

Sixteenth St. Jerome Translation Contest

Sponsored by the Conference Management Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna

Remarks by the judges – Ms. Diane Frishman and Mr. Paul Stephenson

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Is it possible that translators sometimes can't see the wood for the trees (or, if you're American, the forest for the trees)? I think we can all agree that the translator's job is to be down there with the details -- especially if you're translating for the UN. Surely no one reads a job as carefully as the translator, who has a myriad of details in the source text to check and understand and then to find a way of mirroring in the target language. But sometimes the translator needs to step back a bit and take a look at the "wood" – the bigger picture.

In the case of the Spanish text chosen for this year's St. Jerome competition, we're looking at a deliberately far-fetched, whimsical article that does its best to contrast a human being's feelings and instincts with a soulless artificial-intelligence-guided machine. The author stretches this idea to the point of absurdity – to make a real paella, you need generations' worth of memories and intuition and the type of stubbornness you need to get back on your bike after you've fallen off and grazed your knee?

The article builds up nicely to the punchline: a machine could no more make a real paella than it could write such a wild, fantastical article as this. Only that's not precisely what the last lines of the Spanish say. In fact, like much of the article, they're difficult to translate (*este arabesco*) or at least to translate accurately into idiomatic English. And that's where the big picture comes in. Translators, this is a pretty wild article – knock yourselves out! Make sure your reader can see the "wood" – the whimsical presentation of a serious point. And, at their best, that's what the translators did.

Apart from the whimsy and the licence to roam that this grants the translator, the Spanish text poses more than its fair share of classic translation problems – how to deal with awkward or tricky sentences, hitting the right register, choosing the right word – and the translators came up with more than their fair share of inventive translations to keep the English idiomatic and, at best, sounding as if it could have been written by a native speaker.

AWKWARD

Perhaps the most awkward sentence was the one that mentions that "paella" was originally the name of the pan in which the dish was cooked:

...la paella — que es en realidad el nombre del recipiente absorbido a fuego lento por el contenido allá en su tierra original valenciana

The problem posed by this odd juxtaposition of the paella and the pan prompted translators to take a number of different approaches.

Some translators understandably tried to "fix" the English. For example:

"In the bottom of the paella – originally the word for the pan – there lurked a pan that the tool had measured out too much olive oil."

However, most translators tried to keep the sense of the original while making it idiomatic English. We particularly liked the deceptively simple:

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"A good paella starts with the know-how and keen nose of the person who chose the finest orangewood to perfume the rice."

And:

" ...