

To Be or Not to Be Faithful in Translation?

I thank the FIT jury for having found it fit to honor me with the Karel Čapek Award for my modest translation effort.

Before I proceed, I wish to thank, and share love with, my family who are here to participate in this occasion, my children, grandchildren, and one great-grandchild who have always been an inspiration and source of support for me. I also thank family friends for their presence and sharing the love.

I thank my wife, a constant companion, whose support is given in many ways. She is sometimes the first one to hear my writing efforts and give me what I unabashedly call the most unbiased opinion.

The theme of this Congress, namely ***Bridging Cultures***, is a fitting encapsulation of a major purpose of translation, which is to spread the all-important truth that humanity is fundamentally the same. The differences are only in the details, that is to say, in the cultures that nurture us, that make us express that universal humanity. For example, my source languages, spoken in South Africa, have grammars, syntaxes, syllable structures that are very different from my target language, English. For example in the Bantu languages I'm speaking of, there's always a vowel between any adjacent occlusive consonants. Vowels, the soul of music; the grease that stops these consonants from grinding and squeaking! I feel sorry for languages where consonants run rampant like butting rams. English for example! I don't know why I ever got involved with this language! To say nothing about French where they pile so many consonants on top of each other they don't even pronounce most of them! German! Dutch! Those gutturals! They all need more vowels! You cannot sing without vowels. Syntax? Let's forget it. It's a dangerous minefield! These are some of the barriers we translators have to cross.

One major problem I encounter in translating is that of fidelity, loyalty, faithfulness, whatever you wish to call it. I say to myself I have to be faithful to the original work. Then I discover that being faithful is not as easy as one might think. The very attempt derails my purpose, and I ask myself: Why is being faithful so difficult? Then, when I think there are people who will be reading this translation,

and I want them to like the story, to be entertained, to laugh, to cry to hate or love a character, and being faithful stands in the way of all this, I say to hell with being faithful. Or I compromise: be a little faithful, be a little unfaithful.

Bridging cultures! I think this is the most noble purpose of translation. In our modern world, where sinister forces of greed and power are trying to rip us apart, we need to use all means at our disposal to make our differences our strength, not our weakness. FIT fits us, translators, into a neat place in the process of making diversity so exciting with its challenges, its continuous apparent ambiguities, yet where the differences define a potential symphony where the strength of the ensemble is precisely in the diversity of the different instruments that are assembled to make this possible.

Once again, thank you for this honor, and LONG LIVE FIT!

Daniel Kunene

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