

FRIDAY'S TONGUE ON LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

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My country is a man, bent at the knees to get a better view of the North Sea. He has a hunchback. His bellybutton is called Brussels.

His upper torso speaks Dutch.

His nether regions speak French.

His arse speaks German.

South of Brussels, the official language and mother tongue is French. In that part of my country they might not find French easy, but they don't find it difficult, either—they learn it at their mother's knee. North of Brussels, the official language and mother tongue is Dutch. French is referred to as the “obligatory alternative”—not exactly a pet name. To the north of Brussels, French has to be more or less crammed in, especially when it's hard to understand why you have to be able to say *Je donne le fromage à maman* when you're nine years old and your mother usually asks you to pass the cheese in Dutch. North of Brussels, French is considered difficult.

In order to learn the obligatory alternative we read portions of books. *Bonjour tristesse. Maigret et le clochard*. We don't do this for the fun of it. French teachers introduce the books in question as if they were toy cars to be played with, but before you know it they attach trailers with ballast. “*Bonjour tristesse est écrit par Françoise Sagan. Le bonjour. La tristesse. La Française.*”

The pleasure of reading disappears pretty quickly. By the time you're seventeen you realize that grammar doesn't stop with *le* or *la*, it just gets more and

more unmanageable. Verbs rhyme as if they were invented to be written into songs—*faire / plaire / se taire*—but don't imagine you can conjugate them to music--no way. Add the subjunctive and *je fais* becomes *que je fasse*, but *je me tais* doesn't become *que je tasse*, nor *je plais* become *que je plasse*. French does this for one reason only, to make sure you have a summer assignment to take home when you're seventeen and you failed your exam. "*Il faut que tu lis cinq livres en français. Le cinq. Le livre. Le français.*"

That summer I read and discussed five books, starting with a dark novel by François Mauriac, which made me realize immediately that a whole French book was difficult and, worse still, long. Lots of words, contortions, dirty tricks. In Dutch, as in English, for example, everything is always *good*, but in French it's *bon* for a man and *bonne* for a woman and for both everything is always *bien*. One sentence can contain so many words that you sometimes don't know what goes with what anymore, let alone what it all means.

That summer I manufactured the hat that I am proud to don in the company of translators. *Le chapeau*. During the summer of my seventeenth year I read five French books—in Dutch. The very search for the Dutch versions of the French titles was a learning experience in itself. Did they exist, and if they did, where are they to be found? The discovery that Yourcenar's *Alexis: ou le traité du vain combat* could be transformed into Yourcenar's *Alexis of de verhandeling over de vergeefse strijd* and having both versions side by side in order to complete my assignment aroused the same kind of excitement I experienced at the sight of beautiful paper or the smell of pencil shavings. My heart still skips a beat at the idea that a German Alexis exists somewhere, and a Spanish Alexis, and that someone now—at this very moment—in Hamburg or Madrid or on a trip to the other side of the world is reading the same book I am reading. The fact that languages travel on their own in the form of books, crisscross the globe, and that said books stay with their readers and keep their mouths shut, unless they're accidentally abandoned somewhere, only to be picked up by another reader, I find an extremely pleasant thought. It

would be a fine idea if the tourist adventures of books could be charted, let's say for the month of August.

Two weeks ago, I had a Dutch translation of a book by Coetzee in my bag. The bag was hanging over my shoulder in Japan, in Osaka, in the eight-story Yumobashi shopping centre in the Umida district, on the immense third floor that houses the computer department, hundreds and hundreds of computers for sale, and above each one a loud inscription in Japanese script, hundreds and hundreds of them, thousands of Japanese letters, and I can't read a single one. It was fantastic. I was a Dutch-speaking island in Osaka, Japan, and I realized firsthand just how helpless I was. The only words I could read I had brought with me, in the form of a translated book in my bag. The only sign I could read was a green pictogram with a little man walking behind an arrow toward the exit. Get out, Bart, before you disappear altogether!

In 1999, the composer Filip Bral invited me to participate in a new project. He had returned from a trip to Japan with the pictorial book *My Heart Is a Penguin* by Chiharu Sakazaki, simply designed, ageless, and bursting at the seams with ideas. The Japanese philosophical twists and turns had been translated into English and needed to be reworked. Bral would compose the music to accompany the text, one note for every word. The entire production was a genuine eye-catcher—the book and CD a magnificent edition, and the musical theater presentation out of the ordinary. But that wasn't the end of it. Bral was given the opportunity a year later to transform the book and CD of *My Heart Is a Penguin* into ten languages, and since I had been responsible for the original Dutch translation I was asked to record *all* the language tracks. I was assigned a host of language coaches with whom I was to train intensively. For five days I holidayed in nine different countries, while I crouched on a stool in a studio in Brussels and learned firsthand what it's like to speak French compared with Greek and Danish and so forth. It became immediately clear that the music, composed note for note for the Dutch text, got in the way from time to time. French is inclined to spread itself out, to sing, to open its arms wide. Greek doesn't like a melody. German *Herz* doesn't have

a heartbeat, but in Spanish it does, *corazon, corazon, corazon*. Portuguese can dislocate your jaw. Finnish is the prettiest of the more outlandish languages: give me a few more of those short-short-short syllables. My blind devotion to Swedish, the recording of which they had programmed last as a special treat, turned out to be a bit of a bummer. I clearly don't speak Swedish like the Swedish. The Swedish speak terrible Swedish!

Translators should avoid obsessing about one single language, not even about two. They should love words in general and the power of words in particular. If they limit themselves to the bare knowledge of two languages between which they force a text to travel back and forth, from a word in one language to a word in the other, they impoverish themselves and their translations at one and the same time. *Stuffy!* *Musty!* *Fusty!* A translator should be delighted with the fact that *stuffy* and *musty* and *fusty* not only rhyme with one another, they sound a little like their meaning and they reinforce one another's meaning.

Coetzee's book, which I had in my bag in Osaka when I felt like an island in the middle of the computer department, is titled *Mr. Cruso, Mrs. Barton und Mr. Foe* [in America, it's called *Foe*], the story of a woman who is shipwrecked and washes up on Robinson Crusoe's island.

One evening she asks Cruso how many English words Friday knows. "As many as he needs," Cruso answers: "We're not in England here and we don't need much in the way of vocabulary."

"You act as if language was one of life's curses, like money or the pox," says Mrs. Barton. "Wouldn't it have alleviated your loneliness if Friday had been able to speak fluent English? Then you and he would have been able to enjoy the pleasures of conversation all those years; you could have introduced him to some of the blessings of civilisation and made a better person of him. What is the point of a life in silence?"

Cruso pointed toward Friday's mouth. "He has no tongue...they cut out his tongue....Maybe the slave traders consider the tongue to be a delicacy. Maybe they'd just had enough of listening to Friday's incessant complaining, day in day

out. Maybe they wanted to make sure he would never be able to tell his story: who he was, where he came from, how he had been taken prisoner. Maybe they cut the tongue out of every cannibal they captured as a sort of punishment. How shall we ever know the truth?”

Ultimately, translators have to do a great deal more than love languages. They should be *horrified* at the idea that Friday’s tongue had been cut out, because without it he cannot speak *and* because they will never hear his story. At the same time, however, they should find Friday’s lack of tongue something *fantastic*, because translators are aware of the richness of silence, of the telling glance, of the imagination.

You have a lot to do if you want to be a good translator. You have to do a lot more than a writer. A writer discovers his or her style by living a lot and reading a lot and writing about life under the influence of what they once read. A writer practices with his or her pen, and practice makes perfect. A translator doesn’t get much of an opportunity to practice. A translator has to be a host of writers all at once and from the outset. In extreme circumstances, he or she has to be able to understand all the authors he or she was ever called upon to translate! How many wornout pens are we talking about, how much perfection, how much language, how many thoughts, how much ballast?

Why then are the demands placed on translators so great?

The film director Samuel Fuller was once asked in a documentary what it takes to make a good film, and he answered without giving it a second thought: “A story.” They then asked him what he considered the most important aspect of the story to be, and he answered once again without blinking: “The story.” In the meantime, the camera pans over bookshelves filled with scenarios, all of them stories by Fuller. *Thereafter and beyond, metre by metre. Once upon a time, and then, and then.*

We all have a beginning behind us, are occupied with our middle, and we know that the end will come one day. *And then, and then, thereafter and beyond* is

in our genetic code. We are going to disappear, as stories likewise disappear. We pass them on a couple of times, mix them up after a while with other stories, and before we know it they are swallowed up into new stories.

What distinguishes the one *and then and then* from the other *thereafter and beyond* is the voice of the author. His or her tone, color, rhythm, choice of words and how he or she locates them, adjacent to one another or juxtaposed. Such elements transform stories into Stories, uppercase. If a translator is unable to grasp such peculiarities, then he or she is not the best translator.

The first book I ever translated, Christine Nöstlinger's *Der Neue Pinocchio* from 1989, is a good illustration of what I mean. The original *Pinocchio* was actually nothing more than a story that appeared on the children's page of a newspaper. Talk about *and then and then...* Week after week, Collodi embroidered further on the adventures of the week before. In the case of *Der Neue Pinocchio*, to be honest, it was Nöstlinger's tone that made the book unique and not the brilliantly constructed adventures of Pinocchio. I sensed her tone all right, but it has to be said that I was new to the game and seriously terrified of German, scared to death I would make a mistake or a gaffe. Not good, not good!

The first book of my own ever to be translated was *Kus me*, in English *Kiss me*, which found its way into German, Portuguese, and Norwegian. When the Norwegian version *Kyss meg* first appeared, I stroked it almost indecently and opened it next to the Dutch original because I wanted to see which Norwegian words were similar to Dutch words. I browsed through the book page after page and suddenly realized that one of the chapters was extremely short. Upon further inquiry, it turned out that the translator had used the German version for his translation and not the Dutch original, and he had to confess that his German was full of holes. As it transpired, one of the holes coincided with the missing passage from my book, which he had simply scrapped. In his mind it was a half page that could be missed. Not good, not good!

If I suggest that the task of a translator is to know, understand, and sense so much, perhaps I am making an impossible suggestion, but the task remains the same.

This world of ours is full of people talking, most of them at the same time. The words we assimilate are fast and furious. Am I the only one still fretting about the radio presenter's natterings even after the next jingle has already started? Have you also noticed that conversations on TV are full of half-sentences and that the VJ on MTV seems to have a strong American accent, in spite of the fact that he's Irish or French?

I recently overheard a concerned mother at the International School in Yokohama lament the sorry state of her son's English: 'When you gonna learn to talk right, huh?'

He aint never gonna learn to talk right. I'm one of those people with the right word for the right occasion. If a good curse is what you're after, or an eloquent squabble, I'm your man.

In *Foe*, Mrs. Barton asks Friday to fetch some wood. Friday hears what she says but doesn't move a muscle, so she asks him again: "Wood," and she points to the fire. Friday gets to his feet but just stands there. At that point Cruso says: "Firewood, Friday." Friday heads off to the wood pile to fetch wood for the fire. Initially Mrs. Barton thinks that Friday is like a dog that only listens to one master, but she's wrong. "The word I taught him is *firewood*," Cruso adds. "*Wood* is not part of his vocabulary."

Mrs. Barton considers it verbal poverty, but to me there's something of a surplus involved. Wood is wood, but it's fine to talk about *firewood* if the wood is specifically intended for the fire. It gets rid of the static. The dining room table and your favorite tree are out of danger.

Writers and translators should make an effort at the very least to measure their words and thus help to reduce the static obstructing everyday language. Easier said than done, perhaps. When have we said too much, when not enough?

“It’s a fact that words are never enough and that the most important things are often left unspoken,” says blind Pew, the lighthouse keeper in Jeanette Winterson’s magnificent *Lighthousekeeping*. “You pick up the most important things from faces, gestures, not from our inhibited tongue. Real things are either too big or too small or are in any case the wrong size to fit the template we call language.”

I once received a request from a major company who were looking for someone to write a speech for the boss to read at the beginning of a month of festivities. The speech could be long or short, guarded or poetic, deadly serious or funny. Did I want the job? I said no. I didn’t know the company and I didn’t know its boss, and that made words a problem for me.

I didn’t *need* to know the company or its boss, they replied. I only had to bear in mind that the company and its boss wanted to grow and that the boss was a lover of the Arts and that his motto was a line from a poem by Leopold: “O, abundance of the incomplete!”

I changed my mind.

I discovered a great deal as I worked on the boss’s speech. He was pleased that his company had been able to grow, o abundance of the incomplete, and I realized that the fine idea from Leopold’s forthright poem was correct. The city in which I live has a cathedral with two towers, one of them forever unfinished except, of course, in our imagination. O, abundance of the incomplete. Peter van Poppel, a famed Dutch artist, showed me one of his paintings and I immediately fell in love with it. A man with a cigarette holds up his hands symmetrically. O, abundance of the incomplete. When he showed me the work a couple of months later, the man with the cigarette was wearing a tie, “because,” said Peter van Poppel, “there was something missing.” The painting was indeed more vigorous than before. A short time ago I read in the paper that William Shakespeare, *the* William Shakespeare, always reworked the pieces he had written already, pieces that had already been performed, pieces that had already been critically acclaimed. O, abundance of the incomplete. In 1934, Marguerite Yourcenar published three fragments from a novel

that refused to resolve itself as a collection of stories, the first of which was decades later to become *l'Oeuvre au noir*. O, abundance of the incomplete.

Artists have it easy. They are allowed to evolve, to reinvent themselves, revamp themselves, repeat themselves—but always with a difference. Leopold's law reigns supreme: O, abundance of the incomplete! But whoever translated *l'Oeuvre au noir* had to be good from the start. Complete, completely complete. Translators, masters of the art of two languages or more, only get one chance. Incomplete is certainly not enough, otherwise people notice. The question has to be: Have you read Yourcenar? Have you read Winterson? Coetzee? and the answer has to be: Yes, Yourcenar is fantastic. Winterson writes magnificent prose. Let me quote Coetzee!

As a matter of fact, the name of the translator should be withheld at all times. Readers who rarely delve beneath the surface must be led to believe that the voice of Yourcenar, Winterson, or Coetzee is the same in the target language as it is in the source language. Writers get all the glory; translators have to make do with a little applause here and there between the lines. Maybe you think that's a pity, but translators should already know how much they're worth. You're good, you're very good—and writers are your playthings.

Translated by Brian Doyle

Among language teachers and researchers, translation as a language learning method is enjoying something of a comeback. It's no accident that on the programme for London's Language Show in 2020 there were two talks aimed at language teachers about the value of translation. In the widest sense, this is part of a broader move from the more extreme forms of the 'communicative method' to some readmission of L1 as a language of instruction in the classroom. Translate it into English (or your mother tongue, if different). Then translate it back into the target language. Your result will no doubt be different from the original. You can then explore the differences and have your teacher comment on your translation. This means you avoid translating the target language material into your own language but you try to understanding the meaning of what is written or spoken. The old way of learning that was taught in schools was based on grammar and translation. The result was that after several years of instruction the student knew a lot about the language but could hardly order a cup of coffee in that language. Learning by the direct method is rather like jumping into the deep end of the swimming pool. Google's free service instantly translates words, phrases, and web pages between English and over 100 other languages. Show less. Voice input isn't supported on this browser. Loading | Translate by voice. volume_up. Voice output isn't supported on this browser. Loading stop volume_up. Listen. 0 / 5000. Loading Turn on Handwriting Select Input Tool.