

When “To Cook Dog” Becomes “Ragoût de Chien” – Reclaiming the Language of Recipes in the French Translation of Jonathan Grimwood’s *The Last Banquet*

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Abstract

The translation of cooking recipes is always a challenge irrespective of the source and target language. However, this becomes even more challenging when the source text is set against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, Versailles, and the French Revolution. Jonathan Grimwood’s *The Last Banquet* proves to be an epic story of one man’s quest to know the world through its many and marvelous flavors. So, although the source language is English, the setting is French and since the book is replete with all sorts of sometimes mouthwatering, sometimes macabre dishes (“Three Snake Bouillabaisse” or “Pickled Wolf’s Heart”), the French translator is faced with the difficult challenge of French food that has to be translated from English. The present article is, consequently, going to look into the translation of this book into French, and argue that the French translator opted for a re-domestication or perhaps a reclaiming of food terminology. The translator’s choice here is to reclaim the French food culture, obviously “superior” to the Anglo-Saxon one, by enriching and re-appropriating the food-related language of the English source text. To show that this is strictly the translator’s choice for French, the corpus will extend to the Spanish translation of the novel, which turns out to be more loyal to the source text.

Keywords: culture-specific items, cultural reappropriation, metaphor, overtranslation, reclaiming translation.

Introduction

In analysing Jonathan Grimwood’s *The Last Banquet* and its translations in French and Spanish, it is essential to examine the way in which recipes are formulated in these languages since the food, which is a central part of this picaresque book, is mostly present through recipes that the main character tries to cook. Since the novel is written by an English writer but set in France seemingly paying tribute to the picaresque tradition, it is going to be intriguing to look at how the French translation recaptures elements that are typical of French cuisine are rendered in the English source text. It is predicted that the French translator is not going to be invisible (Venuti 1995), at least as far as the food sections are concerned, given the rich French cuisine tradition we are all familiar with.

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Theoretical background

Before delving into the proper analysis of the corpus, let us briefly discuss a few theoretical elements that help better comprehend some of the concepts to be used in this investigation.

Following Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 197), a text type is a distinctive configuration of relational dominances obtaining between or among elements of (1) surface text; (2) the textual world; (3) stored knowledge patterns; and (4) a situation of occurrence.

Certain texts seem to be used repeatedly in certain situations with more or less the same function or functions. Consequently, such texts acquire conventional forms sometimes even rising to the status of social norms. Hence, the participants in the communication process are expected to observe these norms, otherwise, non-observance may be penalised. This is also the case of *The Last Banquet*, where the use of recipes is recurrent throughout the book.

Text-type conventions and norms play an important part both in text production, where authors have to comply with the conventions if they want to succeed in realising their communicative intentions, and text reception, where the receiver may infer the author's intentions from the conventional form of the text.

In the case of the selected corpus, which is made up of excerpts from the novel which are written in the form of culinary recipes, the translator is required to have some sort of familiarity with the language of recipes (Paradowski 2018: 54). This is in its turn a restricted form of practically oriented "technical" language used by a limited circle of specialists (Nordman 1996: 556), encompassing jargon, strictly formalised syntax, discourse conventions, and special mode of expression. Recipes distinguish themselves from other types of specialised genres by means of layout and a highly conventionalised macrostructure which is also interculturally stereotyped and easily recognisable (558). As such, recipes fall under Christiane Nord's umbrella of "instrumental translation", produced when the target text is supposed to "achieve the same range of functions as an original text" (1997: 50).

The second type of requisite knowledge is what is called 'encyclopaedic' knowledge and experience, especially in the domain of culture-specific items. This refers to phenomena characteristic of only one culture, or better known in the culture from which they stem (Hejwowski 2004: 128). In the case of recipes, embracing foodstuffs specific for particular cuisines, names of dishes traditional to a country, and terms describing cooking utensils, etc unknown in the target culture, among others. According to David Crystal, translators must "have a thorough understanding of the field of knowledge covered by the source text, and of any social, cultural, or emotional connotations that need to be specified in the target language if the intended effect is to be conveyed" (1987: 344).

All instructing texts, such as operating instructions, directions for use or, in the case of *The Last Banquet*, recipes, are characterised as stipulated above by a strictly formalised syntactic structure, illustrated in the table below:

Language	English	French	Spanish	Romanian
Syntactic structure	Imperative/ Simple Present Tense (instantaneous value for recipes)	Imperative	Traditional impersonal construction / now replaced by the infinitive	Impersonal reflexive voice
Example	"Melt the butter on medium heat"	"Plumez et videz les volatiles. "	"Se mondan y lavan las patatas" / "mondar y lavar las patatas"	„Se fierbe apa, se curăță legumele, etc..."

According to K.C. Riley and A.L. Paugh, similar to "age, gender, kinship, and caste, socioeconomic class operates as a feature of contrast to highlight the social categories around which unequal social structures are forged and marked by food. This notion is codified in the term *haute cuisine*, the form of cooking first associated with the upper classes of France and then spread to other corners of the globe" (2019: 95). A.B. Trubek (2000: 127) explains how French cuisine came to signify *haute-ness* (that is, the high or upper class) and serve as a model for what cuisine itself could be, specifically the transformation of natural stuff by trained artisans into exquisitely cultural stuff and commodities people would pay for.

Therefore, aside from the morpho-syntactic structures described above, one has to pay close attention to lexical items as well. It is quite intriguing to look at the strategies employed by the French and Spanish translators of *The Last Banquet*, especially since the French translator sometimes opts for overtranslation in the case of the recipes scattered throughout the book.

Corpus analysis

The corpus under analysis is made up of the source text, henceforth ST, Jonathan Grimwood's *The Last Banquet*, and two translations of this novel: one into French by Carole Delporte, *Le Dernier Banquet*, published by Hachette in 2013, Target Text 1, henceforth TT1; and a Spanish translation, by Maria Maestro, *El ultimo banquete*, published by Alevosía in 2014, Target Text 2, henceforth TT2.

For the analysis of the corpus, the ideas of Aixela (1996: 53-4) are considered, which suggest that each linguistic community has a set of habits, value judgments, and classification systems that may overlap in some cases but are distinct in others. This leads to variation that needs to be taken into account

by any translator. Additionally, cultural transference is something that plays an important part in translation. Acknowledging the differences between two or more linguistic communities leads to cultural asymmetry in Aixela's terms. This means that the discourses of the two or more linguistic communities will reflect these differences in translation which may sometimes lead to opacity or even unacceptability in the target cultural system.

To this end, let us examine the first excerpt from the corpus.

(1) ST: To cook mice

Drown first. Clubbing produces sharp fragments of bone. Gut, skin and clean in water. Wrap three or four together in wet clay and bake in a bonfire. Alternatively, halve along length, fry with sliced onions and season with salt, pepper and thyme. This also works for sparrows. *Tastes like chicken.* (Grimwood 2013a: 25)

TT1: Fricassée de souris

Noyez-les. Les frapper laisse de minuscules éclats d'os. Enlevez les entrailles, la peau, et lavez à l'eau claire. Puis enrobez-en deux ou trois d'une couche d'argile et cuire au feu de cheminée. Sinon, coupez-les en deux dans le sens de la longueur, faites-les frire avec des oignons émincés et ajoutez du sel, du poivre et du thym. Cela fonctionne aussi avec les moineaux. *Goût de poulet.* (Grimwood 2013b: 20)

TT2: Para cocinar ratones

Ahogarlos primero. El apaleamiento genera astillas afiladas de hueso. Destripar, despellejar y lavar en agua. Envolver tres o cuatro juntos en un paño húmedo y asar en una hoguera. En su defecto, partir por la mitad a lo largo, freír con cebolla troceada y condimentar con sal, pimienta y tomillo. Esto también vale para los gorriones. *Sabe a pollo.* (Grimwood 2014: 20)

In this excerpt, the author of the source text follows the already discussed structure of recipes in English. Grimwood uses the instantaneous simple present tense and the imperative. When looking at the French translation in TT1, it can be noticed from the very beginning that the title of the recipe resorts to overtranslation. Here, the French cuisine cultural background of the translator feels the need to overexplain. Therefore, unlike ST and TT2, TT1 resorts to something that could be called cultural reappropriation. It is as if the French translator does not consider that the author did justice to French cuisine by using such a straightforward title as "to cook mice", so she resorts to the name of the dish that can otherwise be guessed from the description of the cooking process in the recipe itself. Thus, the simplistic and apparently impoverished "to cook mice" becomes "Fricassée de souris" in the French version, or "mice stew" if back-translation is considered. He equally offers direct instructions in the English recipe of the "French" dish which are modulated and enriched in the French translation. Thus, the very direct, "Clubbing produces sharp fragments of bone." becomes "Les frapper laisse de

minuscules éclats d'os." Notice here the presence of the anaphoric pronoun "les" in subject position, the verb "club" which becomes "frapper" > "hit", which is more neutral than "club", and the adjective "sharp", replaced by "minuscules" > "tiny". The adjective in "sliced onions" becomes "émincés" which means in fact "thinly sliced", which means that the translator felt the need to explicitate since there are various ways in which onions are sliced in French cuisine. TT2, on the other hand, follows ST much closer and employs the infinitive as illustrated in the table above for rendering the impersonal style of the recipe. Unlike the French translator, the Spanish one does not feel the need to overtranslate or further explicitate the ST.

The second dish to be discussed is made of sparrow meat.

(2) ST: To cook sparrow

Gut, pluck, remove legs and clean carcass in water. Alternate layers of salt and cleaned sparrow in a jar. When needed, wash away salt and fry with a little olive oil. In a separate pan fry onions until clear and add diced tomatoes. Put sparrows on top of sauce and garnish dish with basil. *Tastes like chicken.* (Grimwood 2013a: 25)

TT1: Moineaux tomate-basilic

Plumez et videz les volatiles. Arrachez les pattes et nettoyez la carcasse à l'eau. Alternez couches de sel et moineaux dans un bocal. Le jour venu, ôtez le sel et faites-les frire dans un peu d'huile d'olive. Dans une autre poêle, faites blondir des oignons, puis ajoutez des dés de tomate. Plongez les moineaux dans la sauce et aromatisez au basilic. *Goût de poulet.* (Grimwood 2013b: 20)

TT2: Para cocinar gorrión

Destripar, desplumar, arrancar las patas y lavar el cadáver en agua. Alternar capas de sal y gorrión limpio en una jarra. Si es necesario quitar la sal lavándolo en agua y freír en un poco de aceite de oliva. En otra sartén sofreír la cebolla hasta que se quede transparente y añadir tomates troceados. Colocar los gorriones sobre la salsa y aderezar el plato con albahaca. *Sabe a pollo.* (Grimwood 2014: 20)

In this excerpt, a similar tendency is evident, with TT1 attempting to bridge the invisible cultural gap, as if the cultural knowledge of the English writer is not suitable enough to properly describe French cuisine, so "to cook sparrow", the title of this recipe, is rendered as "Moineaux tomate-basilic" > "sparrows in tomato and basil" (back-translation mine), which is again an instance of overtranslation and explicitation. TT2 opts for equivalence of the title of this recipe. The first instruction in the ST, "Gut, pluck, remove legs and clean carcass in water." is split into two separate syntactic structures in TT1 "Plumez et videz les volatiles. Arrachez les pattes et nettoyez la carcasse à l'eau." > "Pluck and empty the birds. Pull out the paws and clean the carcass in water." (back-translation mine) The simple instruction, "fry onions until clear" becomes "faites blondir des oignons" > "brown the onions" (back-translation

mine), the French translator becoming once again visible through the choice of a more specialised verb. Another more specific verb is used to translate “put” > “plongez” > “dip” (back-translation) TT2 opts in this case for “colocar” = “to place”, which is closer in meaning and register to the ST verb “put”.

The third recipe to be discussed is a dish made out of cat meat.

(3) ST: To cook cat

Gut animal, skin, remove head and tail, cut off paws and lower limb at joint, wash body cavity thoroughly. Carcass looks just like rabbit and can be roasted in similar way. Spit, brush with oil, season with tarragon. Cook until juices run clear when meat pierced with a knife. *Tastes like chicken*. (Grimwood 2013a: 26)

TT1: Chat à l'estragon

Videz et dépecez l'animal, ôtez la tête et la queue, coupez le bout des pattes et les membres inférieurs au niveau de l'articulation. Lavez à grande eau l'intérieur du corps. La carcasse ressemble à celle d'un lapin et peut être rôtie de la même manière. Embrochez la bête, enduisez-la d'huile et ajoutez de l'estragon. Laissez cuire jusqu'à ce qu'un jus clair s'écoule quand on perce la chair avec un couteau. *Goût de poulet*. (Grimwood 2013b: 21)

TT2: Para cocinar gato

Destripar al animal, despellejar, quitar cabeza y cola, cortar las zarpas y cuartos traseros por las articulaciones, lavar a conciencia el orificio corporal. La carcasa es exactamente igual que la del conejo y puede asarse de un modo similar. Espetar, untar con aceite, condimentar con estragón. Cocinar hasta que el jugo salga claro al pinchar la carne con un cuchillo. *Sabe a pollo*. (Grimwood 2014: 21)

Again, as was the case with the previous excerpts, the French translator resorts to explicitation/overtranslation of the recipe title “To cook cat” which becomes “Chat à l'estragon” which is in fact if back-translated, “cat with tarragon”. It is important to specify that the French translator does not make up these titles, but rather chooses them as a result of the description offered by the author in the instructions of the recipes. The tarragon is, in fact, mentioned in the cooking instructions. The first sentence in the recipe, which is nothing but a very direct instruction on how to prepare the meat, is again split into two separate syntactic structures “Videz et dépecez l'animal, ôtez la tête et la queue, coupez le bout des pattes et les membres inférieurs au niveau de l'articulation. Lavez à grande eau l'intérieur du corps.” The split into apparently two separate instructions somehow emphasizes on the importance of the thorough washing of the meat. The very straightforward verb “Spit” becomes “embrochez la bête” > “skewer the beast”, which is another instance of explicitation, TT2, using the equivalent verb “espeter” > “spit”.

The fourth recipe to be discussed refers to ways of cooking dog meat, followed by the main character's musings on how the different types of meat taste.

(4) **ST: To cook dog**

Gut, skin and joint. The thighs are too fatty to make good eating, the flanks can be trimmed for steak, the rest can be stewed or fried at a pinch. Boiling the meat before roasting or frying removes fat and helps lessen the distinctive flavour. Sauce heavily or season with chillies. *Tastes like sour mutton.*

The sad truth is that, apart from dog, one animal tastes much like another, and those that don't taste like chicken mostly taste like beef, with the rest tasting like mutton. The secret of variety for meat is in the spicing. Vegetables, fruits, herbs have far wider variations in taste than the creatures that pick, browse or gnaw upon them. Even the way we describe the taste of meats other than the obvious ones is wrong. We say cat tastes like chicken when, had we been weaned on kitten stew, we'd say chicken tastes like cat. (Grimwood 2013a: 25)

TT1: Ragoût de chien

Videz, dépecez et désarticulez l'animal. Les cuisses sont trop grasses pour être cuisinées, les flancs peuvent être découpés en steaks, le reste peut être cuit en ragoût, voire frit à la poêle. Faire bouillir la viande avant de la faire rôtir ou la frire dégraisse et adoucit la saveur caractéristique. Ajoutez une sauce forte ou pimentée. *Goût de mouton aigre.*

La triste vérité, c'est qu'en dehors du chien, tous les animaux ont pratiquement le même goût, et ceux qui ne ressemblent pas au poulet font presque tous penser à du bœuf, les autres, à du mouton. Le secret de la variété des viandes est l'épice. Les légumes, les fruits et les herbes aromatiques ont un éventail de saveurs bien plus large que les créatures qui les cueillent, les mâchent et les digèrent. Même notre description du goût des viandes est faussée. Nous pensons que le chat a la saveur du poulet alors que, si nous avions été nourris toute notre enfance au ragoût de chatons, nous aurions dit que le poulet avait le goût du chat. (Grimwood 2013b: 20)

TT2: Para cocinar perro

Limpiar, destripar y trocear. Los muslos son demasiado grasos para resultar saludables, la falda puede cortarse en filetes, el resto puede guisarse o freírse si es necesario. Hervir la carne antes de asar o freírla elimina la grasa y ayuda a suavizar su característico sabor. Salpimentar generosamente o acompañar con guindilla. *Sabe a cordero rancio.*

La triste realidad es que, salvo el perro, casi todos los animales saben igual, y los que no saben a pollo, saben en su mayoría a carne de vaca, y el resto a cordero. El secreto de la variedad en la carne está en las especias con que se adereza. La verdura, la fruta, las hierbas tienen muchas más variaciones de sabor que las criaturas que las picotean, desbrozan o rumian. Incluso el modo en que describimos el sabor de carnes distintas a las típicas es erróneo. Decimos que el gato sabe a pollo cuando, si nos hubiéramos acostumbrado al guiso de gato, diríamos que el pollo sabe a gato. (Grimwood 2014: 20)

As with the previous excerpts, it is the French translation that stands out. It seems to be a constant attempt on the part of the French translator to bridge the cultural gap by overtranslating the title of the recipe. Thus, "to cook dog" is rephrased as "Ragoût de chien" > "dog stew".

The following instruction in the recipe “Sauce heavily or season with chillies” is rendered in two very different ways in TT1, “Ajoutez une sauce forte ou pimentée” (= “Add a hot or spicy sauce”), and in TT2, “Salpimentar generosamente o acompañar con guindilla” (= “Season generously with salt and pepper or add chilli. ”) In this case, both the French and the Spanish translators are highly visible, their choices clearly coming from a place that wishes to bridge the cultural culinary gap between the source and target cultures.

In the excerpt that immediately follows the recipe, where the main character muses over the various tastes of the unusual types of meat in his recipes, the following sentence appears: “Vegetables, fruits, herbs have far wider *variations in taste*” > “Les légumes, les fruits et les herbes aromatiques ont un *éventail de saveurs* bien plus large” > “La verdura, la fruta, las hierbas tienen muchas más *variaciones de sabor*”. Interestingly, while TT2 opts for equivalence in the case of *variations in taste*, TT1 chooses a more metaphoric translation of *variations* by using the word *un éventail* (= a fan), which in most Romance languages recalls the image of a wide array of something.

Conclusions

In the current analysis of the French and Spanish translations of Jonathan Grimwood’s novel *The Last Banquet*, the various strategies adopted by the two translators were examined. It was argued that the French translator chose to re-domesticate, reclaim, or even re-appropriate food terminology. The translator’s choice in TT1 was to reclaim the French food culture. One can perceive in the French translator’s choices the concept of a “superior” French cuisine in comparison to the Anglo-Saxon one. This is achieved by enriching and re-appropriating the food-related language of the English source text. Conversely, analysis of the Spanish translation of the novel, showed that the Spanish translator is more loyal to the source text, resorting in most cases to equivalence.

In an attempt to supposedly bridge the cultural gap, the French translator goes as far as reclaiming French cuisine by overtranslating and explicating the titles of the recipes. This makes the French translator more visible although it cannot openly be argued that she is less loyal to the source text.

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