

Translating Translation: Finding the Beginning

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Alberto Alvaro Ríos

Translating Translation: Finding the Beginning

Linguists, by using electrodes on the vocal cords, have been able to demonstrate that English has tenser vowels than, for example, Spanish. The body itself speaks a language differently, so that moving from one language to another is more than translating words. It's getting the body ready as well. It's getting the heart ready along with the mind.

I've been intrigued by this information. It addresses the physicality of language in a way that perhaps surprises us. In this sense, we forget that words aren't simply what they mean – they are also physical acts.

I often talk about the duality of language using the metaphor of binoculars, how by using two lenses one might see something better, closer, with more detail. The apparatus, the binoculars, are of course physically clumsy – as is the learning of two languages, and all the signage and so on that this entails – they're clumsy, but once put to the eyes a new world in that moment opens up to us. And it's not a new world at all – it's the same world, but simply better seen, and therefore better understood.

When I was three or four, my parents bought a new house in what would later become a small suburb of Nogales, Arizona, on the border of Mexico, some four miles outside town. My father was born in Mexico, on the border of Guatemala, and my mother was born in England. I had languages.

As we kept driving out to watch the house being built, my mother got to make a number of choices regarding details, among which was the color of various rooms.

My mother, when asked what color she wanted the kitchen, said to the workers who were all Mexican, and who spoke very

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little English, *limon*. She said it both because she wanted the kitchen to be yellow and because she wanted to start learning Spanish. The workers nodded yes. But when we came back the next day, the kitchen was painted bright green, like a small jungle. Mexican *limones*, my mother found out, are small and green, that color exactly, no mistake.

So that's the color that wall stayed for the next eight years. She said it was a reminder to us all that there was a great deal to learn in the world. You might laugh at first, but after eight years you start to think about it.

And she was right. It was a perfect, small example of that other way to see things, and for eight years the kitchen for us was, perhaps in a very large way, an even better place than school.

Let me tell another story. Several years ago, a man, who only spoke Spanish, was arrested for illegally crossing the border from Mexico into the United States at Douglas, Arizona. He was put in a cell, but it was late in the day, the shift was changing, and the jailer forgot to tell the next shift that someone was back there. It's apparently a small jail, and nobody thought to look since no one heard anything. The man was left there from a Thursday to a Saturday, when a janitor found him.

But why didn't you say something, he was asked. Yet this very question underscores exactly the lack of understanding between the man and his jailers. The man, who was not a criminal, simply did what he was supposed to do. He had manners.

But manners don't always mean good manners.

We try to do what people want, but they have to know what they're asking for. That search for understanding is often itself a search for, and an act of, translation as well.

Several years ago I was doing an Artists in the Schools residency at the high school in Eloy, Arizona. Two memorable events occurred. The first was among a group of gifted students: a fire alarm rang, but nobody got up. We were having such a good time, nobody seemed willing to stop. One student said, "It's probably fake anyway. Couldn't we just send someone out to check?"

That was nice, but something else occurred on the same day, a Thursday. I was also working with a group of – what to call them, what were they called? Non-gifted students? In this class, there was an attentive group of four or five students in front, but in back and to the sides students were in various states of engagement, the most active of which was a poker game.

The students were Mexican and Chicano, mostly, migrant worker children, and those not being entirely attentive were comprised mostly of *cholos*. Cholos are what Pachucos used to be. The young men, in particular, have a uniform: chino pants, black belt, thick, black shoes, two T-shirts – a regular one over a thin-strapped one – and a hair net.

The hair net by itself is interesting, and to an outsider perhaps effeminate. But there were many reasons for a hair net. These boys' older brothers often worked, for example, in fast-food restaurants, and had to wear nets. And a net, it was a show of attitude – you took your net off when the important things happened. School was not that.

In working with these students, I was also faced with a substitute teacher, who had no ideas on how to control the class and who was very glad that I was the one standing up in front.

The week went its own way, with me talking and reading, the students in front responding, and the others playing cards and throwing pencils. But I know this classroom, and that was the thing. I also understood what happened next.

On this Thursday of the week, one of the boys in back got up, starting walking his walk to the front, ostensibly to sharpen a pencil, but he kind of hung around me at the desk. I was done for the day, and everyone was working, or supposed to be working, on a writing assignment.

"Hey, *ese*," he said to me, with a small pointing of the right hand.

"Hey," I said.

He nodded his head. "You really like this poetry shit," he asked.

"Yes," I said.

And then he followed with the very best thing I could have hoped for. "So, how many fights you had?"

In that moment I knew exactly what he was asking me. He was trying to understand, to make some bridge, to make some sense for himself. It was a moment I won't forget. Whatever I answered doesn't finally matter. He had already found some kind of answer in his question.

He was looking for an equation, for something to understand. And he said it in the best way he could.

Language is more than what we say – it's also how we say it, and whether or not we even understand what we are saying. Language is manners, then, well-said or not; language is the at-

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tempt to understand as much as the understanding itself. It is the how as much as the what, form as much as content, intent as much as words.

These are the lateral muscles and physical directions of language that translation often fails to use. I had to be able to hear what this young man was asking me, whether or not I was prepared. It was another vocabulary altogether, yet filled with familiar words.

But maybe that's all right. Maybe that's exactly what keeps a computer or a book from doing the job. Maybe that's what keeps us human, and engaged, and necessary.

How many fights have I had? he asked.

Just one, I said, like you.