“Is That a Fish in Your Ear?” is, of course, a reference to the Babel Fish universal translator in Douglas Adams’ “A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.” While not aimed at that level of whimsy, it is still an entertaining and popular audience look at serious issues in translation. The author, B, is an experienced professional translator, a teacher of translation courses, and he brings in many personal experiences and little-known gems to enliven the text. A reader with little background will gain a much richer and less mechanical view of what translation is, how it is done, its pitfalls, and a debunking of some popular ideas about translation.

I will not attempt an exhaustive chapter-by-chapter critique of each of this book’s 32 chapters plus appendix (“Afterbabble”), but discuss several themes and high points.

In Chapter Two, B points out that translation is not always necessary. One alternative is for people to talk to each other directly, and this is being done with about 80 “vehicular languages,” ranging from English to Urdu, also known as languages of wider communication. Another alternative is for everyone to learn a single language, though this is a rather unlikely prospect.

A theme throughout the book is the difficulty of a precise definition of “translation.” A main idea is that consistency of meaning must be maintained, but every attempt at specific definition of “translation” leads to complications, such as whether good translation involves maintaining sound symbolism, poetic form, humorous references, and the ever-nebulous “impact.”

Chapter Four is “Things People Say about Translation.” This title could easily be applied to many other chapters. Here it focuses on “a translation is no substitute for the original.” B demonstrates the falsity of this by presenting cases of books claimed to be translations from Language X, but which were in fact not translations at all. To balance this, he tells of Ismail Kadare, an Albanian who was entranced by the Albanian version of MacBeth as a child, never realizing it was a translation.
In translation of literary works, one challenge is how to retain “foreign” phrases and concepts in translation. For example, if an English novel has a character occasionally breaking into French, and that novel is itself translated into French, how does the translator keep the flavor of that character? There is no single answer.

In Chapter Seven, one of the most useful, B tackles the thorny issue of meaning. (He says in the following chapter that “Translation IS meaning” – p. 87.) It is clear from his examples that meaning is not universally connected to language (the smell of coffee in the woods “means” that someone is nearby). It is also clear that meaning, while connected to individual words, is highly context dependent. “One double macchiato to go” in the context of a coffee shop means that the speaker wants a particular kind of coffee to take away. But if it is uttered in the Sahara by a cycling fanatic entering a Tuareg camp, it could mean that the cyclist has become deranged. (This chapter would be an ideal place to cite Relevance Theory, e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1995, Gutt 2000, which has gained adherence as a model of communication in recent years and gives great attention to context.) The implication for the translator is that he must know the context of the text he is translating. B also discusses what may be an unfamiliar category to the general reader, that of performative verbs, in which an act occurs upon the verbal utterance of that verb (e.g. “I hereby christen this ship…”), but notes that there are specific conditions for these to be valid (e.g. the speaker must have the authority to perform the action).

Chapter Eight speaks of the mismatch of individual words across languages. The English “cottage cheese” cannot be translated using the Russian for “cheese.” “Salt” is not merely the chemical NaCl, but has a host of meanings, including verbal forms, which again, do not match across languages. Also, what is a single word in one language may translate as multiple words in another language. Russian has two words for the English color “blue.” B notes the possibility of distinctive features to distinguish meanings of words, but shows that this soon bogs down. (This would have been a good place to note Wierzbicka’s 1996 notion of “semantic primitives,” whether in support of such or not.) This chapter is excellent in addressing the mistaken idea that translation is simply substituting one word for another. (B does it wrong when saying that people get the idea that “words” are merely lists of things from Genesis 2:19; Adam’s task there was not to come up with words for all things, but only for animals.)

Chapter 14, “How many words do we have for coffee?,” addresses another myth, that culture has a determinative effect on language, largely publicized as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This has also been competently addressed in “The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax” (as it was phrased by Pullum 1991).

Another thorny issue is “how literal” translations should be. B rightly asserts that there is no such thing as a strictly literal translation, and that “few commentators on translation have ever come out in favor of a literal or word-for-word style” (p. 103).

In Chapter 11, B talks of oral translation and the trust factors it involves, with a fascinating historical account of translation practice in the Ottoman Empire. A sample: when the Sultan addressed Queen Elizabeth as “having demonstrated her subservience and devotion and declared her servitude and attachment” to the Sultan, it was translated into Italian simply as sincera amicizia!
In Chapter 15, which is mostly about translation of the Bible, B introduces the useful terminology UP/DOWN for translation between languages with different status. Translation UP is toward a language of greater prestige than the source language, while translation DOWN is translation into a language with a smaller audience or lower prestige. Prestige of a language can be the result of political power, religious content, or simply numbers of speakers. The prestige of languages shifts over time; for example, in many places English has become more prestigious than French, in contrast to a few hundred years ago. What makes this distinction interesting is that UP translations (toward the more prestigious language) tend to adapt more to that prestige language. On the other hand, DOWN translations (toward lower prestige languages) tend to retain more traces of the source language; in this case, “foreignness” carries prestige. In the context of Bible translation (especially into minority languages), B notes that one would expect characteristics of DOWN translation, but counterintuitively, this does not happen. B traces the history of Bible translation from a slow start to its explosion in the twentieth century, and notes the major influence of Eugene Nida. Nida, according to B, insisted that spiritual truth be accessible to all languages and had high respect for local cultures. Thus the translations inspired by his view tend to use the more adaptive UP approach, with as little “foreignness” as possible.

In Chapter 19, B gives some global overviews of translation. UNESCO’s figures for over a decade show that English is the source of about 80 percent of translations into other languages, while translations into English account for only 8 percent of translations. Interestingly, historically, when empires conquered others, the typical pattern was not translation into local languages, but to make the conquered peoples learn the conqueror’s language. As B puts it, “Translation is the opposite of empire” (p. 205).

Chapter 20 is quite timely, as issues of legalities and human rights are increasingly scrutinized today. B shows how historically the very term “human rights” has had a problematic translation history. Laws are always challenges to translation, because “legalese” frequently uses terms in ways that do not reflect their normal usage. The result is the rise of “lawyer-linguists” who are legally trained, but also are translators. The next chapter (21) gives a fascinating look at how this applies in the European Union. In the EU, all 24 currently official languages are considered equal, and policies are simultaneously produced in these languages, leading to the claim that there are no translations; all policies are originals.

In Chapter 23, B goes over the history of machine translation, noting its rather dismal history. However, he is enthusiastic about Google Translator’s recent advances made by using probabilistic methods based on actual internet usages (which works because just about everything someone says has been said before), and he anticipates even greater advances in the near future.

In Chapter 24, B also gives great credit to simultaneous interpreters, showing the incredible difficulty of their task. This had its modern origin in the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals. Most professionals at the time considered simultaneous interpretation a hopeless task. B gives credit to the “can-do attitude of the victorious U.S. Army” for this initial success (p. 262).

B also includes a fascinating chapter on dictionaries (monolingual dictionaries are quite a recent invention) and briefly discusses translating humor, style, and literary texts.
**Evaluation:**

This book is a potpourri of topics dealing with the general topic of translation. B’s audience is evidently not professional translators and linguists, though they will find it interesting, but the general public, for many of whom this material will be new. For that, B deserves credit for the accessible style, the excellent, entertaining, and pertinent examples, and the breadth of coverage of topics.

This breadth of coverage itself may be seen by some as overly exhaustive for a popular audience. The book is long and drags a bit toward the end as B brings in some chapters with philosophic and less memorable topics.

There are a few instances where B either is inconsistent or misses a larger point. He writes that Japanese does not have a single term for “translation” in Chapter Three, but cites zen’yaku, kan’yaku, shin’yaku, setsuyaku, chokuyaku, hon’yaku, and others to speak of various types of translation. The reader will note the presence of the morpheme yaku in all these, so it appears that these do indeed have a common base. (In what appears to be a parallel case in Hungarian on page 93, B notes that gyerek ‘child’ almost never appears in isolation.)

Though there are a few cases where B could have benefited from some of the linguistic literature (noted previously), he is knowledgeable about literature and translation practice to a degree that few linguists are and definitely knows how translation works on the practical level.

**References**


