Activity Sheet no. 1 – "Different ways to translate"

What about the first aspect, namely, selection in translation? When you tell a story, as said, you select, make choices, and so on. This is done with your audience (and the context) in mind. Likewise, a translation has an audience. But the way to select differs from storytelling. There are different ways to translate a text. They are often divided into six types: word-for-word, literal, faithful, balanced, idiomatic, and free, with the first being the closest to the text and the last furthest away.

For example, "Certains peuvent croire que je m'accroche." (Cocteau)

Word-for-word: "Certain can to believe that I hang myself up."

Literal: "Certain can believe that I am hanging on."

Faithful: "Certain people may think that I am hanging on."

Balanced: "Some may think that I am hanging on."

Idiomatic: "Some may think that I am sitting pretty."

Free: "You may think I'm doing alright, but I haven't a clue!"

The first two scarcely depart from the literal sense of the French – for example, *certains* = 'certain ones' and *croire* = believe – but the faithful and balanced turn toward rendering the French into more natural English prose – for example, *certains* = 'some' and *croire* = think.

Exercise no. 1

In order to build this understanding of the difference, translate the following sentence (a) literally, (b) in a balanced way, and, finally, (c) in a free or idiomatic manner:

« tu descends au village faire quelques courses pour ta mère, acheter du tabac pour ton père, des cigarettes pour toi. » (Perec)

Literal:

Balanced:

Free/Idiomatic:

The way in which the French sentences in the example above were translated employed specific translation techniques:

(a) Transposition is when a grammatical structure in one language is altered when translated into another. For example, in the 'literal' example above, the infinitive 'croire' becomes 'in thinking' and 'certains' for 'certain people' or 'some'.

(b) Modulation is using a phrase that is different in the source and target languages to convey the same idea. For example, 'j'y tiens' becomes 'it's important to me'.

(c) Calque differs from modulation to the extent that phrases are translated directly from the French, rather modulated using another cognate English phrase. A translation of "on n'apprend pas à un vieux singe à faire des grimaces" as "don't teach an old monkey to pull faces" is a calque and is completely fine. But there is also the option to switch the French proverb for another English cognate, for example, 'don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs'.

Exercise no. 2

Let us do the same again with another slightly trickier sentence. Translate the following sentence (a) literally, (b) in a balanced way, and, finally, (c) in a free or idiomatic manner:

« À travers le brouillard, il contemplait des clochers, des édifices dont il ne savait pas les noms ; puis il embrassa, dans un dernier coup d'oeil […]Notre-Dame … » (Flaubert)

Literal:

Balanced:

Free/Idiomatic: