

Nobel Prize laureate to translators: keep those questions coming

Chris Durban is pleased to hear praise for translators' skills at the highest level, but finds things aren't quite as they should be further down the chain



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No less an authority than José Saramago, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for literature, came out in favour of inquisitive translators in May.

Speaking in Buenos Aires at the Fourth Latin American Conference on Translation and Interpretation, Mr Saramago, who writes in his native Portuguese, insisted that he expects translators of his books to raise questions, highlight uncertainties, and elucidate intent and meaning where these are not immediately clear.

'Good translators,' he said, 'are the ones that ask questions.' Since writing gives the mistaken impression

that everything is clear, translation 'is an opportunity to reexamine what the author really means,' he explained. (*The Onionskin* was ecstatic: as we regularly point out, the same applies to scientific, technical and commercial translation.)

Addressing an audience of 1,400, Saramago stressed the cross-cultural role of translators. 'Writers create national literature,' he said, 'but it is translators who create

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José Saramago, (left) won the 1998 Nobel Prize in literature for works including *Blindness* (right), translated by Giovanni Pontiero



international literature.'

José Saramago's own works have been translated into 45 languages and are available in 60 countries. His awareness of cross-border language issues reflects not only his writing but also his personal experience as a translator: from 1955 to 1981 he produced – in his 'free time' – Portuguese translations of Colette, Pär Lagerkvist, Jean Cassou, Guy de Maupassant, André Bonnard, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, Étienne Balibar, Nikos Poulantzas, Henri Focillon, Jacques Roumain, Hegel and Raymond Bayer.

Mr Saramago is married to Pilar del Rio, a journalist who is also his Spanish translator, and who in a separate presentation discussed the challenges his books pose to translators.

Ms del Rio had harsh words for 'cultures which believe they are self-sufficient and do not need other languages,' noting that only 3% of all books published in the United Kingdom were originally written in languages other than English. But she had warm praise for the sensitivity and craftsmanship of Saramago's many translators. And no doubt she asks him a lot of questions.