

Writers Aloud

Episode 413

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 413 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, Adriana Hunter contemplates the limitations of automated language translation by computers and the liberties that human translators simply *must* take with source material. Then, Brian Clegg considers our human tendency to interpret the world via patterns and categories, and explains the trouble this causes when it comes to getting books into the hands of readers that might enjoy them. First, here's Adriana Hunter with 'Necessary Departures'.

Necessary Departures

*Idiom, word games and domestication in
literary translation*

Adriana Hunter

A FRIEND CONTACTED ME recently because she needed to have a letter translated into Malay and she assumed that, as a literary translator, I would be able to recommend an app. Perhaps she pictures me cutting and pasting French phrases, sentences or even entire paragraphs into a translation app and then stitching the results together into a book. People do often ask me, 'Can't that all be done by computers now?'

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Machine translation *is* improving all the time and it can be a useful resource because it can cope with straightforward sentences. But when students express concern about translation being a dying art, I like to use an amusing trick to show them just how badly and quickly machine translation can go wrong. We take the title of a book, film or television show, ask an app to translate it into another language and then to translate this result back into English.

Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* goes into Croatian and comes back as 'Mother's Week'. We've lost much more than the specificity of Sunday; we've lost the cultural significance of what most people now call 'Mother's Day' and the elegant period feel of the term 'Mothering Sunday' which would have been used in the 1920s when the book is set.

Strictly Come Dancing returns from a trip to Italy as 'The dance hall advances vigorously' — the syntax of the three-word phrase has been misunderstood and repurposed as a sentence, and all cultural references to the long-running BBC show *Come Dancing* and to Baz Luhrmann's film *Strictly Ballroom* are lost.

And I've now used that word three times, the word that so many people associate with translation: the word 'lost'. I'm accusing the apps of losing things in translation, but I like to think we human translators do a lot of *finding* things in translation. When it's impossible to replicate something as it appears in the original, the translator's job is to find a solution that will give the readers the same 'ride' as readers of the source text.

There's a combination of science and art in a translator's work. The science is taking words at face value and translating them accurately. If we were asked to translate 'The cat sat on the mat' into another language, we wouldn't translate it to mean 'the dog lay down on the lino'...but there's a whole art to deciding whether the words *should* be taken at face value. Does 'the cat sat on the mat' mean only what it says? Or is it all about the rhyme, in which case we'd need to work a lot harder to replicate

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that in another language. But there's more: Is the sentence being used deliberately because it's a stock phrase that most English speakers will recognise? Or, if this sentence appeared in a novel about someone called Catherine, nicknamed Cat, whose boyfriend was called Matt, it could be playing on all of the above while also making a specific comment about their relationship or their bedroom activities.

These are just the sort of problems that confront the translator. Rather than giving up and losing something in translation, we often have to step away from the original material in our search for solutions. Very early in my career, I translated the book *Five Photos of My Wife* by Agnès Desarthe who speaks extremely good English and herself works as a literary translator of English into French. We were chatting about my translation and came to a passage where she had used the French idiom 'droit comme un i' to describe an embattled woman, standing tall in difficult circumstances. Translated literally, the phrase means 'upright as the letter i'. I'm ashamed to say I didn't recognise this as an idiom and thought it was a simile that Agnès herself had chosen, so I'd lamely translated it as something like 'an upright little figure like the letter i'. Agnès very diplomatically told me, 'I think you need to let go of the original' and I had a powerful image of being in a hot-air balloon, sailing skywards and letting go of the earth — the better to see it from above. I came up with 'upright as a little tin soldier' which replicated the pathos of the original, and Agnès's advice has served me well through more than ninety further translations: I've learned to check whether strange-sounding phrases are French idioms, and the image of the hot-air balloon has stayed with me and has helped me feel the exhilaration of letting go of the letter of the text in order to serve its spirit.

Idiom is an obvious example of when a translator needs to let go. And it's also a good example of where the algorithms fall down: they translate the words in front of them, whereas I've learned to consult Google or a native French speaker about strange-sounding phrases. Once I know a phrase is an expression in French, it's easy to find its English equivalent.

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With Virginie Grimaldi's book *Chasing the Stars*, I needed help from a French-born friend to understand that one young character keeps unintentionally mashing up different expressions. I had fun creating the same effect in English with things like: 'You mustn't put the cart before the gift horse's mouth' and 'Don't teach your grandmother to walk on eggshells.' Word for word, these sentences bore no relation to the French originals, but in terms of defining the character and making the reader smile, they were identical.

The fun really begins when a strange-sounding phrase isn't a set expression but something that the author has coined. As with my 'cat sat on the mat' example earlier, they may have done something a little different for any number of reasons to do with the rhythm, rhyme or alternative meanings of the words. A perfect example of this is word games and puns, which – hardly surprisingly – are often the hardest part of any text to translate. They also almost inevitably require the translator to make one of those necessary departures from the original.

As an illustration, in a career so far spanning twenty-three years and more than ninety books I've translated about four-and-a-half-million words of text and that has included a *huge* number of word games...but in all that, I can think of only *one* that I was able to recreate as it was in the French original. It was in Frédéric Beigbeder's £9.99.

The sentence was: 'Des filles potables parlant dans des téléphones portables', which translates literally as 'drinkable girls talking into mobile phones' but the word 'drinkable' here means 'tasty' or 'yummy' and the sentence plays on the near-homonyms 'potable/ tasty' and 'portable/ mobile'. The answer was very simple: 'Nubile girls talking into mobile phones', which accurately recreates the casual misogyny of the original. All I can say is thank goodness I wasn't working for the American market because the word game wouldn't have worked if the girls had been talking into cell phones.

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But what would I do if I had to say ‘cell phone’ and the pun was untranslatable? One thing I certainly wouldn’t do is regurgitate the French words in English and then laboriously explain the pun (as I have done for the purposes of this talk). And I would never ignore a pun and move on swiftly; that would sabotage the author’s intention and deprive the reader of a laugh or a smile and some of the book’s personality. No, translators ensure that jokes don’t get lost in translation, by finding other comparable jokes: We might find a nearby sentence in which a different pun suggests itself; or add a new sentence with a pun in it; or even alter the meaning of the original sentence in order to create a pun if the laugh is more important than the content in this particular instance.

One area of my work where there’s an especially high laugh count is in the Asterix albums. They are crammed with word games, visual gags and cultural references, and the job of translating is made harder by the fact that – in graphic works – the words are intimately paired with images. In the last album I translated, *Asterix and the Griffin*, there’s a clueless Sarmatian character fetching ingredients for the wizard Getafix to make his magic potion. It’s a running gag with several iterations of Getafix wearily chiding the Sarmatian with lines like ‘not bacon lard, rainbow chard’. The sequence culminates in an image of the Sarmatian brandishing a pair of tongs and a couple of saddles and saying, ‘as requested, O druid, tongs and two saddles’ except that in French the words ‘tongs’, ‘une pince’, and ‘two saddles’, ‘deux selles’, put together – ‘une pince et deux selles’ – sound exactly like ‘une pincée de sel’, which means a pinch of salt... and that’s a highly likely final ingredient for a recipe. What was I to do? I couldn’t change the image, I couldn’t alter the fact that he was clutching a pair of tongs and two saddles, but this image somehow had to work with an ingredient for a potion. I couldn’t even ask to move the speech bubble to change which character was talking. I came up with ‘Tongs and two saddles, O druid...or was it the tongues of two adders’. This is nothing like as neat as the French joke, but it too plays on assonance, and this new possible ingredient – adders’ tongues – sounds rather pleasingly like something from the three witches’ brew in *Macbeth*. This raises a smile

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with the English reader *and* makes a cultural reference which is another hallmark of the Asterix franchise.

Cultural references can also be difficult to translate and may require the translator to step away from the original text in order to produce the same effect in the target language. In Beigbeder's £9.99 mentioned earlier, there's a chapter that opens with the line: 'C'était à Méga-Rail, faubourg de partage...' which befuddled me, and I could tell that this apparent nonsense about some railway system and a suburb was busy being very clever. The author explained that it was a riff on the famous opening words of Flaubert's classic novel *Salammbô*: 'C'était à Mégara, faubourg de Carthage...'

Now I could have some fun and bastardise a famous opening sentence from a classic English novel. I wanted to shoehorn in the word 'line' because the central character Octave is endlessly doing sneaky lines of coke. I toyed with 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a line', but this was too wordy, and the prissiness of Jane Austen's world didn't sit well with the context. Dickens is more muscular and the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* had the added bonus of powerful London-Paris resonances: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' became 'It was the best of lines, it was the worst of lines.'

This process, when the translator changes something so that it is more accessible to their readers, is called 'domestication'; and I performed something of a domestication coup with £9.99. Its protagonist Octave is an advertising executive and the whole book is a searing condemnation of the world of advertising. It quotes countless well-known marketing slogans throughout. The reader can't help but recognise them and feel implicated and involved in this world. But my English readers wouldn't recognise all those French slogans, and there just weren't enough international brands to cover the sheer volume of slogans used in the book. No, I needed instantly recognisable, everyday one-liners like 'exceedingly good cakes'

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and ‘Every little helps’... then I was faced with the problem of Octave turning on his car radio in the middle of Paris and being bombarded with English advertising slogans. The solution was obvious but controversial: I moved the action of the book from Paris to London; Octave became English, and I anglicised all the references to where he worked and all the swanky gadgets in his apartment.

My editor was game, and Beigbeder himself vindicated my decision by saying he couldn’t really see how the book would work in another language without doing this. So it was *very* heavy-handed domestication and a *substantial* necessary departure, but I fulfilled my remit of giving English language readers the same ‘ride’ as readers of the original French. That book *really* pushed me to think outside the box and it perfectly illustrated the need to step into that hot air balloon and move away from the original text in order to remain true to it.

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That was Adriana Hunter recorded by Ann Morgan. Next, here’s Brian Clegg with ‘The Category Conundrum.’

The Category Conundrum

Brian Clegg

WE HUMANS LIKE TO allocate things to different boxes. It’s by using such categories that we make a very big, very complicated world easier to get our heads around. Strictly speaking, what we make use of is patterns. We interpret the world around us using patterns, because otherwise we’d have to learn from scratch what to do every time we encountered anything. In a pattern-based view of the world, a category is simply a set of related patterns.

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Think about a simple category of activity: switching on the light using a wall switch. Imagine that you had to program a robot to turn on the light. You could tell it to go into a particular room, extend a robotic finger to a position 1.25 metres above the floor and 20 centimetres to the right of the door frame and to exert a force of about 50 newtons for a second before withdrawing the finger. And that would probably light up my office.

But our imaginary robotic assistant has a problem. If it now moves from the office to the kitchen, following those instructions would not enable it to turn the light on. It would fail miserably, because there isn't a light switch at that location in the room. Life would be very complicated (and, frankly, boring) if we had to re-learn how to turn a light on every time we encountered a switch. So, we apply a broad theory of pattern that shows us how to recognise and operate the category 'wall light switch'...and until we go to America and find they've put the switches on the wall upside down, we can painlessly get illumination.

Of course, we didn't start taking this approach to be able to turn the lights on. In evolutionary terms, our ability to discover patterns and put collections of these into categories was a matter of survival. If an item of the category *predator* is lurking in the bushes, we have more pressing things on our minds than assessing it as a new phenomenon. It's by using quick categorisation that we can engage what is, hopefully, an effective survival strategy.

This same approach is the basis of all science. If we treated everything in the universe, every experience, as unique, we couldn't take a scientific approach. There would be no natural laws, no science at all — just chaos. Thankfully, the world does incorporate sufficient patterns for scientists to be able to put things into appropriate boxes and gain a broad understanding of what's going on.

Infamously, the New Zealand-born physicist Ernest Rutherford is said to have remarked 'All science is either physics or stamp collecting.' As

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someone with a physics background myself, I know what he meant. Because putting things into categories as happens, say, in natural history, isn't enough to get to an effective explanation of what's going on. But Rutherford wasn't suggesting (other than with his tongue firmly in his cheek) that scientific stamp collecting is a bad thing. It's a necessary, if sometimes dull, foundation on which to build the interesting bits.

Categories and the patterns that lie beneath them, then, are essential to be able to understand the world around us. But in certain circumstances the use of categories can be problematic. Perhaps the most obvious example is when we see patterns that simply don't exist. Patterns are so central to our experience that we can believe they are there when they aren't.

Often this over-enthusiasm for spotting patterns causes superstition. Imagine, for example, that there is a cluster of cases of an illness in a location. Historically (and, sadly, right now in some places), this apparent pattern might have been blamed on the local witch. Now, superstition is more likely to produce imagined patterns in the locations of phone masts or powerlines.

The problem with this is that in our enthusiasm for patterns and categories, we really struggle to understand the nature of randomness. Events that happen totally randomly are not nice and evenly spread out. They form clusters and gaps. There is no reason, no guiding pattern behind this — it is just the nature of randomness. We can see this makes sense if we imagine dropping a boxful of ball bearings on the carpet. If they ended up all nice and evenly spread out in a grid, we'd think there were magnets under the floor, or some other cause. It seems perfectly reasonable that there will be clusters and gaps. But with illnesses, say, it's different.

Driven by superstition it is easy to assign the apparent pattern of randomness to the category of 'malignant cause' — which we then assign to what we would *like* to be behind the problem. Interestingly, although places with phone masts and powerlines also tend to have churches and

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pubs, these are rarely blamed for the cluster. Of course, this isn't to say that there can't be genuine patterns — a real local cause. I come originally from Rochdale in Lancashire, and the pattern of high levels of asbestosis in the town at one time was indubitably caused by local industry. However, just because there *is* a cluster in time or space does not mean that there is an underlying pattern.

Another problem with categories is that they are not necessarily exclusive. Any object – or for that matter, person – can be fitted into many different categories. When we let one categorisation dominate, or we extend it beyond its realistic worth, we are at risk of devising a stereotype.

That's effectively what we do, changing the focus from science to literature, when we force a book into a single category: it's being stereotyped. Yet that happens every time we walk into a bookshop. Look up at the top of the shelves and you will see a bewildering collection of category headings. All put there with the best of intentions. But does it help us get to the books we would enjoy the most, or gain the most from reading? I'm not sure it does. Instead, it forces us to select by the pattern of 'genre' and 'author'. But the real pattern I'm looking for when I go into a bookshop is 'books I'll get excited about' — and that can be a very different thing.

The category conundrum the reader faces has two facets. One is an information management issue. The point of those categories is to make it easier to find a desired kind of book. But any book can fit into more than one category. So, for example, a book can be hardback, paperback, audio or electronic. It has at least one author and a publisher — and a publication date. And it will usually (but not always) fit into one or more genres.

In a computer, we can organize appropriately categorised data by any of these properties in an instant. But short of having an n-dimensional bookshop (appealing though that may be), we can't do it with physical books. Which is a shame, because not every reader will look for a book under the same category. Of course, someone could walk in feeling the

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urge to pick up a biography and find the current arrangement of sections useful. But equally, they could be looking for a book by *me*, in which case, they might find them under science, popular science, physics, maths, crime, science fiction, fantasy, business or education.

What we can say with near-certainty is that they will not be explicitly searching for a book that has been published by Allen Lane, or Collins, or Bloomsbury — sorry, publishers, but readers rarely care, or even know, who the publisher is. Which is why, incidentally, a number of years ago so many people were baffled when they went shopping in the leading London bookshop Foyles and discovered that the category system there *was* to arrange books by publisher.

Bookshops do try to overcome the multi-dimensional requirement by having more than one type of categorisation. As well as the conventional, genre-organised shelves, they will usually have tables or special display units at the front of the store which are organised by a mix of publication date, popularity of title and, well, how much the publisher pays to get their book in a suitably visible position.

This might seem a cynical view on my part — surely those lovely booksellers wouldn't take cash to push a particular title? But it certainly does happen. I used to know a marketing executive at a British high street chain who confessed that they once had failed to sell one of their high visibility slots near the front of the store. For a laugh, they picked a totally uninspiring looking book and put it in the slot unpaid. It made the *Sunday Times* bestseller list.

But leaving aside the unsatisfactory lack of n-dimensional bookstores to cover all those categories, there's a bigger problem, which is the very nature of categories and genres themselves. They seem to me to be the literary equivalent of social media bubbles or echo chambers. Just as on Twitter I surround myself with other writers and scientists who have a similar outlook, so I home in on the familiar, comfortable shelves. Whole

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swathes of the bookshop are off-limits, in part because the signage tells me to keep out.

In some cases, this repulsive effect is particularly strong. I don't know if they still do, but WHSmith used to have a section for what are usually called in the trade 'Misery memoirs'. The shop's heading was even more cringe-inducing: it called them 'Tragic life stories'. I like the occasional biography, but I would *never* have gone near that particular bookcase. I am being forced into a pattern that may not be to my benefit.

To be fair, some booksellers do attempt to break the genre barrier. The category many of *my* books get lumped under is popular science — and there are plenty of readers who feel the same way about that label as I do for those depressing misery titles. But in Waterstones, for instance, you'll sometimes find my books in an adjacent but more ambiguous category labelled 'Smart Thinking'. This combines topics from philosophy to economics and the environment to physics and it gives a first hint of what I am looking for in the ideal bookshop.

So, here's my proposal. Each category section of a bookshop should have, say, forty per cent dedicated to expanding the reader's horizons — and it shouldn't be tucked away, but located smack, bang in the middle of the section. The next point is going to set any librarian or bookseller's teeth on edge. Those books should not be organised alphabetically by author but should instead present the reader with a spectrum of risk.

The books at the start of this horizon-stretching location would be relatively similar to the other books in the section. There's a reason those 'Smart Thinking' books in Waterstones sit next to popular science. They're mentally adjacent topics. So, for example, the general fiction section's mind-expander might start with a mix of genre fiction that would usually be found under a different category — crime, science fiction, romance novels. But as you pass through the spectrum, you might find things more dramatically different. A book on the Anglo-Saxons, or Laurie

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Lee's reminiscences, or one man's attempt to have a song top the charts somewhere in the world.

In a way I'm cheating with that list, incidentally — these books were selected randomly from the nonfiction section of my bookshelves at home. They don't obviously fit with my prime reading topics — but they're all books that I've found enjoyable.

I admit I'm not making things easy for booksellers here. They need to generate such a list for each section. What I wouldn't recommend is an Amazon style 'people who bought this book also bought...' list, because that's too biased to recent acquisitions. Nor would I suggest going for the 'bookseller recommends' type list — unfortunately for this particular exercise, booksellers are too bound by tradition and their education.

Instead, what would be good is to ask people who buy in a particular category for a couple of recommendations — one adjacent, one totally unconnected. There would need to be some kind of incentive to take part — but worked right, it could both provide the information and help build a stronger book-buying community. I'd also ask authors — they have a vested interest in expanding readers' horizons and love talking about books — so asking every living author a bookshop stocks for a few adjacent and wacky linked titles to their favourite categories could work well.

This sounds like a lot of work. And it is. But think what the outcome could be: breaking readers out of their self-enforced ghettos. Expanding readership in different directions. How about it, booksellers? Let's stretch some minds and shatter some of those restrictive bubbles, allowing readers to access a new pattern. Who knows what book any of us could be reading next if we could escape from the tyranny of the category.

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RLF outro: That was Brian Clegg recorded by Caroline Sanderson. You

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can find out more about Adriana Hunter and Brian Clegg on the RLF website. And that concludes episode 413, which was produced by Ann Morgan and Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 414, Ian Ayriss speaks with Ann Morgan about storytelling as therapy, football as a form of expression, and discovering Shakespeare.

We hope you'll join us.

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