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► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Guillaume. Translating British and US-American Graphic Novels into French: A Conversation with the Translator Lili Sztajn. *New Readings*, 2015, 15, pp.93-110. hal-02162488

HAL Id: hal-02162488

<https://hal.science/hal-02162488>

Submitted on 21 Jun 2019

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Translating British and US-American Graphic Novels into French: A Conversation with the Translator Lili Sztajn

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This article is based on an interview conducted with Lili Sztajn, a professional translator, on 25 September 2014 before a live audience at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. It includes quotations from Sztajn’s interview—in italics—followed by my own reflections and analysis of specific translation issues.¹ This unusual layout has the advantage of allowing theoretical concerns to be combined with an insider’s view of the specificities of professional translation. Although Translation Studies is now a well-established field of research, the translator’s important role in cultural exchanges is not necessarily recognised by the general public; to echo Lawrence Venuti’s famous title, translators still have a certain invisibility, as their legal and social status often falls short of complete authorship. More invisible still is the translator of comics, a medium which still does not quite enjoy the same cultural legitimacy as non-graphic literary texts, and is regarded by some as second-rate material, fit to be adapted quickly and cheaply. As this article seeks to demonstrate, much is to be gained from translators, especially those working in the field of comics, being seen—and heard. In France as well as in English-speaking countries, comics occupy a position between high and low culture, yet enjoy only partial recognition (Maigret, “La Reconnaissance” 116). It has therefore been argued that such distinctions are ill suited to describe the medium, and that it demonstrates “l’essoufflement du modèle théorique” [“that the theoretical model of legitimation is running out of steam”] (Maigret, “Bande dessinée” 135).

In academia, the many specific problems of comics translation have come to the fore since the advent of what Klaus Kaindl terms “the cultural turn of translation studies”, when “the range of topics was broadened considerably, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the problems in comics translation” (“Comics in Translation” 37). This marks a departure from the previous situation in which “only a handful of comics, e.g. *Astérix* and *Tintin*” (36) were deemed worthy of academic research. The continued prominence of these series is reflected, for example, by the translations of *Astérix* being extensively dealt with in Bertrand Richet’s 2011 book, *Le Tour du monde d’Astérix*. Limiting study to a particular

¹For the slightly redacted full French text of the interview see Sztajn. Translation of the selected interview passages into English is mine.

series is, of course, a legitimate approach, yielding stimulating results; however, focusing on the work of a single translator, as in this article, documents an approach to comics translation across many books.

The first section of this article provides general context on the current situation of French comics translators today, based on Sztajn's personal experience. In the second section, it examines specific issues a comics translator may face. Finally, it analyses Sztajn's ethos of translation, and establishes a theoretical framework for her approach to translating English-language graphic novels.

Sztajn has translated the works of major graphic novelists such as Robert Crumb, Alison Bechdel, and Posy Simmonds. Many of these books raise interesting questions about translation strategies insofar as they display a sophisticated use of language, heavy reliance on literary intertexts, and, in some cases, bilingualism. What is more, the source-text authors operate within what is often called the "independent" sector of the comics industry;² in other words, they own the rights to their characters and do not work under the close supervision of a mainstream publisher belonging to a larger media corporation. This enables them to experiment with the conventional comics format, which in turn has a direct impact on translation. For example, Simmonds's work occasionally includes long passages of written text juxtaposed with drawn strips, which the translator can approach as if they were excerpts from a novel.

The World of Professional Comics Translation

Sztajn started working as a translator in the 1970s, at a time when work was abundant, especially in the allegedly subcultural fields of genre fiction and comic books. Although translation was taught in English departments, specific training courses for aspiring professional translators were not yet offered in French universities.

Translations used to be done by dilettantes and academics. It was often teachers who translated books because they loved them. When I started working, you couldn't learn translation anywhere.

Over the course of forty years, however, the situation has changed. First, the comics medium has gained a form of cultural legitimacy. Although France, the home of *Bande Dessinée*, is sometimes viewed by foreigners as a cultural haven for comics, in reality the medium as of now is still in the process of being assimilated into the academic field of cultural studies and put on an equal footing with other artistic forms. Translation has gone from being one activity among others to being a viable full-time job, as translators set up associations, thus making their situation relatively stable.

Nowadays, there's a code of good conduct between translators and publishers—which, by the way, is not always respected. When I say it

²Although this terminology mainly comes from the US-American comics industry, it can also be used to describe the British comics of Simmonds.

was a dilettante activity, I mean you couldn't make a living out of it: there was no pension system, and the AGESEA, which provides social security to authors and translators, didn't exist either. In this respect, there were many changes: now translation is a clearly structured profession... and yet it remains highly dependent on the relations one has with the publishers. It's still on the margin.

Because the job is now less risky, and perhaps also because of the newfound legitimacy of formerly marginal forms, entering the industry has become more difficult. Sztajn makes it clear that publishers are now less likely to give work to beginners, and that her own easy start (she landed her first job with a single phone call) would not happen today:

Today, publishers have their own pool of translators, [which] means that beginners will find it hard to enter the marketplace if they don't know the right people.

The fact that universities now offer vocational training to Master's level for students wishing to become translators is, of course, partly responsible for these difficulties:

Competition now is very harsh because there are more than a hundred translators who enter the job market each year with a Master's degree, and the market can only integrate (these figures may not be quite exact, but I'd say) not even half of them.

Sztajn is not even convinced that the training offered in those programmes is adequate. She stresses that a solid knowledge of English, although necessary, is not sufficient to make an excellent translator. People who are going to translate from English to French, and not the other way round, should master their native language, and develop the skills of a professional writer.

We sometimes forget to tell the students that their command of French is decisive. I know translators whose English isn't perfect, but who can really write; so I think it's essential that they know French impeccably.

Conversely, Sztajn is keen to emphasise that a translator should not rewrite the text he or she is working on; on the contrary, she believes in remaining as faithful as possible to the source text.

Unfortunately, many translators will hand in a text that looks absolutely flawless; but it's an adaptation, not a translation. I've seen quite a lot of these: when the editor reads the text, it flows, it sounds amazing, but it has nothing to do with the original.

In order to avoid such re-writings, Sztajn insists that the editor should always go and look at the English original. More broadly speaking, the role of the editor is central and much hinges on the relationship between author, editor, translator and letterer.

The bulk of translation is a solitary process and Sztajn, like many others, usually works alone. She describes translators as living in a “den” and adds that if you do not enjoy being on your own, the job is probably not for you. At the same time, translation entails a certain amount of collaboration. Befriending native speakers is highly recommended, especially when authors are likely to use colloquialisms from a particular geographical area. Sztajn confirms that even veteran translators regularly resort to native speakers, when their instincts tell them that they are missing something, without exactly knowing what.

Sometimes a sentence seems perfectly clear, but then a little alarm bell goes off and says “No, this can’t be right.” And in that case, only a native speaker can tell you, “No, it’s not what you’re thinking at all!”

One of the perks of working with contemporary comic books is that the author is likely to be both alive and in direct contact with the publisher. Although this is not always the case, many authors will provide clarifications as needed. They may even take an active part in the process of adaptation, for example, if images need to be slightly altered or redrawn in order to fit the translated text. Sztajn recalls working with Simmonds on the visual adaptation, as well as on the translation of the written text:

I was lucky enough to be able to reach the author when it was necessary [...]. It’s extraordinarily reassuring for a translator, because you know you’re not betraying the text, which is a major source of anxiety.

Sztajn also describes two cases of collaboration with another translator. The first was with Corinne Julve, who helped her with both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* in order to meet tight deadlines. Alison Bechdel’s books are filled with quotations and allusions; therefore, every reference needed to be looked up so as to provide the existing French translation (if there was one) or even choose among the different available translations in order to stay close to the English. Julve did most of the time-consuming documentary work, but she also translated certain chapters of the books. Sztajn’s second collaboration was with her partner Jean-Luc Fromental, director of the collection Denoël Graphic, translating Simmonds’s *Gemma Boverly*. She describes this collaboration as a verbal game of table tennis, where each person throws ideas at the other:

Verbalising the text allows us to polish our sentences; but the result is also different, because when you work like this, you tend to favour readability over fidelity.

On those occasions, translating is no longer a silent activity; it becomes an oral exchange, as each sentence is read out loud, in a process reminiscent of Gustave Flaubert testing the fluidity of his sentences, by yelling them in what he called his “gueuloir” [“yelling-place”] (qtd. in Philippot 535). Different working conditions yield different results, and the very fact of uttering the chosen translation before writing it down seems particularly suited to the prominence of orality in *Gemma Boverly*. Thus even when one works alone, translation can take many forms, and is (or, at any rate, should be) embedded within a wider editorial process. In the case of *Marilyn la Dingue*, a comic book adaptation of Jerome Charyn’s novel *Marilyn the Wild*, Sztajn’s translation was done at an early stage, before the book was even drawn:

Jerome Charyn had written a script based on his book, and he was the one who approached the publisher. Jean-Luc Fromental looked for an artist who could fit the story; he found Rébéna and they started writing together. I translated the original script into French; then the artist and Charyn worked together on the layout.

Close collaboration between editor, translator and writer can lead to new modes of collaboration, in which the translator plays an essential role as a go-between.

In other instances, translating a comic book might be a way to make it available again. Such is the case with Robert Crumb’s *Yum Yum Book*, which he drew at the age of nineteen. The book was published in 1975 by Scrimshaw Press, which immediately went bankrupt; the book has been out of print in English ever since. Sztajn had first translated it into French in the 1970s for *Pilote*, a French magazine, and it was published in book form by Dargaud in 1980. Denoël Graphic’s decision to republish Sztajn’s translation several years ago made the *Yum Yum Book* easier to find, at least for the French-reading public. Similarly, Crumb’s collaborations with his wife Aline Kominsky-Crumb (a series of short jam pieces entitled *Drawn Together*, co-created by the two artists) were issued in collected form on the French market first, only subsequently making their way to a US-American publisher.

After the first stages of a translation, in which a translator is indeed alone with his or her work, quite a lot of collective correcting takes place. Sztajn emphasises the need for the text to be proofread by several different people, especially because in comics, images tend to attract the eye and distract it from any potential mistakes.

I check it two or three times, the editor checks it once, the corrector checks it once, then I check the proofs, the editor checks the proofs.

Finally, the translator has to work in close association with the letterer. Indeed, once the linguistic text has been translated, it needs to be inserted within the drawn page.

We have to work together. Even if you count characters (which is rather tedious, but it’s also part of what you have to do as a comics

translator), very often the text doesn't fit, or simply doesn't look very good. You don't want your speech balloons to be chock full of text; it can ruin a page or a picture. Sometimes you have to make cuts for purely visual reasons.

In other words, the visual dimension of comics has a direct impact on the specific constraints within which the translator has to work.

Specificities of the Medium

Sztajn emphasises two specific issues for comics translation: the limited space available within the speech balloons and the interaction of words and images. A third problem for translation may be many instances of onomatopoeia in a comic. I shall now look at each of these elements in turn.

Sztajn finds that translated texts in French can be 10% to 20% longer than the English source text. This phenomenon, called amplification, is well-known to translators and academics, however its causes are hard to establish. Guylaine Cochrane, who looks at variations in word count, shows that amplification is particularly significant in English-to-French translations, and can be attributed to linguistic constraints (186). What is more, the figure quoted by Sztajn seems to fit Cochrane's estimates: working on scientific texts, the latter reports increases in length of 6% to 17% (188). In a literary corpus a similar trend has been observed by Gilbert Barth, who found that "French translators increased the number of words by 13%" (40). Since, most of the time, a smaller font is not really an option as it would make the texts too hard to read, translators must aim to be as concise as possible. A concrete example of this lack of space can be seen at the beginning of Bechdel's *Fun Home*, where the father is described: "He was an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of decor" (6). This tripartite expression has only two parts in the French version and illustrates the process of *deletio*:³ "C'était un alchimiste des apparences, un Dédale de la déco" (10). Because of the specific layout of the page (one single line of text in the blank space between two panels) the French letterer had limited space to work in, and could not fit the complete translation without reducing the font size or tampering with the original shape of the panels. The reference to Daedalus is significant in context, and removing it would have been detrimental to the network of associations developed in the book; on the other hand, the expressions "alchemist of appearance" and "savant of surface" share the same denotations (expertise and superficiality), therefore, removing one of the two may alter the balance of the sentence, but it does not deprive the reader of any substantial information.

³Kaindl's typology of translation procedures distinguishes five types of translation strategies: *deletio* (deleting texts or images), *detractio* (censoring violent elements), *adiectio* (adding visual or verbal elements), *transmutatio* (changing the order of the elements), *substitutio* (replacing an element with "more or less equivalent material") ("Thump, Whizz, Poom" 278–82).

Comics translators must preserve the delicate synergy of words and pictures. In a number of cases, this means having fewer options to choose from; substitution, in particular, can become problematic because the object that is culturally unique is made immediately visible to the reader, and cannot be easily modified. A cartoon from Simmonds's *Literary Life*, entitled "National Character",⁴ depicts several groups of people taking a stroll in the English countryside; as they walk past a bed of daffodils, each and every one of them starts reciting Wordsworth's famous poem "Daffodils" (1807), with varying degrees of fidelity. The reference to Romanticism becomes a comical kneejerk response. Sztajn decided to keep the Wordsworthian intertext, and to use the 2001 translation of the poem by François-René Daillie ("J'allais, solitaire ainsi qu'un nuage") (Simmonds, "Literary Life: Chroniques" 36). It is her contention that, "Daffodils" being one of the best-known poems in the English language, and *Literary Life* being aimed at an educated public, the poem will be just as familiar to the French as it must have been to its British readership. Although I agree that the poem is a classic, I was not entirely convinced at first by the decision to translate it, because it is in fact more recognisable in English, "I wandered lonely as a cloud." I tend to think that the mental effort needed to recognise the original somehow attenuates the comical dimension of the strip. Still, on second thoughts, Sztajn's decision remains the only reasonable one. Theoretically, there would be four main possibilities when translating the reference to "Daffodils": 1) Keeping the English text: since the poem is most likely to have been read in the original (for example, during an English class), it will be easier to recognise as "Daffodils" than as "Jonquilles". 2) Keeping the English text, but adding a footnote to make the cultural reference explicit. This strategy of *adiectio* is often adopted by translators when no alternative is available, or when the passage is culture-dependent. For example, manga translations by French publisher Kana frequently begin with a list of relevant vocabulary and concepts. Amusingly, Sztajn explains that footnotes are a source of conflict with her editor who "hates them, because he thinks they interrupt the reading": this may be the reason why she decided not to use one in this particular instance. 3) Using the published French translation (which Sztajn did). The rationale behind it, I assume, is as follows: the point of translating a book is that the readers, even if they have some knowledge of Anglo-Saxon culture, do not feel comfortable reading English texts (otherwise they would have bought the original). 4) Transposing the joke (*substitutio*), if one assumes that French readers are not familiar with "Daffodils" at all. Transposition would be achieved either by finding a French poem about the same flowers or by finding another object, which would be to French literature what daffodils are to English literature. The latter is not an option without changing the drawings because the daffodils are visually present on the page and cannot be replaced by, say, Baudelaire's albatross, or Hugo's bunch of eglantine. One could think for example of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Les Colchiques" ["Autumn Crocuses"],

⁴The English version of *Literary Life* is not paginated. However, if we consider that the first page corresponds to the first strip, then "National Character" is on the thirty-third page.

although it deals with a different botanical specimen (Apollinaire 33). But it would only lead to more confusion because the poem, although well-known, is hardly a cultural staple and the “national character” of the title would make no sense; the drawbacks exceed the putative benefits. Cultural domestication to this extent tends to create situations of cultural chaos; for the sake of one effect, the consistency of the work is compromised. Nowadays, translators are aware of the need to preserve the cultural setting of the source text, but this tendency is in fact quite recent: in the 1970s, popular characters were often renamed, from Wolverine (who was called “Serval”) to Darth Vader (who became “Dark Vador”, presumably to avoid the /θ/ sound). As late as 1995, several characters from the manga series *Sailor Moon* by Naoko Takeuchi were given French first names like Frédéric or Mylène, despite the fact that their clothes, behaviour and nationality were explicitly Japanese. This is probably due to the assumption that the original cultural context was too alien to preserve. The same type of modifications were made to Japanese animated series.

Sometimes the pictorial dimension of the source comic can actually help the translator. In *Gemma Boverly*, Joubert, the French baker, comes across the diaries written in English by Gemma before her death. Joubert, who is not bilingual, shares his perplexity with the reader: when Gemma describes a hideous tie, adorned with penguins “on the job”, the diary entry is interrupted by Joubert, who comments: “What? *Je n’ai aucune idée de ce que veulent dire ces usages*” (17). Of course the English reader knows what “on the job” means. This leaves the translator with a choice; either she translates the expression, which makes Joubert’s intervention rather pointless, or she keeps “on the job” as it is, in order to further align the reader’s perception with that of Joubert. In a novel, the latter might have been deemed unnecessarily obscure, but because the journal entry is illustrated, Simmonds actually provides a reference illustration of said penguins, whose mating position leaves little doubt as to the meaning of the expression (17, see Fig. 1).

In Simmonds’s *Tamara Drewe*, many instances of onomatopoeia underwent translation: for example, “splut” and “tsk” (n. pag.)⁵ became “splotch” and “tss” (33). But this is not systematic:

Some [onomatopoeic words] are so integrated into the language that they can be kept as they are, whereas others need to be translated, because you need to make the noise explicit. But some of them work very well in English.

The choice to translate an onomatopoeic word is therefore linked to the cultural surroundings: it depends on what the average reader is likely to understand based on his or her knowledge of other comics, which constitute a general frame of reference. In the examples quoted above, “splotch” is a very common instance of onomatopoeia in French; it is preferable to “splut”, which is not frequent in French comics and would be difficult to understand. On the other hand, onomatopoeic

⁵The English version of *Tamara Drewe* is not paginated, but if we consider that the title of the first chapter, “August”, is on the first page, then the page I am discussing would be the twenty-fourth.



Figure 1: Posy Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly* (17)

words without an obvious equivalent are more likely to be left as they are. Carmen Valero Garcés provides useful consideration of the prevalence of English onomatopoeia in Romance languages (239–40). She points to the intrinsic ease with which English forges new terms, and cites an earlier survey of 161 onomatopoeic words in a French translation, only 58 of which were of French origin.

Conversely, a good example of foreignising would be that of the “Dr Derek” strips in *Literary Life*, whose graphic style is a pastiche of 1950s love comics. At one point, Simmonds’s female character, a writer, is shocked to learn that her new book is in fact purple prose, and produces a sound that is rendered as “choke”.⁶ Sztajn decided not to translate the onomatopoeia (34, see Fig. 2), even though it is rather uncommon in French—a possible equivalent would be “gloups”, which indicates swallowing and implies surprise or anxiety. The effect is double: first, it surprises the reader with unexpected onomatopoeia, which fits the humorous and slightly absurd tone of the strip. Secondly, it reinforces the reference to US-American love comics by making it clear that the character is meant to be identified as an English speaker.

Translating Multilingualism

Simmonds’s French is splendid, and makes *Gemma Boverly* particularly entertaining for a bilingual audience. Because most characters speak French as well as English, some nuances and plays on words will only be accessible to those who

⁶The English and French versions of *Literary Life* do not include exactly the same strips, although many are present in both. The “Dr Derek” strip in question appears only in Denoël’s version.



Figure 2: Posy Simmonds, *Literary Life* (34)

understand both languages. But which parts of English should be translated, and which should be kept as an indicator of foreignness?

The translation was done in the early 2000s, when English was only starting to spread [as a second language used by large numbers of French native speakers]. [...] We tried to find a balance between what sounded natural and what would be understood, what the audience would get or not; and we chose to sprinkle the text with foreign words, in order to preserve the spirit of the Anglo-French dialogue while still remaining intelligible.

Yet, for all the qualities of Simmonds's French, certain expressions may sound artificial or problematic to native French readers. In most cases, they are innocuous: see for example the phrase "je n'ai aucune idée de ce que veulent dire ces usages" (*Gemma* 17), which was edited to "je n'ai aucune idée de ce que veut dire cette expression" (17) in the French translation, because "ces usages" sounds unusually old-fashioned, and would be likely to divert the reader's attention from the main joke of the passage (namely, the penguins "on the job"). In other situations, very slight mistakes on Simmonds's part lead to massive ambiguities. For example, Gemma's French lover has a row with his official girlfriend, who suspects his unfaithfulness; the most important elements of her speech are in English in order to be understood, but some sentences remain in French, so that the reader knows that the language being spoken is actually French. She exclaims, "Who is she? *Il y a un autre dans ta vie, je le sens!*" ["There's someone else in your life, I can feel it!"]. Unfortunately, the use of "un" instead of "une" suggests that this someone is male, thus implying a homosexual relationship—which does not make any sense given this precise situation, and contradicts the use of the pronoun "she" in the English version. Sztajn's translation of this passage amends it to "*Il y a une autre femme dans ta vie*", thus clarifying the gender of the partner.

Translating Intertextuality

The main challenge of translating Bechdel's work resides in the fantastic erudition displayed by the author, and the number of references one has to look up. Most of the time, these references are openly signalled: Bechdel lets us know when she is quoting Marcel Proust, or James Joyce, or a book by Dr Seuss. Yet occasionally there might be no explicit sign of a quotation being a quotation. A notable example would be that of *Are You My Mother?*, the title of the second book. It is a reference to a children's book by P. D. Eastman, which features a baby chicken looking for its mother. This fact inevitably influenced the translator's decisions: while the standard translation of this expression would be something along the lines of "Est-ce que tu es ma mère?", Sztajn decided to use "C'est toi ma maman?" which makes sense for the children's book title, but would be a confusing choice if one did not know about that context. Indeed, the focus is different: "C'est toi ma maman?" raises the implicit question "Who is my mother? You or somebody else?" whereas "Est-ce que tu es ma mère?" could be equated with "Are you involved in a parental relationship with me?" Of course "maman" is also more childlike and affectionate than "mère".

Bechdel's work is full of texts—letters, pages from books, dictionary entries—that have been copied by hand. Although this does not affect the process of linguistic translation, it was certainly an issue for the visual translation of the comic, and an editorial problem.

The first book, Fun Home, was hand-lettered. Then the letterer found a "handwriting" font which allowed him to bypass that problem. But for Fun Home, that's how it was done. And I think it drove everyone mad! Hand-lettering has become so expensive that it multiplies the production cost of the book, and what used to be feasible a few years ago has become impossible.

Translating a Bible Adaptation

Robert Crumb's *The Book of Genesis* is a rather extreme case, in the sense that it did not require translation so much as textual harmonisation: indeed, it is a faithful adaptation of the biblical text, which is reproduced verbatim, either in speech bubbles or in captions. This book is hardly representative of Crumb's career as an underground comix author, and was seen as particularly surprising in its tone and subject matter, as Crumb has often been critical of religion. Similarly, the translator's work on this book was highly atypical, which is why, in the French version, the text is said to be "established by Lili Sztajn", as opposed to the usual phrasing "translated by". As he explains in the introduction to *The Book of Genesis*, Crumb drew from different sources, including the King James Bible and Robert Alter's 2004 *Five Books of Moses*. To make things more complicated, he also states, "In a few places I ventured to do a little interpretation of my own" (n. pag.). According

to Sztajn, he did relatively little of that, but the mixed sources of the original still gave her a hard time.

I had the three Bibles he'd used. I spent my time looking for the option he'd chosen: for Robert Alter's book, which has never been translated into French, I had to stay as close to the text as I could, the King James Bible has an official translation, and for the rest, I picked whatever was closest to the English text. [Crumb] kept the King James Bible because it is the main reference in Anglo-Saxon culture, but whenever he could, he switched back to Alter's Bible, which clarified many obscure points.

Expletives, Slang and Censorship

Comparing the French and English versions of the same book can yield some amusing results; for instance, in *Gemma Boverly*, when the heroine has an argument with her former lover over the phone, the original dialogue is a sanitised “Just **** off! **** off! **** off!” (15), whereas the French uses the very explicit “Va te faire foutre, espèce de connard de merde!” (15). Sztajn confirms that the decision to restore the swear words was made with Simmonds's blessing.

Censorship in England drives Posy Simmonds positively mad; you're not allowed to write “fuck”.⁷ She is a very proper English lady, but she could make a sailor blush, and she is furious because whenever she writes “fuck”, the word turns into little asterisks as soon as it hits the press. So knowing that her French publisher can write “fuck off, you fucking asshole” is absolutely delightful to her.

This censorship was first implemented by the *Guardian*, which pre-published Simmonds's work, and maintained in the final version as printed by Jonathan Cape. However, erasure of swear words does not extend to the French passages in the original work, and Simmonds uses this to amusing effect. At one point, Joubert exclaims: “Je suis prêt à parier ma couille gauche qu'elle a un amant!” [“I'll bet my left ball that she's got a lover”] (41). The line sounds just as creative in French as it does in the literal translation, yet the footnote in the English edition simply translates this as “I'll bet she's got a lover” (41). Unfortunately, this discrepancy between a rather explicit French expression and its extremely tame English equivalent cannot be carried over by the translator, who has no choice but to remove the footnote, losing the friction between English and French. Simmonds's interest in slang and orality is also apparent in her book *Tamara Drewe*, whose cast includes two adolescent working-class girls from the English countryside. The sociolect

⁷This may be due to the Harmful Publications Act (1955), which to this day imposes restrictions on comic books. However, most British media follow self-regulation guidelines, and much importance is attached to the perceived offensiveness of swear words (Allan and Burrige 108).

used is fascinating, as Simmonds really documents the linguistic habits of this social group at the end of the 1990s (e.g. “I want to lose my V-plates to Ben”). Sztajn says that she did not try to write things that French girls would say in a French rural, working-class environment. Instead, she strove to find expressions that would fit a French person’s view of the English rural proletariat. In other words, her contention is that one should not assume that readers know nothing of the original culture which the book evokes, and acknowledge instead the gap between the two cultures.

[You think]: this word, this expression won't work, they're too out-dated, too old, too new. . . And then you think of something in between that will carry across the slightly distorted view that French people have of the English, rural proletarian environment.

In Bechdel’s works, one of the main points of lexicographical interest is the use of slang related to gender, sexual orientation and sexual minorities. Bechdel reclaims homophobic slurs like “pansy” (93), “sissy” (97) or “butch” (96), and appropriates them. Sztajn translates some terms, like “sissy” which becomes “chochette” (101). Others remain unaltered, like “butch” (100), which has no real equivalent in French—the Collins Robert dictionary suggests either the odd and old-fashioned “hommasse” or the incomplete “gouine”, which simply means “lesbian”. These choices show that translation strategies vary according to each term’s degree of integration into the French language. The word “butch”, like “queer”, is familiar to people with any interest in LGBT communities; conversely, “sissy” in French would probably conjure up images of an Austrian princess (which it never would in English), and so had to be changed. The term “butch” also crops up at the beginning of *Fun Home* (15) and this time, it is translated as “garçon manqué” (19), which means “tomboy”. The difference lies in the fact that this time “butch” is not used as a term of address, but describes unfeminine behaviour (an indifference to elegant clothing) in a very young girl. In this respect, “garçon manqué” is certainly more appropriate because it describes gender identification, not sexuality, unlike “butch” which is more openly synonymous with lesbianism in French.

The translation of “pansy” in context is particularly tricky, because the word is used during a discussion involving flowers, and is meant to be understood both as a reference to the botanical specimen and as a disparaging way to refer to a homosexual or effeminate man. Sztajn, perhaps uncharacteristically, decided to forge a new term that would fit the bill; she used “reine-des-prés”, the flower called queen of the meadow (97). In French, this word is not normally applied to people; yet, it is easy to understand and would be spontaneously interpreted as a way to describe a man with feminine qualities, because of the semantic proximity with “reine” (although the word does not have the same subtext as “queen”).

Towards a Practice-Led Theory of Comics Translation

Throughout our discussion, Sztajn consistently emphasised the need to keep an open mind and avoid approaching the text with rigid principles. Yet she also stated certain preferences—for example, for keeping English proper nouns instead of suggesting a French equivalent, even if it meant adding a footnote. Over the last forty years, English has become more familiar to the average French reader, which means that English names are now frequently preserved by translators in all media. According to Kaindl, “since the 1960s, the trend for keeping the original titles has prevailed, especially if they included the protagonists’ names” (“Comics in Translation” 38). What Sztajn went on to explain about her method is more controversial and implies a distinct theoretical framework:

My opinion is that you have to know you’re reading an English text, that it has to be slightly uneven, slightly distorted—while still remaining fluid, of course—because you’re not reading French; you’re reading English. You’re reading an English text, which has been translated into French so that people who don’t know English can understand it; but it has to retain the offbeat quality of the English language.

In other words, Sztajn stands by Venuti’s assertion that a translation should not be made to pass as an original. In *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti states that readers often favour “fluid” translations that aim to pass as the original, thus “producing the illusory effect of transparency” (5). Against this invisible domestication of the source text, he advocates “a foreignizing method [. . .] to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (20). This is by no means a consensual position among professional translators, many of whom are happy to depart from the source in order to craft fluid and attractive French versions, thus making the text easier to read for the target audience. Interestingly, it has been suggested that “whereas translations of ‘low brow’ comics literature [. . .] are dictated by the market and are generally target-oriented, translations of ‘high brow’ comics literature are instead more source-oriented” (Zanettin 7). Sztajn’s translations obviously fall into the second category, and her professed desire to “make the reader work” to understand the text is obviously consistent with a perception of comics as deserving respectful adaptation.

Sztajn’s defence of a foreignising strategy rests on stylistic arguments. When asked about the problem of preserving an author’s style and carrying it across language boundaries, she argued once again in favour of adhering to the source text’s rhythm and syntax, even at the expense of absolute fluidity:

You can always find a way to preserve the syntactic structure of the sentence; and [if you do], you’ll find the style. You’ll need to bend the sentence around, but most of the time, there’s a way to make it work in French. I know it’s a rather marginal position, but it’s the best way to do justice to the text.

The problem of syntactic structure is particularly acute in works containing long and complex sentences, like those of Bechdel. The following passage from *Are You My Mother?* may serve to illustrate Sztajn's method: "Getting her undivided attention was a rare treat. It felt miraculous, actually—like persuading a hummingbird to perch on your finger" (13). In the French edition, it is translated as: "Accaparer toute son attention était un plaisir rare. Ça tenait du miracle, en fait—comme de persuader un colibri de se poser sur votre doigt" (19). We notice that Sztajn keeps the dash; this is normally deemed an Anglicism in academic translation, although it would be regarded as standard by most French readers. She also preserves the syntactic structure and the verbal forms of the two sentences. The result, although perfectly acceptable, feels ever so slightly grating to a French ear: "votre doigt" especially seems jarring since an impersonal "your" is more correctly translated as "son" than as "votre". Here, of course, "son" would have been ambiguous because it would have been interpreted as referring to the same person as the other, personal "son", which translates "her" earlier in the sentence. However, this could have been corrected (although not necessarily improved) by resorting to a personal form ("comme si j'avais persuadé un colibri de se poser sur mon doigt"). The sentence also seems more strained in French than in English because "de persuader" feels more comfortable after the verb "être". Other translators might have decided to smooth it out by changing the syntax as follows: "En fait, c'était presque miraculeux — comme de persuader un colibri...". Sztajn's version, by contrast with this one, remains true to the English turn of phrase. Of course, such principles operate at sentence level, not on isolated words. Having a close look at her work, we discover many examples of transposition, where one term is not replaced by its direct equivalent. In *Literary Life*, for instance, a female writer is depicted writing a sex scene, and getting more and more aroused by her own writing, until she reaches a form of literary climax.⁸ Then in the last panel, as she lights a cigarette, the computer talks to her and asks, "So... How was it for *you*?" In French, this was translated as "Alors, heureuse?" ["So, are you happy?"] (32), which does not follow the English structure, but does a better job of getting the idea across, because in French culture "Alors, heureuse?" is the stereotypical corny question a proud male would ask his lover after sex.

Puns are sometimes assumed to be untranslatable, but this is far from systematic. In *Are You My Mother?* when Alison tells her analyst about a dream that she had in which the analyst patched her jeans, she exclaims, "You were gonna fix the tear [in the jeans]. Which maybe means *tear*, too! You're healing me!" (82). This homography is entirely coincidental to the English language and may look untranslatable at first; still, the French "accroc" ["rip", "tear"] happens to contain both "eau" ["water"] and "âcre" ["bitter", "harsh"], which places it in the same semantic field as "larmes" ["tears"]. Thus, with just a minor explication of the pun (88, see Fig. 3), Sztajn manages to save the structure of this psychoanalytically significant double meaning.

⁸Again, *Literary Life* is not paginated, but the passage I am discussing is on the twenty-ninth page.



Figure 3: Alison Bechdel, *C'est toi ma maman?* (88)

Such serendipity remains rare. In most cases, something is forever lost in translation. Sztajn admits to regretting having been forced to translate “drawn together” by the less striking expression “parle-moi d’amour” [“tell me about love”], because the double meaning of “drawn” had no equivalent in French.

We thought about it for a long time but couldn't find anything satisfactory, so we talked to Aline and Crumb, and in the end the best option was to keep it simple, to say what the book was about. It's a great regret of mine.

However, sometimes the translation process can bring new facets to certain passages, or shed light on aspects that might have been missed. The translator may create almost imperceptible comical effects, which support and reinforce the humour in the text. In *Parle-moi d'amour*, several characters happen to speak French (especially towards the end, after the Crumbs have moved to Southern France) and so mention of “en français dans le texte” [“in French in the text”] and its variants appear frequently (207); but as the repetition of this sentence becomes tiresome (and useless, because readers can see the difference between passages in italics, which were French in the source text, and unitalicised passages which were translated), Sztajn abruptly adds “VF, on le redira pas” [“French version, I won't tell you again”] (227). This throws the translator's work into the spotlight, and is in keeping with the overall tone of the book, in which the authors represent themselves and address the reader directly and informally.

In comics, as in general with literature, certain elements are untranslatable. However, I have tried to show that the practice and process of comics translation is a rich and stimulating one, much deserving of academic scrutiny. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie writes, “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something may

also be gained” (17). The translation he had in mind was primarily geographical—people moving to a new country. I hope to have demonstrated that in many instances, literary translations of graphic novels do in fact *create* meaning, so that something is also gained.

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