

Iain Banks in French: Translating 'The Foreigner Within'

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Over the years literary translation has constantly come up against the difficulty of relating cultural elements which are inherent to the original language, whether they are dialects or sociolects, examples of humour or references to the history, geography or customs of the country. These elements are often crucial in establishing that a character in fiction is a 'stranger' to the mainstream values of his or her own culture; effectively that he or she is a 'foreigner within'. In this article I argue that although some losses are inevitable when transferring novels from one language to another, translators and publishers must assume the responsibility of minimising the ethnocentrism of the translation process to make room for the 'foreigner within', this nuanced version of 'the Other', which gives the fiction its flavour.

First, I focus on an excerpt which illustrates the various strategies adopted by translators faced with the challenges posed by translating the humour, violence and 'Scottishness' present in four of Iain Banks's novels which have been rendered into French. The practical considerations are necessarily informed by an overall vision of translation studies, and cultural studies in the area of literary translation. I then address the issues raised by 're-centring' the way in which Banks and indeed Scottish novels in general are translated.

Iain Banks is a popular and critically acclaimed Scottish writer who remains relatively unknown in France, even though four of his major novels have been translated into French. Have the difficulties faced by his French translators diminished his reputation amongst francophone readers? There was an increased interest in the translation of Scottish fiction in France at the beginning of the 1980s. Banks was initially presented as an author of science-fiction (writing as Iain M. Banks) and of suspense novels. His first work of fiction, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), was even classed in the horror/fantasy category. From that point on, it was difficult for translators to submit any other kinds of work written by Banks to publishers. Banks's fiction, however, is far from homogeneous: it is colourful, dense, varied and impossible to classify. At the time of writing,

one of his most successful novels, *The Crow Road*, has not been translated, possibly because its specifically Scottish concerns do not conform to publishers' expectations. The cross-generic nature of Banks's output, then, is a first challenge to his French translators and publishers.

The present article deals only with Banks's work as a 'mainstream' fiction writer; it leaves aside those of his science-fiction works that have also been translated into French. My concern here is the interaction between stylistics and sociolinguistics as they apply to the field of translation. Even though black comedy, violence (both verbal and physical) and 'Scottishness' are present in all the four novels considered here, I examine only one of these dimensions in each novel discussed.

***The Wasp Factory*: Flattening the Style**

The Wasp Factory was translated as *Le seigneur de guêpes* by Pierre Arnaud in 2003. Despite the undeniable horror of the murders committed by the novel's main protagonist, Frank, they are also striking because of their absurdity, in the Beckettian sense. The whole novel is impregnated with an atmosphere of madness. For example, Banks manages to involve us deeply in a fight between Frank and a rabbit, which is described with such excitement and suspense that we almost forget how ridiculous the situation is.

The novel's grotesque black comedy is illustrated by the following excerpt, in which the author characteristically combines irony with touches of the macabre. The events that take place on this island off the North-West coast of Scotland are indeed terrible, yet the details used to describe them exaggerate reality, making them ridiculous. In the following passage, the description of the physical setting is characterised by the reiteration of lexical elements relating to its location, identified by (1) in the source text. The action involves burning sheep running down a hill – an image both terrible and comically grotesque (2). The repetitive use of the conjunction 'and' and the participial '-ing' form of the verb stylistically amplify the vision of the cascade of burning sheep. Both elements are absent from the translation, which as a result seems flat and platitudinous. Whereas Banks offers us a hyper-real, horror-film description of the burning sheep, the translator adopts an earnest and serious tone, downplaying the marks of exaggeration that are crucial to the black comedy.

The light was in a halo **over the big dune behind the house** (1), where the Skull Grounds were; it was flickering yellow with smoke-trails in it. The noise was like that the burning dog had made, but magnified, **repeated <and> repeated, <and> with another edge to it** (2). The light grew stronger, and something came running **over the top of the big dune** (1), **something burning and screaming and running down** (2) over the sea-face of Skull Grounds dune (1). It was a sheep, <and> it was followed by more. First

another two, then half a dozen animals came charging **over the grass and the sand** (1). In seconds the hillside was covered with **burning** sheep, their wool in flames, **bleating** wildly <and> **running** down the hill, **lighting** up the sandy grass <and> weeds <and> **leaving** them **burning** in their fiery wake.^[1]

Elles formaient maintenant un grand halo brillant, à peu près à la hauteur du Pré des Squelettes. Les hurlements me rappelaient, amplifiés mille fois, ceux qu'avait poussés le chien en brûlant. La lumière se fit plus forte et, soudain, des animaux apparurent en haut de la dune ; ils couraient en tous sens, le dos en feu. Il y en eut d'abord deux, puis dix, et en quelques secondes la colline fut couverte de moutons qui brûlaient, bêlant désespérément en galopant vers la maison, laissant des traînées de flammes dans leur sillage.^[2]

The loss of these details and stylistic elements has unfortunate consequences, for it changes both the tone of the translation, and leaves the reader with only the gothic aspect of the novel to experience. Yet the tone and effect of the original, as we have just seen, were quite different. This extract illustrates the problems that arise when translating a certain kind of humour, signalled through style. When humour is based on taboos or when it relies on puns, it is often translated through adaptation and/or compensation. When it is based on style and socio-cultural knowledge, the translator needs to follow the original model. Only by so doing, will the translation do justice to the original text and its author, for it is very likely that these characteristic elements will also appear in his other novels.

This misrepresentation of the writer's intentions is also evident in the way the translation deals with Banks's attacks on religion, also to be found in many of his other novels. Here we focus on a single example, the French translation of the title of the novel, which is echoed in the heading given to chapter VIII, "The Wasp Factory" (in French, respectively *Le seigneur des guêpes* and chapter VIII, "Le sanctuaire aux guêpes"). Not only does the French translation change the title of the novel (affording a gratuitous and distracting allusion to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*) and the chapter, it also gives a religious connotation to both which would no doubt irritate Banks, a self-proclaimed atheist. Whereas the source text speaks of sacrifices and totems, the translation misleadingly returns us to a different form of religion.

A similar flattening of style can be observed in *Complicity* (1993), translated as *Un homme de Glace* by Hélène Colon in 1996. Cameron Colley, the novel's main character, is addicted to drugs, alcohol and sadomasochism. He becomes involved in a series of sordid murders committed by a childhood friend. In the following excerpt, for the first time in the novel, the violence of the language, expressed in the rhythmic repetition of obscenities, reflects the violence

of the acts described. The effect is therefore not one of shock or vulgarity for its own sake, but a desire to convey the full force of the verbal assault. This choice of wording reveals just how angry the murderer, Andy, is and amplifies his sadistic and violent personality, his desire to punish a corrupt and materialistic society.

Fucking squaddie culture, yeah; adoration of the fucking Maggie and pit bulls and getting some scoff down your neck and let's get pissed on lager and all moon together from the bus and camouflage jackets in the high street and yeah-well-I'm-inarestid-in-martial-arts-in't-I I'm not a fucking Nazi I just collect militaria I'm not a fucking racist I just hate blacks and gun magazines instead of magazines for guns wanking over the glossy photos of chromed Luger; Half of them think Elvis is still alive, buncha fucking stupid little cunts! [...] "Why are people so fucking useless?" he sobbed. "Fucking let you down, fucking can't do their fucking job ! Fucking Halziel; Captain fucking Michael fucking Lingary DSO – cunts!"^[3]

La culture de caserne... l'horreur. Idolâtrer Maggie et les pitbulls ; bâfrer ; se saouler la gueule à la bière ; montrer son cul tous ensemble par les vitres du car ; porter sa tenue de camouflage dans la rue ; se prétendre intéresser par les arts martiaux ; dire qu'on n'est pas un nazi mais collectionner les insignes militaires ; prétendre qu'on est pas raciste, mais qu'on peut pas blairer les Noirs ; acheter des magazines spéciaux au lieu de revues normales, sans doute pour se branler devant des Luger chromés sur papier glacé... La moitié d'entre eux croient fermement qu'Elvis est toujours en vie, les cons ! [...] « Comment les gens peuvent-ils être aussi nuls ? a-t-il sangloté. Vous laisser tomber comme ça, être incapable de faire correctement leur boulot ? Salopard de Haziél ! Salopard de capitaine Michael Lingary, avec sa médaille militaire de merde ! Tas de connards ! » ^[4]

The extreme violence of the murders in this novel may be read as a metaphor for the violence that the Conservative government has inflicted on the country. Here all the intensity of the hatred that Andy feels is articulated by the harshness of his words. But what do we observe in the translation? Here the flattening of style takes the form of an act of censorship, or self-censorship, which is typical of a French tendency to standardise 'deviant' features of a source text. Not only is it mandatory to edit out any repetitions, it is also essential to polish up the style. "Fucking" is both violent and socially nuanced; its omission sabotages the translation's potential to position the characters socially and to express the extreme nature of their emotions.

Translating 'The Foreigner Within'

The challenges posed to translators by 'deviant' styles of language are particularly salient when addressing the meanings of variation within a text. To illustrate this point, I refer first to *The Bridge* (1986), translated as *Entrefer* by Bernard Sigaud in 1988. In this novel, the protagonist, Alex, has a car accident and ends up in a coma. The narrative is his experience in this state, somewhere between life and death. *The Bridge* is entirely written in standard English, except for those chapters in which a barbarian, who represents Alex's unconscious and further functions as a cipher of the Scottish working class, expresses himself in a phonetic representation of a broad Scottish accent. The barbarian's language is not characterised by a rich Scots lexis or grammar, though some lexical items appear here and there. These two varieties express the twin subjectivities of Alex, who, in a deep coma, travels along the winding paths of his imagination. Thom Nairn highlights these linguistic and social divisions, while resisting the hasty 'national' reading of Banks they might suggest:

Quirky, complex, pointed humour, a diverse parade of atrocities and much else in Bank's work likewise recalls the Caledonian antiszygy, the dichotomy so beloved by MacDiarmid. Potential schisms in the individual (schisms are piled on schisms of all kinds) are constantly present in Banks's fiction, making it comparable to R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and James Hogg's *Confessions or The House with the Green Shutters*, or Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*. Yet Banks has expressed doubts about the place he may or may not occupy in a specifically Scottish literary tradition, as well as some dubiety about Scottish literature itself. The antiszygy, after all, is far from exclusively Caledonian: the same holds true of the most distinctive feature of *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge*, which is their fusion of diverse styles of hard realism and quasi-science fiction, hardening the realist base while delving into some fairly strange subjective zones.^[5]

For the translator, these linguistic and stylistic contrasts are nonetheless best understood as dramatising a diglossic Scottish condition. There is a clear distinction between the code of emotions, generally expressed in Scots, and the code of rational thinking, sometimes associated with school and school bullying, which is expressed in standard English. The use of Scots in the following 'barbarian' section of *The Bridge* articulates the Freudian dimensions of the main character; the shift in codes expresses a schizoid tendency that is arguably characteristic of protagonists in Scottish novels.

It wiz this majishin that geez this thing, cald it a familyar soay did an it sits on ma showdder and gose jibber fukin jibber oll bluy day it gose. I cany stand the dam thing but am stuk with it I suppose an it wi me to, cumty think ov it. The majishin sed it woold help me; sed it woold tel me things, which it duz alright, but I thaught he ment sum usefyull

things no a lode a shite oll day. He wiz trying tay bribe me becose he thaugh I wiz goantae kill him, whitch I wiz, an he sed if I didnae hed give us this reely intirestin an usefyull familyar tay keep watch at nyht an giv us oll that advyce an that. So I sed fairnuf pal, lets see whit it can dae then, so he gose tay this shelp an gets this wee box an puts sum stuf intae it an ses sum o thae wurdz an that (I wiz watchin him, ken, in case he tryd enythin, had ma sord at his throate in case he tryd tae turn me intae sumthin wee an nastie, but he didnae).[\[6\]](#)

Sétté smajissyin kimavé doné struk, un familyé killaplé alor moi ossi et ysspérshh sur mon népoll et ski baraggwynn bordél toutt lanssintt journé illarétpa! Chpeupa bléré ste saloppry mais chpeupa man debaracé et jssupozz kssé paréye pour lui kanton nipanss. Le majissyin ydizé ki médré, komquoi ymdiré des truk pourssur sésskifé ahoui alor mais chkroyé kivoulédír des truk util padéta de konnry touttla journé. Il éssyéé dmashté passki kroyé kjalléltué illavé pator et ydizé keussi jletuépa y donnré à mezig se familyé vréman intréssan et util pour montélagardd la nuy et mdoné plintkonsséye ékssétra. Alor jyaidi sakollmonpott voyondonkvoir skisséfér, alor y vachérsché sétt petitt boitt sur unn nétajjér, illimé du truk dedan et ydidémo komssikomssa (jlavéaleuye, ouais, okaou ytantré kékshozz de toutpti touvilin, mais illa ryinfé).[\[7\]](#)

Even though the process of representing a socially and geographically specific accent on the page may run the risk of making the text impossible to read for some, it conveys a Scottish cultural identity. The French translation uses a similar phonetic process with the language yet it is hard to identify any social markers and therefore to grasp the reasons for this code. The resulting text may be contrasted to that of Raymond Queneau's *Zazie dans le metro* (1972), in which the language of the main character, Zazie, is represented phonetically, to express her personality as a young girl, and indeed another of Banks' novels, *Feersum Endjinn*, in which the language of one of the characters, Bascule, is represented in a kind of region-less, phonetic 'text-speak' to convey his youth.[\[8\]](#) If an English-speaker were to read the original passage from *The Bridge* aloud, he or she would at least approximate a Scottish accent, whereas a French-speaker reading the translation would find no clue as to the socio-cultural origin of the speaker.

The language of translation has at least two dimensions: language as expressive of content and language as a social process. The variety of English adopted by speakers often reflects their education and is therefore suggestive of social class or aspiration, and in Scottish contexts may convey the image of an oppressor or invader. When the barbarian expresses himself, he is reverting to his 'mither tongue', and at the same time returning to his working class roots. Unfortunately the translation is merely a synthetic morphosyntactic production that neglects the fact that Scots is more than a literary dialect, it is also a grounded social representation. The

translation of a regional and social accent or dialect in a novel, when it is directly opposed to the standard form of the language, remains closely linked to the function of both. While the literary representation of social dialects invites play, and although it is true that, to paraphrase Derrida, a good translation must know how to abuse, it must do so while remaining true to the writer's intent.^[9]

A further example of the challenges posed by language variety can be found in *The Business* (1999), translated as *Le Business* by Christiane and David Ellis in 2001. Kate Telman, the heroine of this novel, works for a semi-occult firm that wants to take over a state in order to obtain a seat at the UN. In the following extract she meets a young Scottish girl and begins a conversation with her. As Jean Berton discusses elsewhere in this issue of *IJSL*, it is extremely difficult to reproduce the effect of these characteristically Scottish oral markers. Whereas in the previous extract a form of phonetic spelling was used to characterise a 'barbaric' voice, here similar strategies are used to differentiate middle-class English and working-class Scottish voices:

'Come here, small girl.'

'Whit?'

'I said, come here.'

'Whit fir?'

'What? What did you say?'

'Eh?'

'Are you actually talking English, child?'

'Ahm no Inglish, ahm Scoatish.'

'Ah. Well, at least I understood that. I wasn't questioning your nationality, young lady. I was merely wondering aloud whether we shared the same language.'

'Whit?'

'Never mind. Look, would you kindly step closer to the car; I hate having to raise my voice...I'm not going to bite you, child.'

'Who'he?'

'That is Gerald, my chauffeur. Say hello, Gerald.'

'Aye-aye. Y'all right hen?'

'Aye... Zat him fixin the tyre, aye, missis?'

'Yes. We had a puncture. He's changing the wheel.'

'Aw aye.' 'How are we doing there, Gerald?'

'Getting there, ma'am. Getting there.'

'Now, what is your name?'

'Ahm no supposed to talk tae strangers. Ma maw telt me.'^[10]

- Viens ici, petite fille.
- Quoi ?
- J'ai dit : Viens ici.
- Pourquoi qu'faire ?
- Pardon ? Qu'est-ce que tu as dit ?
- Hein ?
- Est-ce que tu parles anglais, mon enfant ?
- Arrh, chu pas anglaise, chu écossaise.
- Ah ça, je l'avais compris. Ce n'est pas ta nationalité que je mettais en doute, jeune demoiselle. Je te demandais seulement si nous utilisons le même langage.
- Da quoi ?
- Bon laisse tomber. Tu veux être gentille et t'approcher un peu de la voiture ? J'ai horreur d'élever la voix...Allons, je ne vais pas te manger, mon enfant.
- Qui c'est-y, lui ?
- C'est Gerald, mon chauffeur. Dites bonjour, Gerald !
- Aye, aye ! Ca va ?
- Aye !...C'est lui qui répare le peuneu, aye, m'dame ?
- Oui. Nous avons crevé. Il change la roue.
- Aw aye.
- Nous progressons, Gerald ?
- Ca vient, Ma'me. Ca vient.
- Dis-moi, comment t'appelles-tu ?
- C'est pas permis de parler aux étrangers. Ma'aman, è'm'défend d'parler aux étrangers.[\[11\]](#)

The translator's strategy is similar to that used by Sylvère Monod in his translation of Scott's *Heart of Mid-Lothian* (also discussed by Jean Berton in the current issue of *IJSL*):

I therefore tried to introduce certain elements into the French used by these characters, on the one hand a small number of simple Scottish words which the general public may already know or which are discreetly explained when they first appear as is the case with *laird*, *kirk*, *cairn*, *manse*, their objective being to add a little local flavour without, one hopes, causing too much damage; on the other hand certain slightly stilted or deliberately awkward turns of phrase to express a feeling of strangeness – this is the sensation one should have, as is the case in Scott's novel, when speaking to a Scotsman and even more so when faced with a young Scottish girl dressed in her national costume in the Southern part of Great Britain.[\[12\]](#)

We might well take issue with the expression 'slightly stilted or deliberately awkward turns of phrase.' Indeed all readers in the target language will be faced with characters who do not speak properly ("Da quoi" is an example of a solecism in French), whereas in the original text the girl and the chauffeur speak 'good Scots', characterised by a local accent and a traditional lexicon (for example, the term of endearment, 'hen') and grammar (such as the weak verb 'telt', *told*). The effect that this has on a Scottish reader is difficult to predict with certainty: while some might regard the contributions of the girl and the chauffeur as poor English, others would welcome it as the familiar language of the local community. For other English-speaking readers, the discourse might simply be marked as Scottish. In the translated excerpt from *The Business* (it is important to note that the scene takes place in the outskirts of Glasgow), it is difficult to know if the reader will infer that the young girl is speaking as she does because she is young, or because of her lack of education, or because in her part of Scotland everyone speaks in the same way.

The translator, consequently, is faced with a set of choices amongst a politically sensitive array of potential 'equivalences'. Christiane and David Ellis negotiate these choices inconsistently. The contraction of the syntagm "je suis" into "chu" gives the reader the choice between five possibilities: the character is either relatively young, or uneducated, or from the North of France, or from a rural background, or all four. However the elliptic wording of "è'm'défend d'parler" is more a reference to oral language and can to some extent be destabilising to the French-speaking reader. Finally it is very rare for a translator to retain words or expressions from the source language which are unknown in the target language and rather than translate them try to incorporate them so that the readers can discover the Other. However, only "aye" and "aw aye" are kept, and "wee" (which appears a little further on in the original), a stereotypically Scottish term, disappears in the translation. This lack of consistency has its drawbacks. For example, isolating one word or one expression can give the target reader the impression that it is not a regional language but more a cry of pain, similar to the French interjection "aïe." In short, the complex potential significations of language variety in the original text lead to a number of incompatible strategies in the translation, which render it ultimately confusing to read.

Conclusion

The translation strategies adopted in the French versions of *The Wasp Factory* and *Complicity* diverge from the more experimental approach used in *The Bridge* and *The Business*. As we have seen, whether or not experimental techniques are adopted in the translation, it is still difficult for the readers of the French versions to appreciate the stylistic subtlety and range that is evident in the original texts, and this may have damaged Banks' reputation in francophone culture. The translators should not necessarily be blamed for the inconsistencies and shortcomings to be found in the versions of what are highly demanding texts to adapt. The publishers also have their

share of responsibility. A positive initiative in this respect can be seen in the policy of the Métaillé publishing house: it has a Scottish library and assigns one translator to each of its authors. This policy leads to consistency between translations, and indeed intertextuality among novels, and there is a greater chance of honouring the style of the original writer.

In terms of translation techniques, the first two excerpts considered here are cases of gradual adaptation^[13] and are characteristic of a certain conception of literary translation that still prevails in commercial publishing. Translation deadlines are often too short and so, even when the translations are the work of specialists who are asked by their publishers to respect the source text, they sadly remain unfaithful. The challenges posed by the latter two examples are more complex, and demonstrate the *aporias*, or inevitable impasses that translation induces / produces. Some attempts to address these issues are suggestive – for example, the use of French vernacular like *chtimi* in Freddy Michalski's translation of William McIlvanney's *Docherty* (Paris: Rivages, 1999) – yet it is important to note that each case is different and it is difficult to establish a generally applicable set of rules for translators to follow.

One is therefore forced to admit that a likely reason why a writer such as Banks has not been as successful in France as we might expect is that his novels pose substantial challenges for translators and publishers: they destabilise generic boundaries, and they are deeply rooted in a nuanced Scottish world-view that stands apart from mainstream Anglophone culture, a stance that is marked by either a characteristic form of humour or a penchant for code-switching. All of these elements create difficulties for the translator who is working under pressure for a publishing house, particularly when novels are allocated for translation individually. Flattening the style and deleting vernacular expressions are all too common translation techniques that invite a more imaginative response from increasingly visible translators.

Further Reading:

Berman, Antoine, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995)

Berman, Antoine, *La Traduction et la lettre ou l'Auberge du lointain* (Paris: Seuil, 1999)

Cordonnier, Jean-Louis, *Traduction et Culture* (Paris: Hatier / ed. Didier, 1995)

Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995)

Venuti, Lawrence, *The Scandals of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1998)

NOTES

- [1] Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (1984; London: Abacus, 1990), p. 175.
- [2] Translation by Pierre Arnaud, *Le seigneur des guêpes* (Paris: Fleuve noir, 2003), p. 212.
- [3] Iain Banks, *Complicity* (1993; London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 212-13.
- [4] Translation by Hélène Colon, *Un homme de glace* (Paris: Denoel, 1997), pp. 227-8.
- [5] Thom Nairn, 'Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory' in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds), *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 127.
- [6] Iain Banks, *The Bridge* (1986; London: Abacus, 1990), p. 77.
- [7] Translation by Bernard Sigaud, *Entrefer* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 90.
- [8] John Corbett, 'Past and Future Language: Matthew Fitt and Iain M. Banks' in Caroline McCracken-Flesher (ed.), *Scotland as Science Fiction* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, forthcoming).
- [9] Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol. I* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 67.
- [10] Iain Banks, *The Business* (1999; London: Abacus, 2000), pp. 22-3.
- [11] Translation by Christiane and David Ellis, *Le business* (Paris: Belfond, 2001), pp. 32-3.
- [12] Walter Scott, *Le Coeur du Midlothian*, trans. Sylvère Monod (Paris: Gallimard, 1998)
- [13] See Lance Hewson, 'L'adaptation larvée : trois cas de figure', *Palimpsestes*, 16 (2004), 105-116.