

PRIZE FOR NEW TALENT IN TRANSLATION

Introduction by Adriana Hunter

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The organisers of this new prize were very pleased with the response of nearly 70 entries, especially considering how very hard the two texts were, and how different they were in style (these were, of course, deliberate choices to make the exercise testing). It was interesting to see that many candidates were “in their comfort zone” for one text or another but rarely both.

All credit must, therefore, go to the four finalists who negotiated the tough twists and turns of these two slalom courses with considerable aplomb, because there were a lot of entries that had things really wrong. To pursue the skiing metaphor: at least one contender stayed in the chalet virtual skiing on Wii (by which I mean the texts had clearly been fed into an online translating service); some slithered clumsily over the more difficult passages; some went off-piste and lost their way; and one seemed to be heli-skiing in a parallel universe! (her translation of the simple sentence “Je l’aide pour tout” was “My life is one long stint as her personal assistant”.)

Once the panel of judges had weeded out entries with serious errors of understanding and/or unacceptably poor English phrasing, we narrowed down the stronger entries by picking out a number of key points.

The most significant factor was the translators’ ability to find a voice. Narrative voice is key to fictional/literary translation and was, therefore, of tantamount importance in the translations we were judging. Voice is the mood, tone and feel of a piece; it can imply age, gender, social background, personality, class and more. The narrator in Annie Saumont’s ROSE is a schoolboy who uses colloquial terms and whose words spill off the page like the spoken word, whereas the voice in François Emmanuel’s L’ENLACEMENT is more formal, perhaps even stiff; slightly precious but restrained.

Once a translator has established a narrative voice, it must remain consistent: we

would not expect the narrator of ROSE to refer to Georgio as Rose's "elder brother" for example, nor would we expect the narrator in L'ENLACEMENT to say the woman "felt a wally" for collapsing. The translation must stay tuned into narrative voice as a singer must stay in key: any wavering out of voice jars like someone singing flat or sharp, anything inappropriately flamboyant sounds like one of those naff key change in last chorus of song.

Another criterion was how the translators' solved problems; how intelligently, inventively and with how much inspiration they coped with difficult passages. And finally we were looking for the courage they displayed in translating: the courage to go ahead and replicate something unusual from the French original (for example the rudimentary punctuation in some parts of ROSE); the courage to find an alternative way of presenting something (one finalist, Frances Hedges, put the first person singular into lower case - "i'm not very good at Latin" - to mirror the absence of commas); or, conversely, the courage to introduce something to make it more English sounding (Emily Boyce, for example, used the expression "thank you very much" to show how emphatically Rose believes there is an ant wriggling on her tummy, and Francesca Barrie introduced the English idiom "rubbish at Latin I am"); or the courage actually to alter something so it works better in English (for example in her translation of Emmanuel's passage about the woman's hands, Sarah Knapp had: "would have an instinctive knowledge of textiles, an appreciation of the way they can adapt, impose limits, form creases, flow, hold a shape").

One entrant deserves a mention for her exceptional handling of the L'ENLACEMENT text and that was Jill Leatherbarrow. Sadly, there were too many errors in her work overall for her to be among the finalists. In fact, of 140 texts just one had absolutely no actual errors, only minor weaknesses. No one's work was faultless so it would be perfectly possible for a runner-up to look at the finalists' texts and feel "yes but..." - that is one of the joys and frustrations of translations: even in the pick of the bunch there are "yes buts".

All four finalists displayed: sound understanding of the texts and accuracy in their rendition of the material into English; a strong grasp of narrative voice and consistency in maintaining that voice; good techniques for problem-solving; and signs of inspiration and courage in their translations.

In fourth place was someone who impressed the judges by really establishing a strong narrative voice in ROSE, and tackled the more wordy L'ENLACEMENT very competently: Francesca Barrie

Marginally ahead of her in third place, a contender who used good contemporary idioms to identify the narrator in ROSE, and worked her way smoothly if cautiously through L'ENLACEMENT: Emily Boyce

There were two outstanding entries with very little to choose between. The finalist in second place showed a very intelligent grasp of both texts, producing smooth and consistent prose with flashes of inspiration: Sarah Knapp

Our winner by a whisker (who incidentally was the translator of the only text with no errors, her translation of L'ENLACEMENT), again showed tremendous grasp of both pieces, wrote confidently and demonstrated great flare and inventiveness: Frances Hedges