

*The Sociolinguistics of Interlingual Communication*. Eugene A. Nida. Brussels: Les Éditions du Hazard, 1996 (Collection Traductologie). 118 pp. ISBN 2-930154-00-4.

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This is an attractively produced small monograph by one of the long-term heavyweights of translation studies. Although one might suspect that Nida would have little left to say after his classical texts on Bible translation and his theory of ‘dynamic equivalence’, here we find him becoming even more engaging and entertaining, somewhat less technical and theoretical, in an attempt to open wider horizons for translation studies and translator training. Even on the technical equivalence score, Nida now allows for a vague range of possibilities between a maximum and a minimum (114), thus considerably dilating his earlier positions. Yet there is far more here than strict translation theory.

The book offers a meandering path through the main issues in (American) sociolinguistics and indeed in general theories of language use, mostly on the level of a leisurely introductory course. Despite the title on the cover, the central concern is later described as ‘the sociolinguistics of translating’ (59), organized around five main themes: the sociological and psychological roles of language, the relation of language to focal or core elements, the tension between structure and creativity, the different levels of ‘involvement and investigation’, and the close link between language and culture. Abundant examples are drawn from ethnography, classical and modern literature, and modern science (Nida’s fields of interest are by no means limited to Bible translation), displaying an acute awareness of cultural difference in a profoundly multilingual world, with no simple relations between languages. Indeed, the sociolinguistic world is full of lingual overlaps and asymmetries, thus significantly altering the language-to-language frame of many other approaches to translation. Further, this sociolinguistics recognizes and respects the personal uses of language, seeing creativity as ‘a personal achievement’ (51), and in the same breath remains laconically critical of many apparent achievements: “Some people have acquired the habit of speaking without actually saying anything” (51). This is not the case of Nida, who not only has much to say but also takes obvious pleasure in the saying.

One might regret, of course, that the style and format of the book exclude properly empirical evidence. I would very much like to see, for example, quantitative reasons for assuring us that the United States has so few schools teaching translation and interpretation because of the “number of highly trained immigrants who are often able

to serve as translators and interpreters” (62). Here, and in many other cases, we simply have to rely on Nida’s wealth of experience.

The importance of this monograph does not lie in its presentation of any new ideas as such. It is instead useful in that it insists that linguistics can still be of crucial concern to translation studies, and that sociolinguistics might provide some of the most practical insights. This makes rubbish of claims to separate translation studies from linguistics, be it through a ‘cultural turn’ or simply by turning one’s back. Nevertheless, most of Nida’s sociolinguistics remains of a kind that concerns source and target texts rather than translators or translation; there is little mention of translation as a specific mode of code-switching or as one of several options for communicating across intercultural space. In the end, although Nida’s purpose is to open up sociolinguistic notions as a general frame for translation, a sociolinguistics truly of translation could turn out to be a rather more narrow affair.

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