The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

If I Were Queen of Translation Reviews

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

August 14, 2019



Pixabay / MT

Рецензия: review

It's been a while since I allowed myself the pleasure of a good, long rant.

To get in the mood for a rant, you need both a background of annoyance and a trigger. The annoying background is, of course, life in Moscow this summer. First, there's the fact that August in Moscow has been like September, which might be bearable if July hadn't been like October. And then there are the constraints on weekend activities. For over a month taking a stroll, going to a restaurant, or taking a trip to a bookstore in the center of the city might get you nabbed by a black-clad spaceman and frog-marched to a paddy wagon. Broken limbs, fractured glasses, and various other injuries and indignities are a real possibility, even if you look like a puzzled tourist or doddering pensioner. And let's not even think about the daily news from around the world.

The trigger was a review of one of those miraculously self-translated novels. You know the kind. They appear in English apparently by themselves, and are quoted as "what the author wrote" as if he or she didn't write them in Arabic or French, and as if there wasn't a translator who gave a year of his or her life on those words "the author wrote."

So. If I were Queen of the Literary Review Universe — a position, I must say, I aspire to — these would be my rules for reviewing translations of fiction.

Because we are The Moscow Times, I'll write about translating from Russian into English. And since this is Women in Translation Month, all my pronouns will be feminine. Because I'm Queen and I decide.

Those Banned From Reviewing

1. Someone who doesn't know the language of the original. Duh, right? I mean, would you ask me to review a translation of book of Chinese poetry if I didn't know Chinese? Of course, you wouldn't. But magazines, newspapers and journals do it all the time.

But every rule has exceptions. The exceptions to # 1 are essays about the work and author by other writers of fiction, critics, or specialists in a particular genre. Under my reign, I would certainly publish, say, as many articles about Russian literature as Virginia Woolf could write (especially since she was so sensitive of the differences in language and culture and what she might be missing). These essays can have great value, as long as the authors make clear the scope of their efforts.

And here I am discussing translations of literature, not non-fiction. Non-fiction is usually, and rightfully, reviewed by specialists in the book's subject, and economists or military historians or medical practitioners aren't called upon to check the text for accuracy. Readers expect that the editors have done that for them. I've translated non-fiction, and while I hoped reviews would include my name, I didn't expect anyone to praise my beautifully translated tables of key five-year plan indicators. With non-fiction, not noticing the translator is probably a sign of a job well done.

2. A native speaker of Russian who has no experience with translation. By "translation" I mean "translating works of literature from one language into another," not translating a letter to the U.S. post office for your Russian grannie or interpreting for your cousin when he's trying to buy a computer. Native speakers invariably get stuck in the original text and spend the entire review free-associating about an idiom on page 157 or going on about how the sound of word on the top of page 267 evokes a specific berry found only in the far north-west corner of Komi.

The exception to #2 is the vast, hard-working, thoughtful community of bilingual or nearly bilingual translators and, especially, teachers of translation, who spend their entire lives reading, comparing, writing, and critiquing translations.

3. The author being translated. This is an entire sub-genre in translation literature, which I have to say is almost never interesting. Yes, your name is in Russian on the cover. Yes, the translator is the winged messenger, the workhorse, the tugboat, the runner between worlds (or other preciously described servant of your prose). Yes, that boat or horse or slave did have

some trouble with that complex, multi-layered imagery on page 456, but too bad you can't tell readers how she handled it.

The exception to #3 is a small contingent of writers who are engaged in the translation process and write intelligently about it.

What Reviewers May Not Do

1. Devote one adverb in a 3,000-word review to the translation. You know this adverb: the book was "skillfully," "fluently," "masterfully," "capably," "blandly," "choppily" translated by X. This is particularly galling in reviews written by people who don't know the source language because: How would they know if the translation was skillful or not? If the language in translation is choppy, how do they know that it was the translator's error, not an accurate representation of the original text?

2. Play "gotcha." "Gotcha" is when the reviewer, having already used up her store of adverbs but feeling still dissatisfied with her work, triumphantly announces that a word in paragraph three, page 784 is an error. The translator misunderstood the Russian. The translator missed the allusion. The translator called it an arm when it was really a hand. The dress the heroine wore was deep magenta, not purple. Gotcha! (See how clever I am?)

3. Criticize erroneously. Imagine that you are translating a novel that describes events that took place in 1812. An idiom is used by one of the characters. After 12 hours in the library; six days trawling the deep, academic depths of the internet; 14 supplicating phone calls; four sleepless nights; and one miserable afternoon drinking tea with an ancient specialist on your author in a stuffy apartment that stank of cat, you have figured out what the phrase means and found a similar idiom in English. And because you are a diligent translator, you have checked to be sure that the phrase in English was used in 1812, too.

If you have never translated, you don't know the joy of this moment. You are Megan Rapinoe on the field at the World Cup. You are Simone Biles after nailing that triple-double. You are Marie Curie receiving the Nobel Prize.

And then a reviewer writes — absolutely incorrectly! — that your idiom — your beautiful, apt, perfect, lovely little idiom that took three years off your life — is an anachronism and only entered usage in 1924. And there is nothing you can do but write a Letter to the Editor that no one will ever read.

Those Allowed to Review

People who know Russian as well as the literature, history and daily life of the country. People who have read the original in full or in part. People who know something about the author, have read her other works, are familiar with literary criticism about the book and author in Russia. People who translate. Editors who work with translations. Other people who know something about translation. People without any axes to grind. People who are grown-ups, capable of writing about someone and something other than themselves. People whose native language is English. People who are well-read. People who know something about literature.

What Reviewers Should Do

1.Tell us about the author and her work. Tell us about the original book — its tone and style, its general plot and characters. If it's important to know, tell us how it was written, or how it fits in with her other work, or how it was reviewed and received in Russia.

2.Tell us about the translation. If in Russian the novel is an edgy coming-of-age story with lots of teen slang, in English is the novel an edgy coming-of-age story with lots of teen slang?

That's it.

Is that too much to ask? I mean, that's the whole point of a review of a translation, right? Make sure it's all there (no cuts). Check that the style and tone are more or less equivalent (taking into account language and cultural differences). Be sure that there aren't any or many mistakes.

And then, if the reviewer has time and space, I'd like to know what kinds of decisions the translator made and her general approach— issues like adding footnotes, transliterating or translating names, translating proverbs literally or finding English-language equivalents. If there are a lot of errors, are they of meaning or tone?

And then, how about this: If something seems really off – a chapter missing, strange word choices, muddled syntax — why don't you try to contact the translator and ask about it? Because maybe the author requested changes to the translated text, or an editor made a last-minute change, or the translator discussed an issue with the author and they decided on a particular word, or even that yes, the translator made a mistake and noticed it after the book went to print.

Because if you are making an accusation, the accused ought to get a chance to respond.

How Reviewers Work

Here's the thing: Doing this right involves a lot of tedious, time-consuming, labor-intensive work. You need to read whole swaths of text in Russian and English to be sure the tone and style more or less match. And then you need to examine both texts, page by page, sentence by sentence, word by word, to make sure there are no cuts or errors, and to get a sense of the translator's approach to the work.

That can take days as you struggle to be fair, find ways of explaining the translator's choices to readers who don't know the original language, and find passages that are illustrative, not exceptional.

But that's the job.

Is that too much to ask?

Updated 17.08.2019.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/14/if-i-were-the-queen-of-translation-reviews-wordsworth-a66847