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What Makes a Translator?

By Brett Jocelyn Epstein

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The "prison of language is only temporary...someday a merciful guard - the perfect translator - will come along with his keys and let us out," Wendy Lesser wrote in an article, "The Mysteries of Translation," in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2002. The following questions remain, however: Who is this translator? What does he do? And what skills should he possess?

Simply put, a translator is a person who recreates a text in another language, attempting to keep a delicate balance between being so literal that the text sounds awkward and unnatural in the new language or being so free that the text has become virtually unrecognizable. A translator has to not only translate the words, but also the concepts. In other words, a translator unlocks the prison of language, as Ms. Lesser said, and helps a text break free of its limited original language, culture, and audience. This service is an unfortunately under-appreciated art and craft.

To do all the above, a translator must have the following things: a native or near-native level of proficiency in both the source language (the language to be translated from) and the target language (the language to be translated to); the ability to thoroughly understand all that a text says and implies; and excellent writing and editing skills. Ideally, the translator would also have a lot of knowledge about both the source and target language cultures, as this affects word usage and meaning, as well as about the author of the original document and his style of writing.

It all sounds rather formidable, certainly, but not impossible. There are, in fact, many excellent practitioners out there who fulfill these hefty requirements, but the tiny number of translated books published in the United States each year reveals the sad fact that few people take up this challenging and stimulating work. If only more people would join the ranks of translators and help unlock the prison of language.

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About the Author: Brett Jocelyn Epstein is a Swedish to English translator who has translated articles, menus, websites, stories, and other works. She is also an English teacher, writer, and editor, and she has a BA in literature and creative writing from Bryn Mawr College and an MFA in fiction from Queens

What Makes a Translator?

University. Please visit her website at <http://www.brettdaniel.net/> for more information.

Thank Goodness For Our French Translator

By Analeese Burnabaker

I love almost everything about travel. I love the wonder and the newness of entering a culture that I have never been to before. I love meeting new people, trying new customs, and getting acquainted with the foods and drinks that people around the world love dearly. One thing, however, that I always struggle with in my travels is communication. While many people in the world speak English even if it is not their first language, I hate being the tourist that enters a new land and expects people to do things on my terms. So when I was preparing to spend a month working on a photography book in France, I was most happy to have the services of a French translator.

When my company told me that they were sending me and a team of three other photographers to France to get initial shots for a tour of France photojournalism book, I could not have been more excited. That is, until they told us that we would be staying with French people, doing French things, and learning to see France through the eyes of the native people. I was nervous about having to communicate with the French in their own language since I had barely made it through two years of high school French. My French translator was the best resource during that trip.

Our French translator was an amazing French woman that was more than happy to accompany us on the month long journey all around her native country. We met her at the airport and she never made us feel anything but safe and at home in her native land. I took a special liking to our French translator, I guess partly because she was doing the hard work of crossing the language barrier that I always dreaded about travel.

I told our French translator that while I did in fact need and want her to translate for me in most situations, I also wanted her to teach me as much French as possible during our month together. She obliged and we immediately began a month of intensive French lessons. I loved my lessons and I loved feeling like I knew way more about speaking French after just one month with a personal tutor.

Our French translator was the one who talked with me about the importance of learning foreign languages and of realizing that English was not the only language of the world. I learned so much from her that month. We became lifelong friends. I was so glad that she helped me make it through my month in France.

Analeese Burnabaker is a photographer that gets many opportunities to travel and meet new people. Her French translator was the lifesaver for her last trip to France. See

for more details.

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