

15th St. Jerome Translation Contest

— 2020 EDITION —

Remarks by the judges

English

Remarks by Paul Stephenson

This was a hard text to translate! It was hard enough to *make sense of* in places, let alone put into idiomatic English. An in-flight meal of scraps of salmon from the *fosses septiques* (“septic tanks” in everyday French) of the Indian Ocean? (I wouldn’t dwell on it.)

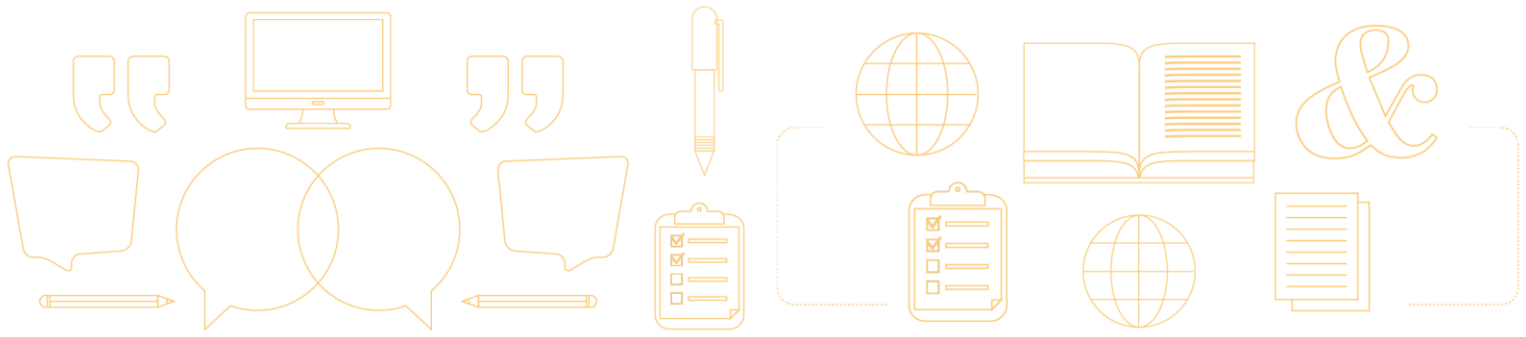
Maybe the first question the translator needs to ask about a translation like this is: what kind of publication is the text taken from – so what kind of reader are we translating for? What register are we aiming at? *Slate* calls itself “some kind of cool dirtbag” on its English website. That tells us a lot about it! I can hear the translators sharpening their pencils, so to speak, as they get ready to come out with their coolest dirtbag prose. Many of them did a better job of this than I could have!

While a glance at some of the articles on the French *Slate* website suggests it has its serious moments, the author is clearly from the offbeat, colloquial side of the magazine. So, where possible, we’ll be trying to convey the author’s sense of humour (after all, he’s terrified of crashing but pretending not to be). We can afford to be a little slapdash – like the author: planes don’t usually fly across the Atlantic at 12,000 feet, and I dread to think how those salmon scraps made it to the Indian Ocean and into an airline meal. (You guessed, I was traumatized by this image.)

The key to a translation like this, then, is to find equivalents. A straightforward example would be the *Journal de 20 heures*: an institution readily recognized by the French reader, best translated, I think, as “the evening news”, or “the main evening news”. (Once upon a time, a UK reader would have readily understood the “Nine o’Clock News”, but I understand it’s been moved to 10 o’clock, and, anyway, I think we can agree that the days of Brit-centric translation are over, unless we know for a fact we’re writing for *The Sun*.)

A less straightforward example would be *serein comme une vache en route pour l’abattoir* – I quite liked the translations that got away from the cow and spoke of the proverbial lamb being led to the slaughter, or of being “as calm as a turkey before Christmas” (I’d give the last one a special prize).

Encouraging translators to find equivalents, though – especially those translators who tread on eggshells every time they translate a UN document, trying to produce something that



won't start a world war, or the student whose every comma is open to criticism and who maybe feels that their entire career is riding on finding that word that's *on the tip of their tongue* – is like letting a kid loose in a candy store (or toyshop? *magasin de jouets*?). It certainly opens the door to all kinds of inventiveness, as long as you don't run riot. I liked “stoner” and “pothead” for *un fumeur de cannabis* – the author slips this in as if he's particularly proud to be a regular smoker (“How cool am I?”). On the other hand, I found “floating in the clouds like a weed fiend after smoking an especially satisfying spliff” a little over the top for the whole phrase (*détendu comme seul un fumeur de cannabis sait l'être*).

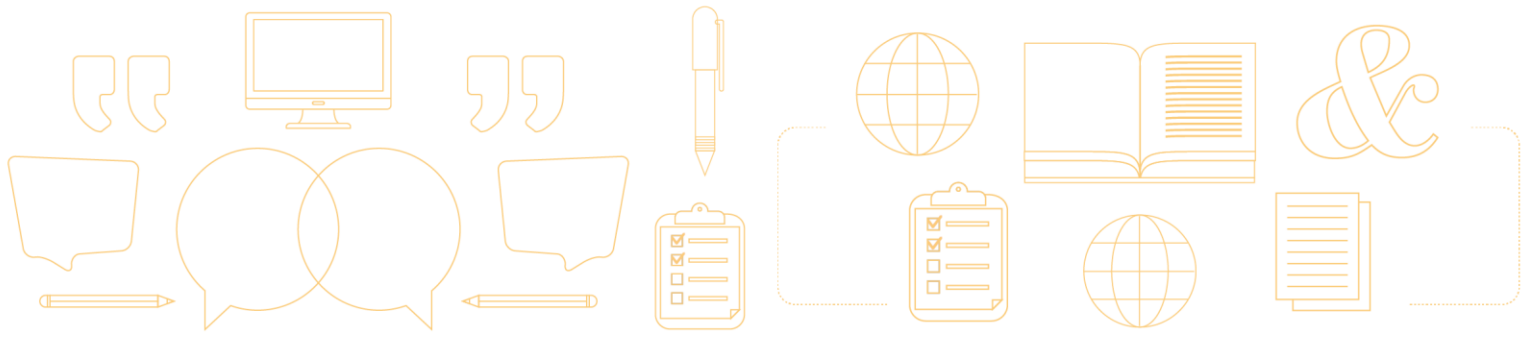
The trouble with translation is that it's sometimes the simplest words that are tricky to translate. What would be the equivalent of *bise*? Mouah, mouah? For this old English guy, a kiss is just a kiss. So I liked the translations that unobtrusively explained it to me – “kiss on the cheek” or “kiss on both cheeks”. The one I liked best was “kiss hello”. I thought a “bear hug” went too far; I would get some funny looks if I gave a bear hug to everyone I give a *bise* to.

Vagabonder was another straightforward word that gave unexpected problems. No, a plane hardly “wanders” or “roams”, we hope, but we have to assume the author chose the word deliberately (like his salmon from the Indian Ocean). There were lots of suggestions, including “meandering”, “rambling” and “pootling along”; you can hardly argue with “wandering” or “roaming” – after all, they reflect what the author said; but I liked “drifting” best, maybe because of its connotations, in my imagination, with the idea of “the drifter” or being “adrift on the ocean”.

Another simple phrase that gave problems was *juif en cavale*. This sounds strange. Doesn't he mean *juif errant*? But *en cavale* doesn't mean “wandering”. Up go the translator's antennae, we hope. Google to the rescue: it turns out to be the title of one of the author's books. He's just being self-referential! So that's okay: he really is “on the run”, at least in his own mind (or perhaps genuinely, given his fondness for a joint).

The piece certainly exercised my imagination. I'm trying to think how the boilerplate safety instructions read before take-off could be called a *discours tout en nuances*. The author was surely being ironic: one translator brought that out nicely by translating *tout en nuances* as “ever so subtle”.

The more I looked at it, and you have to do that a lot when you're looking at dozens of entries, the more I came to see this text as a translation minefield. It was so full of awkward words that you could practically hear the heavy breathing of the translators as they tried to avoid tripwires and blowing themselves up, in their search for that simple but elusive “right



word in the right place”. There were too many neat translations for me to mention them all. But here is a short list of some of them, with what I felt were the standout translations.
avarie – I thought “mechanical hitch” or “technical glitch” were the best of the bunch

peinard – relaxed, chilled out, laid back, and even chillaxed – all good suggestions in this context (the usual dictionary translations don’t fit at all)

du haut de mon siège – from the vantage point of my seat, from my lofty perch

carcasse – wreckage (the word you hear to refer to the burnt-out cars on New Year’s Eve in France)

Quel bonheur – I thought “what fun” was the likely equivalent in an English article of this kind; some of the alternatives might seem a little old-fashioned or class-sensitive (oh how splendid!)

vrombissement vaporeux – “hazy hum” (even though it’s hard for a hum to be hazy, I didn’t see any better ideas and couldn’t come up with one myself)

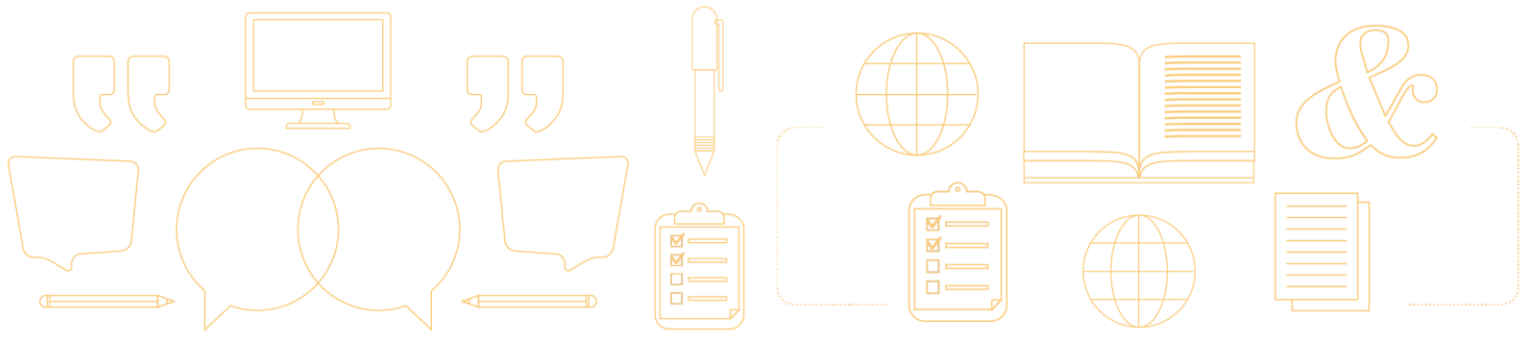
torse en biais, jambes de traviole – body aslant and legs askew

Et si j’annulais tout? – Maybe I should call the whole thing off? Like the best translations, this fits perfectly and seems obvious – in retrospect (when someone else has come up with it).

In places, the sentence structure needed to be changed to avoid “sounding like a translation”. On the whole, the translators restructured sensibly and only where necessary. We would not expect, I don’t think, to read “that is absolutely not my case” in an article of this sort, even if the original does say *ce n’est absolument pas mon cas*. Several ingenious solutions were put forward: “I know people who ... but I’m not than one of them/I’m not like that” were my favourites.

One of the best bits of translation advice I was ever given was, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth”. If there’s an obvious translation that sounds fine, just use it! Perhaps “plummets to its doom” is a bit too much for *finit par s’écraser*. Why should “enchanted” lakes become pristine, glimmering or scintillating? And “watery grave” seems to be the obvious idiomatic translation for *cimetière marin*. The cliché is your friend!





I feel I should say a word about machine translation, or computer-assisted translation. I think we all know that it can take some of the slog out of translation but can also sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help. I can't help but feel that it has a lot to answer for in a couple of these translations. Where else would "all to my joy to contemplate" come from? Or "cuddly like never"?

Thanks to all of you who took part in this year's competition. It takes some courage to crawl through a minefield like this! Your excellent knowledge of French shone through, but I was especially struck by how sensitive you were to the problems of conveying the meaning in a way the English reader in general would understand, and the English reader of *Slate* magazine in particular would appreciate. It's difficult to choose the winners when the original text, by its very nature, opened the door to so many creative solutions. The translations I've highlighted above are taken from different entries. No one has a monopoly on the perfect translation, least of all me! But I had the advantage of seeing all the "translation sweet spots" that you, as a group, had already hit. In selecting the winners, I've tried to find the translations that hit the most of those sweet spots.