



Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation

Umberto Eco

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'Translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures. A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural.' Umberto Eco is of the world's most brilliant and entertaining writers on literature and language. In this accessible and dazzling study, he turns his eye on the subject of translations and the problems the differences between cultures can cause. The book is full of little gems about mistranslations and misunderstandings. For example when you put 'Studies in the logic of Charles Sanders Peirce' through an internet translation machine, it becomes 'Studies in the logic of the Charles of sandpaper grinding machines Peirce'. In Italian 'ratto' has no connotation of 'contemptible person' but denotes speed ('you dirty rat' could take on a whole new meaning!) What could be a weighty subject is never dull, fired by Eco's immense wit and erudition, providing an entertaining read that illuminates the process of negotiation that all translators must make

Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation Details

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Boronia says

Absolutely loved this book. A plus if you can read & speak English, French, German, Italien and Spanish. Litteral translation from one language to the other: hilarious!

Manny says

Umberto Eco's collection of essays on the theory and practice of literary translation is very fine, and I devoured it in a day and a half; but I'm afraid to say that, the whole time I was reading it, I couldn't stop thinking about Astrid Lindgren's unforgettable character Karlsson på taket, aka Karlsson on the roof, Karlsson vom Dach, Karlsson sur le toit, ???????, ??????? ????? ?? ????? and a host of other names. One reason is already clear: Karlsson has been translated into a huge number of languages, and the challenges involved in this kind of venture are at the heart of what Eco is writing about here. Literal translations of any work of literature fall flat, for reasons Eco analyzes in great detail, and Karlsson is an excellent case in point. In the original Swedish, he has a unique and irresistible charm; in translation, he can easily come across as an insane egomaniac. Some of his translators (the German, and I am told by all my Russian friends, the Russian one) get him right; some (unfortunately, both the English ones) get him wrong; the French one is somewhere in the middle. As Eco says, you need to think deeply about the effect the author is trying to create and figure out how to create the same effect in the target language. That involves making compromises. You give up something less important, usually exact fidelity to the source text, to get something more important: here, the all-important thing is that Karlsson should be a loveable rogue and not a lunatic. Hence the subtitle of the book, "Translation as negotiation".

The other thing that made me think of Karlsson is, if I am to be blunt, that Eco does not list modesty among his many virtues. World's greatest polyglot literateur, guess who that is? World's most amusing translation theorist, guess who that is? World's best inserter of hidden references into postmodernist texts, guess who that is? World's greatest, cleverest, funniest, most-translated, most postmodern, all-round bestest author, guess who that is? In each case, I hear Lillebror's voice from the 1974 movie, answering in adoring tones: *det är DU, farbror Umberto!*

But you can't help loving him anyway, the old rascal. How does he do it? He's evidently performed some extremely cunning negotiations when he translated himself into written form...

Annie says

Well, Umberto Eco is Umberto Eco. Try as he might to be as academic and objective as possible, he just can't help reminding the reader of his own superiority and intelligence. And although it is something one most probably expects when choosing to read Eco, it still does ruin the reading experience in some moments. "Mouse or Rat?" is a collection of Eco's lectures on translation. And although I wouldn't say he presents novel ideas (at least from the point of view of a 2017 reader who already knows the basics of translation and

translation theory), he does offer some novel and interesting perspectives from which you can discuss or analyze certain aspects of translation.

The main topic of the book - negotiation in translation - is tackled from every possible side and explained thoroughly with extremely intelligent comments and remarks. Personally, I also especially loved the last chapter, although I felt like it was more of a linguistic discussion and the aspect of translation was only thrown in as an afterthought in the last paragraphs. On the other hand, I simply hated Eco's attempts to disprove Jakobson's theory of translation and his thoughts on adaptations. It just felt disgustingly pretentious and some of the points sounded naive and definitely exaggerated.

Eco gives numerous examples (often from translations of his own novels), which, interestingly enough, is both a strong point and a weak point of this book. He's very inconsistent in a way of presenting these examples. Sometimes, he quotes a translation in, for example, French, and then translates it back into English or at least thoroughly explains what is done well in badly in this translation and why it of interest for him or for the readers; with such examples, even a person who doesn't know any French will get the point.

However, what happens more often is that he quotes translations in various languages and offers little to no explanation as to what is even the point of him bringing up these texts. You're just left with half a page of text in Italian or German and if you don't understand it, then it's your problem, because Eco goes on without further explanations. One would have to be fluent in at least Italian, Spanish, French, and German to really get the full experience out of some of the chapters.

All in all, even if I rolled my eyes at Eco's pretentiousness and was dissatisfied with the poor handling of providing examples, the book was definitely an interesting read. Like I said, it does offer some interesting new perspectives and perhaps it may challenge your views on some aspects of translation.

Jenne says

This is a subject I just find endlessly fascinating.

Eco's theme in this book is that translation (particularly literary translation) is a "negotiation" between what you might call the 'letter' and the 'spirit' of the original. For example, the book's title refers to Eco's attempt to translate the scene in *Hamlet* where Hamlet stabs Polonius behind a curtain, saying "How now? A rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!".

Eco says he translated 'rat' as 'topo', which in Italian actually means mouse, because they don't really have a word that means 'rat' in the same sense. Of course, this misses the wordplay of 'rat' as someone who is a betrayer.

The book is mainly a series of similar examples, many taken from translations of Eco's own works. His writing is especially difficult in this respect, since it is full of allusions, both subtle and obvious, to all kinds of other literature and popular culture.

Mouse or Rat doesn't exactly break new ground in this field (Douglas Hofstadter's *Le ton Beau de Marot* covers similar ideas and also tells an affecting love story at the same time; I recommend it highly), but I could read examples like this pretty much endlessly.

The only problem I had is that you really need a working knowledge of all the languages used to get the full effect, but even my meager knowledge of German/French/Spanish/Italian was enough to get the idea.

Al Maki says

“Reflections on his experiences” of translation, as a writer whose works were translated; as a translator of others' work; as an editor; and drawing on his academic work for a theoretical basis. Lots of specific examples and explanations of the complexities. A particularly good section at the end on the illuminating complexities of translation of colour terms.

“...translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures – or two encyclopedias.”

To give an example, the Russian translator of *The Name of the Rose*, “...Helena Costiukovich, remarked that Latin words (whether or not transliterated in Cyrillic characters) are not only incomprehensible to Russian readers, but also do not convey any religious connotation. Thus Costiukovich decided to render my Latin quotations in the old ecclesiastic Slavonic used by the Orthodox Church in the Middle Ages – so that the reader could both vaguely understand their meaning and perceive the same aura of old religiosity.”

Eco wrote that translation is negotiation, a process wherein you give up something to gain something.

David Scarratt says

I always find Eco entertaining. This series of lectures is no exception, with obscure facts, erudite games, and arcane anecdotes a-plenty. However, it seemed to me to lack coherence. Even though the core idea -- translation as negotiation -- is mentioned in each chapter, it is never developed to any significant extent. It is not clear to me how Eco intends to cash his metaphor -- as, clearly, negotiation with "the unique voice of the original author in the text" is to be taken figuratively. Negotiation is a multi-player game; but here there is only the translator, along with ghosts and, er, echoes. Eco's discussion points out some of the not-so-obvious considerations that he and others have taken into account in literary translation, such as rhythm in novels, or the "vibe" of an erudite quotation, but never really situates the play in a context that makes it any clearer how you can pick a winner or a loser in the game. Many times it seems purely subjective, and rather unlike a true interpersonal negotiation.

Eco sets out to provide many examples of the kinds of translation problems he talks about, and this is good. It makes the book a useful source of illustrations of the creativity that can be required to translate from one language into another, and that can be hard to explain to people who've never tried it. I find it unfortunate that the examples are pretty much exclusively literary, though, especially since the idea of negotiation seems to be up to the task of relating translations for different purposes. Once again the idea just doesn't seem to be developed adequately.

It would be fascinating to read about translation into languages unrelated to European ones, as well, but I suppose one must draw the line somewhere, and Eco's personal competence in translating among the major literary languages of Europe is inspiring. As usual it makes me wonder what I've been wasting my time on.

Romelando Juanatas says

This book is an excellent book telling us the nature of translation and how it is different from interpretation. There were a lot divergence with how people in the past perceived translation as a form of interpretation or vice-versa. My take-home from the book is that in translation, there are mainly two ways to do it – to focus

on the source language or the target language. Anything in between may cause a hazy translation.

It would have been good for me if I had knowledge in European languages as there were a lot of examples in Italian, in French and others. Because I had no idea what those strings of words meant, either I read those selections in passing or I didn't read it at all. But I don't think my experience in reading the book was less as compared to those who knew those languages. I just feel like my experience is not similar to them. It's like watching a foreign movie without subtitles and still somehow getting the entire story while losing some fine details.

Overall, I like the book and I like the idea of translation as a form of negotiation between the language, the translator, the culture and the people to whom the service is being done for.

Patricia Macías García says

No sé si me he pasado con la mala nota, pero es que he terminado leyendo en diagonal (y porque tenía que leerlo para clase, que si no probablemente no lo habría terminado). El problema con el libro es que se supone que está enfocado a traductores, pero no creo que los traductores encuentren nada nuevo leyéndolo. Sin embargo, creo que sería muy difícil de comprender para alguien que no haya estudiado Traducción. Entonces, ¿qué es lo que pretendía Umberto Eco con este libro? ¿Solo contar sus anécdotas? La verdad es que resulta muy aburrido ver cómo te corta y pega en mitad de su explicación traducciones de sus obras o traducciones realizadas por él y comparadas con otras para demostrar que él lo habría hecho todo mejor siempre.

Douglas says

As one might expect, this isn't a book for everyone. One of my pet peeves is people who try to read Eco, for example, because someone said he would make you look smart for having read it and then say you hate it because you couldn't understand it. One doesn't climb Everest because someone thought it makes you look like a good climber, you climb it because you can--or you fail. But for lovers of language and semiotic theory, there's just not a clearer, more enjoyable little book. Eco has a few books on translation, certainly on symbols and their interrelationships, but this one fits a number of his obscure treasures. It does get a bit dry now and then, in his wonderful scholarly tone, but it usually picks up right away and you're carried away with him on this magnificent linguistic journey. It helps if you know a little German and French, Italian and Spanish, but it's not absolutely necessary. This book covered so much ground for me, and gave a stimulating vocabulary with it, that I can't help but recommend it--to the right crowd.

Rob says

As a self-confessed word game player, the late Umberto Eco was clearly not an easy man to translate for. He was also a translator himself, which at least allows him to allow that he is making things difficult for people, but he was also a stickler, and an eruditely blinkered one at that who did not always see the absurdity of what he was demanding from his collaborators (8 different archaic ways of saying "red" in your language even if you can only find six, and those at a full Latinate stretch).

As Eco writes: "Sometimes I ask myself if by chance I write novels purely in order to put in hermetic references that are comprehensible only to me. I feel like a painter who, in a landscape, puts among the leaves of the trees – almost invisible – the initials of his beloved. And it does not matter if not even she is able to identify them."

Case closed, as we might say. The appeal of Eco actually lies in his investigative (and rather atavistic) zeal. It is not in vain that his breakthrough novel, *The Name of the Rose*, was sold as a kind of mediaeval literary whodunnit. His connection with his surprisingly large readership (given his flighty concerns) comes through the fact that he is the indefatigable and avuncular academic with more ways up the mountain than anyone else. Whatever had to do with language, he took it on board.

This book from 2003 is in fact based on a series of lectures on translation in which he looks at a number of the issues that come with the field, from intertextual concerns to how to take on board certain unbridgeable differences, such as in rhyming poetry. To a translator, it is endlessly interesting, but also often maddeningly pernickety. For example, he muses on Fredric Jameson's decision to translate "coupé" as "hansom cab", and allows that "coupé", which exists in English but has become more readily identified with a car, may have been less identifiable for the reader than "hansom cab". But then Eco suggests that with the hansom cab the coachman is behind and in the coupé in front, eventually conflating this "difference" in mode of transport with a Prime Minister arriving at the scene of a disaster by car instead of helicopter and what readers might infer from such a difference. But very few readers know (or care) whether the rider of a hansom cab is in the front or back, seeing it simply as a horse-drawn carriage, and this distinction indeed only takes on importance for the scene if the driver in some way has to interact with the characters. Which is precisely the key point for the translator. If not, then the word chosen has to be one that will best paint the scene. If so, then it is necessary to ensure that the choice does not muddy the viewer's perception, and the translator's research has to take in the fact of the driver's position. Translation is indeed about negotiations of meanings but it is even more importantly about gauging your readership correctly without speaking down to them or overestimating them.

Eco is right to state that a translator must understand all the ins and outs of the text he/she is translating, and that all the necessary research must be done to ensure there are no errors of understanding. His view of translation as a form of negotiation between languages is also a good analogy, hinting at the pragmatic decisions we need to make when faced with terms from the source language that do have a fixed equivalent in the target language, or when needing to suggest elements that the source language reader will automatically feel upon reading the source text. However, in making "rules" we are always invoking the arrival of the exception: the truth is that the translator has to ensure that the reader in the target language understands the book in the way the author intended for their counterpart in his/her own language. Where the rhyme is necessary, look for a rhyme, where a list of terms for red is necessary, ensure there are enough for the point to be made clear and the character rendered faithfully. But whether there is truly a difference between 6 and 8 of said definitions is really a question for Eco and his desire to play games, hermetic or otherwise.

To be fair, when removed from his love for verbal games, Eco actually argues a similar point, "Translators must negotiate with the ghost of a distant author, with the disturbing presence of foreign text, with the phantom of the reader they are translating for. Translation is a negotiation to such an extent that translators must also negotiate with publishers, because a translation may be more or less domesticated or foreignised according to the context in which the book is published, or the age of its expected readers." In short, the same way that Sun Tzu said that one must "one must know one's enemy and know oneself," it is paramount for a translator to understand the work and its context as well as the target audience and the moment in history. The tools that can be used for this come more from reading and culture than they do from theory, but

Eco does a good job of setting out some of the theoretical names for the tasks that form part of the bread and butter of every translator's (increasingly computerised) day.

Fips says

Whilst I can't claim to have had massive expectations from this book, the author's reputation, experience, and the subject matter piqued my interest at first glance. This book is a collection of essays roughly sewn together reflecting the author's personal experiences in the field of translation, either via conversations and experiences with translators and translations of his own works, or through translating by his own hand.

As a collection of personal reflections collected together in essay form, there are plenty of interesting and oft amusing anecdotes which Eco ties together to support his thesis of translation as a form of negotiation between cultures. Relying to a large extent on examples taken from the various translations of his own works, he illustrates how the idea of translation must be seen through the capacity of the medium. That is to say that a language provides only a limited resource, and one rooted in its culture, which makes the art of translation a constant battle, a question of compromise, of content and connotation, of rhyme and register, of familiarity and foreignness. Eco's own works provide plenty of toothy work for the translator, which he here amply dissects and compares, and these are at times supplemented by no lesser fry than the likes of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, for example.

Eco's thesis notwithstanding, there are problems with the book which for me detracted from my enjoyment. Firstly, as some other reviewers have pointed out, there are some pretty steep language requirements in order to really be able to fully understand many of Eco's examples. Italian is, naturally, the most often quoted language, along with French and Spanish as a Romanic trio of languages, and German crops up on occasion. In the case of the latter, there were a number of obvious mistakes in the book, which no doubt rest to a large extent on it not being one of Eco's stronger suits. Indeed, although nominally a work exploring translation as a whole, the author's own (albeit impressive) lingual skills narrows it down to an investigation of translation between Romance languages and English, with really very little mention of non-Indo-European languages or cultures, where far more interesting problems doubtless arise.

Another important detractor is that as the book is a compilation of essays based on a lecture series, rather than one contiguous treatise, there were numerous occasions where Eco repeated himself relatively excessively. One example which springs to mind is his quotation of W. V. Quine that a sentence such as "neutrinos lack mass" is for some languages of the world untranslatable, a quotation which crops up three or four times in different essays.

One final criticism, although this is certainly more a matter of taste, is that with all that brain power, Eco tends to write with a lot of hubris. Another commenter quoted an excellent line which I think sums it up nicely: "Sometimes I ask myself if by chance I write novels purely in order to put in hermetic references that are comprehensible only to me. I feel like a painter who, in a landscape, puts among the leaves of the trees - almost invisible - the initials of his beloved. And it does not matter if not even she is able to identify them." For all the fascination that the subject of translation has to offer, discussing the translation of symbols invisible to everyone but the author is certainly the most abstract and esoteric topic he could have chosen to concentrate on.

Ultimately this book offers a very interesting read, but only for the right, qualified reader. I should say a

command of at least one Romance language is a must, as well as a reasonable familiarity with the field of translation. For the uninitiated, a more basic but also more thorough and elaborate investigation of the world of translation can be found in the recent *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?: Translation and the Meaning of Everything*.

Wesley Gerrard says

This book is a collection of essays on the topic of translation. It is constantly exploring the role of the translator as a negotiator in the way he interprets texts for his target audience. Eco points towards an underlying perfect language that writer uses which transcends the individual tongues a work may be written in. What duty does the translator have in presenting an author's true thoughts? The examples are plentiful and obviously abound from a man with a great deal of real-life experience as a translator. I found the in depth discussion of poetry translation a little over my head and very complicated but it gives you something to aim at as you learn the art and process of becoming a translator. The essays build on the work of other translation scholars and argues for and against their ideas and methods. I found that the text reads very well and is an ideal compliment to the more formal study one gets from course texts. I am sure that after a few rereads Umberto Eco's message will reveal itself more fully to me.

Pete Harris says

Interesting, with many examples of how passages of Eco's own works had to be translated using different approaches to get the best (not necessarily the most literally faithful) equivalent in different languages.

It's not primarily about surface language differences so much as differences in cultural and literary background that have to be navigated so the impact of a passage can be delivered in the way the author intended, even if it means some meaning is lost or changed.

To appreciate the examples as much as possible, it'll help to have at least minimal reading familiarity (not fluency) with some of Italian, French, Spanish, Catalan, German.

What this book is really good for is making you realise you only got about 10% of what Eco was doing in any of his books that you thought you understood :)

Shelley says

3.5

Edward says

This is a moderately interesting and informative collection of essays on the subject of translation. It centres mostly on anecdotes about Eco's own novels, which (as I have not yet read them) put me at a disadvantage in terms of my appreciation for this book. I have an intermediate level of competence with Italian, but not

French, Spanish or German, which are the other languages covered in this book. A reader familiar with all those languages would be better able to appreciate the subtleties described, but ironically, would probably not have much to learn from this book.

My favourite chapter was the last one, which contained an interesting analysis of the delineation between colours in various languages and cultures. This chapter in itself could have formed the basis for quite an interesting book.
