

## BOOK REVIEW

By

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Laura BERTONE: *En torno de Babel. Estrategias de la interpretación simultánea*, Editorial Hachette, Buenos Aires, 1989, 180 pp.

Here is a little gem of a book: short, interesting, insightful, informative, entertaining, serious and unpretentious. The "Introduction" places interpretation squarely in its place:

*"In trying to describe the interpreter's cognitive, social, and linguistic situation, we shall take as examples those cases in which his speech 'parts ways' with the speaker's; i.e. in the case of an 'abnormal' situation (in which an interpreter is required), the study of 'abnormal' cases ... shall allow us to reveal the mechanisms the interpreter uses while performing his job. These mechanisms are in all probability the same obtaining in 'normal' communication, where their transparency and universality turns them almost impossible to detect. Compressed by time and confined in space, the interpreter exacerbates them thus making them more easily detectable: thanks to that magnifying lens of sorts, we shall reveal the scaffolding of the operations involved."*

After a brief historical preface, we plunge into Chapter 1:

*"This side of and beyond words: Wherein the importance of the speaker's 'identity' and the interpreter's 'presence' is revealed. Tell me 'who' says it and I'll tell you what it means. Stanislavski and the actor's basic questions."*

Now, here is an extremely unusual, intriguing and auspicious way of beginning a discussion of our subject. The last chapter is titled *"Curtains up continued. On interpretation, the theatre and life. And all the things we do when we talk."*

The reading makes for a well organised but leisurely pleasure trip through seminal concepts, practical examples and amusing cases. If all books on our discipline were like this, I am sure I would not have to complain so bitterly about translators and interpreters not reading a hoot on translatology. LB shows the fundamental difference between oral speech and written texts and the way it affects conference interpretation. The essential dialectics between meaning and sense is thoroughly explored; the importance of the situation examined from all possible sides; the link between the conference and the stage, and the interpreter and the actor most vividly brought up. Crucial emphasis is made on the "strategy of silence", one of the most valuable and most neglected tools in our trade. Still, one thing bothers me: "The scant influence translation theory has had on this piece stresses the difference we make between the written and the oral operations," quoth LB at the very beginning of the introduction. The difference between oral and written communication is real and well taken, but what about what they have in common? LB seems to think translation and interpretation are altogether different endeavours, following altogether different rules. Her most quoted muse, Mariano García Landa, would certainly disabuse her; and so would Danica Seleskovitch and her Parisian hosts. Interpretation and translation do indeed part ways, but not that early nor, all things considered, that much: they cannot be just rent asunder. My guess is LB has neglected to take into account all that most modern translatalogists (many of them interpreters themselves) have said about translation and interpretation, viz. that they are both part and

parcel of, yes, translation theory. The main difference lies, of course, in shared vs. displaced situationality (a subject magnificently developed, among others, by Neubert and Lvovskaja). This fact LB explains thoroughly; but the difference between meaning and sense, the importance of the situation itself (whether shared or displaced), etc. are common to *all* forms of communication and translators and interpreters should approach both their texts and their tasks the same way: respectively, as an attempt at communicating through language, and as an attempt at mediating in that communication when sender and addressee do not speak the same idiom. Besides, not even shared situationality makes interpretation strategies and approaches uniform: fundamental differences obtain between simultaneous and consecutive interpretation; between the interpretation of written statements (whether read aloud or not) and of spontaneous speech; between the conference setting and the courtroom (where utmost faithfulness to otherwise irrelevant formal features of speech can become essential) etc. Similar differences apply to the translation of written texts. And then there's advertising adaptation, and dubbing and subtitling. Translatology must encompass all of them (and indeed it does), stating both what they have in common vis-a-vis non-mediated interlingual communication and what they do not; the way medicine distinguishes epidemiology from gynecology, or 'earth' medicine from space medicine.

Not the least that makes LB's book a must is that it is written in Spanish, a language so woefully bereft of any serious literature on translatology, barring García Yebra's scholarly if too linguistically-biased *Teoría y práctica de la traducción* and Ortega y Gasset's almost prehistoric essay *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción* (the other couple of books I know are best unremembered). With regards to 'interpretology', our only guru, Mariano García Landa, seldom if ever publishes anything in Spanish (nor, way way behind him, do I). What a pity, then, that such a wonderful piece should be written in a not altogether uncontaminated Spanish: Gallicisms are rife and at times quite jarring. It would be a minor objection were it not

that, to my mind, next to good writers, the foremost examples of correct and elegant use should come precisely from translators (interpreters included).

But this is, up to a point, a family quarrel. Anybody wishing to know about interpretation, anybody with a mind to becoming an interpreter and, definitely, anybody already eking out a living in a booth would be well advised to grab this book.