

Hidden narrators in non-fiction texts

Dr John Jamieson

Translating with the help of TMs inevitably fragments the original, sometimes obscuring the narrative sequence of the content. However there are also a multiplicity of micro-narratives operating at sentence, clause and even word level. These indicate, for example, who is talking, who is being addressed, whether they expect to be taken seriously, etc.

The rules for these micro-narratives differ between languages. For example, abstract nouns tend to be more impersonal in English than other European languages. English narratives appear to be based on a more "I"-centred perspective, as opposed to the "we" stance available in other languages. Some simple rules can be suggested for adjusting between these perspectives when translating into or out of English.

I believe that an awareness of these micro-narratives, operating within the amount of text in a typical TM segment, can help us to keep control of the longer narrative of the text, and therefore to get the best out of translation memories.

Why do we still see oddities such as the following:

1. "Anne, Anne, fuis sur ton âne!" (first line of a poem by Rimbaud) translated as "Anne, Anne, flee on your donkey!"? and
2. "Razve ya sposoben na ETO?" (on the first page of Crime and Punishment by Dostoyevsky) translated as "Am I really capable of THAT?"
(and many other examples)?

Arguably the advent of a more visual culture in general, and the use of CAT tools in particular, is reducing our ability as translators to get behind the text as it appears written on the page to penetrate the mysterious things that might be going on in the writer's mind. More precisely, we are quite good at translating "what" is said, but less able to deal with "how" and "why" it is said.

Drawing on some ideas taken from Kristeva and Benjamin, this paper investigates the patterns of natural English as some of us learned it at our mother's knee (termed "semiotic language" by Kristeva, "mimetic language" by Benjamin), and how these patterns might differ from those elsewhere. This knowledge is then applied to reach preferred translations such as

1. "Guinevere, get out of here!" and
2. "Could I actually DO it?"

Prosody differences of this kind also play a part in non-fiction texts, and an awareness of these factors is a useful counterbalance to the influence of working in a CAT environment.

And to pursue the argument a little further...

Some further literary examples I give venture into the domain of paraphrase, producing versions that one might hesitate to publish in written form. But what of that? Why couldn't we set up a FaceBook account for this or that well-known French, German or Maori poem, and then we translators could sign up as "friends", submitting possible translations. The resulting imaginative and spontaneous translations could undergo some sort of voting or Wiki process, creating a valuable discussion forum and training tool for us all.



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While he might prefer to be translating the French poets or sounding the depths of Dostoyevsky's more problematic characters, John specialises in the translation into English of legal, financial and economic documents from a wide variety of Western and Eastern European languages.

'Translation can be seen as an art, drawing on a the practitioner's skill, experience and feel for the never-ending subtleties of language', says John.

A constant flow of Flemish environmental impact reports, Hungarian electricity legislation and marketing plans for German software developers keeps John's dreams of trying his hand at literary translation a far-distant goal.

He was awarded his PhD at Otago University, Dunedin, New Zealand.

(<http://www.nztranslation.co.nz/ourpeople/english.html>)