

READING COMPREHENSION

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary | 45-60 minutes

Topic: Education | Skills: Reading, Vocabulary, Speaking

Read the text carefully. Then answer the questions on Page 2.

The Translator in the Footnote

At the reading, someone congratulated the translator on making the novel sound as though it had been written in English. She thanked him. It would have been discourteous to explain, over a paper cup of wine, how much labour had gone into preventing precisely that effect. The compliment named a real achievement, fluency, and quietly promoted it into the only achievement worth noticing.

The novel's narrator used a form of address that shifted with intimacy, irritation and social rank. English offered no convenient equivalent. Repeating titles made the dialogue stiff; first names flattened distinctions; explanatory phrases made characters announce relationships they would ordinarily leave **implicit**. Every fluent solution redistributed something. The question was not whether a loss could be avoided, but which loss could be made **legible** without turning the novel into a lesson about itself.

Her editor proposed removing three footnotes. He did not object to explanation in principle. He thought these notes interrupted scenes whose emotional force depended on what was not said. The translator agreed about one, defended another and rewrote the third. In the published version, a momentary awkwardness in the dialogue did work that a paragraph of commentary had previously attempted. Some reviewers described the exchange as slightly unnatural. She could not decide whether this meant she had succeeded.

An interview later asked her to list the words that were "untranslatable". The category promised a neat display of cultural difference: a difficult word, an evocative explanation, a small revelation for the reader. What interested her was less photogenic. A perfectly ordinary sentence could become difficult because of who was permitted to say it, to whom, and with what **plausible deniability**. The obstacle did not always reside inside a word.

None of this made obscurity a virtue. A translation that compelled readers to admire its difficulties could be as self-regarding as one that erased them. Nor did preserving a trace of strangeness guarantee **fidelity**: the translator could manufacture an exotic texture the original's readers had never experienced.

She returned to the compliment after the event, less irritated than she had expected. Perhaps the problem was not that the reader had failed to notice her decisions. It was that the available praise made their disappearance sound like the absence of decisions at all.

Key vocabulary

legible - capable of being understood or recognised

implicit - understood without being stated directly

plausible deniability - the ability to credibly deny an intended meaning or responsibility

fidelity - faithfulness to a source or original

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

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Answer in complete sentences. Support interpretations with evidence from the text.

1. Why is the opening compliment both valid and inadequate?

2. What does the claim that every fluent solution redistributed something imply?

3. Why is the editor not presented simply as an opponent of fidelity?

4. Why does the translator find the category of untranslatable words limiting?

5. How does the text qualify the value of strangeness in translation?

6. What distinction is made in the final sentence?

Discuss with a partner

- When should a translation interrupt a reader to explain a difference?
- Can a very natural translation be faithful to an intentionally awkward original?

ANSWER KEY

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Suggested full-sentence answers. Accept other supported interpretations where appropriate.

1. Why is the opening compliment both valid and inadequate?

It recognises fluency as a real achievement but overlooks the translator's deliberate preservation of distinctions that resist seamless English.

2. What does the claim that every fluent solution redistributed something imply?

Each choice preserved some relationships or effects while altering others, so no effortless equivalent was neutral.

3. Why is the editor not presented simply as an opponent of fidelity?

His objection concerns the scenes' emotional effect, and the translator partly agrees and negotiates different solutions.

4. Why does the translator find the category of untranslatable words limiting?

It locates difficulty in isolated vocabulary, whereas ordinary sentences can depend on social permission, relationships and deniable implications.

5. How does the text qualify the value of strangeness in translation?

Strangeness may preserve important distinctions, but it can also become self-display or introduce exotic effects absent from the original.

6. What distinction is made in the final sentence?

The sentence distinguishes decisions becoming unobtrusive to a reader from the mistaken belief that no significant decisions were required.

Teaching notes

Read once for the main idea, then reread for evidence. Compare answers before discussing the two open questions. Interpretive answers may vary; ask learners to justify their reading.

Language and reading focus: Metalinguistic argument; implied relationships and balanced qualification.

Text: Original commentary using a fictional scenario. Discussion questions have no fixed answers.