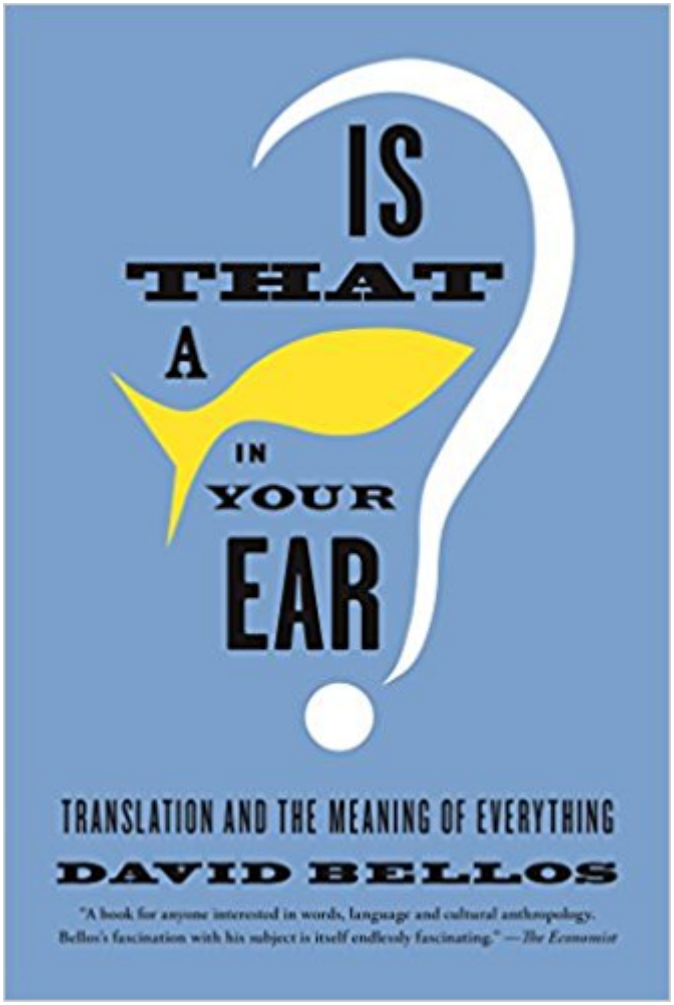
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Is That A Fish In Your Ear?: Translation And The Meaning Of Everything



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Synopsis

An NBCC Award and Los Angeles Times Book Award finalistA New York Times Notable Book for 2011 One of The Economist's 2011 Books of the Year People speak different languages, and always have. The Ancient Greeks took no notice of anything unless it was said in Greek; the Romans made everyone speak Latin; and in India, people learned their neighbors' languagesÃ¢â ¬â ¢as did many ordinary Europeans in times past (Christopher Columbus knew Italian, Portuguese, and Castilian Spanish as well as the classical languages). But today, we all use translation to cope with the diversity of languages. Without translation there would be no world news, not much of a reading list in any subject at college, no repair manuals for cars or planes; we wouldn't even be able to put together flat-pack furniture. Is That a Fish in Your Ear? ranges across the whole of human experience, from foreign films to philosophy, to show why translation is at the heart of what we do and who we are. Among many other things, David Bellos asks: What's the difference between translating unprepared natural speech and translating Madame Bovary? How do you translate a joke? What's the difference between a native tongue and a learned one? Can you translate between any pair of languages, or only between some? What really goes on when world leaders speak at the UN? Can machines ever replace human translators, and if not, why? But the biggest question Bellos asks is this: How do we ever really know that we've understood what anybody else saysÃ¢â ¬â ¢in our own language or in another? Surprising, witty, and written with great joie de vivre, this book is all about how we comprehend other people and shows us how, ultimately, translation is another name for the human condition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“[Bellos] offers an anthropology of translation acts. But through this anthropology a much grander project emerges. The old theories were elegiac, stately; they were very much severe. Bellos is practical, and sprightly. He is unseduced by elegy. And this is because he is onto something new . . . Dazzlingly inventive.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Adam Thirlwell, The New York TimesÃ¢â ¬Å“In the guise of a book about translation this is a richly original cultural history . . . A book for anyone interested in words, language and cultural anthropology. Mr Bellos's fascination with his subject is itself endlessly fascinating.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢The EconomistÃ¢â ¬Å“For anyone with a passing interest in language this work is enthralling . . . A wonderful celebration of the sheer diversity of language and the place it occupies in human endeavour. Conducted by a man who clearly knows his stuff, it is a whirlwind tour round the highways and byways of translation in all its glorious forms, from literary fiction to car repair manuals, from the Nuremberg trials to decoding at Bletchley Park.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢The ScotsmanÃ¢â ¬Å“Bellos has numerous paradoxes, anecdotes and witty solutions . . . his insights are thought provoking, paradoxical and a brilliant exposition of mankind's attempts to deal with the Babel of global communication.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Michael Binyon, The TimesÃ¢â ¬Å“This informed book props open the door to the idea of translation with pop culture . . . This broad-ranging book reads like a survey course in translation, providing a look at its history, detractors, challenges, future--if computers are the future--and current practice, both spoken and written . . . The result is arresting.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Carolyn Kellogg, Los Angeles TimesÃ¢â ¬Å“David Bellos writes like a person who chooses his words not only carefully but also confidently and pragmatically. Translation is a challenging enterprise, but one he embraces vigorously and without the gloomy pessimism that leads some to declare that it's impossible . . . Rich, often playful chapters.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Jim Higgins, Milwaukee Journal SentinelÃ¢â ¬Å“[A] witty, erudite exploration . . . [Bellos] delights in [translation's] chequered past and its contemporary ubiquity . . . He would like us to do more of it. With the encouragement of this book, we might even begin to enjoy it.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Maureen Freely, Sunday TelegraphÃ¢â ¬Å“Is That A Fish In Your Ear? is spiced with good and provocative things. At once erudite and unpretentious . . . [it is a] scintillating bouillabaisse.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Frederic Raphael, Literary ReviewÃ¢â ¬Å“Forget the fish--it's David Bellos you want in your ear when the talk is about translation. Bellos dispels many of the gloomy truisms of the trade and reminds us what an infinitely flexible instrument the English language (or any language) is. Sparkling, independent-minded analysis of everything from

Nabokov’s insecurities to Google Translate’s felicities fuels a tender--even romantic--account of our relationship with words.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢NATASHA WIMMER, translator of Roberto BolaÃƒÂ o’s Savage Detectives and 2666Ã¢â ¬Å“A disquisition of remarkable freshness on language, speech and translation. In short, punchy, instructive chapters that take in such things as linguistics, philosophy, dictionaries, machine translation, Bible translations, international law, the Nuremberg trials, the European Union and the rise of simultaneous interpreting . . . I could say anyone with an interest in translation should read Is That a Fish, but there wouldn’t be very much point; instead, anyone with no interest in translation, please read David Bellos’s brilliant bookÃ¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Michael Hofmann, The GuardianÃ¢â ¬Å“Bellos has adopted a radically different approach: as his Hitchhikery title suggests, he has set out to make it fun . . . Is That a Fish in Your Ear? is essential reading for anyone with even a vague interest in language and translation--in short, it is a triumph.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Shaun Whiteside, The IndependentÃ¢â ¬Å“Erudite . . . ultimately illuminating, even transformative.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Kirkus ReviewsÃ¢â ¬Å“Written by an award-winning translator and professor of comparative literature, this book is informed by considerable culture and an original, probing intelligence with a mostly light touch--the title riffs off of Douglas Adams’s The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, whose babel fish, when inserted in one’s ear, could translate any imaginable language. If only it were that easy . . . It is a breeze to get lost in translation, and for this reason Bellos cannily exclaims, Ã¢â ¬ËœWe should do more of it.’Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Publishers Weekly (starred review)

David Bellos is the director of the Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication at Princeton University, where he is also a professor of French and comparative literature. He has won many awards for his translations of Georges Perec, Ismail Kadare, and others, including the Man Booker International Translator’s Award. He also received the Prix Goncourt for George Perec: A Life in Words.

As someone who comes from a family of translators and who has worked in translation himself, I am utterly glad that someone has come up with a book like this, an honest and passionate attempt to unveil the world of translation to the average person and spark the debate among the more knowledgeable ones.In attempting to write a book that covers, well, pretty much everything about translation, David Bellos has produced a comprehensive and badly needed primer full of insight, yet a not-so coherent and cohesive unity. The book is divided into 32 small sections (yes, 32), each dealing with a different aspect of translation, from the meaning of "meaning", to the alleged "myth" of

literal translation, with newswires and the ridiculous sophistication of coffee-shop language somewhere in-between. Some of these sections are delightful and concisely written, others are riddled with analogies and humorous attempts that distract from the main topic, yet others are frankly repetitive or well under-developed. The result is less a piece that seems to flow from chapter to chapter, but rather something that feels at times like a collection of disparate short essays that rumble from bananas to bibles to eskimos and back to translation. While some chapters indeed perform liaisons to previous or following ones, sadly that is not the overall feeling that one gets when tackling the text.I guess this is the unavoidable result of attempting to put together so many different topics under a single umbrella, while trying to give equal importance to each and every single one. But my other assumption is that the book could have greatly benefited from a better editing job, which in turn would have resulted in a more 'natural' feeling to the final product.On the other hand, I do not necessarily agree with everything that Mr. Bellos asserts and the way he does it (but that is a whole different story). I believe he gives too much credence to his own opinions and parades them as axioms, without even considering or giving some space to alternative or critical views. The issue of 'literal translation' is a good -but no the only one- example of this. According to the author's Manichean vision, a literal translation is 'not really' a translation and is such a daunting and fictitious task that is almost not worth trying. This whole argument is sustained in a verbal and semantic pirouette, given that he later on acknowledges that it really all depends on what 'literal' and, yes, 'translation' means to you. However, he does not even bother in considering the opinion of someone who believes that a literal translation (or something close to it) is possible. It simply can not happen, period. One wonders whether he is representing the entire translation community or just speaking for himself which, based on reading his text, is quite hard to tell.Now, on the positive side, the book is full of pearls of wisdom and clever insights into the world of translating. I really hope that this work contributes to spreading the word on the invaluable contribution of translators all over the world, and I hope as well that next time Mr. Bellos will find a better editor.

As someone who has been trained and has worked as a professional translator, I really wanted to like this book. But, alas, for professionals, it provides no new insight. And it seems too dry for non-professionals.

It would probably be perfectly possible these days - using Blue Tooth, WiFi and internet sites - to manufacture the "Fish" of the title - but the "instant translation" would suffer all the usual problems that David Bellos lays out for our reading in his marvelous book.I do so agree with the blurb from

Michael Hofmann of the UK Guardian who simply says "Please do read David Bellos's brilliant book."

This book ended up on several Best Books of 2011 lists, yet I wonder if every reviewer read past the sexy title and consumed it from end to end. David Bellos is a professional translater (French to English) and has some very interesting and enlightening views on communication and translation. In this book, he doesn't shy away from radical overstatement (such as when he says that nowadays English is the only lingua franca that the various Belgian linguistic communities can still use to communicate with each other). But he is easily forgiven, because he really provides new insight on what a translation is or should be. Unavoidably, this leads to meta-meta-paragraphs about language which can be quite dense at first glance. Other parts are seriously theoretical (such as the Axiom of Ineffability), which make this book's position on the Best Books list rather surprising, as I doubt that many people are interested in this level of theoretical analysis (I am, so I enjoyed it).

Nice book, useful information. I've enjoyed looking through it.

Excellent treatise of the relationship between the word (spoken and written), meaning and culture. An interesting and certainly appropriate review of machine translation and the importance of style.

A great read for translators.

Bellos' exposition of the issues - and resolutions - surrounding translation, interpreting and moving across cultural divides is both extraordinarily well researched and presented in a fashion that any reader can enjoy and understand (no academic jargon). I recommend it especially to the monolingual reader for its educational and entertainment value. The multilingual reader and professional translators will find experience many "ah ha" moments as phenomena that they have experienced are explained.

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