Is That a Fish in Your Ear?

TRANSLATION AND
THE MEANING OF EVERYTHING

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For most of the last century, reviewers and laymen have customarily declared in order to praise a translation to the skies that it sounds as if it had been written in English. This is hollow praise, since the selfsame community of reviewers and laymen has often shown itself unable to tell when an alleged translation was written in English. All the same, the high value placed on naturalness and fluency in the “target,” or “receiving,” language is a strong feature of the culture of translation in the English-speaking world today. But there are contrarian voices. If a detective novel set in Paris makes its characters speak and think in entirely fluent English, even while they plod along the boulevard Saint-Germain, drink Pernod, and scoff a jarret de porc aux lentilles—then something must be wrong. Where’s the bonus in having a French detective novel for bedtime reading unless there is something French about it? Don’t we want our French detectives to sound French? Domesticating translation styles that eradicate the Frenchness of Gallic thugs have been attacked by some critics for committing “ethnocentric violence.” An ethics of translation, such critics say, should restrain translators from erasing all that is foreign about works translated from a foreign tongue.

How then should the foreignness of the foreign best be rep-
movies made in Hollywood speak natural English interrupted at regular intervals by *Jawohl, Gott im Himmel*, and *Heil Hitler*.

The device may be taken much further, in popular as well as classical works. The dubbed Italian version of *Singin' in the Rain*, though it performs miracles of lip-synch in the translation of witty patter, leaves the sound track of the title song in the original English. A famous modern production of *King Lear* in Chinese has Cordelia speaking Shakespeare’s lines—she speaks the truth to her father in the true language of her speech.5

In general, however, translations only simulate the foreign-soundingness of foreign works. In fact, the challenge of writing something that sounds like English to speakers of other languages can even be met by not writing English at all.

English is heard around the world in pop songs, TV broadcasts, and so on by millions of people who do not understand the words of the lyrics, jingles, and reports. As a result there are large numbers of people who recognize the phonology of English—the kinds of sounds English makes—without knowing any English vocabulary or grammar. Some forty years ago, an Italian rock star performed a musical routine in which he pretended to be a teacher of English showing his class that you do not need to understand a single word in order to know what English sounds like. Sung to a catchy tune, Adriano Celentano’s “Prisencolinensinainciusol ol rait” is a witty and surprising simulation of what English sounds like—without being in English at all. However, the transcription of “anglogibberish” in textual form represents English-soundingness only when it is vocalized (aloud, or in your head) according to the standard rules for vocalizing *Italian* script. “Prisencolinensinainciusol ol rait,” which can be found on many currently available websites and in some cases with one of its possible transcriptions, is a specifically Italian fiction of the foreign.

It is equally possible to produce gibberish that sounds for-
Je le se tro savita  
Je la tossa vi la toit  

Se motra so la sonta  
Chi vossa l’otra volta  
Li zoscha si catonta  
Tra la la la la la la

That sounds like French—or Italian, or perhaps Spanish—to an English speaker with no knowledge of the languages, only a familiarity with what French (or Italian, or Spanish) sounds like. The verses have no meaning, and only a few of the words are actual words of French (Italian, Spanish). The point is this: you do not have to make any sense at all to sound foreign. For the ancient Greeks, the sound of the foreign was the unarticulated, open-mouthed blather of va-va-va, which is why they called all non-Greek-speakers varvaros, that is to say, barbarians, “blah-blah-ers.” To sound foreign is to mouth gibberish, to be dim, to be dumb: the Russian word for “German” is немой, from немой, “dumb, speechless,” and in an older form of the language it was used for any non-Russian-speaker.

However, since the 1980s a number of modern European classics have been retranslated into English and French by translators whose avowed intention was to make familiar classics such as Crime and Punishment or The Metamorphosis sound more foreign—although they certainly did not wish to make them sound dumb.

Nineteenth-century translators frequently left common words and phrases in the original (but mostly when the original was French), though this device is rarely used by contemporary translators into English, however “foreignizing” they may seek to be. When Gregor Samsa wakes one morning and finds that he has turned into an insect overnight, he does not exclaim, Ach Gott! in any modern English version; nor does Ivan Fyodorovich say Это вот как in any available translation of The Brothers Karamazov. Had these novels been written in French and translated into English by the conventions of the 1820s, we can be fairly sure that Gregor Samsa would have said Oh mon Dieu! and Ivan Fyodorovich would have said Alors, voilà in the English translation.

Things have changed, not in French, German, or Russian, but in English. In the language culture of today, English-language readers are not expected to know how to recognize conversational interjections such as “Good God!” or “Well, now” when spoken in German or Russian; whereas within the language culture of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, educated readers were familiar with French expressions of that kind.

A genuine educational and social purpose can be served by maintaining items of the source text in the translation. It allows readers to acquire what they had not learned at school, or to refresh their memory of half-forgotten lessons. Retention of the original expression in narrowly delimited and self-explanatory speech situations such as greetings and exclamations provides readers with something they might well want to glean from reading a translated work: the vague impression of having read a novel in French. When reading French was an important mark of cultural distinction, this could be a very satisfying feeling indeed.

Selective, or “decorative,” foreignism is available only in translation between languages with an established relationship. For many centuries, French was a requirement of advanced education in the English-speaking world, and bits of French were therefore part of the educated English speaker’s general linguistic resource. What those fragments of the other language signified was, simply, “This is French!” together with the pleasing corollary, “I know some French!” The effect on the reader’s self-esteem was hardly diminished if the exact meaning of
phrases such as parbleu and ma foi had been lost. When a mastery of French was the hallmark of the educated classes, part of the point of reading a French novel in translation for those whose education had not been quite so complete was to acquire the cultural goods that the elite already possessed. The more French was left in the translation of work from French, the better the reader’s needs and wants were served.

You can’t do that with Russian or German anymore. These languages are taught to only tiny groups of students nowadays. Knowledge of either or even both has no relation to cultural hierarchies in the English-speaking world—it just means you are some kind of a linguist, or maybe an astronaut or an automobile engineer.

What could represent “Russianness” or “Germanness” inside a work written in English? Conventional solutions to this conundrum are no more than that—cultural conventions, established within the English-language domain by historical contact, patterns of immigration, and popular entertainments such as Cold War dramas like Dr. Strangelove. But if we were to take d’Alembert’s recommendation as our guide, then we would try to make Kafka and Dostoyevsky sound like the foreigners that they surely were... by having them write English “embellished” with features not native to it.

In German and Russian, of course, Kafka and Dostoyevsky, however unique their manners of expression may be, do not sound foreign to native readers of those languages. Foreignness in a translation is necessarily an addition to the original. In Chaplin’s gibberish as in retranslations of literary classics, foreignness is necessarily constructed inside the receiving tongue. As a result, the “foreign-soundingness” of a translation seeking to give the reader a glimpse of the authentic quality of the source can only reproduce and reinforce what the receiving culture already imagines the foreign to be.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a distinguished nineteenth-century philosopher and the translator of Plato into German, hovered around this fundamental paradox in his much-quoted paper “The Different Methods of Translating.” He’s usually understood to have taken his distance from fluent, invisible, or “normalizing” translation when he said, “The goal of translating even as the author himself would have written originally in the language of the translation is not only unattainable but is also in itself null and void.” But that famous statement can also be understood the other way around: that it would be just as artificial to make Kafka sound like a “stage German” writing English as it would be to make Gregor Samsa sound as if he had turned into a beetle in a bedroom in Hoboken.

Why should we want or need Kafka to sound German in any case? In German, Kafka doesn’t sound “German”—he sounds like Kafka. But to the ear of an English speaker who has learned German but does not inhabit that language entirely naturally, everything Kafka wrote “sounds German” to some degree, precisely because German is not quite that reader’s home tongue. Making Kafka sound German in English is perhaps the best a translator can do to communicate to the reader his or her own experience of reading the original.

For Schleiermacher, in fact, apart from “those marvelous masters to whom several languages feel as one,” everybody retains the feeling of foreignness” when reading works not in their home tongue. The translator’s task is “to transmit this feeling of foreignness to his readers.” But this is a peculiarly hard and rather paradoxical thing to do unless you can call on conventions that the target language already possesses for representing the specific “other” associated with the culture of the language from which the source text comes.

Foreign-soundingness is therefore only a real option for a translator when working from a language with which the re-
ceiving language and its culture have an established relationship. The longest and most extensive rapport of that kind in the English-speaking world in general is with French. In the United States, Spanish has recently become the most familiar foreign tongue for the majority of younger readers. English therefore has many ways to represent Frenchness, and American English now also has a panoply of devices for representing Spanishness. To a lesser degree, we can represent Germanness, and, to a limited degree, Italianness as well. But what of Yoruba? Marathi? Chuvash? Or any one of the nearly seven thousand other languages of the world? There is no special reason why anything within the devices available to a writer of English should “sound just like Yoruba” or give a more authentic representation of what it feels like to write in Chuvash. We just have no idea. The project of writing translations that preserve in the way they sound some trace of the work’s “authentic foreignness” is really applicable only when the original is not very foreign at all.

On the other hand, translated texts can teach interested and willing readers something about the sound and feel and even the syntactic properties of the original. So can originals—Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart introduces elements of African languages, and Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English, August gives you a good start on Hindi and Bengali vocabulary. But when foreignness is not thematized—not made the explicit subject of the story—some prior knowledge of the original language is essential for a foreign effect to arise. In order to even notice that this sentence from German a foreignizing translation is have you to know that in German subordinate clauses at the end their verbs put. Otherwise it is comical, clumsy, nonsensical, and so forth—not “German” at all.

Modern Times and Adriano Celentano play entertaining games with literal foreign-soundingness in sung and spoken speech sounds. A recent translation of Metamorphosis could of course be sounded out in the reader’s head in a nonnative phonology. Gregor Samsa’s first words in direct speech—

“Oh God,” he thought, “what a gruelling job I’ve picked! Day in, day out—on the road.”

—would then be taken as a written representation of sounds more recognizable transcribed as:

“Och Gott,” e saut, “vot a kruling tschop aif picked! Tay in, tab out—on ze rote.”

This is surely very silly: no translator ever intends his or her work to be sounded out with a stage accent. It nonetheless forces us to ask a real question: If that is not what is meant by foreign-soundingness in the translation of a foreign text, then what exactly is foreign-soundingness? What allows us to judge whether the following passage retains some authentic trace of the Frenchness of Jacques Derrida, or whether it is just terribly hard to understand?

The positive and the classical sciences of writing are obliged to repress this sort of question. Up to a certain point, such repression is even necessary to the progress of positive investigation. Beside the fact that it would still be held within a philosophizing logic, the ontophysiological question of essence, that is to say of the origin of writing, could, by itself, only paralyse or sterilise the typological or historical research of facts.

My intention, therefore, is not to weigh that prejudicial question, that dry, necessary and somewhat facile question of right, against the power and efficacy of the positive researches which we may witness today. The genesis and system of scripts had never led to such pro-
found, extended and assured explorations. It is not really a matter of weighing the question against the importance of the discovery; since the questions are imponderable, they cannot be weighed. If the issue is not quite that, it is perhaps because its repression has real consequences in the very content of the researches that, in the present case and in a privileged way, are always arranged around problems of definition and beginning.7

We know that the content of this hard-to-follow extract isn’t related to whether it “sounds like” English or not—Céline’s song has shown us already that you can make completely meaningless concatenations sound like perfect English if phonetic English-soundingness is all you want to achieve. However, one detail that marks it as a translation from French is the anomalous use of the word research in the plural, matching a regular usage of a similar-lookong word in French, recherches. Obviously, that can be seen only by a reader who knows French as well as English: the foreignness of “researches” is not self-evident to an English-only speaker, who may well construct quite other hypotheses to account for it, or else accept it as a special or technical term belonging to this particular author. But if the bilingual reader also has some additional knowledge of French philosophical terminologies, then the word positive preceding researches becomes transparent. A bilingual reader can easily see that “positive researches” stands for recherches positives in the source. What that French phrase means is another issue: it is the standard translation of “empirical investigation” into French.

We could say that “positive researches” is a poor translation of a standard French phrase that the translator seems to have treated as something else; or we could see it as a trace of the authentic sound of the original. Indeed, unless an English phrase is perceptibly anomalous, we would not be able to see it as contain-

ing any trace of not-English. But it is equally clear that we would not be able to see the “authentic Frenchness” of the phrase if we had no knowledge of French.

Back-translation of the foreignism “positive researches” into a number of other languages, among them Modern Greek, would produce the same result—that is to say, would allow its meaning to be identified as “empirical investigation.” Without the information that the work in question has been translated from language A, foreignizing translation styles do not themselves allow the reader to identify which foreign language A is.

Foreignizing translation styles bend English into shapes that mirror some limited aspect of the source language, such as word order or sentence structure. But they rely for their foreignizing effect on the reader’s prior knowledge of the approximate shape and sound of the foreign language—in the quoted case of Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak’s translation of Derrida given above, specific items in the vocabulary of the foreign tongue.

Imagine a novel translated from a language such as Hindi, where there are three ways of saying “you”: tu, tum, and ap, corresponding to the intimate, the friendly, and the formal. Alternation among the three forms of address is a significant part of the way the characters of our imaginary novel relate to one another. Could a translator create a linguistic anomaly in English that corresponds to this triple division of “you”? Yes, of course. But would we know that it was a mark of Hindi? Not without a translator’s footnote—because we do not know any Hindi.

Since the majority of translations take place between languages spoken by communities that have quite a lot to do with each other, culturally, economically, or politically, formal and lexical borrowings from the source have often been used to represent the foreignness—and the prestige—of texts imported from abroad. In the sixteenth century, for example, many works of literature and philosophy were brought from Italian into
French, just as many Italian craftsmen were imported to beautify palaces and castles across the land. The translators of that era wrote French with a wealth of Italian words and turns of phrase, because they felt that their readers either did or really should know the words and phrases they imported. More than that: they thought French would be positively improved by being made a little more like Italian. And in fact the process of making French more like Italian has continued down to the present day. The caban (pea jacket) and the telecon (underpants) in your closet and, if you’re lucky, the cantaloupe and the caviar in your refrigerator, like a huge number of other ordinary, scholarly, refined, and delicious things, are all named in French by words taken from Italian, and for the majority of them the taking was first done by translators.\(^8\)

A similar kind of lexical enrichment took place in the nineteenth century when German-speaking peoples sought to constitute themselves as a distinct and increasingly unified nation. German translators consciously imported a quantity of words from Greek, French, and English not only to make European classics accessible to speakers of German but also to improve the German language by extending its range of vocabulary. The issue as they saw it was this: French and English were international languages already, propped up by powerful states. That was why nonnative speakers learned French (and, to a lesser extent, English). How could German ever be the vehicle of a powerful state unless nonnatives learned to read it? And why should they learn to read it unless it could easily convey the meanings that arise in the transnational cultures held to represent the riches of European civilization?

In today’s world, translators into “small” languages also often see their task as defending or else improving their own tongues—or both at the same time. Here’s a letter I received just the other day from a translator in Tartu:

My mother language, Estonian, is spoken by about a million people. Nevertheless I am convinced that Life A User’s Manual and my language mutually deserve each other. Translating Perec I want to prove that Estonian is rich and flexible enough to face the complications that a work of this kind brings along.

Translation can clearly serve national purposes—but also their opposite, the cause of internationalism itself. A contemporary writer of French who uses the pen name Antoine Volodine has formulated in striking terms why he wishes to use his native language as if it were a foreign tongue. For Volodine, French is not just the language of Racine and Voltaire. Because translation into French has been practiced for a very long time, French is also the language of Pushkin, Shalamov, Li Bai, and García Márquez. Far from being the privileged vector of national identity, history, and culture, “French is a language that transmits cultures, philosophies and concerns that have nothing to do with the habits of French society or the francophone world.”\(^9\) It is not that French is by its nature or destiny an international language: on the contrary, only the practice of translation into French makes the language a tool of internationalism in the modern world. Thanks to its long history of translation from foreign languages, French is now a possible vehicle for an imaginary, infinitely haunting literature that Volodine would like to consider absolutely foreign to it.

It would therefore be quite wrong to see the progressive interpenetration of English, French, German, and Italian together with terms and phrases from the ancient source tongues, Latin and Greek, and (in the writings of Volodine) Russian and Chinese, too, as the sole product of what is now called globalization. In any case, globalization does not spread only English into other languages and cultures: it could just as well be exemplified...
by the spread of pizza language and the vocabulary of pasta into corner stores and fast-food joints the world over. It is also the result of long efforts by translators to raise their national languages to international status. They did not necessarily seek to make their translations sound authentically foreign. Indeed, if that is what they were really trying to do, their success has made mincemeat of the ambition, because the words they imported or mimicked have now become part of the receiving language to such an extent that they are no longer foreign at all.

No less than 40 percent of all the headwords in any large English dictionary are imports from other languages. A foreignism—be it a word, a turn of phrase, or a grammatical structure that is brought into our marvelously and infuriatingly malleable tongue by a translator seeking to retain the authentic sound of the original—has its path already mapped out. Either it will be disregarded as a clumsy, awkward, or incomplete act of translation, or it will be absorbed, reused, integrated, and become not foreign at all.

However, contemporary efforts to produce translations into English that keep something authentically foreign about them are not strictly comparable to the kind of translators’ campaigns in centuries past that made German more like English, French more like Italian, Syriac more like Greek, and so forth. The foreignizers of today are not struggling to make English an international language, because English is the international language of the present. To some degree, they are seeking to enrich English with linguistic resources afforded by languages that are distant from it. “One subliminal idea I started out with as a translator was to help energize English itself,” Richard Pevear stated in an interview in *The New Yorker*.

That creative, writerly project rests on a wish to share with readers some of the feelings that Pevear has when reading a Russian novel. He has also often said that he is not a fluent speaker of the language and relies on his partner to provide a basic crib that he then works into a literary version. Something similar may be true of other proponents of awkward and foreign-sounding translation styles. The project of writing translations that do the least “ethnocentric violence” to the original thus runs the risk of dissolving into something different—a representation of the funny ways foreigners speak.

The natural way to represent the foreignness of foreign utterances is to leave them in the original, in whole or in part. This resource is available in all languages and has always been used to some degree in every one of them.

It is not easy to represent the foreignness of foreign languages in complete seriousness. It takes the wit of Chaplin or Celentano to do so for comic effect without causing offense.

What translation does in the first place is to represent the meaning of a foreign text. As we shall see, that’s quite hard enough.
Native Command: Is Your Language Really Yours?

Translators traditionally and now almost by iron rule translate from a foreign language into what is called their mother tongue. In translation-studies jargon this is called L1 translation, as opposed to L2 translation, which is translation out toward a learned or other tongue. But what exactly is a mother tongue?

We all start with a mother and it seems obvious that we first learn language in her arms. The language that your mother speaks to you is therefore what you are “born into,” which is all that can be meant when instead of “mother tongue” we call it a native language.

It is an axiom of language study that to be a native speaker is to have complete possession of a language; reciprocally, complete possession of a language is usually glossed as precisely that knowledge of a language that a native speaker has. In spite of the obvious fact that speakers of the same language use it in infinitely varied ways and often have quite different vocabularies and language habits at the levels of register, style, diction, and so forth, we proceed on the assumption that only native speakers of (let us say) English know English completely and that only native speakers of English are in a position to judge whether any other speaker is using the language “natively.”

We also know, from observation and self-observation, too, that native speakers make grammatical and lexical mistakes and find themselves lost for words from time to time. In what is now a conventional view of language use, the slips and stumbles in the speech of a native speaker are themselves part of what it means to possess the language natively. Teachers of foreign languages are expert in distinguishing between mistakes that language learners make and those that are characteristic of native speech; and for a native speaker of any language, there are some kinds of errors made by others that sound not just wrong but not native. But let us put these practical and effective uses of the distinction between “native” and “nonnative” aside. Other, much more difficult issues are involved in using terms such as mother and native to name the way we are more or less at home in the language we call our own.

We do not have to learn our mother tongue from a mother. It can be acquired just as effectively from siblings, from an au pair, or from the kids next door. What matters for normal human development is that there be a language available in our immediate environment in infancy, for no child invents a language by itself, without input from outside. We acquire our first language from whatever sources are available in our infant environment. Some children do it faster than others, some acquire wider vocabularies than others, but all children normally achieve communicative competence within a relatively narrow time band, between the ages of one and three. But the language that is acquired in those early stages of development may or may not turn out to be the one in which as adults we feel most at home. Great numbers of people the world over are not particularly skilled users of the language taught to them by their infant environment. In many circumstances, formal education replaces the infant language with one that goes on to be used in adult life as the operative means of communication.

From the disappearance of Latin as a spoken language in around the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. until the age of Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz, no mother ever spoke Latin to her
child, and no child was ever born into a Latin-speaking home. However, Latin was learned by young males of the higher social classes throughout Christianized Europe for well over a thousand years. Throughout that long period, Latin was the language in which all educated Europeans operated in thought, formal speech, and writing, for purposes as varied as diplomacy, philosophy, mathematics, science, and religion. The language was taught by means of writing, and it was also spoken—in schools, monasteries, churches, chancelleries, and law courts—as the verbalization of a written idiom. All speakers of Latin in the period of its use as the primary form of communication had at least one other mother tongue, but these vernaculars were not used as tools for elaborated thinking or expression. But if a clear distinction can be made between the language learned from your mother and the language in which you operate most effectively for high-born males in Western Europe between 700 and 1700 C.E., the very concepts of “mother tongue” and “native speaker” need to be looked at again.

Examples of the difference between “first learned language” and “operative language” can be found almost anywhere. I can find several in my own family. My father learned to speak in Yiddish, the language of his mother and of his environment in London’s East End some ninety years ago. Once he started going to school, he acquired English. There is no question that he could soon do far more with it than he ever could with his mother tongue. Similarly, the mother of my children spoke Hungarian as an infant but acquired French when she moved to France at the age of five. Neither of these cases involved the loss of the mother tongue. Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz also remained everyday speakers of their “native languages,” respectively, French, English, and German.

In many modern cases, the mother tongue that is supplanted by a learned language for higher-level activities remains only “mother’s tongue,” used exclusively for interaction with the older generation. Yiddish and Hungarian remained for my two relatives the way they spoke with their mothers and served almost no other purpose in adult life. That is fairly typical of first-generation immigrants in countries such as France, Britain, and the United States, many of whom possess a mother tongue that is stuck at the state of sophistication achieved around the age of five. But that was certainly not true of Descartes or Newton, who also wrote in French and English, respectively; it may well not be true of many millions of other bilingual speakers in the world today.

Throughout our lives we retain more or less strong emotions about the language in which we first learned songs, nursery rhymes, games, and playgroup or family rituals. These are foundational experiences, and the language in which they were experienced must surely be forever lit by the warm glow of our earliest reminiscences. But it does not automatically follow that the language of our earliest memories has any special importance as a language for what we may go on to become, or for what we take to be our personal identity.

When the first-learned language is overlaid by a language of education, it ceases to be at the forefront of an individual’s development. What is learned in the second but increasingly firstlike language are the foundational techniques of writing and counting, as well as all-important systems like the rules of baseball, alongside song lyrics and the bruising business of social interaction outside the family circle. All this sudden learning can of course be translated back into a first language, especially if the family environment supports parallel development and parents or siblings take the time to teach the child how to express all these new things in the family idiom; but without such support, few children would bother to do something so manifestly pointless (pointless, because unrelated to the social and personal uses of the newly acquired skills).

One problem with using the expression “mother tongue” to
name the language in which an adult operates most comfortably is that it confuses the history of an individual's acquisition of linguistic skills with the mystery of what we mean by the "possession" of a language. But it also does something more insidious: it acts as a suggestion that our preferred language is not just the language spoken to us by a mother but is, in some almost mystical sense, the mother of our selfhood—the tongue that made us what we are. It is not a neutral term: it is burdened with a complex set of ideas about the relationship between language and selfhood, and it unloads that burden on us as long as we take the term to be a natural, unproblematic way of naming our linguistic home.

We may all be born with the potential to acquire a language and a need to do so—with what some linguists have called a "language-acquisition device"—hardwired in our brains. But in practice, we are not born into any particular language at all: all babies are languageless at the start of life. Yet we use the term native speaker as if the contrary were true—as if the form of language acquired by natural but fairly strenuous effort from our infant environment were a birthright, an inheritance, and the definitive, unalterable location of our linguistic identity. But knowing French or English or Tagalog is not a right of birth, even less an inheritance: it is a personal acquisition. To speak of "native" command of a language is to be just as approximate, and, to a degree, just as misleading as to speak of having a "mother tongue."

The curious ideology of these language terms is brought into clearer focus by British and American universities, which, when seeking to appoint someone as a professor of languages, conventionally state that "native or quasi-native competence" is required in the language to be taught. What can "quasi-native" possibly mean? In practical terms it means "very, very good." Implicitly, it means that you can be very good at French or Russian or Arabic even if it is not your birthright. But the most obvious implica-
French people exclaim with surprise, “But I thought you were French,” I still blush with pride, like the good schoolboy I was. But what such flatterers really mean is not that I speak “native French” but that they took my speech to indicate a particular nationality. Nationality is of course one of the few things that most people acquire by birth—either because of the nationality of their parents (“by right of blood,” *jus sanguinis*) or because of where they were born (“by right of soil,” *jus soli*). The relatively short history of the European nation-state founded on linguistic uniformity has resulted in a fairly profound confusion of language with nationality, and of “native-speaker competence” with country of origin.

The passport you hold doesn’t have anything to do with your competence as a translator, nor does the language that you learned in your infant environment. What matters is whether you are or feel you are at home in the language into which you are translating. It doesn’t really help to call it “native,” and it helps even less to insist that you can translate only into a “mother” tongue. The paths by which speakers come to feel at home in a language are far too varied for the range of their abilities to be forced into merely two slots (“native” and “nonnative”), however broad or flexible the definitions of those slots may be.

Knowing two languages extremely well is generally thought to be the prerequisite for being able to translate, but in numerous domains that is not actually the case. In the translation of poetry, drama, and film subtitles, for example, collaborative translation is the norm. One partner is native in the “source-text language,” or L1, the other is native in the “target language,” or L2; both need competence in a shared language, usually but not necessarily L2. Also, the target-language translator needs to be or to believe he is in expert command of the language of the genre—as a playwright, as a poet, as a skilled compressor of meanings into the very restricted format of subtitles, and so on.

Even in the translation of prose fiction, there are celebrated translation teams—Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, for example, who together have produced new English versions of many classic works of Russian literature. A different form of collaborative transmission is involved in my own work with the novels of Ismail Kadare, who writes in Albanian, a language I do not possess beyond phrase-book level. I work from the French translations done by the violinist Tedi Papavrami and then raise my own queries with both Papavrami and Kadare, through the medium of French, which Kadare speaks well enough to discuss allusions, references, questions of style, and so on.

In cultures other than those of Western Europe, the prejudice against translating into a language that is not native is less profound, and in some places it is rejected outright. For many decades, Soviet Russia insisted that the speeches of its UN delegates be interpreted not by native speakers of the other official languages but by Russian speakers who were expert interpreters and translators into Spanish, French, English, Arabic, and Chinese. The translators’ school in Moscow developed a theory—or a cover story—to justify this politically motivated practice, according to which the essential skill of an interpreter is her complete comprehension of the original. Most professionals disagree, regarding unreflecting fluency in the target language as the real key to getting away with the almost unimaginably brain-taxing act of simultaneous interpretation—but for more than forty years the Soviet Union relied almost exclusively on what are called “L2 interpreters,” who coped with the job very well.

L2 translation—writing in a language that is not “native”—is also quite widespread for languages that do not belong to the small group of Western tongues with established traditions of teaching one another’s languages in schools and long-standing two-way translation relations. Few “native” writers of English,
French, Spanish, or German are fluent readers of Tamil, Tagalog, Farsi, or Wolof, and among them fewer still wish to devote their time to translation. For writers in these and most of the other languages of the world, the only way to get an international hearing is to put the work into a world language learned at school or else through emigration or travel. The effort often backfires. L2 translations from contemporary China and Albania are notoriously dreadful. Many of the sillier examples of translation mistakes in commercial material and tourist signage are visibly produced by L2 translation. But it would be futile to insist that the iron rule of L1 translation be imposed on all intercultural relations in the world without also insisting on its inescapable corollary: that every educational system in the world's eighty vehicular languages devote significant resources to producing seventy-nine groups of competent L1 translators in each cohort of graduating students. The only alternative to that still-utopian solution would be for speakers of the target languages to become more tolerant and more welcoming of the variants introduced into English, French, German, and so forth by L2 translators working very hard indeed to make themselves understood.

Whether done by a speaker of L1 or L2, an adequate translation reproduces the meaning of an utterance made in a foreign language.

That sounds straightforward enough. It corresponds entirely to the service that contemporary translators and interpreters claim to provide. But it doesn't provide an adequate understanding of what translation is, because the meaning of an utterance is not a single thing. Whatever we say or write means in many ways at once. The fact is, utterances have all sorts of "meanings" of different kinds. The meaning of meaning is a daunting topic, but you can't really study translation if you leave it aside. It may be a philosophical can of worms—but it's an issue that every translation actually solves.

There is obviously more to meaning than the meaning of words, and here's a simple story to show why. Jim is out hiking with friends. He wanders away from the group and finds himself in thick woods. He's lost his bearings entirely. Then the smell of coffee reaches his nose. What does that mean? It means that camp is not far away. It's a real and important meaning to Jim—but it has nothing to do with words.

The kind of meaning that things have just by themselves is called symptomatic meaning. Smells, noises, physical sensations,