

Translator and Reporter: A Behind the Scenes Conversation

By Kari Lydersen and Susana Galilea

After months of collaborating on articles for *Contratiempo* without ever having met, when Chicago-based translator Susana Galilea and journalist Kari Lydersen ran into each other at a fundraiser, they began an ongoing conversation about the intricacies of and parallels between their work.

Lydersen, a staff writer for *The Washington Post* and freelancer for *Contratiempo*, a Spanish-language cultural and political magazine, learned how translators are similar to and different from editors, and how they might often become more familiar with a writer's work than the writers themselves. Galilea, who usually translates for social service organizations and advertising clients, got a window into the atmosphere-rich world of journalism and the role translators play in it. Both gained more appreciation for their own work and the other's craft through these free-flowing, ongoing discussions.

In May of this year, Galilea and Lydersen shared their comments during a lively forum hosted by the Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters at DePaul University in Chicago. A dialogue between the two follows.

KL: We first started talking when I made an offhand remark about how impressed I was that your Spanish translations were so able to capture, it seemed, the exact spirit and structure of what I was saying. I had initially assumed that my exact word choice and construction was not that crucial, since I figured my articles would come across fairly differently in Spanish. But as someone who speaks Spanish enough to understand and appreciate the translation, I really was surprised to see how true the translation was to my English draft.

SG: I must say this conversation is giving me new appreciation for what is involved in my work—the endless assortment of talent, knowledge, training, and intuition that goes into the task. You do not necessarily get a chance to discuss that aspect of it so much. You discuss the specific work, but not the larger picture of everything that goes into it. Hearing an outsider's perspective is helpful because in the course of the profession, you have to constantly educate the client

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about what you do and why it is of value. Clients do not always understand, and often think anyone who speaks a language can handle a translation.

KL: I will admit I used to think that; now I see differently! Talking about translation with you has actually really made me appreciate language as a whole more, and it has made me spend more time considering and listening to the words I use. In many ways I feel like a translator has a role parallel to that of an editor, since you are working with a writer to clearly define what they want to say and to produce a finished product. But it must be strange for you to be in this role yet not be able to change or actually edit writing

when you feel it is needed. You have to be true to the original document even if it is not a perfect or even a good one.

SG: My clients run the gamut from top of the line ad companies to low budget nonprofits, and you find the whole spectrum of flawless and messy writing across the board. You have to go back to the client sometimes when you do not understand something, because you have to understand it in order to translate it. Sometimes this interaction is the first time clients realize something does not make sense or that they made an error. You are often the one seeing all the glitches, since you are looking at the piece with a magnifying glass to do your job. I never had a client who was not grateful to have potential issues pointed out to them. But you have to be tactful and diplomatic, since you do not want to offend any egos. So I make sure to keep my comments on the level of linguistics, rather than passing judgment on the quality of a piece.

KL: You have described how, since you translate for Spanish-speaking audiences from very different countries and cultures, you have to try to make the tone and language relevant for all of them. That sounds really challenging, and that is similar to what reporters, at least from mainstream general-audience newspapers and magazines, need to do. As a reporter, even if you are only dealing with an American audience, there is such a range of cultures, ages, and education levels in this country.

SG: It takes a very good understanding of the cultural codes, both of the language/culture you are translating into and the one you are

translating from. You have to find equivalent customs and reference points in both. Every culture is full of its own conventions, sayings, and self-references. You need a very deep connection with both cultures, and ideally you must have spent time soaking up the language and way of life in both settings. Language is really a whole series of codes, connotations, and assumptions based on an entire lifetime of existing and having experiences in a certain environment.

KL: In both journalism and translation, it seems that specialization is very beneficial, but at the same time you need to be skilled at learning about a given topic or culture very quickly and then conveying that knowledge in condensed form to your audience. It is like you are always getting crash courses on different subjects.

SG: Yes, specialization is important in translation. It makes it easier to deal with terminology or concepts you are already familiar with, and it gives you an edge in the market. In translation you really have to know your limitations, and you have to be very honest with yourself and turn down work that you are not fully qualified for. While I routinely translate for a broad Spanish-speaking audience in the U.S., I would not accept an assignment targeted exclusively to a specific country in Latin America, since in all likelihood my attempt at sounding natural would come across as “foreign.” Even worse, say you are doing highly specialized medical translation; if you make a mistake, lives may be at stake.

KL: I could see that. There are similar situations with journalism, for example, when you are reporting health information or advice to the

public. Things like that make you think about the power of the media and words in general.

What are some of the main differences right now between American language and culture and Spanish-speaking cultures?

SG: Hmm, well in the U.S. there is the whole thing with political correctness now—and to a certain extent it is starting to seep into the Spanish language. Many of the Spanish terms that have been adopted to discuss evolving sociological topics are direct translations from the English (i.e., disability/*discapacidad*, transgender/*transgénero*, etc.). Take the term *violencia de género*, which has managed to enter the mainstream even if the Spanish word *género* originally only applied to grammatical structures and not to “gender” as used in English to indicate male or female. There are a lot of debates among translators over if and how their own languages are supposed to reflect this political correctness being “exported” from the U.S.

KL: In journalism it is also hard to keep up with what the most current and accepted terms are. Even in describing race, when do you say black and when do you say African-American? Or Latino versus Hispanic? How do you reconcile how someone refers to themselves with the accepted politically correct term? I know that Latin America is also very complicated and diverse racially—that must be an issue in translation.

SG: Yes, a lot of times it is a bit tricky, because the issue of racial makeup is treated so bluntly in the U.S. When I came here I was amazed to see these boxes on the Census or other forms where you have to iden-

tify yourself racially. For anyone who does not live in the U.S., that may be quite shocking. Usually if you are translating for a Spanish-speaking audience in the U.S., you have to assume people are used to checking these boxes, so you just do not make a big deal of it and translate it as is. With the social service agencies I work for, often that racial data is information they might simply need for grant proposals. You always have to keep in mind what the purpose of the document is.

KL: Do you ever turn down work because it is offensive to you, or you just cannot stand to read and work on it over and over?

SG: During my entire career I have only turned down material twice because it was ideologically objectionable to me. Without going into too many details, both assignments had to do with a certain aspect of law enforcement I felt quite uncomfortable being exposed to. I know of colleagues who have refused assignments of a pornographic nature on moral grounds. The way I see it, if you are truly uncomfortable handling the material in question, you will not be able to do it justice, so it is best to turn it down.

KL: I think in both our professions you are constantly learning. That is one of the things I like most about journalism. I imagine you feel the same way.

SG: Translators tend to be very curious beings to begin with. We are gluttons for knowledge, references, and connections. So the wider and more diverse your knowledge, the better off you are. No knowledge ever goes to waste, because you never know what is going to come across

the page of your source document.

KL: For example, you translated an interview I did with film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, and I was impressed how you were able to translate a lot of colloquialisms and industry jargon he used talking about *schlockmeister* Spanish filmmaker Jess Franco.

SG: This is one of those happy accidents where your background makes you ideally suited to translate a given paragraph. It just so happens I grew up in Spain during that time period and was familiar with the type of cinema being referred to. In Spain in the 1970s there was all this opening up of censorship, all these movies that were risqué and even tasteless. But they were a reflection of a very unique social setting, and I can still remember how it “felt.” And as far as the word *schlockmeister*, I lived in New York for many years, and found that Yiddish pretty much became second nature!

KL: I am still fascinated by how you translate subtle terms that carry all these connotations and double meanings.

SG: In the case of *schlockmeister*, you have one word that carries a contradiction. The dictionary will tell you that *schlock* means shoddy or of poor quality, yet *meister* brings positive connotations of being in charge. Then there is the issue of context and the very unique realm of Series-B movies. This is one of those cases where, as a linguist, you tip your hat to the perfection of an untranslatable concept. In the end, since this was an interview with a film expert, I chose accuracy over other linguistic considerations. In the absence of an equivalent all-encompassing term in my

language, I had to make peace with the fact that sometimes you have to sacrifice connotations for the sake of precision. It is a whole process of deciding what cannot be left out.

KL: One of the most interesting things you told me about translation is the goal of reproducing not only the meaning of the words, but the tone, and how sometimes you might

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use totally different words, but maintain the same tone. In my own work I think the tone is produced subconsciously. It is intriguing to think more about what, concretely, creates and constitutes “tone.”

SG: When I started translating your articles, I found reproducing the atmosphere you create with your very vivid descriptions quite a challenge. Instead of sticking closely to every adjective, I found I needed to take in the entire paragraph and contemplate the image that emerged—its sounds, smells, and color—almost in a cinematic sense. Once I was able to visualize that atmosphere, it was easier to come up with the language to describe it. A lot of times in translation you have all these tools and tricks, but what ends up giving you the answer you want is tone.

KL: I am the most conscious of tone and have the most trouble with it when I am trying to write with more attitude, especially for a younger audience or a magazine or website where you want the tone to be more snappy and hip.

SG: I am always amazed at the current trend in American journalism to turn every heading into a linguistic pun, no matter how far-fetched! I have not seen this trend take hold in the Spanish-speaking media, so “snappy” is not necessarily a concept that translates well. On the other hand, if I was translating articles for a teen magazine, I would have to research that tone and see how teens are addressed in Spanish-language magazines—how they talk—and just soak that up.

KL: How did you first learn English and acquire all the subtleties and intricacies of it? From years of speaking Spanish, I know how many gradations of proficiency and fluency there are, and I know many people live in a country for decades without really becoming comfortable with the language.

SG: I grew up with Spanish, French, and some Catalan on the side, which I am sure all helped in learning English later on. I remember when I was a kid asking my father what the title of the movie “Love Story” meant, and when he told me I blushed—I was this bashful kid! I learned a great deal from reading novels, watching movies with subtitles, and listening to records while reading the liner notes—back when records had liner notes. That was before the Internet! But the English I

Continued on p.21

Paper Product Terminology

ASPAPPEL

www.aspapel.es

An extremely useful six-language glossary (Spanish, English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese).

Papermaking Process Virtual Tour

www.internationalpaper.com/Our%20Company/Learning%20Center/Paper_Tour_Apps/Tour/paper.htm

Though not exactly a glossary per se, the website of International Paper provides a wonderful overview of the steps involved in the papermaking process, as well as the principal terminology. For best results, a small program, known as a plugin, from iPIX will speed the download time for each of the photos in this virtual tour. Your computer may already have this plugin, but if it does not, you will be asked if you would like to download it (this download is very quick).

Plastics Processing

During the process of researching polymer chemistry, in addition to the aforementioned textbook on organic chemistry, I unearthed quite a few excellent monolingual glossaries and other resources on plastics processing, including:

Glossary on Plastics

http://homepages.enterprise.net/cais-torg/Main_p.html#p_thermo

Dow Corning

www.dowcorning.com/contentapps/glossary_index.asp?app=Glossary&DCWS=Silanes%20Solutions&DCWS=Plastics%20and%20Rubber

In addition to the fairly extensive English-language glossary of terms and definitions, this site also claims to provide information in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and German, with the promise to add more languages in the future. However, it was disappointing to find no foreign-language equivalents for the terms in the glossary.

Odds and Ends

And the list—and the mining operation—continues. You can find glossaries and other resources on virtually any subject. I even found a trilingual glossary (Spanish, French, and English) of disaster terminology at www.proteccioncivil.org/glosario/GlossaryEs.htm.

Finally, if all that digging makes you hungry, be sure to visit the marvelous website offered by the Café Columbus in beautiful Mar Del Plata, Argentina (a.k.a. *la Cocina de Pasqualino Marchese*) for a wonderful menu of fresh seafood dishes, complete with recipes, preparation instructions, and mouthwatering color photographs, not to mention some nice music. The site (www.pasqualinonet.com.ar) also includes an excellent glossary of culinary ingredients featuring Argentine cuisine.

Until next time, happy digging!

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Translator and Reporter: A Behind the Scenes Conversation Continued from p. 17

was exposed to in Spain was an academic blend of British and American, so I had to get a crash course in “real life” American English when I came to the U.S. I remember on the plane over here I asked for “the loo,” and I will never forget the puzzled look the flight attendant gave me.

KL: For many years you were seriously involved with modern dance. Does that have any parallels to translation?

SG: Yes, for me language and movement are very similar experiences. For some people language is a purely intellectual exercise, but when I am translating it is a very physical thing. I need to grapple with the tone, the subtleties, engage the sentence and ask, “Where are you going?!” I want to know the rhythm of the sentence, the impulse, the energy that fuels it.

At the risk of sounding new agey, it is a little bit like alchemy. You throw all these elements in the cauldron, stir

it around, let them interact, and see what happens. The best phase is when you go back for the final read and forget that there was a source document there, and just hear it flow.

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