

# Translating Harry Part I: The Language of Magic

By Steven Goldstein

*The range of translation issues involved in the publication of the Harry Potter series is vast; this article attempts only a broad survey of some of the more interesting and important topics. This first installment deals with several of the linguistic and cultural issues involved in the translations, and the choices translators faced. Part II, which will appear in the next issue of Translational, will cover some of the procedural and marketing aspects, as well as special challenges, that surround the works.*

The record, as far as we can tell, shows no instance of the now globally famous J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, ever having called one of her translators to offer that person the job of bringing the magical world of wizards and muggles to his or her native culture.

But that hasn't prevented some excited reactions from those translators who have gotten the nod, either through their local publishers, or through their own pluck in lobbying for one of the most prestigious—and challenging—jobs in translating today.

And how could it be otherwise: worldwide sales of the

Harry Potter books are estimated at over 250 million copies, with over 80 million sold in the U.S. alone. In 1998, worldwide marketing rights to the franchise were sold to Warner Brothers, enabling the schoolboy's story to enter the realm of true global phenomenon. What started with the British publisher Bloomsbury is now a transnational, corporate marketing enterprise that incorporates the inevitable films, T-shirts, games, and

myriad spinoffs. And the key players in all this are the literary translators who re-create the texts in other languages—over 60 at last count, including Ancient Greek—for page and screen.

## On being chosen

Translators of the Harry Potter books have reacted in different ways to their selection as the transformers of this magical world for the children, and adults, of their native culture. For Emily Huws, translating *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* into Welsh was a great honor but also a huge responsibility. "It is a classic book," she says, "and I feel that Welsh people have a

right to have it in our own language. I wanted the children to have the great books like Roald Dahl's *The Enormous Crocodile* to read in Welsh."

Beatrice Masini, who translated the three most recent Harry Potter books into Italian, also imagined the joy of children when

contemplating the re-creation of this new, magical world. "It was the fun of bringing over such a popular work for Italian kids and seeing a little of the reflected stardust raining down." Yuko Matsuoka, on the other hand, saw her selection to bring Pottermania to Japan as something more divine: "A wave of shock ran through my body and mind," she recalls, having read the entire first book in a single night—despite being a non-native speaker of English. "I said to myself: 'Here is something I have waited for. Here is something that must have waited for me! It is fate.'"

Not so in the case of the current Russian translator, Viktor Golyshev. After transla-

tions of the first four volumes into Russian had been widely criticized for inaccuracies, a lack of fantasy, and inserted moralizing, the publisher brought in Golyshev—the brilliant translator of William Faulkner, Thornton Wilder, and George Orwell—for the fifth book. As the doyen of a team of three Russian translators working on *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Golyshev expressed no appreciation at all for the work, proclaiming not the slightest interest whatsoever in children's literature. And yet, with the success of his team's translation, he is now probably better known for his association with Harry Potter than he is for the whole of his professional oeuvre, which spans several decades.

## Translating cultures

Along with the fame (or notoriety!) of being known as a Harry Potter translator, the series undeniably presents special challenges to the literary specialists among us. The most important of these challenges is undoubtedly a cultural one, as the environment of the book is decidedly English, from the very English-sounding

### Dumbledore in Norway

The name of the venerable Hogwarts headmaster is an archaic word for the golden bumblebee that combines English and French, "bumble d'or." As related by the Norwegian translator Torstein Bugge Hoverstad, the Norwegian word is *humle*, which "must obviously be part of any solution, but on its own it's too short to convey entirely the original, which is a tiny sort of word painting of the sound this pleasant insect makes. The Norwegian word for this sound is 'surr,' so could we call him 'Humlesurr'? The right number and sequence of sounds, so we're getting there ... but he's not the most straightforward person you could think of, so what about getting a little twist into the name as well? 'Snurr' in Norwegian sounds nearly the same as the bumblebee's 'surr,' but actually means something like turning rapidly—so we end up with *Humlesnurr*, conveying the original idea and the sound of the bumblebee, while adding a touch of nimbleness."

## Separated by a common language

Along with her American editor, J.K. Rowling decided that beyond Americanizing the spelling (flavour/fluor, recognise/recognize, etc.), words should be altered only where it was felt they would be incomprehensible, even in context, to an American reader. "I have had some criticism from other British writers about allowing any changes at all, but I feel the natural extension of that argument is to go and tell French and Danish children that we will not be translating Harry Potter, so they'd better go and learn English," Rowling says.

Thus dustbin becomes trashcan and a packet of crisps is turned into a bag of chips. Dumbledore is barking in Britain but off his rocker across the Atlantic. Most importantly, at the suggestion of the American editor, the title of the first book was altered from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, both to avoid what might be thought of as a reference to misleading subject matter, and to reflect Harry's magical powers. The choice of *Sorcerer's Stone* was Rowling's idea.

Privet Drive, where Harry lives with his non-magical relatives, to teachers calling students by their surnames to virtually everyone having tea and crumpets in the afternoon.

The stories follow a familiar theme in English children's books, that of adventures at boarding school, and many of the cultural nuances will be unfamiliar to readers in translation. Translators have several options, including de-Anglicizing the text, leaving names and concepts as they are (but including explanations of particularly difficult notions, such as Christmas crackers, Halloween, and Cornflakes—the latter having earned a footnote in the Chinese translation, to indicate that these are consumed immersed in milk for breakfast), or some combination of the two.

"I wanted to keep it very British and make the readers understand they are in Britain," says Jean-François Ménard, the French translator (who is also the translator of Roald Dahl). One way to do this was

to translate invented words and names in a sort of anglicized French: "Snape" became Rogue, "Slitherin" became Serpentard, and the British word "Bagman" became Verpay, from the acronym VRP, describing someone engaged in door-to-door sales.

For other translators, however, a certain mixture of elements made more sense. Gili Bar-Hillel changed an English sherbert lemon into an Israeli chocolate sweet. While Lena Fries-Gedin, the Swedish translator, transplanted the entire boarding school setting onto Swedish soil. "There have been other children's books in English with that setting. And the fact that it's still an unfamiliar environment to many Swedish children undoubtedly makes it more exciting, because it's strange and exotic."

## Language: meanings, dialects, puns, and names

With made-up words, magic spells, regional accents, unknown creatures, and descriptive names, the language of Harry Potter's world is fraught with challenges for translators. The mere manner of speaking, for example, of the various characters reveals much about them. Expressions and forms of speech are often regional, requiring corresponding equivalences, where possible, in other languages. The accent of Hagrid, a misguided and heavy-footed giant, is a case in point; it originates somewhere in northern England—so Ménard simply gave him a friendly and straightforward way of speaking in French.

Invented words, including the spells and incantations of Harry's magical world, pose special problems. The names of people, places, and things—"Knockturn Alley," "muggles," and "Ravenclaw," for example—invariably evoke powerful imagery and thus create immensely difficult problems for translators. Not all names are translated, but those that are require extreme creativity and sensitivity in an attempt to duplicate—or at a minimum, approximate—the associations of the native English.

According to Nieves Martin, the Spanish translator, it can take a month to translate

one of Rowling's invented words with the degree of humor and subtlety of association contained in the original. "We eventually translated 'skrewts' (magical creatures) as *escregutos*, which sounds a bit frightening and suggests excrement and sputum," he says. Lia Wyler, the Brazilian Portuguese translator, ended up coining over 400 words to re-create Harry's expansive and magical universe.

German translator Klaus Fritz often found it impossible to translate Rowling's puns; the magical street name "Diagon Alley" became *Winklegasse*, or "Corner Alley," losing the play on words. So Fritz took a broader view of the books to reproduce the same flow of jokes, sometimes inventing new gags to make up for the ones lost in translation.

## Through children's eyes

Although Harry Potter may be read on several levels, it is ultimately a world created for children, and for the most part the translators never lost sight of that. "I relied on my granddaughter, a wonderful child just Harry's age," says Lia Wyler. "I used to recount every chapter to her and on recounting them I found where to add and cut to give it just the right rhythm in Portuguese." So too did Emily Huws, who for the Welsh translation had help from a 15-year-old Potterphile "consultant," who gave her advice along the way.

Because in the end, as the translators realized, it is the language of magic that is what children truly understand. ◀

*Translators have several options for conveying cultural nuances.*

# Translating Harry Part II: The Business of Magic

By Steven Goldstein

Part I of this series, "The Language of Magic," appeared in the December 2004 *Translational* and addressed several of the more important cultural and language-related issues involved in the translations of the Harry Potter books. This installment covers various contractual, procedural, and otherwise special challenges that the translators faced.

As July celebrations go, it can't possibly hold a candle to the pomp and ceremony of, say, the national Independence Days of countries like Canada, France, or the United States.

But then, nobody's talking about those festivities the way they're buzzing about the upcoming birthday of Harry Potter, VI.

With *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*—the penultimate book in the tale of the magical young wizard—set to be published on July 16th, 2005, Potterphiles the world over are already kicking into overdrive. The rumor mills have started cranking. Chat rooms are overflowing. And after an unusually long period of slumber this time around, the sleeping giant that is Potter global merchandising has once again been awakened. Welcome to the next installment of Harry Potter, Superstar. And to the workings of the translators who are so integral to its production.

## Working for a living

Torstein Høverstad, the Norwegian translator of Harry Potter, is among the many who have described the experience of being a literary translator as that of attempting something inherently impossible, being badly paid, and

remaining virtually invisible—and that's if you're successful. Yet still, in our celebrity-addled world, it is hard to imagine that there's not at least a certain cachet that comes with being a Harry Potter translator, basking in the ever-widening glow of rock-star author J.K. Rowling's fame, fortune, and adulation. This cachet does, in fact, have some truth to it, but the reality is often far different from our perceptions.

In Part I of this series, we saw how the Potter translators had a certain freedom to decide for themselves on matters of linguistic integrity, most notably in whether or not to translate Rowling's marvelously whimsical and inventive names. Torstein

## *The translators must wait, like everyone, for the English publication*

Høverstad believed that everything in the original that could be translated *should* be translated. Many of the 60-odd other translators, however, opted for a much less aggressive posture in the matter, leaving many of the names in their original forms.

Much of this, although admittedly not all, has had to do with the entrance of Warner Brothers into the picture. In 1999, around the time of the publication of the third book in the series, the media conglomerate purchased the rights to the entire Harry Potter franchise, in effect buying creative control for how all subsequent items in the series—movies, toys, video games, and yes, foreign book translations—would be marketed. With this came the company's attempt—largely successful, it should be noted—to impose on the translators a contract that would oblige them to give up many of the translation rights that they had originally held.

In addition to restricting or even forbidding the translation of names—which would make it easier to conduct global marketing campaigns—the contract generally redefined the terms of agreement, including remuneration and deadlines. Those translators who had the most flexibility in negotiating these conditions with their individual publishing houses were those, like Høverstad, who had completed translations before Warner Brothers appeared on the scene. At the other end of the spectrum, however, the negotiations tended to be far harsher: in one notable instance, the Catalan translator of the first four novels, Laura Escorihuela, adamantly refused to give up her rights by signing the contract, and was thus barred from translating subsequent Harry Potter books.

And what do Harry Potter translators get paid for their efforts? It varies, of course: while royalties are rare anywhere and in some countries, like China, the rate can actually be below market, in general fees range from slightly above the standard market rate to even fairly generously above it in certain countries. Even in the latter instances, however, most of the translators will still say that they are paid like ... well, like translators.

## A need for speed

Much has been written about the often brutal deadlines imposed on the Potter translators. And much of it is true. As Warner Brothers is intent on preventing any leaks of the stories to the general public, the translators must wait, like everyone else, until publication of the original English version before being able to begin work.

Although a five-month period has not been unusual in some cases for the most recent, very long volumes, there is often pressure from Warner Brothers to have the translations completed much more quickly. Jean-François Ménard, the French translator, translated the 700-plus page fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, in just 63 days. Torstein Høverstad negotiated a bonus percentage with his publisher

if he was able to finish the same book in a similar two-month period. (He did.) And Hanna Lutzen and Victor Morozov each formulated plans to translate the even longer Book V, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, into Danish and Ukrainian, respectively, in the same eight-to-ten week timeframe.

Gili Bar-Hillel, the Hebrew translator, agrees that the pressure is intense but in her case believes that this actually contributes to the quality of her translations, for two reasons: first, she must by necessity be single-mindedly focused on the task, and second, everyone around her—including her family—is geared to helping her work as fast and as effectively as possible.

Even in the face of such pressures, the translators tend, on the whole, to work alone (although their work is of course checked by the publisher's professional editors and proofreaders). Lia Wyler refused to hire an assistant for the Brazilian Portuguese version, saying that she would in effect need a clone of herself, someone with an identical linguistic background, right down to her neighborhood and accent. "Language is collective," she says, "but vocabulary is extremely individual." Even when confronted with difficult linguistic problems, the translators often must rely on their own ingenuity and creativity (and dictionaries) to solve them. Contact with J.K. Rowling is not an option, as the author has generally not made herself accessible to the translators, nor has her agent been especially forthcoming on problematic areas of the translations.

## Of pirates and proofreaders

Publishers demand speed for another reason: the existence of "pirate," or unofficial, translations, that are often collaborations of Potterphiles on the Internet, and which can be published months ahead of the sanctioned version. In China, several Harry Potter fans started to translate *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* two months before the publisher's paper edition was due to appear, updating it on the Internet at a rate of 10,000 Chinese words a day. Although these counterfeit translations are

for obvious reasons of a generally inferior quality, they demonstrate the zeal of Potter fans to get their hands on the stories as quickly as possible.

A somewhat more satisfying, but no less vexing, issue is that of the hordes of Potterphiles who care so much about the books that they read every word as if they were professional proofreaders or editors. Within a week of the Israeli publication of Book V, Gili Bar-Hillel already had a list of four mistakes that readers had found, including a missing period, a missing letter, and two minor spelling mistakes (all of which were corrected in subsequent printings). This was nothing, however, compared to the ten-year-old bilingual Brazilian child who challenged—quite publicly and aggressively—Lia Wyler's Portuguese translation of the difficult word "muggle"!

## A tale in motion

Beyond the contracts, the money, and the deadlines, the Harry Potter series presents one final, and unusual, challenge: it is an unfinished story; the fact is, some things are simply unknowable until J.K. Rowling puts the final period at the end of the final sentence of the seventh book. None of the translators was aware there would be a second book until each had completed work on the first. Lia Wyler acknowledges that this fact would certainly have influenced her reinvention of certain proper names. The Spanish translators did, in fact, go so far as to make a mid-course correction: they had translated "Professor Sinistra" as (a masculine) Profesor Sinistra, and had to make a quick gender change to Profesora Sinistra when they found her dancing with Mad-Eye Moody in Book IV.

Retranslations are commonplace with great literature. Is it possible that once the series is finished, and perhaps after a generation has passed, other translators, who might be able to work at leisure, would want to tackle the saga anew, in the quest of new versions that might reach a fuller potential? Maybe. But for now, our current translators have only one thing on their minds. A birthday, this summer. ♠

## Readers become proofers and editors

## Test Yourself

How would you translate the famous "Riddle of the Sphinx," from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*? Give it a try, and then check your translation against that of the published versions, at <http://www.iti.org.uk/indexMain.html>. If you don't have Internet access, drop a line to the editor for a copy of the answers. (Source: TransLittérature, ITI Bulletin, No. 24, Winter 2002, Paris, with kind permission.)

### The Riddle of the Sphinx

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,  
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.  
Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,  
The middle of middle and end of the end?  
And finally give me the sound often heard  
During the search for a hard-to-find word.  
Now string them together, and answer me this,  
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

## References

For more information on Harry Potter translators, see the following resources, which in part informed this series:

- ▶ "The Translatability of Harry Potter," by Miranda Moore, in the Wikipedia Internet Encyclopedia
- ▶ "Harry Goes to Paris," *Translatio (FIT)*, Vol. 4, 2003
- ▶ "Harry Potter for Children, Teenagers and Adults," by Lia Wyler, *Meta* XLVIII, 1-2, 2003

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