

Sixteenth St. Jerome Translation Contest

Sponsored by the Conference Management Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna

Remarks by the judges – Ms. Diane Frishman and Mr. Paul Stephenson

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Is it possible that translators sometimes can't see the wood for the trees (or, if you're American, the forest for the trees)? I think we can all agree that the translator's job is to be down there with the details -- especially if you're translating for the UN. Surely no one reads a job as carefully as the translator, who has a myriad of details in the source text to check and understand and then to find a way of mirroring in the target language. But sometimes the translator needs to step back a bit and take a look at the "wood" – the bigger picture.

In the case of the Spanish text chosen for this year's St. Jerome competition, we're looking at a deliberately far-fetched, whimsical article that does its best to contrast a human being's feelings and instincts with a soulless artificial-intelligence-guided machine. The author stretches this idea to the point of absurdity – to make a real paella, you need generations' worth of memories and intuition and the type of stubbornness you need to get back on your bike after you've fallen off and grazed your knee?

The article builds up nicely to the punchline: a machine could no more make a real paella than it could write such a wild, fantastical article as this. Only that's not precisely what the last lines of the Spanish say. In fact, like much of the article, they're difficult to translate (*este arabesco*) or at least to translate accurately into idiomatic English. And that's where the big picture comes in. Translators, this is a pretty wild article – knock yourselves out! Make sure your reader can see the "wood" – the whimsical presentation of a serious point. And, at their best, that's what the translators did.

Apart from the whimsy and the licence to roam that this grants the translator, the Spanish text poses more than its fair share of classic translation problems – how to deal with awkward or tricky sentences, hitting the right register, choosing the right word – and the translators came up with more than their fair share of inventive translations to keep the English idiomatic and, at best, sounding as if it could have been written by a native speaker.

AWKWARD

Perhaps the most awkward sentence was the one that mentions that "paella" was originally the name of the pan in which the dish was cooked:

...la paella — que es en realidad el nombre del recipiente absorbido a fuego lento por el contenido allá en su tierra original valenciana

The problem posed by this odd juxtaposition of the paella and the pan prompted translators to take a number of different approaches.

Some translators understandably tried to "fix" the English. For example:

"In the bottom of the paella – originally the word for the pan, but now the name of the dish gently simmered inside it, the pride of Valencia – there lurked a paraffin-like liquid, because the tool had measured out too much olive oil."

However, most translators tried to keep the sense of the original while making it read better in English. We particularly liked the deceptively simple:

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“the original meaning of paella, before it was imbued with the meaning of the contents in its homeland of Valencia”; and

“originally the word for the pan, but now the name of the dish gently simmered inside it, the pride of Valencia.”

TRICKY

There are of course times when we should not “interfere” in the original:

Una buena paella comienza con [1] los recuerdos de quienes sabían desbrozar los mejores leños de madera de naranjo... [2] La añoranza por quienes ya no están ... Y [3] la emoción por transmitir a los más chicos los secretos heredados de nuestros padres y abuelos. [numbers inserted for clarity]

So, in theory, a good paella starts with three things: memories, yearning and emotion. So far, so good. Unfortunately, our all too human writer becomes distracted with thoughts of firewood and saffron and forebears, and it becomes difficult to follow the meanderings of the author’s mind. For better or worse, our translation can only meander along with the original.

No sabe cómo huele el petricor que desprende la tierra empapada por una tormenta veraniega

“Petricor” is a perfectly good, but not widely known, word, meaning “a distinctive, earthy, usually pleasant odor that is associated with rainfall especially when following a warm, dry period” (Merriam-Webster). So there is an element of redundancy if we use the word and also offer a gloss. Here, the explanation is more helpful to the English reader than the rather nice, but rarified, word. We liked “the smell that rises from the earth after a sudden summer storm” (“summer downpour” was a nice alternative).

“*Sofrito*”: Translate, gloss or use the Spanish? We felt (and one of us is certainly no cook) that this word can be considered anglicized, if Internet cookbooks are anything to go by. “Sautéed vegetables” and “stir-fry” don’t really call to mind a *sofrito*; and as the actual ingredients vary, it’s probably best not to be too specific in a gloss (e.g. “the onions and garlic”), though the one of us who cooks thought that “the sauce of sautéed onion, garlic and tomatoes” gets the meaning across.

FLEXIBILITY

A somewhat different type of situation is posed by the syntactical differences between Spanish and English and the two languages’ varying preferences for one part of speech over another. For the sentence:

Una buena paella comienza con los recuerdos de quienes sabían desbrozar los mejores leños de madera de naranjo, para lo cual es necesario mucho olfato.

many translators followed the sentence structure of the source text, which was perfectly justifiable and “worked”. But what we felt worked even better was, as some of the translators did, to take the somewhat awkward phrase at the end of the sentence and turn it into another part of the sentence. Rather than the straightforward translation of that last phrase (“which requires an excellent sense of smell”), some incorporated its meaning into the main part of the sentence:

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“A good paella starts with the know-how and keen nose of the person who chose the finest orangewood to perfume the rice.”

And:

“... who had a nose for sniffing out the best firewood.”

REGISTER

“*Dichoso*”: The translators tried many possible translations for this little word, but they sometimes distorted the register (from the cowboy “darned” to the cockney, or mockney, “bleeding”); we preferred the simple “wonderful” or “marvellous”.

THE RIGHT WORD

“*Satisfacción inmediata y mecanizada*”: “instant and automatic gratification” seemed to be the perfect choice of words, although, clearly, it was not the only possibility.

NEAT TRANSLATIONS

“*Tutoriales copiados de internet*”: “online how-to videos”.

“*No sabe nada porque no le late nada*”: “It does not know anything because it doesn’t feel anything”, “it doesn’t have a heart”

“*Este arabesco*”: “these musings”.

“*La inteligencia artificial nos servirá y mucho*”: “will make our lives easier, much easier” was a particularly nice way to deal with the “y mucho”

“*Sus maravillosas imperfecciones*”: This phrase was not difficult to translate (“wonderful imperfections” was a common translation) but the alliteration of “fabulous flaws” was a nice touch.

Like all good translations, these seem obvious once someone else has come up with them!

Congratulations to the winners and runner-up, and thanks to all for taking part with a sense that, sometimes, translation can be fun!

PS: Do you think these comments were produced by artificial intelligence?