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Translating Frenchness: A Case Study of *La Délicatesse* by David Foenkinos

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Abstract

La Délicatesse by David Foenkinos contains numerous cultural references that convey a certain form of “Frenchness”. The novel was adapted for the cinema in 2011 by Foenkinos himself, who is also a screenwriter, thus raising questions concerning processes of “intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson 139). This article analyses the strategy Foenkinos used to translate the “Frenchness” of the written medium into a filmic one and shows how this can be considered an instance of self-translation. In 2012, the novel was translated into English by Bruce Benderson under the title *Delicacy*, and I also consider Benderson’s strategy by examining various examples from the source text and assessing their rendition in the target text. Whether or not the cultural references were kept in the French context or adapted for the target readership provides insight into the strategies at play in the translation process. Additionally, this article highlights the translator’s role as a bicultural mediator whose responsibility is to adequately translate not only the words but also the culture conveyed in a piece of literature.

Context

David Foenkinos’s *La Délicatesse*, published in 2009, tells the story of a young woman, Nathalie, who falls in love with a young man, François. They live a life of marital bliss for several years before François’s untimely and tragic death. Depressed and work-obsessed, Nathalie fights off the unwanted advances of her boss, Charles, before surprising herself and embarking on a new relationship with her Swedish colleague, Markus. The novel paints a delicate picture of a young woman dealing with grief in her own way.

Some of the themes touched upon in this novel are recognized as “universal” in nature: love, human connection, sadness, rebirth. Indeed, this is a story that could happen to anyone, and the element of “universality” renders the novel accessible. However, if the novel’s interest was only derived from the use of such topoi of contemporary literature, it could be considered a banal page-turner – what in French is known as a “roman de gare”, the kind of fast-paced novel typically found on sale in airports and train stations. What distinguishes *La Délicatesse* from traditional romantic fiction is Foenkinos’s masterful use of language and style, despite engaging with a narrative that can be anchored in readers’ lives. He arguably does the impossible: makes the reader both smile and think while enjoying a masterpiece of contemporary French literature.

Though the themes developed in this novel may give the reader a sense of déjà-vu, the novel’s form is unique. *La Délicatesse* is 210 pages in length and is composed of some 117 chapters, which can be divided into two categories. While some are focused on the narrative itself, others, peppered throughout the book, offer lists of information, summaries, quotes and facts. This latter category is a highly original feature of the novel. Furthermore, these chapters provide additional information about a detail mentioned only briefly in the previous chapter. For example, in chapter 99 Nathalie takes the train from Paris to the small countryside town of Lisieux; in chapter 100 we receive the Paris-Lisieux train timetable. One could argue that such factual chapters do not serve any narrative purpose, but I argue that they represent the very essence of the novel in that they reveal the specificity of Foenkinos’s literary style and

constitute a way of expressing the characters' thoughts. Chapter 15, for example, is devoted to a few thoughts that François likes to repeat to himself before going for a run in the park. While some of these chapters relate directly to the content of the novel, others are more experimental in terms of their form. Taken together, they portray a new way of experiencing the narrative. Moreover, many of these chapters are focused on "Frenchness"; that is, on the cultural references related to France and its specificities. For example, chapter 66 relates to the song lyrics from "L'amour en fuite" by well-known French musician Alain Souchon. This glimpse into "Frenchness" offered by the author allows a return to more traditional forms of storytelling and gives an additional layer to the narrative.

La Délicatesse was published by prominent French editing house Gallimard in their *La Blanche* series devoted to French literary classics, indicating that the French publishing industry considered the novel to be a potential literary success from the beginning. It was largely well received among readers and critics. The national newspaper *Le Figaro*, for example, published the following review: "Foenkinos sait raconter comme personne des histoires d'amour avec légèreté, humour et auto-dérision car son narrateur est souvent pris dans des complications hautement psychologiques" [Foenkinos knows how to tell a story like no other, with hints of lightness, humour and self-deprecation, because his narrator is often found in deeply psychological situations] (Aissaoui).¹ In another French newspaper, *L'Express*, Benamon writes that "l'auteur réussit comme jamais l'alchimie du grave et du léger, du drame et de l'espérance" [The author succeeds like no other in creating an alchemy of seriousness and lightness, of drama and of hope]. A further example comes from the literary blog *Enfin Livre*, shedding light on the link between the novel's title and its content: "voici un roman qui porte bien son nom: délicatesse des personnages, délicatesse dans l'analyse des sentiments, délicatesse de l'écriture toujours légère et élégante" [Here's a novel which wears its name well: the delicacy of the characters, delicacy in the way that feelings are analysed, delicacy in the writing which is always light and elegant] (Volle). These reviews not only highlight the complex issues explored in the novel and the way in which these are expressed through masterful language, but they also denote the juxtaposition between lightness of tone and profound reflection on the characters' part.

La Délicatesse is a unique novel in the French literary system in that it is the only novel to have been nominated for all five major literary prizes in France: the Prix Goncourt, the Prix Renaudot, the Prix Femina, the Prix des Lectrices Elle and the Prix de la Maison de la Presse. It has also won a number of other literary awards, including the Prix An Avel, the Prix Jean-Pierre Coudurier and the Prix Orange du Livre. The novel's popularity has undoubtedly grown thanks to its recognition by these major French literary prizes. Certain prizes are renowned for their commercial influence, demonstrating a connection between prize-winners and bestsellers, as exemplified in the case of *La Délicatesse*. This recognition increased both the novel's popular and commercial value. Indeed, as Sally-Ann Spencer argues, prizing helps "[popularize] literary fiction in a context where the special role accorded to writers and writing has traditionally been associated with a view of literature as an elite activity distinct from commercial trends" (205). The novel's success also helped establish its place within the French "literary polysystem" (Even-Zohar 199), as the French publishing milieu is extremely competitive and hard to penetrate. Once it was demonstrated that *La Délicatesse* could occupy a place in the French literary system, the novel had a greater chance of being both adapted for the screen and translated.

It wasn't only the novel that grew in popularity; its author did too. David Foenkinos studied literature at La Sorbonne before becoming a teacher. He began writing in 2002 and soon became a prolific author and screenwriter. Most of his novels have been quite successful,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

though they pale in comparison to *La Délicatesse*, his ninth and most popular work. This may not be the case for long, however, as his most recent novel, *Charlotte*, published in 2014, has already achieved great success, notably by winning the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary award. Foenkinos is a very good example of an author who has gained "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu) – that is, a recognition of his status. Indeed, he has developed his craft over the years and has become a celebrated author among readers and literary critics alike. The novel's success and the reading public's fondness for the author mean that his writing has achieved a very high level of popularity and *La Délicatesse* has become known outside of France, being exported to numerous European and English-speaking countries through the film adaptation and Benderson's English translation. For all of these reasons, *La Délicatesse* is a unique and relevant text to examine in the context of Translation Studies.

Film adaptation

La Délicatesse was adapted for the screen in 2011, appearing with English subtitles the following year. The screenplay was written by the author, who directed the film together with his brother Stéphane. It is likely that Foenkinos always intended the book to be made into a film, as chapter 32 of the novel is an excerpt of the film script. This is an instance of "intersemiotic translation" (Jakobson 139) – that is, a translation from the written medium into a filmic one. Since Foenkinos is the writer of both the source text and the screenplay, I argue that this can also be considered an act of "self-translation", traditionally defined as "translation that can either refer to the act of translating one's own writings into another language or to the result of such an undertaking" (Grutman 257). In this case, however, it is the medium, rather than the language, that has changed.

In light of Foenkinos's dual role as both writer and screenwriter, I argue that, although the novel was released before the film, the two were conceived, and perhaps written, at the same time, as suggested by the inclusion of part of the script in chapter 32. We might therefore wonder whether Foenkinos intended his film to be similar in tone and content to the book. Regarding the intersemiotic translation of "Frenchness", we might also wonder if he tried to convey the subtleties and specificities of his style in the film adaptation or if he chose to distance himself from these, thus resulting in a somewhat different interpretation of the story.

Upon closer inspection, the tone of the film is very different from that of the book. There is a distinct lack of "Frenchness" in the film version, though it is set in Paris and the well-known French actress, Audrey Tautou, plays the main character. In contrast to the overwhelmingly positive reviews the novel received, reviews of the film in the French context were rather mixed. For example, the online blog *Critikat* argued that "le film préfère rester en surface plutôt que de se confronter aux réels enjeux de son sujet et affirme une préférence pour la forme que pour le fond" [the film prefers to remain at surface level rather than confront the real issues of the subject matter, and privileges form over content]. Many reviews critiqued the screenplay for downplaying the dramatic obstacles that support the plot. The film is seemingly trying to target the "romantic comedy" demographic, even though the novel itself goes far beyond this categorization. Indeed, the film is very much realized within the framework and requirements of Hollywood films, thus diluting the elements of "Frenchness".

For example, in the film adaptation, most of the cultural references are lost, as those odd chapters of the novel that provided most of the "Frenchness" and singularity are not present. The most striking example is when the main character, Markus, watches President Barack Obama's speech on the television, instead of a speech given by a member of the French Socialist Party (as is the case in chapter 49 of the novel). This is an example of how "Frenchness" has been erased from the film version, and indicates the extent to which it was aimed at a new, Anglophone target audience. It might be the case that Foenkinos targeted the novel to a more literary readership, while the film version was intended for an audience that

first and foremost likes to be entertained. The traditionally structured film adaptation lies in stark contrast to the deconstructed nature of the novel. Clearly, in producing the film adaptation within the Hollywood context, the producers have gone to great lengths to culturally adapt it for both an American audience and a French audience accustomed to American cinema.

The author as translator

Given that the film was intended for an American context, can the same be said for the written translation into English? That is, has Benderson reproduced the source text faithfully and retained most elements of “Frenchness” in his translation, or has he instead adapted it for an American audience, as is the case with the film? Benderson is first and foremost a literary author, a factor which is likely to influence his translation strategy and ability. He is an American novelist, essayist, journalist and translator, widely published in France and the United States. His works include an erotic memoir (*Autobiographie érotique*, originally written in French in 2004 and translated into English in 2006 as *The Romanian: Story of an Obsession*), a novel about drug addicts and prostitutes (*User*, 1994), an essay about the influence of the internet on human life (*Sex and Isolation*, 2007), an essay about class struggles in New York (*Toward the New Degeneracy*, 1997), a satirical novel about life in the US northwest (*Pacific Agony*, 2007), and a biography of James Bidgood (1999), among others. As a journalist, he has written many columns in well-known US magazines such as *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He has translated many French novels, as well as Celine Dion’s autobiography, and in 2014 he began translating a thousand-page biography of filmmaker Jean Renoir. He is an activist-author with a taste for controversial themes and contemporary issues, who makes his voice heard through his work and is interested in taking a position. He has certainly gained a lot of “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu), thanks to his essays and his translations of prominent and controversial French authors (among them Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Dijan and Benoit Duteurtre). Many of the books he has translated are aligned with his own writing ethics, dealing with controversial themes and/or written in a non-traditional form – examples include Nelly Arcan’s *Whore* and Benoit Duteurtre’s *Customer Service*. Benderson’s translations have generally been well received by critics and journalists, allowing him to build a considerable reputation in the literary translation milieu. No doubt this popularity and experience in the area of French literary translation led to his being chosen to translate *La Délicatesse*.

Literary translation, according to Ziaul Haque, can be considered “one of the highest forms of rendition because it is more than simply the translation of a text. A literary translator must also be skilled enough to translate feelings, cultural nuances, humour and other delicate elements of a piece of work” (97). Indeed, literary translation is a special area of translation because it relates not only to the translation of content but also of form, and is not only about language but also culture. This last point is especially relevant for this case study.

The diverse skill set required of the translator – in Benderson’s case, of the author-translator – has been amply considered from the point of view of Translation Studies. Bassnett notes that this new perspective “stresses both the creativity and the independence of the translator” (*Translation Studies* 5). Since a work of literature can be considered a piece of art, the translation “is supposed to be of artistic value too and the literary translator himself must be an artist” (Hassan Mansour 35). Being a creative writer is certainly a great advantage when it comes to the translation of literary texts, as it ensures greater mastery of the use of language and stylistic devices. Indeed, in terms of the linguistic aspect of the translation, Benderson has gone to great lengths to replicate the style and aesthetics of *La Délicatesse*. The various passages of free indirect speech in the source text have been expertly rendered in the target text. Benderson has also deftly reproduced the passages of stream of consciousness in his translation. His ability to successfully convey the linguistic style and aesthetic is likely due to

his own experience and skill as a practising author. Moreover, the fact that Benderson has already translated prominent and prized French authors into English has certainly helped to improve the quality of the translation from a linguistic point of view. His mastery of French language and culture has helped him to adequately convey the cultural elements specific to this novel. This will be further explored in the next section of this article.

Translating “Frenchness”

La Délicatesse is anchored in the French cultural context, and can be characterized as having a certain degree of “Frenchness”; not only because the novel is set in Paris and mentions names of the city’s streets and places, situating it within a particular geographical space, but also because it contains French expressions and idioms that clearly situate it within French culture. These hints of French culture are peppered throughout the novel, resulting in a certain degree of fluidity. Expressions such as “sur le pouce” [eating quickly] and “une de perdue, dix de retrouvées” [one lost, ten found] are good examples of this. Foenkinos also names a few famous figures symbolic of French culture, such as the literary authors Albert Cohen, Marguerite Duras, Alfred de Musset, Boris Vian, Michel Butor and Guy de Maupassant, the singer Alain Souchon, and actors Jean-Paul Belmondo, Claude Lelouch, Annie Girardot and Pierre Richard. Moreover, the mention of the very famous “Larousse” dictionary of French language, the results of the football games in France, the mention of the “Parti Socialiste Français” [French Socialist Party] and its members Ségolène Royal and Martine Aubry, and the French radio station “Nostalgie”, an “oldies” station, further anchor *La Délicatesse* in its French context. Additionally, there are specific cultural references that do not concern France as a whole but are uniquely relevant to Parisian life. The “RER”, for example, is the public transport link between downtown Paris and nearby suburbs; the “Journal Métro” refers to the free daily newspaper handed out at every subway station in the city; and “Odéon”, “Clichy” and “Passy” are all well-known neighbourhoods. These are examples of some of the most prominent French cultural references.

So how does one translate these cultural references, this “Frenchness”? Should the translator opt for a strategy of “domestication” or one of “foreignization”? (cf. Venuti *Invisibility*). Harald Martin Olk argues that the procedures the translator has used can be examined in order to “identify ‘foreignization’ or ‘domestication’ tendencies in the translator’s approach to handling the cultural load of a text” (344). Though the linguistic translation of *La Délicatesse* is stylistically faithful to the original (as Benderson has conveyed very vividly and accurately the linguistic features of the source text in the target text), the cultural translation of this novel – that is, the rendition of “Frenchness” – is problematic. Indeed, the specificity of this novel lies in its use of the French culture to incorporate factual chapters about French life and customs. It would therefore make sense to keep those French cultural elements in the target text. However, Benderson has largely chosen to “domesticate”, with domestication defined as “an exchange of source language intelligibilities for target language ones” (Venuti, *Invisibility* 203). In other words, when using a “domesticating” method, the translator adapts the source text references to the needs of the target culture. Benderson has chosen to adapt most of the prominent cultural references that anchor the novel in the French context. However, it is important to note that some French cultural references have been retained.

As I will demonstrate, however, Benderson has been somewhat inconsistent in his choices. It is important to examine these instances, to question what makes the translator decide which references to keep, which to change, and the strategies that are at play. According to Schleiermacher, the literary translator either “leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him, or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer towards him” (49). Benderson chose overwhelmingly to leave the reader in peace, as little intellectual effort is required to fully understand the translation. Was this

adaptation the result of his role as an activist literary author? Were Benderson's adaptation choices influenced by the adaptation strategies deployed in Foenkinos's film? Let us consider three major examples in order to understand Benderson's strategy of adapting the French cultural elements in the target text.

Case study analysis

All examples chosen represent instances of cultural reference, which in a broad sense is defined as "words which refer to objects and concepts specific to a given culture" (Ranzato 67). More specifically, Jean Pierre Mailhac defines cultural references as "any reference to a cultural entity which, because of its distance from the target culture, is characterized by a sufficient degree of opacity from the point of view of the target reader to constitute a translation problem" (173). This definition views cultural references as creating potential misunderstandings in the target culture if not translated accurately. Indeed, cultural references have been considered to pose a "translation problem" (Gonzales Davies and Scott-Tennent 168). In other words, cultural references in the source text are opaque to the extent that they pose a considerable challenge to the translator, who will need to adopt an appropriate strategy to make these references understandable in the target culture. Moreover, the fact that "translation is not just of texts, but of entire cultural representations and identities" (Pym 79) points to the translator's role in creating and maintaining cultural stereotypes. It is very important that this role is performed adequately by the literary translator, although the task can be quite difficult. Indeed, as Hervey and Higgins note, "cultural differences can sometimes be bigger obstacles to successful translation than linguistic ones" (31). As a result, the role of the literary translator is not only that of a facilitator of communication but also that of a cultural mediator.

The most striking example in this case study relates to the film adaptation of *La Délicatesse*. Chapter 49 in the source text portrays Markus watching a televised political speech from the "Parti Socialiste Français", and the whole chapter is about his inner thoughts regarding what he sees. Yet, as already mentioned, Benderson seems to have taken inspiration from Foenkinos's idea of adapting the French cultural context for the American one and has changed the French Socialist Party to the US presidential candidate Barack Obama on election night. Furthermore, it was not simply a one-line reference that was changed; an entire page was adapted to the American context, with references to "the Great Depression", "Yes we can", "Atlanta" and "Barack Obama's inaugural speech" (104-106), among others. This example reveals that the author may influence the translator's choice of strategies: Foenkinos chose Barack Obama's speech in the film adaptation and the translator followed suit. Was this perhaps discussed by Foenkinos and Benderson prior to the release of both the film and the English translation, in order to maintain consistency? Was this an attempt at placating target readers, who would subsequently not have to think too deeply about cultural references, given that they were already adapted for them? Unfortunately we cannot answer these questions, as the target text appeared with no translator's preface or notes.

I would argue that it is likely that Benderson followed the adaptation strategy used by Foenkinos in the movie version and replicated it in the English translation. However, he in fact went beyond Foenkinos's changes and added some of his own. For example, in chapter 48 of the source text, Markus, the Swedish colleague, recalls some childhood memories with his girlfriend at the time, Brigitte, whom he parallels with the French icon Brigitte Bardot. Bardot is an actress, a model, a singer and an activist, an emblem of sensuality, whom Benderson chose to replace with a domestic equivalent: Marilyn Monroe. Although there are many parallels between the two icons – both were born in similar periods, cultivated a similar physical appearance and attained a similar cultural status – this is a very clear case of adaptation. By replacing a French reference with an American one, Benderson makes the cultural reference more understandable for the target culture but loses an aspect of the source

culture. Similarly, chapter 95 of the source text is devoted to an announcement made on television by Isabelle Adjani, a celebrated French actress who won five major prizes for her roles in cinema. Benderson again chose to use the strategy of cultural relocation by replacing Adjani with Oprah Winfrey. There is little similarity between the two women.

The last example consists of a change in the narrative itself, with Benderson choosing to condense two chapters into one. The source text begins with the death of Nathalie's husband, François. This event is divided into two chapters, which creates a distinct rupture in the text, foreshadowing something tragic. In the target text, however, the chapters are conflated so that no such rupture exists. What is more interesting is that this event happens between chapters 12 and 13 in the source text, while only chapter 12 recounts it in the target text. Since the number thirteen is usually associated with misfortune and misery, it was perhaps an attempt by Foenkinos to foreshadow the tragic event. Yet Benderson chose not to keep this allusion. This is arguably less of a change than the previously mentioned adaptations, but I would suggest that it is not the translator's role to modify the novel's structure, nor to influence its impact on target readers.

In choosing an adaptation strategy for what would seem to be – in Benderson's eyes, at least – the less comprehensible French cultural references, the translator is either seeking to render the work's "Frenchness" invisible or to make the task of the American target readers less difficult. In any case, the translator should be mindful of instances in which cultural non-equivalence will interfere with readers' understanding of the target text. It is true that in adopting the domestication method, the translator usually facilitates the target reader's comprehension and avoids confusion. On the other hand, it may compromise the novel's cultural identity. Benderson, it would seem, has chosen to culturally adapt a novel that was deeply anchored in a specific culture. As a result, much of the work's "Frenchness" has been lost in the target text, thus leaving the English-speaking readership with a translated novel that conveys both a bit of "Frenchness" and a lot of "Americanness". This is obviously not what was intended by Foenkinos in the source text, but was arguably the case in the film version. I would therefore argue that there is an inextricable link between the film and the English translation of the novel, the latter being influenced by the adaptation strategy chosen by Foenkinos in his intersemiotic self-translation.

Conclusion

As a case study, *La Délicatesse* raises the question of how to translate culture and, more specifically, "Frenchness". Bassnett reminds us that "translation is vital to the interaction between cultures" ("Introduction" 6), thus suggesting that translation helps cultures interact with each other and, potentially, understand each other. In addition, Venuti reminds us that "a translation does not communicate the source text itself but the translator's interpretation of it, and the translator must be sufficiently expert and innovative to interpret the linguistic and cultural differences that constitute a text" (Venuti *Changes* 113). In other words, the translator must be bi-cultural – that is, according to literary translator Clifford Landers, he or she must be able to "perceive in a unique way the signs and symbols of both cultures; to pick up signals even at a subconscious level and to share in the collective unconscious" (77). David Katan goes further, highlighting the importance of a "bi-cultural vision". He explains that "the translator is uniquely placed to identify and resolve the disparity between sign and value across cultures" (14). Although Translation Studies theorists have emphasized the literary translator's need to be a "cultural mediator", in this case study Benderson has kept few of the French cultural references from the source text and has instead followed the guidelines of the film adaptation.

Indeed, the fact that Foenkinos directed the film adapted from his novel, as an instance of intersemiotic self-translation, greatly influenced Benderson's strategy in translating cultural elements. The film version of *La Délicatesse* adapts the tone and content of the book to serve

different purposes. I would argue that Benderson chose to follow this version in translating the cultural elements of the novel; while he faithfully reproduced the linguistic style of the source text, he closely followed the cultural adaptation strategies used for the movie to cater for an American audience. This therefore gives a lot of agency to Foenkinos who, as author and screenwriter, was able to influence the translation of his book through the release of the film.

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