CHAPTER 3 TRANSLATING COMICS

Translating comics as a genre

Translating comics involves several aspects that are not present, or are less evident in prose. Constraints on space with existing speech bubbles mean that translations must occupy about the same space with conversational elements in the same order. Some flexibility may exist in some comics, where parts can be redrawn or speech bubbles rearranged, but in most cases significant parts of the original cannot be altered. This presents translators with restrictions that are not present in many texts, chiefly that:

- Since the images are largely unchanged, localisation of many elements is impossible and other strategies must be employed. However, the images often greatly help the reader to understand a culture that they have never entered in person, thus reducing the need for localisation.
- The text of the translation must fit the speech bubble, and must match the image.

Comics often involve a large amount of interplay between the images and the text, or textual elements in the images themselves. Some examples include:

- Shop signs, road signs and other street furniture
- Newspapers and other reading material
- Visual humour relating to the text
- Onomatopoeia
- Typeface and font

Figure 43: The original text has Germanised spelling, but the same typeface. The translation adds Gothic script for the German language.

Figure 44: Differently shaped balloons and tails are used to add variety and indicate tone. The earlier English innovation of marking foreign languages with a different typeface has been incorporated into the French text.

In addition to these elements, the translator should recognise decisions made by the original artist or conventions of the genre in the source culture, which may affect elements such as size, shape and placement of panels and bubbles, reading direction (some Japanese and other Asian comics read right to left), colour and other elements. Text in comics is often dialogue rather than prose, and the narrator may have a voice that indicates the register of the text and the relationship between the author and addressee. Comics have much more scope for indicating tone by using different typography, showing facial expressions, indicating movement or other means, which must also be considered by a translator.

In contrast to prose, the fact that the images are used without alteration in a translation places a higher emphasis on functional equivalence.

Figure 45 Asterix and the Goths, p. 41

In the above panel, Getafix gives an imprisoned chief some magic potion, and Asterix makes a wordplay on the word *dechaîne* (unchained, unhinged, crazy). Obelix gets the joke as the chief makes a trail of destruction on the way to the throne room of his usurper. The following criteria are less flexible than the semantic content of Asterix's statement:

- The comment must fit the speech bubble
- It must fit the events of the panel and the facial expressions of the characters

- It must be funny, but in a way that only later becomes clear to Obelix
- It must be understandable to the target readership

The translators of Asterix

The main translator of the Ásterix series, Anthea Bell, has made her own comments about the invisibility of the translator. Unlike the common opinion at the time, Bell affirmed belief in invisibility as a goal, and described the translation process as an 'illusion':

> "I have felt that translators are in the business of spinning an illusion: the illusion is that the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing."

> (Bell, 2004)

Bell likens the target language reader to a person standing inside a house and looking out at a garden, and the translator to a pane of glass; while they are not in the same environment or exposed to the same influences as a person in the garden, they are able to gain a clear view of the garden if the window is clean and free of imperfections. Similarly, a good translator will provide as few distortions in the original message as possible. Bell argues that a translator should 'give voice' to the original writer, but is not clear on the extent to which this should involve amendment of the original meaning to accommodate differences in cultural knowledge. Like Umberto Eco, Bell sees translation as "a process of negotiation (between author and text, between author and readers, as well as between the structure of two languages and the encyclopaedias of two cultures)." In this sense, therefore, distortions are acceptable only insofar as they serve the understanding of the text, rather than as a way to relate the text to the culture of the target language reader or to their own experiences.

Bell's argument is similar to Nida's perspective that a translator has a duty to reproduce the function of the original text, and to bridge the gap between the source and target cultures to some extent. She justifies this by highlighting the practical considerations of a translation: publishers would wish a translated book to sell, and therefore to be popular and readable to target language readers. An emphasis on encountering the 'otherness' of the source culture might act against this aim.

"I imagine, too, that translated authors would like their books to sell, and won't mind at all if they read naturally in English. It does not appear to me conducive to this aim to make readers confront the otherness of the foreign culture. I would hope, rather, to seduce them into enjoying and appreciating a book in translation as much as if they could read it in the original, without placing too many obstacles in the way of that enjoyment."

(Bell, ibid.)

'Enjoying and appreciating' a translation entails an emphasis on the function, so a formal equivalency that sacrificed readability and presented unnecessary obstacles to the original function would not be considered faithful. Bell argues that "good entertainment as well as high literature" can (should?) be translated, thus downplaying the value of rigid adherence to the original meaning at the cost of other concerns. An example she gives is the line, *y a plus de saison!*, which involves a humorous allegory in French. A translation of the bare meaning of the words without the allegory and humour would not be faithful to the original.

A further consideration that Bell highlights is the fact that translated texts pay a relatively minor role in English speaking countries, despite efforts to change this fact. Relatively few native English speakers are bilingual, so perhaps the 'ethnocentric violence' of translations may be less harmful than the removal of the voice of foreign language authors altogether. This has had some success since Bell's talk was given in 2004, and translated fiction sales doubled between 2000 and 2015 while overall sales fell 4%. A recent study found that while only 5% of published literary fiction titles in English are translated, these represent 7% of total sales (Literature Across Frontiers, 2015). However, this may be attributable to the reduced barriers to entry of authors rather than a greater willingness to read translated fiction. This figure is also more liable to distorted by the popularity of particular titles or authors rather than indicating overall interest, since 25% of fiction titles that reach the top 20 bestsellers are translated. Sales of Italian literary fiction grew from 37,000 in 2001 to 237,000 in 2015, but 179,000 were of three titles by Elena Ferrante, totalling 12% of total sales of translated literary fiction.

Although fidelity to the reader is not considered by many theorists to be equivalent in importance to fidelity to the source culture and author, the economic pressure of the

target language reader as the final customer gives this a greater practical significance.

Bell expresses surprise that some readers did not realise that the Asterix series was not originally written in English, despite its obvious emphasis on French people and culture. This could be seen as the goal of a successfully invisible translator, that the reader is not distracted by the presence of the translator between the author and reader. Unlike the change from *holy kiss* to *hearty handshake* though, Bell seeks to make the French voice understandable to the English reader rather than erasing the difference between the cultures. Bell finishes her talk with the comment:

> "For to my mind the translator is constantly walking a tightrope, owing an equal duty to the original author and to the readers of the translation, trying not to fall off that tightrope between languages, but to preserve the illusion that what was thought and written in one can be read and understood in its essentials in another."

While she is well-known as a translator, Bell studied English at Oxford rather than modern languages or translation. Her working knowledge of a few of the theories seems to have come from books aimed at laypersons, such as Umberto Eco's *Mouse or Rat?*, or from interacting with other translators. Indeed, in this talk she comments on her lack of theoretical knowledge, despite forming her own theories and principles from translation practice and the translation community. Despite this fact, Bell is respected as a translator and the Asterix series is one of the most widely read translations into English. In part due to this fact, we have additional information about the principles and process of translating the series, as well as commentary on the texts by the translators.

The Complete Guide to Asterix details the resources Bell and Hockridge were given and those that they brought to the work. These included a list of wordplay and cultural jokes compiled by the original writer Underzo, which simplified Derek Hockridge's task of identifying topical, cultural and morphological humour within the French, to be translated by Bell. Translators were also sent a copy of the text while the original was in production, although this was often not accompanied by the artwork. Several different dictionaries are used to find translations, synonyms, rhyming words or quotations that could point to the equivalent of the French.

Finally, the translators worked according to the following six principles:

1. *The idea is to render, as faithfully as possible, the feel of the original.*
2. *With humour of this intensely verbal nature, the translation must follow the spirit rather than the letter of the original; we must therefore often find jokes which are different, though we hope along the same lines as the French jokes.*
3. *They must, of course, suit Albert Uderzo's wittily detailed drawings. In particular, they must fit the expression on the speaker's faces.*
4. *From the purely technical point of view, they must be about the same length as the original wording, or we shall create difficulties for the letterer trying to get the English text into the speech bubbles.*
5. *Very important: we will try for the same kind of mixture of jokes as in the French, where Asterix appeals on a number of different levels. There's the story-line itself with its ever-attractive theme of the clever little fellow outwitting the hulking great brute; there is simple knockabout humour, both verbal and visual, which goes down well with quite young children; there are puns and passages of wordplay for older children; and there is some distinctly sophisticated humour, depending on literary or artistic allusion, for the adult or near-adult mind.*
6. *We will also have the same number of jokes as in the French. If we just can't get one in at the same point as in the original, we'll make up for it somewhere else. If there is an obvious gift we'll use it, even if there was no counterpart in the French.*

(Kessler, 1995)

It is clear that the focus is much more aligned with Nida's *functional equivalence* than *formal equivalence*. While the principles seem to be written in an informal way either as translators who are less familiar with translation theory or as an explanation of more comprehensive principles for a general readership, they cover the gestalt of the text more than the precise meaning. The translation must appeal to a similar readership with a similar mixture of jokes, use of wordplay, literary allusions and physical humour, classical references and other content intended to appeal to educated adults as well as small children. Where the principles focus on specific elements of the text, these relate to practical considerations such as the need for a similar length of text and for correspondence between the text and images. This

necessitates some degree of domestication, as if Goscinny were writing for an English-speaking readership.