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and a newsletter



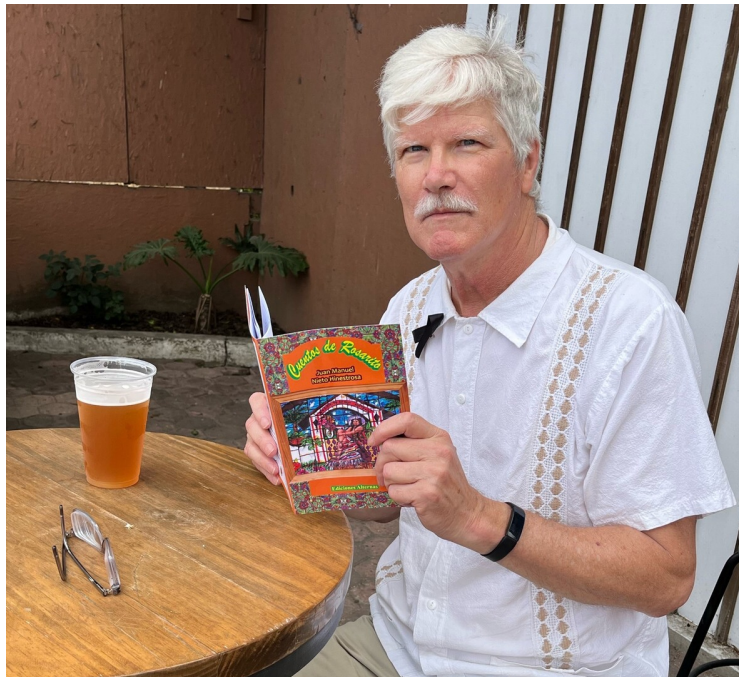
## Lost and found in translation

In Seventy-Two and Sunny San Diego, we are dismayed when forced to endure weather phenomena.

Sometimes we have morning low clouds and fog, especially near the coast. On other days, usually inland, the temperature can creep into the eighties and even the nineties. But once in a lifetime you get a

hurricane/tropical storm, which is bad,

but it does allow overuse of the words apocalyptic and catastrophic, and maybe even pestilential and malevolent. And days like the past few allow nature to communicate with SoCal residents in a weather language we either forgot or



*Brew, book, and Baja. David at Cervecería Tinta Negra in Rosarito, Mexico. (Photo courtesy of David Gaddis Smith)*

never knew. Nature as conduit. Nature as educator. Nature as translator. Sort of like David Gaddis Smith.

He is a practitioner of the mysterious literary art of translation.

A book that finds its way to a publisher's list has survived writing, editing, revisions, additions, deletions, reassessments, and more editing. With that accomplished, it must be a simple thing to convert that book to another language so more readers can appreciate its beauty and usefulness, right? Can't you cut, paste, and press a button or something? Well, no. The book undergoes what amounts to a new round of editing as a translator works to convey not only the words but the meaning and nuance. Without translators, most of us in the United States would not be reading Norwegian noir, German detective novels, or fantastical offerings from Mexico and other parts of the Americas.

David is a retired newspaper editor with sweeping intelligence, a mane of white hair, and a distinctive, infectious laugh. Once ignited, the laugh was powerful enough to be heard in the far reaches of a gray and cavernous newsroom. It was a brave act because as the years went on, many reporters, editors, graphic artists, page designers, and photographers were as quiet as possible, hoping the big bosses wouldn't notice them during the next round of layoffs.

David is from Gainesville, Florida, the home of the University of Florida, where he earned a degree in news-editorial journalism and his father taught agricultural economics. The family lived in Costa Rica for two years when David was young so his father could help Tico farmers become more efficient. David learned Spanish there. The bulk of his journalism career was spent in San Diego, and he was able to take a year's leave to get a master's degree in international journalism with an emphasis on Mexico from the University of Southern California. He became what newspapers call the foreign editor, the person with the greatest expertise in international matters. That meant he worked on the news desk, which looked to metro desk drudges like a fun place, given the personalities there and David's laugh.

He found time in a busy schedule of editing jobs and Tijuana visits to answer questions about translating.

**Your primary career focus has been editing for newspapers and other publishers. How did you add translation to your resume?**

I started doing freelance copy editing after leaving the newspaper and took an excellent online course from University of California San Diego extension on the

business aspect of being a copy editor. As a result of this process, I discovered that UCSD extension also was offering courses in translation and I thought I could also do translations to supplement my copy editing income. So I started taking courses, some in person and some online, and received my translation certificate.

**How is it that you speak and write perfect Spanish? I ask because I have spent decades (off and on) trying for fluency and have not advanced beyond American Classroom Spanish.**

I wish I spoke and wrote perfect Spanish. I do read it very well. Following American Translators Association guidelines, I only translate from Spanish to English and not from English to Spanish—I would likely goof up the syntax in some spots and make things sound stilted in others. Still, I did learn Spanish as a kid in Costa Rica and later took Spanish in high school in Florida (I was state declamation champion for my portrayal of a priest) and in college and traveled a year in South America after graduating from the University of Florida; all this helped me get a news editor job at the then *San Diego Union*, which had few Spanish speakers at that time and badly needed them. And my personal library has more than 2,000 books on Mexico, about half in Spanish and half in English, and I still read at least two Spanish-language newspapers a day and the Tijuana weekly *Zeta*. I joined a Toastmasters speaking club in Tijuana and eventually got good enough to win city and state humorous speech contests with my talk on “The History of Mexico in Seven Minutes.”

**You mentioned in an earlier email that your translation work has been nonfiction but that you once had an idea to translate a Mexican author’s novel. Can you explain why that didn’t happen and if you would still like to have a go at fiction?**

After moving to San Diego, I took a Spanish literature class at San Diego State University and became a fan of the nineteenth-century Mexican author Ignacio Manuel Altamirano. After getting my translation certificate, I had the idea of translating his novel *El Zarco*, about a bandit whose gang wreaks havoc on a Mexican region. It had so many parallels with present-day Mexico, where organized crime leaders have overwhelmed authorities and devastated Mexican communities while also attracting beautiful women, that I thought it would be a good idea to translate it as it would be entertaining and educational for U.S. readers. A previous translation was not the best, and I started to translate the book only to find that Ronald Christ had fairly recently translated the novel to acclaim, so I went on to other projects. I still found the effort to have been worthwhile and have not found another novel I have wanted to try my hand at.

## **What would you say to people who think translating can't be much harder than running words through Google Translate or some other AI platform?**

A lot of times, Google Translate and other such platforms can provide the gist of the subject at hand but miss the nuances and can often miss the big picture as well. If you are translating for a serious publication, a responsible human needs to examine everything in order for it to be as correct as possible. I have edited a number of translations that were so far off it was not funny. I don't know how much those translators relied on AI, but the results were horrible. In one translation class, a classmate used Google Translate to translate a passage she was supposed to translate by herself and did not even edit it (suspicious, I ran the original passage through Google Translate and it came out exactly as she had submitted it) and the result was not good. I remember when I bought an office chair that came in various colors, including lime green, and the Spanish translation of the chair instructions said the colors included *cal* (lime the mineral, not the color, which would be *verde limón* for Mexicans or *verde lima* for Spaniards).

## **What would you say are the essential tools for the translator? I understand that being a good writer is the foundation, but what else?**

These include widespread knowledge about the world and culture — much of which comes from reading. I once read around one hundred books in a very short period of time about the Middle East when the subject was particularly hot. This later helped me tremendously when I was an editor for a Middle East website that relied on translators. Although I don't know Farsi or Arabic or Hebrew or Turkish, the knowledge I gained from that crash reading course helped me stop error after error from creeping into the website's copy. My translation classes also helped me in this regard; I discovered that translators often make the same kinds of mistakes no matter what language they are translating from, and this helped me stop bad translations and ensure that stories said what authors intended them to.

## **One issue seems to be that a translator can be too literal and thus undermine an author's intention. Would you agree with that?**

*Sí*. Here's an example. A Mexican author's character might say, "*Esta noche cena Pancho*." A literal translation of this would be "Pancho is going to have dinner tonight," but this saying has nothing to do with food. A better translation would be "I'm going to get laid tonight." You have to know idioms! Most cases are of course not so extreme, but the larger point is the same. Daisy Rockwell, who translates books about India, told *Architecture and Design* that too many translations get hung up on precisely describing the spaces where novels are



set and wind up taking away from the all-important story and character. Often less is more, particularly when it comes to the long, circuitous sentences common in Spanish.

**I've read that translators (of fiction anyway) need to leave the reader a little room for ambiguity—that the translation can't impede the reader's ability to imagine what an author is describing, much like painters and other visual artists give the viewer the opportunity to dream. Is it hard to maintain a balance that is true to the author's words yet provides that ambiguity?**

It is hard, and it might be harder for a longtime journalist like me who has spent his life dedicated to providing as precise a wording as possible and ferreting out truth. Of course, a former newspaper editor could take possible cues from politicians and look at what was said and say to himself, "How might a word master like Bill Clinton word this so that different people might take what he said in different ways yet at the same time be true to what was said?" How does one translate the first sentence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*? Kafka never defines what enormous vermin (*ungeheuren ungeziefer*) is involved. Does Gregor Samsa wake up transformed, as has been translated, into a "monstrous verminous bug," a "gigantic insect," a "monstrous cockroach," an "enormous bedbug," a "monstrous insect," a "large verminous insect"?

**What do you do when you encounter slang? It seems like translating the words literally would leave readers confused, but how do you find words that convey meaning and yet have slang's informality? And slang falls in and out of favor, sometimes quickly. I've been reading a memoir written in 1944, and the word "screwed" is used to indicate leaving an area quickly rather than to describe a hopeless situation or, well, you know. Decades ago, I often heard the word "bolted" to describe a fast exit, which could be fitting since it has etymological roots in the same hardware family as screwed. But how does a translator balance the shifting meanings of words and render a true representation in another language?**

Thanks for that groovy question, *buey*. That means ox or castrated bull, but in slang it often can be translated as dude or man or bro. *Buey* often is interchangeable with *guey*. Depending on how emphatically *buey* or *guey* are pronounced and context, they could also mean cuckold or dumbass, insults that could lead to violence. It can be tough to stay on top of slang terms. Luckily for me, most of my translations have been for academics who don't throw slang around too much, just jargon (although this at times can be worse).

**What about clichés? They have no place in serious writing, but they still**

**litter our languages, which must be aggravating for a translator. Sometimes American clichés don't make much sense to people who speak English, much less Spanish. Jump the shark, for example, has confused me since the day I first heard it. How do you treat clichés?**

John, when life gives you lemons (such as when the Indiana Jones franchise has once again jumped the shark, or *entrada en declive*), make lemonade. One equivalent of the lemonade cliché in Spanish is “*A mal tiempo, buena cara.*” You wouldn't literally translate this as, “In bad weather, (put on a) good face,” as U.S. readers would likely go, “Huh?” I often will try to come up with a non-trite phrase that works. So just look on the bright side of life, John. Make lemonade and go see *Barbie* instead of *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*.

**Are there times when English doesn't provide the necessary words for a beautifully written sentence in Spanish and vice versa?**

Yes. When Louise and I were married in the chapel at the Rancho Guajome Adobe in Vista, we read an Octavio Paz poem in part as a nod to my interest in Mexico. I read the poem in Spanish, and Louise read the English translation by Eliot Weinberger. Weinberger is so good that the Mexican government awarded him the Order of the Aztec Eagle, but as I read some of his translations in *The Poems of Octavio Paz* I had the Mexican cultural knowledge to see some things he missed. This is not to say, however, that I would have done a better overall job on any of his translations. And if there were a beautifully written sentence in English that uses the word valedictorian, there would be a lot of extra verbiage in the Spanish, which does not have a word for valedictorian.

**Do you sometimes need to talk to the author of something you are translating to get a better sense of what is intended?**

A lot of times the original Spanish is ambiguous, or the facts are wrong, and I will query the author. A recent book I edited and partially translated about the history of flooding in Tijuana was unclear in certain spots: Did floodwaters create a crack in a garage with a concrete foundation or did they create a gully in a dirt-floor garage? A query to the author revealed that it was the latter (although the original translator had written the former).

**The art of translation is undervalued, according to things I've read. Translators' knowledge of two or more languages and cultures allows written works to reach people who otherwise would not have a chance to read them. The obit of translator Gregory Rabassa points out that he was an essential gateway in the 1960s, allowing authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa to reach an international**

**audience. Rabassa was prominent and respected, but most translators don't get as famous or as well paid as the authors of the work they translate. Would you say translators are undervalued?**

Probably so. Translators such as Rabassa and Weinberger (who also has translated the poetry of the Chinese writer Bei Dao) are the exceptions to the rule. Interestingly, the Vancouver-based poet Yilin Wang recently received compensation from the British Museum following a hue and cry after it did not pay or credit her for her translations of nineteenth-century poems by feminist revolutionary Qiu Jin the museum used for its "China's hidden century" exhibit. Credit should go where it is due! You could also say Spanish-English translators are undervalued: There are so many people engaged in this pairing that its translators often will make less per word than, say, those translating from German or French or Arabic.

**In the past few years, I've read well-reviewed books out of Norway, Sweden, Germany, and other places that were not originally written in English. When I don't like the book as much as the hype demands, I sometimes blame the translation, but when I enjoy the book, I always praise the author. Am I being unfair? Go ahead, tell me. I can take it.**

Well, sometimes the translation can make the book. Just last year Indian author Geetanjali Shree's experimental novel *Tomb of Sand*, translated by Daisy Rockwell, received the 2022 International Booker Prize, selling more books in English than in its original Hindi. Many in India did not know what to make of this novel full of made-up words and gibberish whose plot is about an elderly woman who decides not to get out of bed. Had it been any translator but Rockwell, who has had a long career translating Hindi and Urdu and of visiting India, one imagines that the English-language version very well might have languished. Are you being unfair in thinking that books you like were well-written originally and those you don't were poorly translated? Well, if you are, as penance you could read the various English translations of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and see which one bugs you the least.

**Thanks, *buey*, and I mean that as dude, man, or bro.**

### **Take a look**

Interested in seeing how a translator works? Sophie Hughes gives you a word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence interactive (if that word hasn't jumped the shark) look at how a translator renders a work in one language into a work in another language. [Click here.](#)

# Glad I read that

From *The Lock-Up* by John Banville:

His wife was in a nursing home, dying of cancer, and now he had lost his daughter. He gave off sorrow like a smell.

# Glad I heard that

Joe Ide has written six novels featuring Isaiah Quintabe—loner, misfit, high school dropout, and genius. IQ, as he is known, investigates wrongdoing in his sketchy LA neighborhood because no one else will, so the author fit sensibly into a well-attended panel discussion called *Improbable Detectives* at the *San Diego Union-Tribune* Festival of Books last weekend.

But maybe someone should create a panel called *Improbable Best-Selling Authors* and put Joe on it. Consider the former screenwriter's responses to these questions during the discussion, answers he delivered with an appealing mix of self-effacement, deadpan, and even a touch of smart aleck. His wry humor was a hit with the audience.

How did he get started?

*(WARNING: Don't read this if you're having trouble finding a publisher).* Joe asked his brainy cousin, political scientist and author Francis Fukuyama, to read the first IQ manuscript. Afterward, the cousin asked Joe if he had a literary agent, that practically unattainable representative who separates those who will find a Big Five publisher from those who will receive a hundred rejection letters. Joe had sent the manuscript to half a dozen publishers but did not have an agent. So, the cousin talked Joe up to his own agent, Esther Newberg, for whom the adjectives leading, dominant, and pre-eminent are inadequate descriptions. Newberg read the manuscript, took on Joe, and had a publisher within two weeks.

"I don't like to tell this to other writers," Joe said.

In answer to a question about how previous careers (his include elementary school teacher, LA tour guide, and business consultant) helped form him as a writer:



“I didn’t learn anything from my jobs.”

On his stint as a teacher, which lasted for a semester: “I was there about three days and realized I really don’t like this.”

Education?

“I was a C-minus student from the start. I got a C-minus in wood shop. I got one report card that was straight C-minuses.” (But he does have a master’s degree.)

How much research do you do?

“I make almost everything up.”

He considers his IQ books as somewhere between a mystery and a thriller. He focuses on filling those books with characters who have interesting backstories.

“I’m weak in plot.”

What authors have influenced you?

“I’m not widely read. I read what I like.”

Do you read while writing a novel?

“Very little. Especially if I am reading someone who’s better than me.”

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