

Is that a fish in your ear

by David Bellos · Language: EN

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Overview

Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything is a wide-ranging exploration of translation as a fundamental human activity, not merely a technical skill. David Bellos argues that translation is not a lossy, second-best copy of an original but a creative act that shapes languages, cultures, and our very understanding of the world. The book challenges common misconceptions—such as the idea that some things are untranslatable or that translation is a modern invention—by drawing on examples from literature, law, religion, technology, and everyday speech. Bellos shows how translation has enabled the spread of ideas, the formation of nations, and the functioning of global commerce, and he demystifies the work of translators, from simultaneous interpreters at the UN to the subtitlers of films.

The book is structured as a series of short, accessible chapters, each tackling a different aspect of translation: its history, its practical challenges, its role in shaping languages, and its philosophical implications. Bellos, a translator himself (notably of the works of Georges Perec), writes with wit and erudition, using concrete examples—from the translation of the Bible to the dubbing of cartoons—to illustrate his points. He argues that translation is not a marginal activity but a central feature of human communication, and that understanding it helps us understand how meaning is made. The book matters because it overturns the common view that translation is a mere mechanical transfer, revealing it as a creative, interpretive, and deeply human act that has shaped our world in countless ways.

Key Takeaways

- Translation is not a lossy copy of an original but a creative act that produces a new work with its own value.
- The idea that some things are untranslatable is a myth; everything can be translated, though not always with perfect equivalence.
- Translation has played a crucial role in the spread of religions, the formation of nations, and the development of science and law.
- Simultaneous interpretation is a highly specialized skill that involves not just language but also memory, anticipation, and cultural knowledge.
- The translation of literature is a form of literary criticism, as the translator must make interpretive choices that reveal the original's ambiguities.

- Machine translation, while powerful, still cannot capture the nuances of human language, especially in creative and emotional contexts.
- Translation shapes languages themselves, as new words and structures are introduced through translated texts.
- Understanding translation helps us understand how meaning is constructed in all communication, not just across languages.

Chapter Summaries

What Is Translation?

Bellos opens by questioning the common definition of translation as the replacement of words in one language with words in another. He argues that translation is a broader concept, encompassing paraphrase, adaptation, and even interpretation. He uses the example of the phrase 'Is that a fish in your ear?'—a humorous mistranslation of a French idiom—to illustrate how translation can go wrong but also how it can create new meanings. The chapter sets the stage for the book's central claim: that translation is a fundamental human activity that deserves serious study.

The Myth of Untranslatability

Bellos tackles the popular idea that some words or texts are impossible to translate. He argues that this belief stems from a misunderstanding of what translation is. Using examples like the French word 'esprit' or the German 'Schadenfreude,' he shows that while single words may lack direct equivalents, the meaning can always be conveyed through longer phrases or explanations. He also discusses the role of context and the fact that translation is always a matter of degree, not an all-or-nothing proposition.

Translation and the Law

This chapter explores the role of translation in legal contexts, where precision is paramount. Bellos discusses the challenges of translating legal documents, such as contracts and statutes, where a single word can have significant consequences. He also examines the history of legal translation, from the Code of Hammurabi to modern international law, and shows how translation has been used to establish and maintain legal authority. The chapter highlights the importance of human judgment in legal translation, as opposed to mere word-for-word substitution.

The Bible and Other Sacred Texts

Bellos examines the translation of sacred texts, focusing on the Bible as the most translated book in history. He discusses the theological and practical challenges of translating the Bible, from the Septuagint to the King James Version, and how different translations have shaped religious beliefs and practices. He also touches on the translation of the Quran and the concept

of untranslatability in Islam. The chapter argues that translation has been central to the spread of religions and the formation of religious communities.

Simultaneous Interpretation

This chapter delves into the world of simultaneous interpretation, the real-time translation of spoken language, as used in international organizations like the UN. Bellos describes the cognitive demands of the task, the training required, and the strategies interpreters use to cope with the pressure. He also discusses the history of simultaneous interpretation, from the Nuremberg trials to modern conferences. The chapter highlights the difference between translation (written) and interpretation (spoken) and the unique skills each requires.

Translating Humor and Wordplay

Bellos addresses the challenge of translating humor, puns, and wordplay, which are often considered the most difficult things to translate. He uses examples from literature, film, and everyday speech to show how translators can find creative solutions, sometimes by inventing new jokes or using different cultural references. He argues that the goal is not to reproduce the exact words but to create an equivalent effect in the target language. The chapter also discusses the role of subtitling and dubbing in making humor accessible across cultures.

Machine Translation

Bellos examines the history and current state of machine translation, from early rule-based systems to modern statistical and neural approaches. He discusses the successes and limitations of machine translation, noting that while it can handle simple, factual texts, it struggles with nuance, ambiguity, and creativity. He also considers the implications of machine translation for human translators, arguing that it is a tool that can assist but not replace them. The chapter ends with a reflection on what machine translation reveals about the nature of human language.

Translation and the Making of Languages

This chapter explores how translation has influenced the development of languages themselves. Bellos shows how translated texts have introduced new words, grammatical structures, and stylistic conventions into languages, from the influence of Latin on English to the role of translation in the standardization of modern languages like Italian and German. He also discusses the concept of 'translationese'—the sometimes awkward language that results from overly literal translation—and how it can affect a language's evolution.

The Translator's Invisibility

Bellos discusses the paradox that translators are often invisible in the final product, yet their work is essential. He examines the history of the translator's status, from the anonymity of medieval translators to the modern recognition of translators as authors in their own right. He also addresses the issue of translation quality and the criteria by which translations are judged. The chapter argues that translators should be seen as creative writers who make choices that

shape the reader's experience.

Why Translation Matters

In the concluding chapter, Bellos brings together the book's themes to argue for the importance of translation in a globalized world. He suggests that translation is not just a practical necessity but a way of understanding and appreciating cultural difference. He also reflects on the future of translation, including the role of technology and the continued need for human translators. The chapter ends with a call to recognize translation as a vital human activity that enriches our lives and our understanding of the world.

Themes

- Translation as creativity
- Cultural exchange
- Language and meaning
- The translator's role
- Global communication
- Myths of untranslatability

Notable Quotes

- "Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture." — Bellos discusses the cultural dimension of translation, arguing that translators must convey not just words but the context and assumptions behind them.
- "The idea that translation is a kind of loss is a very modern one, and it is wrong." — In the opening chapters, Bellos challenges the common view that translation inevitably loses something from the original.
- "There is no such thing as a perfect translation, but there are many good ones." — Bellos discusses the criteria for evaluating translations, arguing that perfection is not the goal.
- "To translate is to change, and to change is to translate." — Bellos reflects on the transformative nature of translation, both for the text and for the language it enters.
- "The translator is a writer, and the translation is a work of literature in its own right." — Bellos argues for the creative role of the translator, especially in literary translation.
- "Machine translation is a tool, not a replacement for human translators." — In the chapter on machine translation, Bellos discusses the limitations of automated systems.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Is that a fish in your ear about?

The book is a comprehensive exploration of translation as a fundamental human activity. It covers the history, practice, and theory of translation, debunking myths like untranslatability and showing how translation shapes languages, cultures, and global communication. Bellos uses examples from literature, law, religion, and technology to illustrate his points.

Is *Is that a fish in your ear* worth reading?

Yes, especially if you are interested in language, literature, or communication. The book is engagingly written, full of fascinating examples, and challenges common assumptions about translation. It is accessible to non-specialists and offers deep insights into how meaning is created and shared across cultures.

How does *Is that a fish in your ear* end?

Spoiler: The book concludes by arguing that translation is more important than ever in a globalized world. Bellos emphasizes that translation is not a loss but a creative act that enriches our understanding of other cultures. He calls for recognizing translators as authors and for valuing translation as a vital human activity.

Who should read *Is that a fish in your ear*?

Anyone curious about language, translation, or cross-cultural communication. It is ideal for students of linguistics or literature, professional translators, and general readers who enjoy thought-provoking non-fiction. The book requires no prior knowledge and is written in an accessible, witty style.

How long does it take to read *Is that a fish in your ear*?

The book is about 400 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 8-10 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a week or two if reading a few chapters at a time.