

Language and the New Sun

The SF-Lovers list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 14 Oct 1992

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/106>

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G.D. Rees — 14 Oct 1992, 17:08

cet1 at cus.cam.ac.uk (C.E. Thompson) writes:

1. In TSOTT, in Thecla's story, as retold by Severian to Agia in the Botanic Gardens, Father Inire is made to say to Domnina: "Yet even though light is so weightless we have given its name to that condition...". This pun only makes sense in English or *very* closely related languages, as far as I can trace the derivation of the words light (opposite of heavy) vs. light (opposite of dark).
2. In TCOTC, Thea says to Severian: "The dawn-men ... renamed it [Mars] Present. That was a jest in their tongue for the same word meant both _Now_ and _The Gift_. Or so one of my tutors once explained the matter to my sister and me, though I do not see how any language could endure such a confusion."

So how is one to reconcile the two passages? With any other SF author than Gene Wolfe, I would attribute one or other to a momentary carelessness, but I would be quite reluctant to assume that here.

I don't know how much fiction you read that appears in translation; probably not much if you're a confirmed sf junkie, sf being a primarily English-language genre, but you should take a look at what _real_ translators can do. Pick up a copy of _The Futurological Congress_ by Stanislaw Lem and translated from Polish. A large section of that novel concerns the development of the language the characters speak (English of course in the translated book) and how it has been influenced by the developments in biochemical technology. This section is full of very clever neologisms and puns that only work in English and could not have appeared in the Polish; the translator has made an excellent job of coming up with ideas along the same lines as Lem but which work in English. There are other dazzling examples of the translator's art in _The Cyberiad_ and _The Star Diaries_.

If you're interested in the problems of translating difficult language-sepcific passages, you might like to consider the problems facing David Boulos, who is most famous for translating Georges Perec's monumental novel 'Life: A User's Manual' ('La Vie: Mode D'Emploi') and is now in the middle of translating another of Perec's novels, the one which I cannot recall the title of, but which was written entirely without the letter 'E' (a kind of French parallel to 'Gadsby').

In the afterward to TSOTT, Wolfe explains that he is 'translating' TBOTNS from some original far-future language and that he has taken liberties by replacing native words with ones he has derived from pseudo-Classical roots to give a better flavour. Under these circumstances, the passages you quote seem entirely reasonable. These problems always occur in novels that purport to be 'translations' of texts originally in a language that does not exist.

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