

Allen teaches and practices the art of translation

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

An old Italian adage, “traduttore, traditore,” whose literal translation is “translator, traitor,” has been haunting the world of translation for decades. In fact, translation is a difficult art that not many people fully understand, and there are professors who teach it in college.

One of those professors is Dr. Esther Allen of the Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

“Translators reflect a lot of different things, their own personal experiences, the political consciousness and the literary trends of their moment, and also, of course, an individual sense of what the text means, because we’re never ever going to agree,” says Allen.

“If you look at a tradition of literary criticism within a single language, it’s not as if people who are all reading the text in the same language agree on what it means.”

This may be the reason why machines have not been able to replace translators. “I think that the development of tools like Google Translate, with their deep imperfections, has made people much more aware of what a translator does and how difficult translation is,” says Allen.

A native of California who obtained her doctorate in Comparative Literature from New York University, Allen believes that technology has actually helped people to understand that good translations can only be made by well-trained professionals. “The very technology that people assumed would replace translation has had the opposite effect and made people much more aware of how difficult meaning is, what an incredibly elusive thing meaning is. Meaning is something you have to create.”

And that is something her students learn very fast. “I have my students research the writer’s oeuvre, the complete works of a writer, where this work fits in, what the essentials of a writer’s biography are. They have to do a preface in which they demonstrate that they understand all of those things.”



Dr. Allen and her students.

Allen’s approach to training her students is pretty straightforward. “We actually begin with a semester-long course in practical translation, where we spend a lot of time actually translating brief pieces of journalism. What they learn is that if they don’t understand what the article is about, if they don’t understand the story, they’re not going to be able to translate it, so they have to do a lot of research.”

She gives as an example recent events in Brazil. “We’ve been looking at the problems of Lula, the former president of Brazil. If they don’t really understand what’s going on with the graft investigation, they can’t translate the story. They understand from the very beginning that they have to have a full grasp of the context, and after that they start looking at the individual words. Obviously, as in any creative endeavor, you can’t guarantee that every student’s going to come out a genius translator, but you can at

least make them aware of what’s at stake and what they need to do.”

When asked whether she fears that with more and more people speaking English worldwide the need for translators will be diminished, she is categorical. “I think English has always existed, of course, at many different levels for many different things. What concerns me, and what I think that the burgeoning interest in translation in the English-speaking world is in part a response to, is the violence of saying to someone, ‘If you don’t express yourself in English you won’t be heard,’” says Allen.

Nor is she fearful of the effect that the Internet may have on making English the only language to be spoken everywhere. “What has happened is that the Internet itself has become a place where many, many different linguistic groups can flourish, can create spaces for themselves, and even languages that were

dying, indigenous languages, have been bolstered by the Internet. People in these groups that are widely separated from each other can connect over the Internet and reinforce the knowledge of the language that they have,” says Allen.

To reinforce her argument, she mentions something that may be counter-intuitive for most of us: only 20 percent of what we find on the Internet is in English.

When confronted with the reality that we can find many translations of the same classic that differ from each other, she offers an eye-opening explanation. “We can watch ten different performances of Hamlet in English, and each actor is going to have a completely different take on who Hamlet is, what matters about Hamlet. So how much more is this going to be the case for the translator, who’s choosing each word, than for those actors, who are all saying the same words and just imbuing them with different emotions? That’s why translation is an art,” she says.

Allen is now working on something completely new for her, something that she has never done before—writing a biography—and she has chosen as her subject the Cuban patriot José Martí. “It’s actually pretty common for translators to move into biography precisely because you have to understand the person you’re translating at such a deep level that at some point you know so much about their life that you start writing their life. So many translators who become immersed in the work of a writer end up writing biographies of that writer.”

She is looking, among other things, at Martí as a New Yorker—“as somebody who lived in and contributed to the life of this city and left behind this extremely rich body of writing, a virtual documentary footage of New York City in the 1880’s and early 1890’s, which hasn’t been exploited by historians.”

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