Foreign Voices and the Troubles: Northern Irish Fiction in French, German and Spanish Translation

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1 The Challenge of Translating Northern Irish Voices

Northern Ireland has often been regarded as a place on the edge of Europe with its own violent traditions, rules and ways of functioning. Many people from other parts of the world consider the region as obscure and incomprehensible. The extent to which Northern Ireland appears to be a place apart with its own particular discourse is reflected in the translation of its literature. Since the outbreak of the Northern Irish conflict in 1968, more than 700 so-called *Troubles novels* have been written.[1] These books focus on political violence and its consequences, often including characters which belong to paramilitary organisations, the British army or the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Whereas some works are merely dismissed by critics as 'troubles trash',[2] a certain number of fine novels have been translated into different languages.

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Working with Northern Irish *Troubles fiction*, the translator faces the challenge of transposing specific voices and world views into a different cultural environment in which many Northern Irish concepts may not mean anything at all. Furthermore, he or she has to struggle with dark Northern Irish humour, which does not translate easily, particularly if the members of the target culture have not gone through periods of political turmoil. Not every translator has had the chance to live in the region before starting to work on a novel, and very often a lack of local knowledge betrays itself in his or her translation. In many cases, this leads to—sometimes very amusing—cultural errors.

In what follows, I set out to explore the German, Spanish and French translations of two widely read Troubles novels: Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (1996) and Colin Bateman's *Divorcing Jack* (1995).[3] Both books were published after the IRA's first ceasefire declaration in 1994. The humorous tone in which the novels are written reflects the authors' more detached attitude towards the Northern Irish situation. Through the use of irony, parody and wordplay, McLiam Wilson and Bateman attempt to subvert received perceptions and traditional one-sided interpretations of the conflict. In addition, both writers allude to very local concepts which might be incomprehensible even for people living in the South of Ireland. All this makes the novels extremely difficult to translate, as not only the writers' voice has to be conveyed but also a whole set of cultural references.

For the analysis of the translations of the two books, Lawrence Venuti's concepts of 'domestication' and 'foreignization' are helpful.[4] In a domesticating translation, according to Venuti, terms and concepts closely connected to the source culture are replaced by expressions and value systems native to the recipient culture. The original is thus reconstituted via recourse to concepts embedded within the translator's cultural environment. The foreign elements of the source text are almost entirely eliminated so that the translation reads like an original in which the translator becomes invisible. A 'foreignizing' translation, on the contrary, is rather to be seen in terms of a non-fluent or 'estranging' translation, which highlights the presence of the translator by underlining the foreign identity of the source text.[5] Yet, we should also mention that Venuti's theory places these two models on either end of a spectrum: no translation can

be 100% 'domesticating' or 'foreignizing', as elements of the opposite concept are always included. Therefore, we could consider a given translation as being 'domesticating' or 'foreignizing' to a greater or lesser extent.

2 Reproduced, Silenced and Added Voices in Translation

First and foremost, it is striking that the three translators of *Eureka Street* leave the title of the novel in English. Most likely, they decided to do so as French, German or Spanish translations, such as *Rue Eureka*, *Eureka-Straße* or *Calle Eureka* would lose their 'foreignizing' effect and therefore not appeal to the respective audience. Only Christa Schuenke, the German translator, slightly modifies the title of the novel by inserting 'Belfast' after 'Eureka Street'. In this way, she underlines the Northern Irish setting of the action.

In McLiam Wilson's novel, the city of Belfast is depicted through its urban space and its population. Eureka Street, the imaginary street central to the action of the book, is illustrated through the description of its inhabitants:

> Eureka Street, 10 p.m. The darkness was soft and coloured. In No. 7, Mr and Mrs Playfair mumbled in their tidy bed, a brand new Easi-sleep reduced to £99 in a bomb-damage clearance sale in a broken store at Sprucefield.[6]

The main challenge of this paragraph involves the translation of the concept 'bomb-damage clearance sale'. As an element of a typical Northern Irish discourse, the term is familiar to a person who has lived in the region during the Troubles. However, it is certainly less present in the vocabulary of a German, Spanish or French readership. The three translators opted for different degrees of 'foreignization' and 'domestication' in order to transpose the concept into the respective target culture.

Brice Matthieussent's translation of the above-mentioned paragraph into French reads as follows:

> Eureka Street, dix heures du soir. L'obscurité était douce et colorée. Au numéro 7, M. et Mme Playfair marmonnaient dans leur lit minuscule, un Sommeil-d'Or flambant neuf acheté 99 livres à l'occasion d'une vente organisée dans une boutique plastiquée de Sprucefield.
>
> [Eureka Street, 10 p.m. The darkness was soft and coloured. In No. 7 Mr and Mrs Playfair mumbled in their tiny bed, a brand new Golden-Sleep bought for 99 pounds at a sale organised in a shop which had been blown up by a bomb.][7]

Matthieussent's translation could be regarded as tending towards the 'domesticating' side of the spectrum as he adapts a number of terms and concepts to the French context. At first sight, however, the reader is struck by an odd mistake: the word 'tidy' is mistranslated as 'minuscule', actually meaning 'tiny'. This error has probably been committed out of distraction. In order to 'domesticate' the source text, Matthieussent translates 'Mr' and 'Mrs Playfair' with 'Monsieur' and 'Madame Playfair'. The made-up brand 'Easi-sleep' is rendered by the equally invented brand 'Sommeil d'or', which translates as 'Golden-sleep.' This choice has most likely been made as the word-to-word translation of 'Easi-sleep', which would be 'Sommeil facile', would not have sounded very attractive as a brand name.[8]

Furthermore, Matthieussent translates the price of the sofa '£99' with '99 livres', employing the French term for the British currency. Nevertheless, he refrains from transforming 'Eureka Street' into 'rue Eureka', its French equivalent. In Venuti's words it could be said that the street name 'Eureka Street' functions as a 'foreignizing element' in the French text.[9] It is very likely that Matthieussent opted for the English term in order to keep the reference to the title of the book, *Eureka Street*, which he also leaves untranslated. In this way, the translator underlines the situation of the source text in an anglophone environment.

The 'bomb-damage clearance sale in a broken store' becomes 'une vente dans une boutique plastiquée,' which translates as 'a sale in a shop which had been blown up by a bomb'. Matthieussent's translation obscures the fact that the sale actually takes place in order to sell goods which have been damaged in the bomb explosion. As in the French translation the reason and the nature of the event are not obvious, the

francophone reader might presume that the sale takes place as a kind of flea market or a garage sale for which the organisers had randomly chosen a damaged shop as a location. The existence of the term 'bomb-damage clearance sale' hints at the fact that the consequences of political violence, such as bomb explosions, have become habitual in such a way that words had to be invented to name them. Through Matthieussent's translation, however, the specific 'Belfast term' belonging to a particular Northern Irish discourse is entirely lost. By paraphrasing 'bomb-damage clearance sale' in his translation, Matthieussent silences the underlying voices alluding to the everyday occurrence of political violence.

The German translation of the above-mentioned paragraph by Christa Schuenke reads as follows:

> Eureka Street, abends um zehn. Die Dunkelheit war weich und voller Farben. In Nummer 7 brabbelten Mr. und Mrs. Playfair in ihrem Minibett, einer nagelneuen, auf £99 runtergesetzten Schlafcouch, die sie in einem demolierten Geschäft in Sprucefield erstanden hatten, das wegen Bombenschaden dicht machen musste.[10]
>
> [Eureka Street, 10 p.m. The darkness was soft and full of colours. In No. 7 Mr and Mrs Playfair mumbled in their tiny bed, a brand new sofa bed, reduced to £99 which they had acquired in a damaged shop in Sprucefield, which had to close down due to a bomb.]

It is striking that the German translator commits the same error as her French colleague: she mistakes 'tidy' for 'tiny', translating 'tidy bed' with 'Minibett', meaning 'tiny bed'. In contrast to Matthieussent, who translates 'Mr' and 'Mrs Playfair' with 'M.' and 'Mme Playfair', Schuenke keeps 'Mr' and 'Mrs' instead of employing the German terms 'Herr' and 'Frau'. The same applies to the price of the sofa; instead of translating £99 with the German '99 Pfund', she keeps the English term. The name of the street remains equally untranslated. Integrating 'foreignizing elements', Schuenke seeks to draw attention to the English-speaking context of the story. The brand 'Easi-sleep,' on the contrary, is simply rendered by the generic term 'Schlafcouch' ('sofa bed'), as a word-to-word translation of 'Easi-sleep' ('Leichter Schlaf') would rather evoke insomnia instead of a sound and relaxing sleep.[11]

In order to carry across the meaning of the term 'bomb-damage clearance sale,' Schuenke explains in a paraphrase that the sofa bed had been bought 'in einem demoliertem Geschäft in Sprucefield […] das wegen Bombenschaden dicht machen musste' ['in a damaged shop in Sprucefield, which had to close down due to a bomb']. Similar to the French translation, the reason for the sale remains obscure: the German reader does not necessarily understand that the sale had been organised with the intention to clear out the shop. The fact that the translation of the 'bomb-damage clearance sale' stays imprecise despite the translator's efforts shows that the concept is remote from contemporary German reality. As in the case of the French translation, the underlying voice hinting at the everyday experience of political violence in Northern Ireland becomes obscured.

The Spanish translation of the paragraph by Daniel Aguirre Oteiza is the most explanatory one:

> Calle Eureka, diez de la noche. La oscuridad era suave y de color. En el número 7, el señor y la señora Playfair hablaban entre dientes en su pulcra cama, una Duermefácil completamente nueva que habían comprado rebajada a noventa y nueve libras en la liquidación de una tienda de Sprucefield, arruinada a causa de los desperfectos ocasionados por una bomba.[12]
>
> [Eureka Street, 10 p.m. The darkness was soft and coloured. In No. 7 Mr and Mrs Playfair mumbled in their tidy bed, a completely new Easi-sleep, reduced to £99 in the clearance sale of a shop in Sprucefield, which had been ruined due to the damages caused by a bomb.]

In contrast to the French and German translation, the adjective 'tidy' is correctly translated with 'pulcra', meaning 'clean'. Aiming at a domesticating translation, Aguirre Oteiza renders the brand 'Easi-sleep' word for word as 'Duermefácil'. He also transforms Mr and Mrs Playfair into 'señor' and 'señora Playfair', hispanicising the original text. Unlike his French and German counterparts, the Spanish translator does not keep the street name but transforms it to 'calle Eureka'. In this way, the reference to the title of the book, which in the Spanish translation remains in its English original, is lost.

However, Aguirre Oteiza goes to great lengths to communicate the precise meaning of the term 'bomb-damage clearance sale', using the

elaborate paraphrase 'la liquidación de una tienda de Sprucefield, arruinada a causa de los desperfectos ocasionados por una bomba', which translates as 'the clearance sale of a shop in Sprucefield, which had been ruined due to the damage caused by a bomb'. Thanks to the term 'liquidación' the translator manages to communicate the reason for the sale and thus underlines the reference to political violence.

Possibly, Aguirre Oteiza is sensitive to the story's violent context as he originates from the Basque country.[13] The translator's decision to employ the above-mentioned paraphrase to explain the term shows his eagerness to correctly communicate the concept of 'bomb-damage clearance sale'. It is very likely that due to his personal experience of political tensions in the Basque country, Aguirre Oteiza is conscious of the importance of this particular piece of information. Thus, the translator encourages the Spanish-speaking reader in a subtle way to establish a parallel between Northern Irish and Spanish history: as Northern Ireland was shaken by the actions of paramilitary organisations from both political camps, different parts of Spain were troubled by the violent actions of ETA. Interestingly, the historic correlations highlighted by Aguirre Oteiza are also visualised in Belfast's urban space: in certain Catholic areas murals can be found which express a certain discourse of fraternisation between Northern Ireland and the Basque country.

3 Transferring Local Humour into a New Environment

The translation of humour is a particular challenge for the translator, especially when source and target cultures differ in their conceptions of values and norms. In the following paragraph of Robert McLiam Wilson's novel, the goings-on in house No. 27 on Eureka Street are described with a kind of humour which is not easy to translate into a different cultural environment:

> In No. 27, […] Mr and Mrs Stevens were absent, holidaying in Bundoran; Julia, their daughter (gladly left behind), was showing both her breasts to Robert Cole, who previously had glimpsed only the upper portion of the left one during a memorable party in Chemical Street.[14]

The extract is rendered by the French translator in the following way:

> Au numéro 27, […] M. et Mme Stevens étaient absents, en vacances à Bundoran; Julia, leur fille (heureusement restée à la maison), montrait ses deux seins à Robert Cole, qui auparavant n'avait aperçu que la partie supérieure du téton gauche lors d'une fête mémorable sur Chemical Street.[15]
>
> [In No. 27, (…) Mr and Mrs Stevens were absent, on holiday in Bundoran; Julia, their daughter (happily remaining at home) showed both her breasts to Robert Cole, who previously had glimpsed only the upper part of the left nipple at a memorable party in Chemical Street.]

It is striking that Matthieussent chooses to translate 'gladly left behind' by 'heureusement restée à la maison'. Whereas the English phrase suggests that Mr and Mrs Stevens's daughter is happy about being left at home, the French translation implies an external observer, who positively comments on the fact that Julia stays at home. In this way, he/she seems to express his/her approval of the young girl showing her breast to her boyfriend. Apart from this, we can observe a further interesting detail: the 'upper portion of the left [breast]', which Robert Cole had the chance to glimpse previously, is translated with 'la partie supérieure du téton gauche', meaning the 'upper part of the left nipple'. The French translation is visibly more sexualised than its English original. Considering the influence of Calvinism on Northern Irish society, the 'upper portion' of Julie's breast appears to be 'shocking' enough to intrigue Robert Cole. It is very likely that Matthieussent felt compelled to choose a stronger image to obtain the same effect with the French reader. In more liberal French society, to glimpse the 'upper portion' of a breast might not be enough to titillate the reader. Through the use of a more sexualised term, Matthieussent manages to maintain the comical tone of the original.

The German translator attempts to recreate the humorous tone of the source text by means of subtle exaggerations and a particular choice of terms:

> In Nummer 27, […] glänzten Mr. und Mrs. Stevens durch Abwesenheit, weil sie in Bundoran Urlaub machten; Julia, (ihre glücklich daheim gebliebene Tochter), war damit beschäftigt, Robert Cole ihre Brüste zu zeigen,

nachdem er zuvor auf einer denkwürdigen Party in der Chemical Street nur einen Blick auf den oberen Teil der linken hatte werfen dürfen.[16]

[In No. 27, (…) Mr and Mrs Stevens were absent because they were holidaying in Bundoran; Julia, their daughter (happily staying at home) was busy showing her breasts to Robert Cole, after he had been allowed to have a look at the upper part of the left one at a memorable party in Chemical Street.]

The German translation remains fairly close to the English original. The sentence 'Julia, their daughter, (gladly left behind)' is faithfully translated by 'Julia (ihre glücklich daheim gebliebende Tochter)'. In the translation, the connotations of the source text are preserved, so that it is clear to the German reader that Julia is happy about being left at home. In the same way, 'the upper portion of the left [breast]', is reproduced word for word without any terminological amplification. The German text strikes a humorous note through the translation of 'in No. 27 […] Mr. and Mrs. Stevens were absent', with 'in Nummer 27 […] glänzten Mr. and Mrs. Stevens mit Abwesenheit'. The German expression 'mit Abwesenheit glänzen' does not only mean to be absent but simultaneously implies that one should have been present. In the context of the above-mentioned paragraph, the expression suggests that Mr and Mrs Stevens would have been well advised to stay at home to prevent their daughter from showing her breasts to Robert Cole. This slightly overstated unspoken judgement on the part of the German translator is just the opposite of the implied comment in the French text. Whereas in Matthieussent's translation an external voice approves of Julia's performance, in the German text, the parents are almost accused of not watching over their teenage daughter closely enough.

Furthermore, translating 'at a memorable party' with 'auf einer denkwürdigen Party', Schuenke introduces a humoristic tone into the German text by means of exaggeration. Through the choice of the adjective 'denkwürdig' ('memorable'), she almost elevates the party to a 'monumental' event, as the word is frequently employed in a historic context.

The Spanish translation is the closest to the English source text:

En el número 27, […] el señor y la señora Stevens estaban ausentes, ya que se habían ido de vacaciones a Bundoran. Julia, su hija, que se había quedado en casa con mucho gusto, enseñaba sus dos pechos a Robert Cole,

quien previamente sólo había podido entrever la parte superior del izquierdo durante una memorable fiesta en la calle Chemical.[17]

[In No. 27 (…) Mr and Mrs Stevens were absent because they had gone on holiday to Bundoran. Julia, their daughter who was very much enjoying staying at home, was showing both her breasts to Robert Cole, who previously had only been able to glimpse the upper part of the left one during a memorable party at Chemical Street.]

The sentence 'Julia, their daughter (gladly left behind)' is translated with the help of the relative clause 'con mucho gusto' ('with great pleasure'), which stresses the young girl's enjoyment. Unlike the German and the French translations, the Spanish text does not contain an implicit judgement about Julia's behaviour subversively expressed through an external voice. Furthermore, as in the previously analysed paragraph, Aguirre Oteiza merely domesticates the terms Mr and Mrs, translating them with 'señor' and 'señora', as well as the street name 'Chemical Street', which he transforms into 'calle Chemical'. Unlike the French translator, however, he does not attempt to sexualise the target text by letting Julie reveal more than the 'upper portion' of her left breast. In this sense, it could be said that Aguirre Oteiza makes an effort to maintain the narrator's voice without transforming it into his own.

4 'The Blah Blah Blackberries': Experimenting with the Sense of Nonsense

The following extract from *Eureka Street* was chosen to demonstrate the difficulties of translating what Lefevere calls 'nonsense poetry'.[18] Transposing poetry from one cultural context into another, the translators have to decide whether to prioritise rhyme, while neglecting other features of the original, or to give precedence to the content. This question has given rise to much debate among scholars and translators. The translators' choice whether to reproduce the rhyme pattern of the original or not entails a complex decision-making process, which affects the form and content of the target text in important ways. The Russian author Joseph Brodsky claims that by ignoring the rhyming character of the

original, the translator merely transmits limited information about the content of the source text. He vehemently rejects translation into free verse, arguing that 'the music of the original' would 'fly out of the window'.[19] Lefevere, on the contrary, argues that if the translator chooses to render the rhyme patterns of the original, the syntax tends to suffer most as it is 'stretched out on the procrustean bed of sound similarity'.[20] Don Patterson underlines the impossibility of rendering both rhyme and content, arguing that this would be a recipe for 'translationese'.[21]

The following paragraph from *Eureka Street* belongs to a scene taking place in a Republican pub at a poetry reading. The slightly drunk protagonist parodies a well-known Irish poem:

> The blah blah under the brown blah of the blah blah hedges.
> I blahhed her blah with the heft of my spade
> The wet blah blahhed along the lines of the country with
> all the blah of the blah blah blackberries.[22]

The term 'blackberries' alludes to Seamus Heaney's famous poem 'Blackberry Picking', which is widely known in Ireland and learned by heart at school. Thanks to the shared cultural background, the Irish reader is able to decode the reference to Irish literature. The foreign translator, however, is not only forced to come up with equivalent nonsense words but also has to convey the parodist character of the poem. Lefevere underlines the difficulty of translating the poetry of the absurd, maintaining that 'any attempt to translate nonsense words and expressions is literally a waste of time'.[23] In the following, we will see to which extent Matthieussent, Schuenke and Aguirre Oteiza manage to avoid 'translationese' by experimenting with the sound and content of the source text. The grammatical structure and the phonetics of their respective languages allow for different possibilities in the recreation of the given nonsense poem.

The French translation of the above mentioned paragraph reads as follows:

> Le blabla sous le bla brun des haies bla bla.
> Du dos de ma pelle je lui ai blablaté le bla.
> Le bla doré blaait le long des courbes du paysage
> Avec tout le blabla des blablatiers noirs.[24]

[The blah blah under the blah brown of the hedges blah, blah
With the heft of my spade, I blahed her the blah.
The golden blah blahed along the lines of the landscape
With all the blah blah of the black blablaters.]

Matthieussent chooses to stick to the rhyme patterns and to the alliterations on /b/. In order to respect the French syntax, he is, however, bound to invert the word order of the second line rendering 'I blahed her blah with the heft of my spade' with 'du dos de ma pelle je luiai blabalté le bla.' As far as the semantic meaning of the words is concerned, the French translator remains relatively close to the source text, correctly translating 'hedges' with 'haies' and 'heft of my spade' with 'dos de ma pelle'. In three cases, however, he diverges from the original. In the third line, Mathieussent translates the word 'wet' with 'doré', meaning 'golden'. This decision was very likely taken to maintain the rhythm of the line, which would have been disturbed by the insertion of the word 'humide' ('humid') as it contains one additional syllable. Nevertheless, replacing 'wet' with 'golden', he deletes the references to Irish weather made in the source text. For the French reader, the image of a swampy Irish countryside is substituted by the somewhat romanticized notion of a 'sun-kissed' golden landscape. This perception of Ireland might be closer to a French idealised version of the island than the image of a cold, damp place. Furthermore, it is striking that Matthieussent translates 'country' with 'paysage' ('landscape') and not 'pays' ('country'). It could be argued that the expression 'lines of the landscape' nourishes romantic notions of Ireland, whereas 'lines of the country', rather refer to the shape of the island in a geographical way. Through his choice of terms, Matthieussent introduces his own voice, painting a glorified picture of the island.

In the last line, the translator has to find a solution for the translation of the term 'blackberries' as the French word, 'mûre', would not fit the chain of phonemes. Choosing sound over content, Matthieussent coins the term 'blablatiers noirs', which in French does not mean anything. It is very likely that he decided to eliminate the references to the poem 'Blackberry Picking', assuming that most of the French readers would not be familiar with Seamus Heaney's poetry.

The German translation stays closer to its source; even the lines' word order remains. Trying to adapt the given nonsense words to German spelling, Schuenke capitalises the nouns so that the sentence follows a certain grammatical logic. In contrast to her French counterpart, she does not attempt to create a romanticised image of Ireland through the choice of beautifying terms:

Das Bla Bla unterm braunen Bla der bla bla Hecken.
Ich blahte ihr Bla mit dem Stiel meines Spatens
Das feuchte Bla blahte die Schemen des Landes mit
all dem Bla der bla bla Blaubeeren.[25]

[The blah blah under the brown blah of the blah blah hedges.
I blahhed her blah with the heft of my spade
The wet blah blahhed along the lines of the country with
all the blah of the blah blah blueberries.]

In the last line, Schuenke translates the word 'blackberries' with 'Blaubeeren' ('blueberries') instead of employing the correct German equivalent 'Brombeeren'. This choice must have been motivated by the desire to maintain the sound structure of the original: thanks to the first three letters of the word 'Blaubeeren', Schuenke is able to keep the alliteration with 'blahblah'. Employing a different kind of berry, she renounces content for sound and obscures the intertextual link to Heaney's poem.

The Spanish translator decides to render 'blah blah' with 'tal y tal', meaning 'such and such', even if 'blah blah' would have been perfectly imaginable in Spanish:

Al tal y tal que hay debajo del tostado
tal de los setos tal y tal
le di un tal y tal en el tal y tal
con el mango de mi pala
y el húmedo tal y tal surcó talmente el campo tal y tal
con todos los tal y tal del tal y tal del zarzal.[26]

[To the such and such that lies under the brown
such and such of the hedges such and such

I gave such and such in the such and such
with the heft of my spate
and the humid such and such he ploughed in such and such a way through the field such and such
with all the such and such of the such and such blackberry bush.]

The reason for his choice of 'tal y tal' over 'blah blah' seems to be the last word, 'zarzal'. Like the French and German translators, he chooses rhyme over content, as 'zarzal' does not mean 'blackberry' but 'blackberry bush'. Yet again, the allusion to Seamus Heaney's poem gets lost. It is, however, debatable whether or not the French, German or Spanish reader would have been able to decode the reference to the Irish poem.

5 Struggling with the 'Untranslatable': The Difficulty of Transferring Telling Titles

The translation of Colin Bateman's *Divorcing Jack* gives rise to a different set of problems. As there is no Spanish translation of the book, I shall concentrate on the German and French translations. Even the title of the book represents a serious challenge in itself, especially for the German translator. Whereas Michel Lebrun, the French translator, opted for *Divorce, Jack!*, Michael Kubiak, his German counterpart, chose *Eine Nonne war sie nicht* (*She Was Not a Nun*) as the title. The difficulty arises from the fact that the title is based on a word-play central to the novel, which the reader is only able to decode after having read half of the book.

The action takes place against the backdrop of an election campaign, which the Alliance Party, with its fictional candidate Brinn, seems to be winning. Unionists and Nationalists, however, try to prevent the victory of this supposedly neutral party by all means possible. The plotline develops around Dan Starkey, a Protestant journalist, who is having an affair with a young girl named Margaret. When Margaret is unexpectedly killed, Starkey hears her last words, which sound to him like 'divorce, Jack'. After Margaret's death, Starkey is persecuted by Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries for no obvious reason. Having been shot at

and wounded while fleeing, Starkey is saved by the nurse Lee, who takes him home to look after his wounds. At her flat, Lee listens to a piece of music disliked by Starkey. The following conversation between the two characters is the key to the wordplay and thus to the title of the book:

> 'You said "Divorce Jack", Lee. The last words Margaret ever said to me. That's what you said.' […] 'Dan, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't say that. I said "Dvořák". The composer. The composer, Dan. Dvořák. I just wanted to say who wrote the music, that he wasn't crap.'
>
> And it was like coming back to life, or reaching heaven and discovering the meaning of everything. Suddenly all became clear. Dvořák. Pronounced by a slurring dying woman as 'Divorce Jack'.[27]

'Dvořák' refers to a music tape which Starkey had received from Margaret as a birthday present. However, instead of pieces by the Czech composer, the tape contained a confession by Brinn, made in a drunken state, about crimes he had previously committed for the IRA. If his confession were to get into the hands of Republican or Loyalist paramilitaries, it would lead to the candidate's downfall. For this reason, Starkey, the innocent holder of the tape, is persecuted by both political sides.

The fact that the wordplay is mainly based on phonetics makes it difficult to transfer into another language. The French translator opted for the following:

> 'Tu m'as dit "Divorce Jack", Lee. Les derniers mots de Margaret …' […] 'Dan, ce n'est pas ce que j'ai dit. J'ai dit "D'vor'jac". Le compositeur. Dvořák! Je voulais te dire que c'était de la bonne musique, c'est tout.'
>
> Ce fut comme un rideau brusquement déchiré sur un coin de paradis, comme la découverte du sens de la vie. Tout s'éclairait subitement. Dvořák. Prononcé, balbutié par une agonisante "Divorce Jack".[28]
>
> ['You said to me "Divorce Jack", Lee. Margaret's last words' (…) 'Dan, that's not what I said. I said "D'vor'jac". The composer. Dvořák! I wanted to tell you that this is good music, that's all.'
>
> This was as if a curtain had been violently torn apart which had covered a region of paradise, like the discovery of the meaning of life. All of a sudden everything became clear. Dvořák. Pronounced in the slurring speech of a woman in her death throes as 'Divorce Jack'.]

The English imperative 'Divorce, Jack!' is the same as 'Divorce, Jack!' in French, only with a different pronunciation. In order to carry the wordplay across, Lebrun is compelled to make a linguistic explanation. Therefore, he decides to translate 'I said "Dvořák"', with 'J'ai dit "D'vor'jac"', imitating the phonetic deformation of the name in the mouth of an English speaker. On the basis of this explanation, the translator is able to use 'Divorce, Jack!' as the title of the book without making it sound odd to the French reader. In this way, he employs the English title only in a different grammatical form: the gerund of 'Divorcing Jack' is merely replaced by the imperative 'Divorce, Jack!' This solution allows Matthieussent to stay terminologically close to the source text, maintaining the allusion to the central wordplay of the novel.

The German translator, however, faces a more difficult challenge, as the word 'divorce' stems from an entirely different root. The German equivalent of 'divorce' would be the reflexive verb 'sich scheiden lassen', which in none of its grammatical forms would work as a catchy title for the book. Kubiak translates the above-mentioned paragraph as follows:

> 'Sie sagten "Divorce Jack", Lee. Die letzten Worte, die Margaret jemals zu mir gesagt hat. Und Sie haben das jetzt ebenfalls gesagt. […] 'Dan, es tut mir leid, so leid. Das habe ich nicht gesagt. "Dvořák". Der Komponist, Dan. Dvořák. Ich wollte nur sagen, wer diese Musik geschrieben hat, daß er keinen Mist komponiert hat.'
>
> Es war, als kehrte ich wieder ins Leben zurück oder als gelangte ich plötzlich in den Himmel und als begriffe ich plötzlich die Bedeutung von allem. Plötzlich wurde alles klar. Dvořák. Von einer sterbenden Frau undeutlich wie 'Divorce Jack' ausgesprochen.[29]
>
> ['You said "Divorce Jack", Lee. The last words Margaret ever said to me. And you just said that as well. (…) 'Dan, I'm very sorry, so sorry. I didn't say that. "Dvořák". The composer, Dan. Dvořák. I just wanted to say that the person who wrote this music did not compose rubbish.'
>
> It was as if life came back to me or as if I'd suddenly reached heaven and as if I suddenly understood the meaning of everything. Suddenly everything was clear. Dvořák. Pronounced by a dying woman as 'Divorce Jack'.]

In order to be able to explain the phonetic wordplay of the source text, Kubiak chooses to translate the phrase 'You said Divorce, Jack' by

maintaining an English element with 'Sie sagten "Divorce, Jack"'. Thus, he counts on the German reader's command of the English language. This solution would have been unacceptable in a French context, as in France Anglicisms are officially banned by the 'Loi Toubon', the law watching over the 'purity' of the French language. Therefore, the French reader rarely encounters English terms in a translated text.

As this rather complicated translation of the wordplay would not be adequate for a title in German, Kubiak chooses to focus on a different aspect of the novel. The title *Eine Nonne war sie nicht* refers to Lee's unusual part-time job: to make ends meet, she works as a stripper in a nun's outfit. Replacing *Divorcing Jack* with *Eine Nonne war sie nicht*, the translator attracts the reader's attention to one of the minor characters and not to the protagonist. Shifting the accent from Starkey to Lee, the translator misleads the potential buyers of the book, suggesting that the novel is about a character disguised as a nun. In so doing, Kubiak imposes his own voice on the German-speaking readership.

6 Misunderstanding Local Behaviour

The following scene takes place in the 'Dolphin', a gangster bar, in which after a day of fighting, Catholic and Protestant gangsters have a drink together:

> Nobody ever went armed to the Dolphin. Any violence that broke out was settled with fists or pint glasses and forgotten by the next morning, but it rarely did. Even gangsters have to relax sometimes.[30]

The German translation remains faithful to its source, apart from two terms, which are altered:

> Niemand ging jemals bewaffnet ins Dolphin. Jeglicher Streit, der ausbrach, wurde mit Fäusten und Bierkrügen ausgetragen und war am nächsten Tag bereits vergessen, aber es kam selten soweit. Auch Gangster müssen sich irgendwann entspannen.[31]

> [Nobody ever went armed to the Dolphin. Any dispute which broke out was carried out with fists and steins and was already forgotten by the next day, but it rarely went so far. Even gangsters have to relax at some point].

In the second sentence, Kubiak translates 'violence' with 'Streit', meaning 'dispute'. The German word 'Streit' refers to verbal exchange rather than to physical fighting. In this way, the translator eliminates the reference to the political violence characteristic of the Northern Irish Troubles. In the same sentence, Kubiak decides to render 'pint glasses' with 'Bierkrüge', meaning 'steins'. This verbal choice amounts to a serious mistranslation, as it results in the disappearance of an entire concept. To begin with, to drink beer out of steins is not an Irish habit; rather, it reminds us of the Oktoberfest in Munich, where beer is drunk out of one-litre steins. Thus, the local colour of the description of Irish pub life gets lost and a subtle German voice is introduced into the translation. Apart from that, the translator ignores what is meant by 'violence was settled with pint glasses'. This phrase is a clear reference to the fighting habits of the gangster milieu. To 'glass somebody' means to break the upper part of the glass over the head of the adversary so as to wound his face with the jagged edge of the lower part. By choosing a 'stein' as a container for the drink, the translator renders the action of 'glassing' impossible. Even if you can hit somebody's head with a stein, it is impossible to break the stein in such a manner. To a German reader the reference to steins would imply that the gangsters cheerfully have a drink together, forgetting about their animosities. It is evident that the German translator is not aware of the 'glassing tradition' of Belfast's gangster milieu. Yet again, the allusion to violence present in the source text is entirely deleted in the German translation. Thus, the warlike atmosphere which pervades the novel is not reproduced in the target text.

The French translator opts for a different solution:

> Personne n'introduisait d'armes. Toute manifestation de violence s'y réglait à coups de poing ou de verres cassés, et tout était oublié le lendemain. Mais ça se produisait rarement. Même les truands ont besoin de se détendre parfois.[32]

> [Nobody brought arms. Any demonstration of violence was settled with fists and broken glasses and everything was forgotten by the next day. But this rarely happened. Even gangsters have to relax sometimes.]

Translating 'pint glasses' with 'verres cassés' ('broken glasses'), Lebrun shows his awareness of the action of 'glassing'. However, for a French reader 'verres cassés' is not a clear reference to the fighting mode as in France bottles rather than glasses are employed for the same reason. The use of bottles instead of glasses is most likely due to the fact that a broken wine glass would not have the same effect as a broken pint glass in the 'glassing process'. To achieve a cultural transfer and render the action clear, the French translator would have done better employing the expression 'broken bottle necks'. Yet, unlike the German translator, Lebrun maintains the promise of violence contained in the source text.

The next extract is taken from the same scene set in the gangster bar the Dolphin:

> East Belfast gangsters in flashy suits and droopy moustaches crowded the bar, shouting bad-natured insults at each other, while their counterparts from the west of the city preferred to relax in round-table packs near the stage, where they could cover each other's backs.[33]

The German translation reads as follows:

> Gangster aus Ost-Belfast in eleganten Anzügen und mit markanten Schnurrbärten bevölkerten die Bar und warfen einander üble Schimpfwörter zu, während ihre Kollegen aus dem Westen der Stadt sich an den Tischen in der Nähe der Bühne versammelten, wo sie einander den Rücken freihalten konnten.[34]

> [Gangsters from East Belfast in elegant suits and striking moustaches crowded the bar and threw strong profanities at each other, while their colleagues from the west of the city got together at the table near the stage, where they could hold each other's backs free.]

A number of inaccurate translations are noticeable: 'droopy moustaches' become 'markante Schnurrbärte' ('striking moustaches') and 'flashy suits'

are rendered as 'eleganten Anzügen' ('elegant suits'). The worst error, however, is the translation of the last part of the sentence 'where they could cover each other's backs'. The German translation 'wo sie einander den Rücken freihalten konnten', means exactly the opposite: 'where they could keep each other's back free'. Yet again, the German translator does not seem to be sufficiently familiar with the habits of Belfast's gangster milieu. The whole point of the action is to protect each other while covering each other's backs. In the German translation, however, the gangsters could be easily attacked as their backs are uncovered. The correct translation of the sentence would be 'wo sie sich einander Rückendeckung geben konnten'. It is very likely that the translator was misled by the German expression 'jemanden den Rücken frei halten' ('to keep somebody's back free'), which has an entirely different meaning. It is commonly employed to describe couples in which the husband pursues his career while the wife stays at home, taking care of household and children. In this way, she 'keeps his back free', so that he can concentrate on his work. In the context of the above-mentioned translation, the use of this expression is obviously inappropriate. Through the choice of terms, Kubiak yet again deletes the allusion to political violence and in this way he obscures the local context of the book.

The French translator opted for the following translation:

> Les gangsters de Belfast Est aux costards voyants et aux moustaches tombantes s'écrasaient au bar, échangeant des insultes grossières, tandis que leurs homologues de l'ouest de la ville préféraient se détendre aux tables bordant la scène, où ils pouvaient surveiller leurs arrières.[35]
>
> [Gangsters from East Belfast in flashy suits and droopy moustaches crowded the bar, exchanging bad-natured insults, whereas their counterparts of the west of the city preferred to relax at tables next to the scene where they could watch their backs.]

The translation of the last part of the sentence 'où ils pouvaient surveiller leurs arrières' is equally confusing and translates as: 'where they could watch their backs'. For the French reader this sounds as if they would watch their own backs and not each other's. This physically impossible action introduces an unintended comic element instead of referring to a specific form of behaviour generated by a violent conflict.

7 Conclusion

The different examples discussed in the chapter demonstrate that besides a linguistic sensitivity, a deep awareness of the local context is a key asset for any translator. This allows him or her to decide on whether to go for a more 'domesticating' or more 'foreignizing' rendering of the original. In this context, the translator has to strike the right balance between the reading habits of the audience and its knowledge of the source text's cultural background. Moreover, he or she has to struggle to reproduce the voice of the different narrators, which is a difficult task as very often translations are influenced by the translator's personal experience. The Spanish translator of *Eureka Street*, for example, proves to be much more sensitive to the literary illustration of political violence in Northern Ireland than his German and French counterparts, perhaps due to his Basque origins. The French translation not only shows the cultural background of the translator but also his attempt to subtly insert his own voice into the target text. It could be said that Matthieussent's sexualised translations of certain English terms show French society's more liberal attitude towards sexuality. The legal situation in different countries might also have an influence on translators' verbal choices. While the German translator of Bateman's novel integrates without any hesitation the English terms 'Divorce Jack' into his text, his French colleague has to look for French equivalents, as anglicisms are officially banned in French texts by the Loi Toubon.

The translation of wordplays presents translators with a particular challenge because it is highly difficult to replace one image with another without transforming the content of the message. As we saw in the case of the German translation of the title of Bateman's novel, transpositions of wordplays might be misleading. Due to the translator's choice of title, *Eine Nonne war sie nicht* (*She Was Not a Nun*) the German reader will most likely expect a novel about a fake nun and might be disappointed by the actual content of the book. As shown above, translators also have to be careful not to fall prey to national stereotypes or established perceptions of a country. Translating the 'wet blah blahhed along the lines of the country' with 'le bla doré blaait le long des courbes des paysages', Matthieussent conforms to a French romantic imagination of a 'golden'

Irish countryside, whereas it is the country's heavy rainfall which is evoked by the source text.

With regards to the translation of poetry, translators sometimes have to choose between sound and content which entails that every so often important cultural connotations are lost. However, as in the case of the 'blackberries' in the nonsense poem occurring in *Eureka Street*, we cannot always take for granted that the foreign audience is able to decode allusions to the cultural background of the target text. The worst but hardest to avoid errors, however, are mistranslations produced out of ignorance. Due to an insufficient knowledge of the source culture, these translations might result in the creation of a very different impression than that intended by the original. The misunderstandings of the German translation concerning the two scenes set in the 'Dolphin' in *Divorcing Jack* clearly illustrate this danger. Not being familiar enough with the 'glassing' and 'protecting' habits of Belfast's gangster milieu, Kubiak sets an entirely different scene, one which is more redolent of peaceful Bavaria than troubled Belfast. Thus, the underlying Northern Irish discourse of political violence becomes entirely lost.

I will conclude by saying that a translation risks cultivating a very different tone and set of meanings and voices if the translator, intentionally or unintentionally, departs too far from its source. This is all the more true of texts which emerge out of unusual circumstances, such as a particular political situation, in which special care is required. One possible solution to the problem might be a careful proofreading by a person with local knowledge. Unfortunately, the budget of most publishers does not allow this kind of double-checking. Therefore, it is to a large extent the responsibility of the translators to acquire as much local knowledge as possible before beginning their work.

Notes

1. Patrick Magee, *Gangsters or Guerrillas? Representation of Irish Republicans in 'Troubles Fiction'* (Belfast: BTP Publications, 2001), 5.
2. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *(De-)Constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 41–62.

3. Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (London: Vintage, 1996); and Colin Bateman, *Divorcing Jack* (London: Headline, 1995).
4. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2008), 15–20.
5. Ibid., 15.
6. Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 36.
7. Brice Matthieussent, trans., *Eureka Street*, by Robert McLiam Wilson (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1997), 36. The English translations appearing in brackets after paragraphs in German, French or Spanish are my own translations and remain close to their respective source in order to illustrate the discrepancies between their English source and the translations proposed by the German-, French- or Spanish-speaking translators.
8. Inventing the brand 'Easi-sleep', McLiam Wilson seems to play with the term 'easy chair', which refers to a functional kind of chair such as a recliner. In a French-speaking context, this particular type of chair is called 'chaise magique' (cf. 'Uaredesign', http://www.uaredesign.com/easy-chair-chaise-beige-magis.html, accessed 3 September 2013). Matthieussent was possibly unaware of this underlying wordplay. Otherwise he could have made up a brand name based on the French equivalent of the term such as 'Sommeil magique'.
9. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 19–20.
10. Christa Schuenke, trans., *Eureka Street*, *Belfast*, by Robert McLiam Wilson (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999), 31.
11. Obviously Schuenke does not make the effort to invent a German equivalent for the brand, a not insurmountably difficult task. To propose a more German-sounding translation, the imaginary brand 'Träum süß' ('Sweet Dreams'), for example, would have sufficed.
12. Daniel Aguirre Oteiza, trans., *Eureka Street*, by Robert McLiam Wilson (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1999), 46.
13. Cf. 'Who is Log', http://www.whoislog.info/profile/daniel-aguirre-oteiza.html, accessed 3 September 2013.
14. Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 36.
15. Brice Matthieussent, trans., *Eureka Street*, 55.
16. Christa Schuenke, trans., *Eureka Street*, *Belfast*, 31.
17. Daniel Aguirre Oteiza, *Eureka Street*, 46.
18. André Lefevere, *Translating Literature. Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 77.

19. Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 53.
20. André Lefevere, *Translating Literature*, 70.
21. Don Patterson, *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke* (London: Faber, 2006), 80.
22. Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street*, 192.
23. André Lefevere, *Translating Literature*, 77.
24. Brice Matthieussent, trans., *Eureka Street*, 243.
25. Christa Schuenke, trans., *Eureka Street, Belfast*, 192.
26. Daniel Aguirre Oteiza, *Eureka Street*, 191–92.
27. Colin Bateman, *Divorcing Jack*, 150.
28. Michel Lebrun, trans., *Divorce Jack!*, by Colin Bateman (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 189.
29. Michael Kubiak, trans., *Eine Nonne war sie nicht*, by Colin Bateman (Bergisch Gladbach: Bastei Lübbe, 1996), 168.
30. Colin Bateman, *Divorcing Jack*, 129.
31. Michael Kubiak, trans., *Eine Nonne war sie Nicht*, 146–47.
32. Michel Lebrun, trans., *Divorce Jack!*, 165.
33. Colin Bateman, *Divorcing Jack*, 129.
34. Michael Kubiak, trans., *Eine Nonne war sie Nicht*, 146.
35. Michel Lebrun, trans., *Divorce Jack!*, 165.

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