounds extreme, and obviously it's realistically undesirable and/or unachievable. But the principle is there somewhere. Even really good translators tend to look first and foremost at glossing the words on the page; it's an effort to think constantly in terms of idiomatic expressions in the target language for conveying the same emotional ideas. This is something that comes up in all kinds of large and small ways.

For instance, French has a feature called ‘left dislocation’ whereby the personal pronoun is put at the front of the sentence in a different case, and repeated, for emphasis. If a kid in England would insist, ‘But *I* want an ice-cream’ – using tone and stress to make the point – his French counterpart would typically say, *Moi, je veux une glace*, achieving the same thing with sentence structure. Bellos shows that left-dislocation occurs only half as often in translated novels as it does in native French-language ones. And half the uses in native novels occur in third-person narration, whereas *all* of the translated examples are in direct speech. Why? Because French people learn in school that left-dislocation is typical of oral language, and translators have obviously found it hard to unlearn the lesson. It's one illustration of a general truth: that translators tend to conform to a ‘normalised’ form of their language, and are more sensitive to ideas of stylistic standard and ‘correctness’ than native writers are.

> In important ways, translators are the guardians and, to a surprising degree, the creators of the standard form of the language they use.

There are so many other wonderful treats in this book, depending on where your interests lie. Diplomatic translation, the economics of translated fiction, twelve ways of translating a Chinese *shunkouliu* – this book is crammed with delights and Bellos knows what he's talking about. Foreign scripts are faithfully reproduced, and there are frequent irrepressible tangents and diversions into obscure corners of lexicography. Anyone interested in foreign languages or thoughtful writing should be as enchanted and stimulated as I was.
