

The Girl Who Translated Everything

She spent a year explaining songs to strangers. Nobody paid her, and nobody knew her name.

5 min read

Before you read

- **literal** — the exact word-for-word meaning
- **nuance** — a small shade of meaning that changes how something feels
- **idiom** — a phrase whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate words
- **archive** — an organised store of material kept for the future
- **obsessive** — unable to stop thinking about or working on one thing



Hana at work on a translation, long after the rest of the flat has gone to sleep

¹ The first song Hana translated took her four hours, and she still got it wrong.

² She was thirteen, living in Busan, and she had found a comment under a music video that read, in careful English, *I love this song but I have no idea what it is about*. The comment had two hundred replies agreeing. Hana had a dictionary, a free afternoon and the particular confidence of someone who has never yet failed at anything publicly. She typed out the lyrics line by line, swapped each Korean word for its English equivalent, and posted the result.

³ Within an hour, someone had replied politely to say that the chorus made no sense.

⁴ They were right. The chorus contained an idiom — something close to *eating one's own mind* — which a Korean listener hears as a kind of restless self-doubt. Translated literally, it sounded like cannibalism. Hana had produced four hundred words of accurate nonsense.

⁵ What she learned that night became the rule she worked by for the next two years: a translation is not a swap, it is a decision. Every line forces a choice between what the words say and what they mean, and the two are rarely the same thing. She started keeping notes on the choices she made, and then notes on the notes.

- ⁶ The work became obsessive in a way she did not entirely notice. A new song would be released at midnight; she would be awake at three in the morning arguing with herself about a single verb. She built an archive — a shared document, publicly readable, with a tab for each release. Beside each translated line sat a short explanation: why she had chosen that word, what the alternative would have implied, which bit of nuance had been lost and could not be recovered.
- ⁷ That second column was the thing people came for. Other fans could translate lyrics. Hana explained them. Her archive was being read in São Paulo, Lagos, Jakarta and Manchester by people who had never met each other and shared almost nothing except an interest in four minutes of music.
- ⁸ She never used her real name. The archive was signed only with a username, and she turned down every request for an interview because the idea of her face attached to the work made her feel ill. Her parents knew she was on her laptop a great deal. They did not know that fourteen thousand people were waiting on her.
- ⁹ The year she turned fifteen, a company began releasing official English translations within hours of each song. They were fast, clean and free. They were also, Hana thought, slightly dishonest — they smoothed every difficult line into something pleasant and general, and explained nothing at all.
- ¹⁰ Her readership fell by half in a month. She found, to her surprise, that she minded less than she had expected. The people who left had wanted the lyrics. The people who stayed wanted the arguing — the second column, the losses she listed, the admission at the bottom of one entry that she had spent a week on a line and still was not satisfied.
- ¹¹ A university student in Toronto wrote to tell her that the archive had made him change his degree. Hana read the message four times, replied with three sentences, and went back to work on a verse she had been stuck on since Tuesday.
- ¹² She is nineteen now and studies translation properly, with lectures and deadlines and marks out of a hundred. Her tutors tell her she has unusually good instincts for a student her age. She has never explained where she got them.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. How old was Hana when she translated her first song?

- A eleven
- B thirteen
- C fifteen
- D nineteen

2. What was wrong with her first translation?

- A She misheard several of the words
- B She translated an idiom literally, so it made no sense
- C She translated the wrong song entirely
- D She left out the chorus

3. In paragraph 7, what made Hana's archive different from other fan translations?

- A It was published faster than anyone else's
- B It included the original Korean alongside the English
- C It explained the choices behind each line
- D It was written by a team rather than one person

4. Why did Hana refuse interviews?

- A Her parents had forbidden them
- B She was worried about breaking copyright rules
- C She was saving the story for a book
- D Having her face attached to the work made her uncomfortable

5. As used in paragraph 9, 'dishonest' most nearly describes translations that are

- A deliberately mistranslated to change the meaning
- B smoothed into something easy that hides the difficulty
- C copied without permission from other fans
- D sold for money rather than given away

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences, using evidence from the passage.

6. Hana says a translation is 'not a swap, it is a decision'. Explain what she means, using the example of the chorus from paragraph 4.

7. Her readership halved when official translations appeared, but she minded less than she expected. Why?

8. What does paragraph 8 suggest about the gap between Hana’s public life and her private one? Use a detail from the text.

9. The final paragraph says her tutors praise her instincts and she has never explained where she got them. Why do you think the writer chose to end there?

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. Hana gave two years of skilled work away for free and refused any credit for it. Was that a reasonable thing to do? Give your reasons.

11. The official translations were faster, cleaner and free, and Hana still thought they were worse. Can something be more convenient and less valuable at the same time? Give an example from your own life.

12. Predict what Hana does after she finishes her degree. What in the passage makes you think so?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. **B** — thirteen | 2. **B** — She translated an idiom literally, so it made no sense | 3. **C** — It explained the choices behind each line | 4. **D** — Having her face attached to the work made her uncomfortable | 5. **B** — smoothed into something easy that hides the difficulty

Part B

6. Swapping each word for its dictionary equivalent produced nonsense, because the idiom meant restless self-doubt rather than its literal words. The translator has to decide between the literal words and the intended meaning, and cannot have both. Accept any answer that identifies the choice between literal wording and intended meaning.

7. The readers who left only wanted the lyrics, which they could now get faster elsewhere. The readers who stayed valued her explanations and her honesty about what was lost — the part the official versions did not offer. Accept answers noting she kept the audience that wanted what only she provided.

8. Fourteen thousand readers depended on her work while her parents only knew she used her laptop a lot, and she signed everything with a username. The writer places these facts side by side to show how completely separate the two lives were. Accept any answer using the username, the parents or the fourteen thousand figure.

9. It closes the story by showing the years of unpaid, unseen work turning into real skill, while keeping her anonymity intact — the secret holds to the last line. Accept answers about the hidden work paying off, or about her choosing privacy over credit.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. A strong answer takes a position and defends it with something from the text — the satisfaction she clearly took in the work, the Toronto message, the discomfort she felt about publicity — rather than simply saying work should always be paid. Prompt with: what did she get out of it that money would not have given her?

11. Look for a real example and a stated reason, not just agreement. Strong answers identify what convenience removes — effort, detail, understanding, choice. Any sensible example counts if the reasoning is explained.

12. A strong answer predicts something and ties it to evidence — she may keep working anonymously, or finally put her name to the work, or move into teaching translation. A weaker answer predicts without any link back to the text. Prompt with: which detail about her made you think that?

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