

THE METHOD THAT WORKS FOR ME

by Betty Howell

In more than fifteen years of being a translator and eight years of trying to teach it, I have developed a method of translating that works for me. It is not unique and it is not the only way, but it is one that I can defend for non-literary translation.

STEPS TO A PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATION

Step One. Do not read the text first. Sit down at a computer (or at the very least, a typewriter) and begin immediately to translate. Write down what you think is a reasonable translation for what you read. If there is a word you don't know, either leave it in the original language or guess. If the right translation comes to you later (as it will, in many cases), write it down, in parentheses, when you think of it. Keep going. Don't stop. Do the whole text, preferably in one shot, even if it's twenty pages long. As you move through, it gets easier. After all, the author probably spent 40% of the effort on the first page and the conclusion. Once he figured out how he was going to say whatever it was, it got easier, and the words just poured out. And so will the translation, once you figure out where you are headed. Do not use the dictionary during the first draft, or only use it when there is a key word and you can't figure out whether it refers to an animal or a building, to a very positive or an extremely negative effect. But there will only be a few such words that you have to look up. In most cases, you will be using what is unconsciously lying in your brain, waiting for you to think of it. Why is it that it is such a successful strategy to ask someone else what the word is for the thing you use when you... and at that point, you find the

word. The person you're asking doesn't know it -- doesn't have the slightest idea of what you're talking about. It's just that you are using your store of language and knowledge of the world, not your "translation skills" at this point, and so you find the word you know but couldn't think of.

Step Two. Leave the draft alone. Overnight if possible. Instead, do a draft of something else, by someone else, on a different subject, if need be. What you have to do is train your mind to turn off what you have just produced, so that when you go back to it, in two minutes or two days, it looks fresh. You can look at it objectively (and that is why it should at least be typed: no one is objective about what he has written in his own handwriting). You will see where you have the wrong combination of noun and verb; the wrong tense for the situation you describe; the wrong conjunction, so that the connection between the two clauses is inaccurate.

Step Three. Look at the translation and revise it. Try to make it sound like the target language. Make it idiomatic. Try to use at least as many clichés as the original. Give it the same emphasis. Check the spelling. Use the proper punctuation. Make sure that the translation sounds right. Read it out loud: your mouth is not likely to let you make a fool of yourself in writing.

Step Four. Now get out the original. This is the part that really counts. Read the translation, then the original. Do they both say the same thing? You are translating ideas, not words, but ideas are expressed in words, which come in indissociable pairs, idioms, tenses, shades of

meaning. Are the original and your translation equivalent? Check to see you know what the original means by looking in a unilingual dictionary in the source language, then comparing it to the definition in a unilingual dictionary in the target language, remembering all the while that dictionaries are the last places you find the right words. (The first places are in your head, in the speech you hear around you, in articles or books on the appropriate subject.) Dictionaries can only give you a brief summary of how a word is used, and it is only up-to-date when it was published. Words sometimes change denotation but constantly change connotation -- reflecting such cultural influences as song lyrics, politics, natural disasters, tragedies, etc. The dictionary is a crutch, and a bad one at that. Use it only to verify your sense of language, not to replace it.

This step is the hard part, the one that calls for judgement. Did you really translate the complete idea, while everything unnecessary has been cast aside? Are the source and the target text saying the same thing, not merely vaguely related by key word or topic? Be sure it's all there. Make sure the numbers are correct, names spelled right (just the way you look your name up in it as soon as you get the new phone book, the customers will check if their names are spelled properly).

Step Five. So the translation has now been revised to match the original in its message, not necessarily in number of words, placement of vowels or commas, even length of sentences or number of paragraphs. Possibly you did the revision on the computer, if your eyes are very strong, but most translators find it less tiring to correct a printed version by hand and then enter the corrections. If you are using only a typewriter, you retype the whole text, not a bad thing

in itself because you get an extra revision where your fingers refuse to type some barbarism you thought was a translation and instead, instinctively, put in the appropriate words. This third run-through should tip you off to misspelled words, incorrect punctuation, or nonsense.

How much time should you expect to spend on each of these steps? That depends on experience and on the nature of your text. Some texts will demand more revision than others. Usually the draft can account for anywhere from 40 to 60% of the time spent on a translation; the first revision, 30 to 50% of the time, and the final revision, whatever is left. On a computer, this approach is particularly productive because your first draft, which accounts for anywhere up to 60% of your work, gets you almost half finished! Most translators I know set themselves goals: 20% done, time for lunch. Another third and I can get up and have some coffee. I'll just finish this bit and then stop. Even with an extremely rough start, you have something to work with and you've started your mind thinking about the subject. You'll find yourself listening more carefully to news reports on the subject, gathering vocabulary from an article in a nearly discarded publication, even picking out the appropriate cliché from a local expert. The first draft helps focus your mind on the subject at hand and makes the time spent on revision much more concentrated and productive. The revision is the time for absolute quiet and interruption-avoidance. It is the time when the real translator kicks in and makes the silk purse out of that sow's ear. What this method does is give the real translator something useful to work with.

So there you have it. A path to follow to use what you already know. Five steps to a professional translation.