

FOREWORD

Whenever I think about translation, I'm reminded of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The title refers to the three levels of encounter with an unidentified flying object (UFO) proposed by J. Allen Hyneck. Close encounters of the first kind are visual sightings of a UFO. Encounters of the second kind take place when, in addition to these sightings, we see people or objects affected by UFOs. Encounters of the third kind are interactions with UFOs, so that their contents begin to influence our lives and affect our understanding of what it means to be human.

Now replace *UFO* with *translation*. As the authors of this book demonstrate through their vividly presented examples, it's not difficult to have an encounter of the first two kinds. All we have to do is watch translators in action—interpreting for a personality in a television interview, signing an event for a deaf audience, or providing an alternative language on a web page. And we sense the effect of the translation when we note successful outcomes, such as the signing of an international treaty or the completion of a multinational business deal. Equally, we see the effect when a mistranslation causes misunderstanding—a situation that, as the authors show in their anecdotes, can have all kinds of consequences, from the jocularly trivial to the seriously profound.

Few of us, though, take our appreciation of the role of translation to the third level—really grasping how it influences the way we live. “Translation affects every aspect of your life,” the authors

boldly state on their opening page. *Every* aspect? That's a hugely powerful claim. But by the end of this book you will believe it. You will have seen, in the reading, how multilingual humanity depends on translation for its successful functioning. And you will be impressed, as I was, by the multifarious situations in which—usually without realizing it—the translator's expertise has shaped the way we live. What we find, in *Found in Translation*, is ourselves.

Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetsche have performed an invaluable service in writing this book. They have not only dealt with translation in a fresh literary way but have made the subject—often presented in abstract and abstruse terms—accessible and entertaining. It is storytelling at its best, with broad themes illustrated by engaging anecdotes and intriguing panels showing how translation enters into the realities of day-to-day living. And the stories, taken from their own experience as professional translators and incorporating a truly remarkable number of visits and interviews, explode some of the myths that surround the subject and bring home to us the enormous problems translators face.

It is the difficulty of achieving high-quality translation that tends to be most underestimated. Language is without doubt the most complex behavior that humans acquire. Typically, dozens of sounds and symbols. Hundreds of syllables. Thousands of grammatical constructions. Hundreds of thousands of words. An uncountable number of contexts in which these linguistic features are used. And all of this done at least twice for most people on the planet—for most of the human race routinely uses at least two of the world's six thousand or so languages. I believe there is no greater intellectual challenge than to build bridges of intelligibility among these languages, but at the same time their individual linguistic and cultural identities need to be respected. The tension between attain-

ing intelligibility while preserving identity is one of the major themes of this book, and it places the translator, whether professional or amateur, at the heart of the task.

The authors begin with a strongly positive affirmation of the role of the translator in our lives, and this tone permeates the book. But a contrasting note appears at the very end, when they quote a negative term they found in a survey of professional attitudes. Asked to characterize the work of translators and interpreters in a single word, one professional said “underappreciated.” I’m surprised the word came up only once. As an honorary vice president of the Chartered Institute of Linguists in the UK, I hear it all the time. Translators do so often feel that their skills and relevance is unappreciated or ignored. Well, they can take some reassurance from this book, which will—as its authors hope in the closing words of their “Final Note”—help change all that. I took my cue for this foreword from the science fiction movies they mention at several places, including the *Star Wars* series. *Found in Translation* is aptly subtitled “How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World.” But their title might equally well have been glossed as *The Translator Strikes Back*.

—David Crystal,
author of *How Language Works*