Speaking of Which . . . Dialogue and Characterization in French Translations of Agatha Christie

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Abstract

The aim of this study is not to provide an overview of Agatha Christie's numerous crime novels or their even more numerous translations into French—such a project is clearly beyond the scope of an article. Instead, I propose to examine in some detail, and with a particular focus on the use of dialogue in a small selection of her works, the transformations that occur through the translation process. This will take us some way toward seeing the novels as they are received by a French (target) readership. My intention is not to criticize, but to describe, and to do this for an audience without specialized knowledge of theories related to translation challenges.

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Like other masterful writers, authors of Golden Age crime fiction use language variation as an important tool for characterization and plot development. One of the most obvious instances of this is Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, who uses relaxed language and effete mannerisms the way television's Columbo uses his unkempt appearance, to disguise the analytical acuity essential in a detective. As Janet Hitchman has pointed out, "Wimsey's looks and behavior were meant to give the impression of the typical 'silly ass' of the period" (16). His verbal habits are marked, revealing among other traits a propensity to quote from the classics, to drop the final "g" sound in "-ing" endings, and to use early twentieth-century slang expressions such as "dear old thing," "beastly," "a bit fagged," "old man" (*Lord Peter Views the Body* 18, 19, 115), "look here," "a deuce of a stink" (*The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* 32). In this latter novel, however, his apparently casual investigative questions give way expectedly to a penetrating focus: "The change in him was almost startling—it was as if a steel blade had whipped suddenly out of its velvet scabbard" (41–42). In the short story "The Unprincipled Affair of the Practical Joker," in the collection *Lord Peter Views the Body*, he moves from being "garrulously imbecile" and spouting "indescribable fatuity" to "a chill tone which bore no resemblance to his ordinary speech" (87, 88–89).

Sayers thus makes frequent and marked use of direct speech mannerisms alongside narrative commentary relating to these as indicators of the character's personality and as plot progression. Other characters are constructed in similar ways. Wimsey's right-hand man, Bunter, and other members of the servant class either speak in a highly formal register, peppered with multiple honorifics ("My Lord," "Sir," "General"), or betray their working-class origins by dropping their aitches and using the "-ink" ending instead of "-ing." Linguistic behavior is thus a vital tool used by the author, and as such requires close attention from the translator. However it is not possible, as we shall see from the following analyses, to replicate these narrative strategies in all cases: the much-debated notion of "equivalence" in its various guises may simply be not applicable where, for example, a stereotype such as the "silly ass" or the Cockney of the source culture do not exist in the target culture. Perhaps the most detailed discussion of equivalence of various types, Mona Baker's *In Other Words* (1992) makes only passing reference to literary texts, some of which include brief passages from Christie's work, but does point to the fact that "[a] network of relations

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which is valid and makes sense in one society may not be valid in another" (219). If maintained in a translation due to a lack of equivalence, these associative evocations might be described as "culture bumps," a term Ritva Leppihalme (1997) has borrowed from sociologist Carol M. Archer (1986). Leppihalme, in a section dealing with allusion and characterization, focuses, however, more on the dialogue's allusive content rather than its form (44-53). The examples she cites have more to do with the characters' reading experiences and with their shared (or not shared) educational background. In the majority of cases there are no particular linguistic markers of differences in social status or personality.

I argue that the nuances of sociolect as related to characterization are a problem which presents in a particularly acute form in the transition between British English, with its heavy presence of class markers in speech, and French, which has by and large no tradition of this as a feature of literary works. Exceptions to this linguistic neutrality or blandness are rare, with the notable examples among "classic" writers of Guy de Maupassant's nineteenth-century Norman peasants, and post-World War II, Marcel Duhamel's *Série noire* policy of using slang in translations of American crime fiction —often in excess of usage in the original text, as pointed out by Alistair Rolls et al. Elsewhere, Clem Robyns has suggested that "while characters in the original texts may often use ungrammatical constructions, this almost never occurs in the French versions" (414). This is said to be a result of a hostile literary environment which gave little or no space to innovative or overly foreign language use in translations. Robyns develops the idea that practitioners and publishers operated within a strongly normative framework, guided by principles of French nationalism (or even imperialism) and a culture with a strong tradition of language protection (reference is often made to the 1634 founding of the Académie française in this respect). Citing Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, according to which popular fiction in translation is considered to occupy a "secondary" position and therefore has no allowance for or expectation of linguistic innovation, Robyns underlines the difficulties encountered by translators in their renderings of texts marked by language variation: I argue that this is due in large part to the absence of "equivalent" models.

Against this background expectation of normalization, and within a tradition of language neutrality, what options does a translator of Golden Age crime fiction have? I will now consider examples from Agatha Christie, exploring a number of French translations of her works in order to highlight potential difficulties in finding "equivalents" between British and French cultures, and examining her various translators' strategies in the face of these. I will first investigate diverse characters, both major and minor, to see how she uses language in their construction, before going on to analyze the special case of Hercule Poirot. An educated Belgian is not likely to mis-speak his native French in the same way that he mis-speaks English: in other words, his foreignness is erased. What strategies might a translator use to negotiate these issues, and—more importantly—what effect might these potential losses of characterization have on target readers' perceptions of Christie as a writer?

Constructing Character through Dialogue and Description

Christie's characters are drawn from a wide range of social contexts: class, nationality, and "internationality" are all represented in novels featuring detectives as diverse as Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and Tommy and Tuppence. Particularly (but not only) in the case of the first two, the "Columbo's raincoat" effect is also in evidence: the detectives' social status and perceived harmless personalities conceal trenchantly perceptive abilities. The reader, while accustomed to deciphering the detectives' true

natures, may require some assistance in interpreting the natures of other characters, including the culprit, whose own disguise is of necessity successful until the climax and the big reveal.

Surface features are evoked, often with great economy, particularly language traits, across a range of characters. In *The Big Four* Inspector Japp's mispronunciations of French vanish in the translation: "Moosior" (14) is normalized into "monsieur" in *Les Quatre* (22). The old man who gives directions to Poirot and Hastings speaks a local (Dartmoor) variant of English: "There be t'Bungalow. Do yee want to see t'Inspector?" (*BF* 23)[1] sounds in translation very like one of Maupassant's Norman peasants: "Le v'là, vot'bungalow. C'est-y l'inspecteur que vous voulez voir?" (*LQ* 38). American Secret Service agent Captain Kent drawls a stereotypical "Say, mister" (*BF* 35), which fades into an explanatory addition in "Au fait, dit-il d'une voix traînante . . ." [Actually, he said, in a drawling voice . . .] (*LQ* 60). The Irishwoman Mrs. O'Rourke's "Top of the morning" greeting in *N or M?* (28) simply disappears into a generalized narrative comment: "Les bonjours échangés" [After greetings were exchanged] (*NMf* 547). And while much of a two-year-old's delightful baby talk at the breakfast table is more or less preserved, some of the accompanying humor is not reproduced:

> Betty Sprot said "*Putch!*" with a fine splutter of milk at Major Bletchley, whose face instantly assumed a sheepish but delighted expression.
>
> "And how is little Miss Bo Peep this morning?" he asked fatuously. "Bo Peep!" He enacted the play with a newspaper.
>
> Betty crowed with delight.
>
> Serious misgivings shook Tuppence. . . . To believe in Sans Souci [the boarding house] as a headquarters of the Fifth Column needed the mental equipment of the White Queen in *Alice*. (*NM* 30)

This is rendered as:

> Betty Sprot contemplait le major. Elle dit: "Poche" et le visage de Bletchley prit un air exstasié.
>
> – Comment va ce matin mademoiselle Coucou? s'enquit-il.
>
> Sans attendre la réponse, il se cacha derrière son journal et cria, en déguisant sa voix:
>
> – Coucou!
>
> Betty gloussa de plaisir.
>
> Tuppence hocha la tête.
>
> "Sûrement, songeait-elle, nous faisons fausse route. . . ."
>
> Pour considérer la villa "Sans-Souci," comme un quartier général de la "cinquième colonne," il eût fallu avoir l'imagination déréglée de la Blanche Reine d'*Alice au pays des merveilles*. (*NMf*, 549)
>
> [Betty Sprot considered the Major. She said: "Poche" and Bletchley looked ecstatic.
>
> – And how is Miss Coucou this morning? he enquired.

[1] Quotations from Christie's works will give the page number and an abbreviated form of the title, as follows: *A Pocket Full of Rye*, *PR; Une poignée de seigle, PS (PS97* for the more recent translation*); The Big Four, BF; Les Quatre, LQ; N or M?, NM; N ou M?, NMf; Murder in Mesopotamia, MM; Meurtre en Mésopotamie, MMf.*

> Without waiting for the answer, he hid behind his newspaper, and shouted, disguising his voice:
> – Coucou!
> Betty chuckled happily.
> Tuppence nodded.
> "Surely, she thought, we're on the wrong track. . . ."
> To consider the villa "Sans-Souci" as a headquarters of the "Fifth Column," you would have needed the disordered imagination of the White Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*.]

Missing from this brief passage are several Christie nuances: the childish splutter of milk, and the fact that the major is both embarrassed and pleased by Betty's response to him—a grown man, and a military man at that, might well feel self-conscious about this playful exchange. Why exactly he disguises his voice is a mystery, an addition on the part of a translator who perhaps has not fully grasped the "rules" of this childhood game (which in French is played by reappearing with a cry of "Coucou, je te vois"); and the sardonic humor of the expression "mental equipment" is also lost to the target reader.

The text continues its edgy humor with the opening of the next chapter and the introduction of another resident at the villa:

> Miss Minton was thin and angular, her neck was stringy. She wore pale sky blue jumpers, and chains or bead necklaces. Her skirts were tweedy and had a depressed droop at the back. (*NM* 30)

The translator once again both adds to and subtracts from the original:

> Miss Minton était maigre et anguleuse et son cou découvrait des cordes qu'elle croyait cacher avec d'énormes colliers de perles fausses. Elle portait un chandail bleu, qui dissimulait mal ses omoplates en saillie, et une jupe de tweed. (*NMf* 549)
> [Miss Minton was thin and angular and her neck showed strings that she thought she could hide with enormous necklaces of fake pearls. She wore a blue jumper, which didn't properly disguise her jutting shoulder blades, and a tweed skirt.]

The translator's Miss Minton is both more self-conscious, in attempting to hide perceived defects, and arguably less attractive: blue rather than "pale sky blue" does not suggest a mitigating softness, and the "depressed droop," which speaks volumes of both poverty and sadness, has been replaced by bony shoulder blades. To add to this distancing, her greeting of Tuppence "with alacrity" in the immediately following lines, suggests a degree of loneliness: in the translation this is reduced to "dit-elle aimablement" [she said pleasantly].

Christie uses both description and dialogue to stress individual differences in her characters, while at the same time making use of recognizable stereotypes to give her readers a rapid grasp of what to expect from each (although of course in the case of the murderer this appearance may be a cunning facade). Take the case of Commander Haydock in *N or M?* He is introduced to Tommy by Major Bletchley, followed (typically for Christie) by a narrative comment, thus:

> “. . . Come along and I’ll introduce you to some of the fellows. Nice lot on the whole, some of them inclined to be rather old women, if you know what I mean? Ah, here’s Haydock—you’ll like Haydock, Retired naval wallah. Has that house on the cliff next door to us. He’s our local A.R.P. warden.”
>
> Commander Haydock was a big hearty man with a weather-beaten face, intensely blue eyes, and a habit of shouting most of his remarks. (*NM* 37)

The translator renders this as:

> “. . . Maintenant, venez, je vais vous présenter à quelques membres du club. Dans l’ensemble, vous verrez, ils sont très bien. Sans doute, il y en a deux ou trois qui sont un peu ra-pla-pla, mais ce sont des exceptions! . . . Ah! voici Haydock! Celui-là vous plaira . . . Officier de marine en retraite. Il a une maison sur la falaise, tout près de la villa.”
>
> Le commandant Haydock était un marin aux yeux bleus, un solide gaillard à la face tannée par le vent de mer. Il avait l’habitude de crier ce qu’il avait à dire. (*NMf* 555)
>
> [“Now come along, I’m going to introduce you to some club members. On the whole, you’ll see, they’re very nice. Probably there are two or three who are a bit tired, but they’re the exceptions! . . . Ah! Here’s Haydock! You’ll like him . . . Retired naval officer. He has a house on the cliff, very near to the villa.”
>
> Commander Haydock was a blue-eyed sailor, a solid, strapping man with a face tanned by the sea wind. He had a habit of shouting what he had to say.]

A number of points need to be made here, all of them linked to the concept of translation equivalence. The word “fellows,” evoking manly companionship and now somewhat dated, is replaced by club members, which neutralizes its potential associations. While some effort has been made to reproduce the Major’s habit of clipping off inessential words, such as the subjects of verbs, this is difficult to reproduce in French and the translator has played it safe: “Il a une maison. . . .” The expression “rather old women,” which here serves as a contrast to the manliness of “fellows,” is translated as “ra-pla-pla,” meaning tired or flat. By way of compensation, perhaps, the comment about this being an exception has been added.

Two culturally specific items have vanished: the term “wallah,” which evokes Anglo-Indian military history and which has no obvious equivalent in French, has been deleted and replaced by a factual naming of Haydock’s previous occupation. The mention of his current position as an A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) warden has also been eliminated, removing an important reminder of his responsibilities and standing within the community.

These are of course merely nuances, but cumulatively their omission undermines some of the finer points that careful Christie source readers might expect to take away from her novels. Translator decisions to eliminate these touches are understandable given their cultural embeddedness, which creates difficulties in finding an appropriate equivalent rendering. Early (and still prevalent) classification of her works as essentially of the “clue-puzzle” variety, in which the major interest is in plot, may also have led to a degree of disregard for the ways the author uses detail, including their manner of speaking, to build characters gradually.

A Pocket Full of Rye

Other examples of careful construction through dialogue and description can be found in *A Pocket Full of Rye*. Lance and his wife Pat are discussing the former's return to favor in his father's eyes, suggesting that this is due to his black sheep son's marriage into a higher class, a more advantageous move than his brother has made:

> Pat laughed.
> "What? Into the aristocratic riff-raff?"
> [Lance] grinned. "That's right. But riff-raff didn't register and aristocracy did. You should see Percival's wife. She's the kind who says 'Pass the preserves please' and talks about a postage stamp." (*PR* 426)

Faced with an English class judgment based on a character's way of speaking, the translator drops this detail:

> Pat rit de bon cœur.
> "Au blason quelque peu terni!"
> "Terni ou non, il n'a vu que le blason! Tu comprendras mieux quand tu connaîtras la femme de Perceval!" (*PS* 381)
> [Pat laughed out loud.
> "With a slightly tarnished coat of arms!"
> "Tarnished or not, he could only see the coat of arms! You'll understand better when you meet Percival's wife!"]

Of interest here is a comparison with a more recent (1997) translation of the same novel, where closer attention has been given to the detail omitted in 1955: "Tu devrais voir la femme de Percival. Elle est du genre à vous dire 'Faites-moi passer la confiture' ou à vous faire tout un cirque pour des clopinettes" (*PS*97 274). ["You should see Percival's wife. She's the type who says 'Kindly have the jam passed to me' or who throws a tantrum over nothing" (literally, who makes a whole circus for nothing).]

Further instances of class-related speech can be found in the dialogue attributed to the somewhat surly butler, Mr. Crump, whose remedy for shock, for example, is voiced as "Brandy she'll be needing" (*PR* 428), translated by the class neutral "Il lui faudrait un remontant!" (*PS* 383)—the specification "cognac" is left to another bystander, possibly in order to avoid the repetition of the word used by two characters in quick succession. Examples of target-audience oriented modifications and omissions abound in this novel, which is hardly surprising when we consider the degree to which the plot is woven around the nursery rhyme of the title. The chosen translation in French, *Une poignée de seigle*, literally "a handful of rye," hence has no connotations (this is true of a number of Christie's allusive titles).

At times, omissions affect the reader's view of the amateur detective, Miss Marple herself. She first appears in the novel on her way to persuade Inspector Neele that the pattern behind the killings is directly related to the nursery rhyme. Christie gives the following description:

> The old lady sat very upright, looking out of the window of the train, her lips pursed together, an expression of distress and disapproval on her pink and white wrinkled face. . . . So charming, so innocent, such a fluffy and pink and white old lady was Miss Marple that she gained admittance . . . Crump saw a tall, elderly lady wearing an old-fashioned tweed coat and skirt, a couple of

> scarves and a small felt hat with a bird's wing. The old lady carried a capacious handbag and an aged but good quality suitcase reposed by her feet. (*PR* 461)

In translation, this becomes:

> Le buste très droit, les lèvres serrées, la vieille dame regardait défiler le paysage. Elle avait l'air préoccupé. . . . Miss Marple était d'apparence si inoffensive et son sourire avait conservé tant de grâce que ce fut sans difficulté que sa voiture franchit les barrages. . . . une dame, à n'en pas douter. Son manteau de tweed était de coupe vieillotte, mais de bon drap, la plume qui ornait son chapeau de feutre était un tantinet ridicule, le sac de voyage qu'elle avait posé par terre était loin d'être neuf, mais son cuir, d'excellente qualité, avait vaillamment supporté les outrages du temps. (*PS* 414)
>
> [Her back very straight, her lips tight, the old lady watched the countryside fly past. She looked preoccupied. . . . Miss Marple looked so inoffensive and her smile had kept so much grace that it was without difficulty that her car passed through the barriers. . . . a lady, no doubt about it. Her tweed coat was of an old-fashioned cut, but good fabric, the feather decorating her felt hat was a touch ridiculous, the travel bag she had put on the ground was far from new, but its leather, of excellent quality, had valiantly resisted the ravages of time.]

The differences here are quite striking: the pink and white wrinkled face has gone, as have Miss Marple's handbag and skirt (!), while the bird's wing has been reduced to just one feather, judged ridiculous, and the text now waxes lyrical over the suitcase.

Once again, it is enlightening here to compare this earlier translation with the more recent one:

> Assise bien droite, lèvres serrées, une expression de douleur et de réprobation durcissant quelque peu les traits ridés de son visage rose et blanc habituellement plus amène. elle regardait le paysage défiler par la vitre. . . . Et c'était une si charmante, si inoffensive, si délicieuse vieille demoiselle, toute de rose, de blanc et de froufrous, que son véhicule put franchir avec une facilité déconcertante les barrages . . . une vieille demoiselle vêtue d'un ensemble de tweed passé de mode, enveloppée dans ses châles et coiffée d'un petit feutre ornée d'une aile d'oiseau. Elle était armée d'un volumineux sac à main, et une valise de cuir fatigué mais de belle facture était posée à ses pieds. (*PS*97 321-322)
>
> [Sitting very straight, her lips tight, an expression of suffering and disapproval hardening somewhat the wrinkled traits of her pink and white face, normally more agreeable, she watched the landscape fly past the window. . . . And she was such a charming, inoffensive, delicious elderly lady, all pink and white and frilly, that her vehicle was able to pass the barriers with a disconcerting ease . . . an elderly lady dressed in a tweed ensemble that was out of fashion, wrapped in her shawls and wearing a little felt hat decorated with a bird's wing. She was armed with a voluminous handbag, and a suitcase of worn leather but superior make was sitting at her feet.]

While this is perhaps closer to Christie's original image in terms of detail, the concept of "fluffy," here altered to frilly, seems to have evaded the translator. Frills sit awkwardly alongside tweed, and the amplification of "a couple of scarves" into shawls is arguably an attempt to justify this. Could Christie's use of "fluffy" here refer to

behavior rather than appearance, in the sense that there is some (deceptive) dithering and fluffing about at times? In any case, it is clear that this preliminary description in the novel is problematic in terms of translation, even when fundamental approaches differ across time, a point we will return to later.

Murder in Mesopotamia: The Special Case of Hercule Poirot

This novel in an exotic setting features a relatively large cast of characters, several of whom are associated with translation challenges relating to social class or idiosyncratic styles of expression. In the opening pages Dr. Reilly exclaims with a presumably Irish formulation, "It's profoundly serious I am" (*MM* 14), which the translator normalizes completely to "Je parle tout à fait sérieusement" (*MMf* 173). This may be a reasonable strategy since any further "Irishisms" on the Doctor's part are few and far between.

The second central character encountered by the narrator, Nurse Leatheran, reminds us of the problem of the "silly ass" type mentioned above: Leatheran observes that Bill Coleman appears "exactly like a young man out of one of Mr P. G. Wodehouse's books" (*MM* 22). His opening salvo includes a number of linguistically marked expressions, for example:

> How are you feeling? Beastly journey and all that? Don't I know these trains! Well, here we are—had any breakfast? This your kit? I say, awfully modest, aren't you? . . . Come along to the old bus. (*MM* 22)

The translation maintains the reference to Wodehouse, and gives Coleman a colorful manner of speaking that, while it cannot evoke a cultural stereotype that did not exist in the target culture, at least shows deviation from standard, neutral French:

> Avez-vous fait bon voyage? Quel long et fastidieux trajet! Ah! si je connais ces trains! Enfin, vous y voici. Avez-vous déjeuné? C'est votre sac de voyage? A la bonne heure, vous ne vous encombrez pas de bagages. . . . Venez rejoindre la vieille patache. (*MMf* 180-181)
>
> [Did you have a good trip? What a long and tedious journey! Oh, don't I know those trains! Anyway, here you are. Have you eaten? Is this your travel bag? Splendid, you don't weigh yourself down with luggage. . . . Come along to the old jalopy.]

Further into the story, a murder is committed: Coleman's alibi is that he had gone into town to collect the money to pay the workers. On his return he announces, "Here's the oof!" (*MM* 68): this is an unusual slang term for money. In the translation the word is replaced by "guimbarde" (*MMf* 223), which refers to a rattletrap vehicle. Here, arguably, the precise meaning of the original text is less important than the reproduction of tone through the use of a slang expression.

On meeting the wife of the archeological dig supervisor, Mrs. Leidner, Leatheran decides she is a "lady," that is, a well-bred Englishwoman of some education and social standing, "une femme distinguée jusqu'au bout des ongles" (*MMf* 187) [a woman distinguished to the tips of her fingernails], "a lady through and through" (*MM* 30). This judgment is soon challenged, as Mrs. Leidner starts to quiz the nurse about her past:

> . . . from the moment I set eyes on her, I felt sure that Mrs Leidner was a lady. And a lady, in my experience, very seldom displays curiosity about one's private affairs. (*MM* 36)
>
> . . . dès l'instant où mes yeux s'étaient posés sur elle, j'avais été convaincue que Mrs Leidner était une grande dame. Or, à mon avis, une personne distinguée s'abstient en général d'interroger les autres sur leurs affaires privées. (*MMf* 192)
>
> [from the instant when my eyes fell on her, I had been convinced that Mrs Leidner was a great lady. Now in my opinion, a distinguished person refrains in general from questioning others about their private affairs.]

The absence of a class equivalent to the English "lady" forces the translator to elaborate slightly: "dame" cannot carry the full weight of social expectation, so the term "grande dame" is needed. However, this over-emphasizes Mrs. Leidner's qualities by turning her into a great lady.

We come now to the case of Hercule Poirot: clearly his use of a sprinkling of French and of slightly distorted English expressions are challenges to the translator into French. To what extent might his trademark foreignness be preserved in the transition? Not only do his French expressions meld more or less seamlessly with the rest of the text, but his awkward English must also vanish: attempting to find awkward French equivalents makes no sense, since it is his native language.

When Poirot does misspeak, how does the translator manage this? For example, early in his appearance (in chapter 13), he suggests that "the pudding proves itself only when you eat it": Nurse Leatheran mentally corrects this, thinking: "The proof of the pudding's in the eating, I suppose he meant" (*MM* 80). The translation adds a dimension to this by identifying a popular English saying:

> . . . c'est en le mangeant qu'on reconnaît la saveur du pudding.
>
> Ce dicton anglais ne manque pas de justesse, mais, pour autant, Poirot ne m'inspirait qu'une médiocre confiance. (*MMf* 233)
>
> [. . . it's in the eating of it that one recognizes the flavor of the pudding.
>
> This English saying is not without truth, but nevertheless, Poirot inspired only a middling confidence in me.]

Less than a page later, the Belgian detective makes another error: "'It is not all the square and overboard—no?' said the little man at the top of the table. Why, he couldn't even speak English properly!" (*MM* 81). Here the translator simplifies and as a result, eliminates the negative comment from Leatheran: "—Oh! évidemment, il y a du louche là-dessous, ajouta le petit homme au bout de la table" (*MMf* 233). [Oh! obviously there's something shady underneath, added the little man at the end of the table.]

As part of his investigation, Poirot asks Leatheran to go to a room and cry out, to see if she can be heard from a particular position. He suggests the noise she might make could be similar to the response to what he calls a "stepped toe." Leatheran mentally corrects this: "(stubbed I suppose he meant!)" (*MM* 133). He later refers to this as "I steb the toe" (*MM* 153), and a further, voiced correction is provided by Leatheran: "it's 'stubbed your toe', not *stepped* or stebbed" (*MM* 158). Once again, the translator simplifies and eliminates the criticism—Poirot refers merely to a "faux pas," a mis-step (*MM* 279). When he repeats the experiment himself, he says "je me tords le pied" (*MM* 297) [I twist my foot]. And where the toe-stubbing, word-mixing episode

closes with Leatheran advising Poirot of his error, the translator deletes the whole episode, some eight lines of text.

These simplifications and eliminations can be seen as justifiable strategies, given that they do not affect the overall development of the plot, and provide a way around the conundrum of how to make a French speaker who mis-speaks English sound as clumsy in what is now his own language. But there is a resulting loss: Poirot's willingness to be corrected is no longer illustrated, and his investigative relationship with Nurse Leatheran is less equal.

Conclusion

Marjolijn Storm (105, citing Barnard [12]), points out that such speech mannerisms serve principally to underline Poirot's foreignness: however, she also maintains that they are absent at moments critical to the plot. She claims that they are far less prevalent once he has commenced the final explanatory narrative (the solution), and that their presence earlier amounts to a delaying and distracting, and thus a suspense-building strategy (106). This is certainly true for *Murder in Mesopotamia*, where the narrator, Nurse Leatheran, even remarks on Poirot's different approaches to different situations: "He dropped his private manner and reverted to his lecture style" (*MM* 198). This "lecture style" continues over two chapters (185-212) yet contains fewer than a dozen words of French and no discernible distorted English expressions. Translating Poirot into French in this mode therefore poses no particular problems. If, however, a translator has smoothed over or eliminated many of the mis-speakings of the preceding chapters, then the Wimsey-like linguistic transformation is likely to go unremarked.

The reader's ability to quickly identify and respond to the social indicators expressed through the characters' speech as well as their appearance is obviously dependent on his or her awareness of such artfully used conventions and disruptions: as we have seen, some of these indicators, particularly but not only as they are used in speech, do not survive the transition into French. Even a relatively random selection of novels, such as this one, has revealed that although there may be a tendency for more recent translations to be closer to the original text, there remain inevitable difficulties resulting from the non-existence of equivalents in the target culture or language. What also emerges, however, is that Christie does create nuanced characters and interrelationships, despite her reputation as an author of clue-puzzle detective fiction working with stock characters which merit careful reading—and translation.

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