
Douglas Robinson. *Performative linguistics: speaking and translating as doing things with words*. London: Routledge, 2003. 288 pp.

In this theoretical approach to translation based on linguistics, Pro-

fessor of English Douglas Robinson incorporates the models of theorists such as J.L. Austin, H. Paul Grice, Jacques Derrida, Anthony Pym and John Searle to support his basic theories on effective translation. The principal paradigm Robinson selects for his argument is Austin's informative illustration of performative linguistics in which to "say some-

thing is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something” and that “the assumption that to say something... is always and simply to state something... is no doubt unconscious”. In this work, Robinson attempts to enhance the understanding of the relationships between words, actions and translation by means of methodologies employed by linguists.

The title of the book must first be addressed because to the reader it might imply that the author’s intentions in writing this are to further one’s education in translating the performing arts. Despite the reader’s initial perceptions and assumptions, the book has virtually no connection with people physically performing in the theater, television, films, etc. What it treats is, in Robinson’s words, “how humans perform verbal actions and respond to the verbal actions performed by others”. What are at stake, according to the author, are the words that perform the action.

The first part of the book, which serves as a basis for Robinson’s translation theories, is J.L. Austin’s explanation of performative linguistics, which can be defined as interest in “actual language use in real-world contexts, in the relationships between actual speakers and writers

and actual interpreters.” This theory, for Robinson, exists in opposition to constative linguistics, which holds that words are more than just statements that convey information in that some words actually perform actions. With Robinson’s well-demonstrated examples such as “I bet you that...” or “I pronounce you husband and wife”, the reader can quickly grasp the importance of performative linguistics, that is to say, how words perform an action that is not necessarily visible. Robinson compliments these ideas by using Roy Harris’ observations regarding the movement from the basic model of performative linguistics to integrational linguistics.

Translation, as Robinson’s target subject, involves performative linguistics and is a powerful manner of reproducing words as doing something to their audience. Performative translation is a contemporary way for a specific group or individual to influence others, as opposed to just supplying information about their beliefs. Normally, the translator is expected to be an “invisible handmaiden of the original text” in which only the voice of the original author is brought to the target audience. Robinson, however, believes that in performative translation, the

voice of the translator must also be heard if he/she is to do more than just convey information.

In the second part of his book, Robinson addresses this issue of what he calls “double voicing”. He asserts that, “the translator works hard to give the impression of ‘objectifying’ another person’s discourse, passing on the words of another without change, so that the target-language reader can read the translation under the impression that it is direct and unmediated”. Double-voicing, however, is a performative manner of translation that allows not only the original author’s ideas to reach its audience, but the beliefs and assertions of the translator as well. This appears to be a necessary aspect of translation as *doing*.

In the third and final section of his study of performative linguistics, Robinson questions the commonly accepted idea of translation as a single-voiced conveyor of information and continues by asking,

“Why are we expected to erase all traces of our own voices, our own interpretive contribution to the translation, our own situatedness in the time and place of the target reader?” Clearly, in attempting to perform or to do something to one’s audience, allowing their own voice to penetrate the translation seems only beneficial.

Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words offers a convergence of linguistic theories that help the reader comprehend the importance of performative linguistics. Although the book contains clear examples of a wide range of theories, the interrelationships that Robinson has sought to elucidate are quite complex. An undergraduate student and beginning translator may have difficulty understanding these concepts and the theoretical mosaic that they create together.

Lacey Branch
St. Lawrence University