

## Translating involves art as well as craft, says Daniel Hahn

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It's the end of the summer, and Harry can't wait to get away from his unbearable cousin Dirk and the rest of the nasty Duffelings. Fortunately he'll soon be back at school with his friends Ron and Hermelien and the benign Professor Anderling, preparing for the annual Zwerkbal cup. So long as he's able to keep away from the sinister Professor Sneep.

Familiar? If you're a Flemish-speaking Belgian, that's what the Harry Potter stories look like to you. Of the 325 million Harry Potter books sold around the world, some 100 million copies don't contain a single line of JK Rowling's prose. They're mediated by the work of other writers who set the tone, create suspense and humour, and give the characters their distinctive voices and accents. The only thing these translators have no impact on whatsoever is the plot, which of course is Rowling's alone.

The moment Bloomsbury put out their next press release announcing that Rowling has delivered book seven and the publication date has been set, more than 60 translators across the world - from Europe to South America, Africa to Asia - will start sharpening their pencils. When that first published copy appears, their race will begin.

It's a race against publishers' deadlines, of course; in certain countries, where the quality of second-language English is very high, it's a race to get the book published in (say) Norwegian, or Danish, before your entire market decides not to bother waiting for the translation, and you find that you're trying to sell it to people who've already read the book in the original.

In some cases it's a race against unofficial translators, too; in China, where enforcement of international copyright law leaves something to be desired, IPR parasites churn out their quick and shoddy renegade versions more or less with impunity. These range from fan-produced translations published online, to brand-new books in the HP series sold on street corners, like the rather peculiar attempt at a book five that appeared while Rowling was in fact still hard at work in Edinburgh writing it (Rowling shares this distinction with Cervantes, who was understandably taken aback to find the second part of Don Quixote published unofficially before he'd had the chance to get round to writing it).

So - you're an official HP translator, and you've managed somehow to grapple with the odd title of book seven (a good version of Deathly Hallows, anyone?). And now Amazon has delivered your copy of the Most Anticipated Book Ever, and it's your job to render it into some other language to appease a hungry local audience somewhere. How do you start?

You start, probably, with the eternal problem faced by every translator - finding the balance between literal fidelity and the equivalence that makes for fidelity of reading experience. When Uncle Vernon hums "Tiptoe Through the Tulips", do you let him keep his Anglophone song and just translate the title? Harry's Spanish uncle hums "De puntillas entre los tulipanes". Or do you find a local equivalent, like Germany's Onkel Vernon, who goes for the rather more German folk hum, "Bi-Ba-Butzemann"?

Spanish readers will find most names and invented words unchanged ("¿Hagrid, qué es el quidditch?"), or translated literally. So the Spanish is faithful in one obvious sense - but while the names may be unchanged, does the name Quirrell really sound as nervous, stammering, querulous in Spanish? Does Hufflepuff sound as ineffectual, dumb and huggable as it does to English ears?

In Brazil, in contrast, translator Lia Wyler chose to maintain the spirit rather than the letter, softening many names into more Portuguese-sounding ones, thereby loading herself with the noble challenge of coining some 400 words of her own. Harry plays quadribol, and when he isn't at Hogwarts is in the world of trouxas (Muggles) with his trouxa cousin Duda. Minerva McGonagall keeps her name, but in keeping with Brazilian school habits is addressed familiarly by the pupils as Profa Minerva. The sorting hat spares Harry from "Sonserina", assigning him to "Grifinória" instead. (Though is translating the English Platform Nine and Three Quarters to the Portuguese for Platform Nine and a Half perhaps just a bit wilful?)

Harry Potter throws at his translators (or in some cases, teams of translators) a number of challenges that most books don't present. There are countless made-up words, for a start. What's the Turkish for "golden snitch", or the Hungarian for "Bludger", or the Welsh for "Quaffle", the Catalan for "Sickles and Knuts", or the Hindi for "Floo Powder"? And then there's the wordplay, the prophecies and rhymes (like those of the sorting hat - the sombrero seleccionador). There are also the spells and the anagrams. (Tom Marvolo Riddle may be an anagram of "I am Lord Voldemort"; but it's not an anagram of "Je suis Voldemort", so in France he's Tom Elvis Jedusor.)

Several translators have been taken to task by die-hard Potter fans who've disapproved of their choices. Other fans have found that when they scour their translations they turn up valuable plot clues. Book six has a note mysteriously signed with the initials "RAB", which many readers have speculated may refer to someone in the Black family, a relative of Sirius Black (most likely his younger brother Regulus); the Dutch translation gives the initials on the note as RAZ - and if you know that in Dutch Harry's godfather is called Sirius Zwarts, this change suggests some interesting intelligence.

Another reason the Potters are a more complicated translation prospect than most books is the contractual requirements imposed by the film company, Warner (for whom questions like the stability of the characters' names have some impact on their merchandising plans); there have been cases of translators objecting to Warner's terms, and finding themselves replaced between one book in the series and the next.

The job of any translator requires that they be simultaneously present and absent; altogether sympathetically embedded in the work and yet totally invisible. And for the most part that invisibility is well maintained. The reluctance of some translators to talk to me for this article may have had something to do with that ideal of invisibility. But maybe it's something to do, too, with the unusually heavy publicity demands that this job makes on them - unusual in their field, certainly. The fact is, in this invisible profession they are the anomalies, self-effacing yet also touched by celebrity. Whatever some may say, this is no ordinary translation job; and sometime very soon the whole circus will start all over again. Daniel Hahn's translations include *The Book of Chameleons*, by José Eduardo Agualusa (Arcadia), recently longlisted for the 2007 Independent foreign fiction prize.