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Reading Between the Lines

Professors explore what gets lost and found in translations of great literary works.

Story by RACHEL HATCH

The great works of literature can be called more than a collection of masterfully crafted words. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is more than a rhythmic story about a dour prince. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is more than the well-written tale of a suicidal woman. Great writing can convey the culture, dreams, norms and challenges of a society, but making sure the message is clear can depend upon the right translation.

How can a reader find a "good" translation of literature? Several Illinois Wesleyan faculty members recently weighed in on the subject of translations.

"Translation is a work of art," says Marina Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies. "It is more than choosing the right words. It's an art form that definitely requires the soul of the artist."

Balina worked with Professor of English Emeritus James McGowan on the translations of poems by German poet Wolfgang Borchert. "Translation is like a sculpture, basically shaping up the material like it was clay, and then refining it," agrees McGowan, who is known for his translations of the French poet Charles Baudelaire. "Just because the words are similar from one language to another, it does not mean the meaning is similar."



Poems by German poet Wolfgang Borchert (above) were translated by Marina Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies, and Professor of English Emeritus James McGowan.

The art of translation may begin with finding the English equivalent, but it then requires going a step beyond, says Balina. "You can build from a beautiful sentence that is close to what the writer is saying, but the cultural barrier remains," she says. "A translator can be blinded by his or her own knowledge of literature and culture."

Balina remembers reading sonnets of Shakespeare in English for the first time. "I thought, 'This was not the Shakespeare I have read in Russian translation'," she says. "I read writers in Soviet Russia, who were translating because they could not get their own work published due to harsh government censorship. They have used the art of translation to convey their own frustration and ideals through Shakespeare's works."

McGowan suggests, when choosing a translation, to understand something of the person doing the actual translating. "More than knowing the language, it's best if a translator knows the genre in which he or she is working. Poets have a better understanding of poetry," he says, adding that it takes a certain temperament to translate. "On the one hand you have to be arrogant enough to do it, and on the other hand be humble enough to realize that the author is the one who created the great work."

According to Scott Sheridan, associate professor of French and Italian, the greatest challenge to selecting translations is overcoming the assumption that every word is correct. "The truth

is that even the best translations are only approximations of their linguistically rich and culturally specific originals,” says Sheridan, who adds, “I am reminded of the Italian maxim ‘*Traddutore, traditore,*’ which means ‘Translator, traitor.’”

Recently, scholars have attacked the standard translations of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky by Victorian-era translator Constance Garrett, saying she often lost the brilliant subtlety of the Russian authors’ works. “Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are two of the hardest writers to translate because they are so dense and multilayered,” says Balina, who suggests finding the most recently published work when looking for translations. “Newer works are often updated, breaking through cultural and generational differences.”

For her classes, Nancy Sultan, professor of Greek and Roman Studies, says she looks for beauty and utility in translations. “I select translations that are beautiful, true to the original and accessible to modern students.”

She noted using a translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* for a Humanities 101 course in which the students use a version taken from the cuneiform written on tablets. The original tablets have many blanks where the clay has crumbled. “It’s scary for an undergraduate to read a text that stops in the middle of a verse and picks up 40 or more lines later, but once they get past their shock, they enjoy playing ‘fill in the blanks,’” says Sultan. The same students later travel to Chicago with Sultan to view the original tablets at the Oriental Institute of Chicago.

Reading literature in another language is often a doorway to understanding the culture from which it came, says Sonja Fritzsche, associate professor of German and Eastern European Studies.

“Those who wish to travel to another country need to pick up a work of literature in translation,” Fritzsche says. “The complex life in that culture comes alive with the challenges and contradictions that the characters must face.”

Reading language is one thing, but hearing it can be another piece of the puzzle in understanding a culture, Balina believes. In her classes in Russian literature and culture in translation, she will read the original Russian texts and have students follow along with translated versions.

“You have to have a feeling of how it sounds in the language. It’s a different flavor to acquire,” Balina says. “Even if they don’t understand it, they can feel the heartbeat of the writer when they listen to the language in which it was written.”

When seeking a good translation, Fritzsche and Sheridan suggest looking to the experts, such as the list of Nobel Prize for Literature winners, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement* or *The New York Times Book Review*. “Since the reading experience is so subjective, it is also good to read a few pages of the work,” says Sheridan.

Sultan adds that a translation should also match the needs of the reader. “Do you just want to read [the work] for fun? Choose a very accessible, popular translation from a good reputable press. If you want to study the text, then do a bit more research.”

“Read as many translations as you can,” advises McGowan, who calls translation, “a delicate balance. You know if you translate something and I translate something, each one would be different.”

Sheridan believes that “good” is a subjective term when it comes to translated works of literature.

“No translation is perfect,” Sheridan says. “Translations give readers of one language access to important texts that they would otherwise not be able to appreciate.”

The importance of translations is that they offer people the opportunity to explore other cultures through the language of literature. “Language is a contextual compass for expressing life and the lived experience,” Sheridan says. “Language assumes a

cultural perspective with historical, socioeconomical, political and philosophical references.”

“Translations,” says Balina, “are always a beginning in the exploration of other cultures.”



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