

Best-Sellers in Portugal: the Case of Bridget Jones¹

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Portugal is still a great consumer of foreign fiction. This is immediately evident to anyone who frequents bookshops, or even supermarkets, where names like J.K. Rowling, Jostein Gaarder, Joanne Harris etc are attractively packaged and promoted alongside the face creams, breakfast cereals and cat food. The extent of the phenomenon has been studied by Alexandra Rosa (2002), whose findings, reproduced in Fig. 1 below, clearly show the Portuguese public's preference for translated fiction as opposed to works produced by the home culture. Does this reflect Portugal's continuing lack of self-esteem in relation to more central powers? Or is it yet another symptom of global consumerism, part of the invasion of all commercial sectors that has taken place in recent years?

| <i>Bookshop</i> | <i>No. Titles in Best-Seller List</i> | <i>Years</i> | <i>Translated Titles</i> | <i>Portuguese Titles</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| FNAC | 24 | 2001 | 67% | 33% |
| FNAC | 95 | 2001 | 55% | 43% |
| Barata | 9 | 2001 | 78% | 22% |
| Bertrand | 24 | 2001 | 54% | 46% |

Fig. 1. Percentages of translated titles on Portuguese Bestseller Lists in 2001 (Rosa, 2002)

¹ Published in *Deste Lado do Espelho: Estudos de Tradução em Portugal*. A. Lopes & M.C. Correia de Oliveira (Eds), Catholic University Press: Lisbon, 2002.

One of the greatest bestsellers of 2001 was *O Diário de Bridget Jones*, translated by Manuela Vaz from Helen Fielding's English original and first published by Editorial Presença in 1998. It is a work with an unusually high degree of cultural specificity. As a satire of a particular society at a particular moment in time, its humour seems to depend largely upon the reader's ability to respond to recognisable social stereotypes, most of which are determinedly local and therefore untranslatable without extensive glossing. Nevertheless, the book was a great success everywhere, even before the film came out. My purpose here is to consider what attracts foreigners (and the Portuguese in particular) to a novel like this, and to reflect a little upon the implications for the globalisation of fiction in contemporary society.

Bridget Jones's Diary started out life as a weekly newspaper column. It was so popular that it was published as a book in 1996, becoming a bestseller in the UK and abroad, followed in 2001 by the film, which was also successful worldwide. Now the sequel is doing the rounds of the bookshops and supermarkets all over the world.

The work is a novel in the form of a diary, covering a year in the life of a single woman in her 30s, with each chapter corresponding to a month, subdivided into day-by-day diary entries. A postmodern dimension is added by the fact that it is also a re-write of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the male hero even bearing the same name as Austen's creation.²

The satire is based upon caricatures of recognisable types in modern British society, who are identified through markers such as discourse style, clothes and other accoutrements. There is a great reliance on brand names, which function almost

² This was underscored in the film by the use of the same actor for the role as played Darcy in the television film of *Pride and Prejudice*.

metonymically as indicators of certain lifestyles; indeed, much of the humour depends upon the reader's ability to interpret these social markers correctly, to understand the semiotic significance of using a particular style of dress, car, hairstyle, for example. This makes it very context-bound and would, one imagines, lead to difficulties as regards transfer across cultural boundaries. Thus, one of my objectives is to examine just how much humour actually gets transferred, and to try to identify the translator's policy as regards the culturally specific elements of the text.

The first extract I would like to examine occurs shortly after Bridget has started her new job with a television company. We have already met her boss Richard Finch and his P.A., Patchouli, and it would seem that the purpose of the 15th September diary entry is exclusively to develop these characters further, giving more opportunities for satire. But the question is, are we able to 'read' the characters in the Portuguese translation? Do the social markers actually mean anything at all?

Uh! Conferência detestável com chefe mandão Richard Finch a dizer: «Pronto. Casas de banho 'uma libra por mija' do Harrods. Estou a pensar Casas de Banho Fantasia. Estou a pensar estúdio: Frank Skinner e Sir Richard Rogers em assentos de pêlo, apoios de braços com ecrãs de televisão, papel higiénico de folha dupla. Para a Bridget, as medidas drásticas com os Jovens no Desemprego. Estou a pensar Norte. Estou a pensar Jovens no Desemprego, a andarem por aí sem fazer nenhum, a sobreviverem a custo.»

«Mas...mas...», tartamudeei.

«Patchouli!» gritou ele, acordando os cães que estavam debaixo da secretária e que começaram a pular e a ladrar.

«Quié?», berrou a Patchouli, no meio do barulho. Estava com um vestido de croché abaixo do joelho, um chapéu de palha folgado e por cima uma blusa pespontada de nylon brilhante, cor-de-laranja. Comose as coisas que eu usava na adolescência fossem um anedota hilariante.

«Onde é que é o OB dos Jovens no Desemprego?»

«Liverpool.»

«Liverpool. Pronto, Bridget. Equipa de OB à porta do Boots, no centro comercial, ao vivo às cinco e meia. Arranjem-me seis Jovens no Desemprego.»

Mais tarde, quando eu ia a sair para apanhar o comboio, a Patchouli berrou, como se nada fosse, «Ah! Pois, Bridget, não é Liverpool, é, tipo, Manchester, certo?». (pp.201-202)

Clearly Richard and Patchouli come across as eccentric characters in this translation. Both dress and speak in a non-standard way, and the balance of power between them does not reflect the classic boss-secretary dynamic. But beyond that, it would seem to me that they are unreadable as recognisable social types. A Portuguese reader is unlikely to be able to relate them to any familiar figures in the home culture, nor to any of the stereotypes of the English that he will have received from other channels.

When we look at the original English version, details of the characters' identities suddenly come into focus and take on a new semiotic significance. Patchouli, we are told 'was wearing a crocheted midi-dress with a floppy straw hat and an orange Bri-nylon saddle-stitched blouse on top' (p.214), which suddenly reveals her as a kind of New Age hippy. The Portuguese translation has not managed to transfer the '60s connotations of 'midi-dress', nor the more modern values accruing to 'Bri-Nylon', so we are unable to make the connection analogically to her name, which was of course the hippy perfume. Similarly, her distinctive style of speech ("“Oh, yeah, like, Bridget, it's not Liverpool, it's, like, Manchester, right?”") recognisable to all British as a Cockney accent has been lost; the characteristic repetition of 'like' has been literally translated as 'tipo', which has no significance whatsoever.

In addition, only a native would be able to fill in the cultural gaps necessary to surmise that the type of character being satirised here is a self-created being; a young woman who has actively constructed her own identity by adopting a resonant name, idiosyncratic style of dress, and 'street-cred' social accent. According to Anthony Giddens, this 'reflexive project of the self' is one of the defining characteristics of High Modernity:

We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves. It would not be true to say that the self is regarded as entirely empty of content, for there are psychological processes of self-formation, and psychological needs, which

provide parameters for the reorganisation of the self. Otherwise, what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which she or he engages. (Giddens, 2002: p.75)

This, he claims, contrasts markedly with more traditional societies, in which 'lineage, gender, social status and other attributes to identity are all relatively fixed'. Hence, a character such as Patchouli is likely to be misinterpreted by readers from a society where regional accent denotes lack of education and unconventional clothes signify limited financial means.

The same may be said of Richard, who wears a green woollen boiler suit to work and keeps two large dogs in his office. In this extract, the most prominent marker of his identity is his style of speech, particularly the reiteration of the phrase 'I'm thinking...' Once again, a certain amount of cultural knowledge is necessary to decode this feature. It gains its significance intertextually through echoing a discourse feature of another cultural stereotype, the American fat cat film director, who sits back on his swivel chair with his cigar between his fingers, getting inspiration from the sky. Only through association with its prototype are we able to read Richard's catch phrase as signifying pretentiousness and desire for power.

The Portuguese translation consistently disregards the cultural semiotics at play in this work. Distinctive syntactical features of characters' discourse are translated literally, even though they are thus rendered meaningless in the target culture, and culturally-specific lexis is either transferred without any kind of gloss (eg. Frank Skinner, Sir Richard Rogers, the North etc), or replaced by a functional equivalent (eg. 'Dole Youth Clampdown', clearly a newspaper headline, which becomes 'as medidas drásticas com os Jovens no Desemprego'). Brand names, which, after so many years of advertising, now function as metonyms for particular lifestyles, are also treated functionally (Bri-Nylon becomes 'nylon brilhante', Fantasy Toilets 'Casas de Banho

Fantasia'). Consequently, the semiotic significance of the references, and thus much of the humour is lost.

It is not easy to come up with any other alternatives as regards translation strategy. A version that laboriously explained the cultural references through glosses or footnotes would of course lose panache, while total domestication through the substitution of equivalents from the target culture would necessarily have to set up an entirely new network of semiotic relations, which would result in a completely different work. The question therefore is not how the translator could have dealt with the text differently, but rather, why it is being translated in the first place. If the aspects that entertained the British public are so irrelevant to foreign readers, then what other quality does the book have that is attracting them? Could it be that British and foreign readers are in fact laughing at completely different things? And if so, is this part of the authorial design, or is it an unexpected consequence of some other stage in the exportation process?

In order to explore this question further, I would like to consider one of the novel's caricatures that gains special interest in a Portuguese context, namely the character of Julio. This character is based upon a stereotype that has had a firm place in the English consciousness since the 1970s, when the Mediterranean package holiday became a familiar feature of middle- and lower-class life; this is the Latin Lover, reputedly endowed with a charm, passion and sexual prowess unbeknown to the English, and with a passionate disregard of social constraints when his emotional integrity is under threat. Although the popular construct is a generalised Mediterranean figure, in *Bridget Jones*, the character is identified as Portuguese. This makes it interesting to examine what happens to those markers of Otherness when the character is translated into a culture in which he is not exotic and foreign at all.

Julio enters the story after Bridget's mother has been on holiday to Albufeira with two female friends. When she comes back, she is acting strangely, dressing better, using perfume, refusing to cook and clean for her husband, and Bridget is rightly suspicious. Her suspicions are confirmed when she bumps into the character in a shop.

As I went to the till to pay, I was thinking it all over and trying, as a feminist, to see Mum's point of view. Then my eye was caught by a tall, distinguished-looking man with grey hair, a European-style leather jacket and one of those gentleman's handbag things. He was looking into the café, tapping his watch and raising his eyebrows. I wheeled round and caught my mother mouthing, "Won't be a mo," and nodding towards me apologetically. (p.54)

From the outset, Julio is marked out as foreign by his personal appearance. We are explicitly told that his leather jacket is of a style favoured by continental Europeans, but what marks him most of all is his bag. As there is no term for this unfamiliar accoutrement in English, we find Bridget flailing about trying to find words to describe it. The resulting juxtaposition of 'gentleman' with the feminine 'handbag' offers a subtle jibe at Julio's masculinity that is completely lost upon translation (it is blandly reduced to 'uma daquelas bolsas de homem').

In each of his subsequent appearances, Julio is always presented as well-groomed, coiffed and perfumed, and we gain the impression that Bridget is amused, if also a little attracted, by him. Predictably, however, the male response is less flattering. Bridget's father calls him a 'greasy beperfumed bouffant wop' (p220), a comically xenophobic term which homes in on those features that distinguish the Latin stereotype from English men. Considering that languages usually do not have a great repertoire of xenophobic terms to apply to their own culture, the Portuguese translation manages admirably at this point to create the double-mirror effect of the local seen through the eyes of the Other, with 'aquele latinóide farfalhudo, perfumado e besuntado' (p206).

It is at the end of the book that the darker side of the Latin Lover construct emerges, in an episode that confronts the emotionally-uninhibited nature of the

character with the more socially-constrained habits of the English. It is Christmas Day, and the family are preparing for Christmas Dinner with their friends.

‘Don’t patronize me, Pam,’ said Una, smiling dangerously. They circled each other like fighters. This happens every year with the gravy. Mercifully there was a distraction: a great crash and scream as a figure burst through the French window. Julio.

Everyone froze, and Una let out a scream.

He was unshaven and clutching a bottle of sherry. He stumbled over to Dad and drew himself up to his full height.

‘You sleep with my woman.’

‘Ah,’ replied Dad. ‘Merry Christmas, er...Can I get you a sherry – ah, got one already. Jolly good. Mince pie?’

‘You sleep,’ said Julio dangerously, ‘with my woman.’

‘Oh, he’s so Latin, hahaha,’ said Mum coquettishly while everyone else stared in horror. Every time I’ve met Julio he has been clean and coiffed beyond all sense and carrying a gentleman’s handbag. Now he was wild, drunk, unkempt and, frankly, just the type I fall for. No wonder Mum seemed more aroused than embarrassed.

‘Julio, you naughty person,’ she cooed. Oh God. She was still in love with him.

‘You sleep,’ said Julio, ‘with him.’ He spat on the Chinese carpet and bounded upstairs, pursued by Mum, who trilled back at us, ‘Could you carve, Daddy, please, and get everyone sitting down?’

Nobody moved. (pp.302-303)

In this passage, the comedy is achieved by contrasting the uninhibited emotional display of the foreigner, who is so overwhelmed by passion that he has lost control of his physical appearance and manners, with the socially constrained behaviour of the English. The sherry bottle clutched in Julio’s hand becomes a potent symbol of this confrontation, since in England, sherry is an aperitif to be sipped from crystal glasses on special occasions, and as such connotes politeness and restraint. This scene thus represents an identity-affirming culture clash, in which the foreigner is caricatured as uncouth and uncivilised, yet can be sufficiently contained to render be attractive and comical at the same time.

. Julio’s menacing growl of ‘You sleep with my woman’ condenses much of this difference. This short phrase reveals not only that he does not command English very well (note the verb in its root form with no kind of marking of tense or aspect), thus

assimilating him to a 'Me-Tarzan-You-Jane' figure, but also that his attitude towards relationships is very different from the British one. 'My woman' sounds intensely primitive in English. Given the range of terms available to denote social roles (wife, girlfriend, partner, fiancée etc), this phrase seems to imply the taking possession of a woman's essence in a way that goes beyond mere social contract. Thus, we are led to feel that under his smooth surface, there is something very raw and primary about Julio. He becomes emblematic of the wild, untameable Other in all its traditional ambivalence.

The Portuguese translation of Julio's utterance clearly aimed to recreate the effect of foreignness, but predictably was unable to deal with the more ominous effects of 'my woman', which of course in Portuguese is indistinguishable from 'my wife' («Você dormir», disse o Júlio ameaçadoramente, «com mulher minha» p.278).³ Yet, presumably, this does not detract from the comedy for Portuguese readers. Ultimately, the English are caricatured as much as Julio is, and it is conceivable that the foreign readership responds inversely to the situation by finding most of the humour in the excessive restraint and incompetence of the English.

Indeed, it has been suggested that *The Diary of Bridget Jones*, like the films *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill* written by Helen Fielding's boyfriend Richard Curtis, is making a deliberate bid for global success by repackaging the domestic image for foreign consumption:

The real significance of the Oxford School's success is that it has introduced a new model of Englishness into the global entertainment marketplace. We have seen – in *Chariots of Fire* – Englishness sold as heroism and class warfare. We have also seen – in *Braveheart* and any number of any other recent Hollywood films – the English as general-purpose cads. But Hugh Grant and Bridget Jones bring something quite different to the party...The first answer is they bring a distinct and nice but essentially bumbling microculture. (London Times)

³ One is led to speculate about the ideological reasons why so many Latin languages have a word for 'husband' as a social role, but no equivalent for 'wife'.

The anonymous author of this article identifies a cultivated incompetence as one of the characteristics of the new Englishness, 'consolingly framed' by a solidly localised environment. 'Apart from simply flattering Americans, the obvious appeal of all this is the implicit message that, in a global world, the local endures'.

If this is the case, then it ultimately matters very little if most of the details of the English sub-text are lost in translation, for the foreign and domestic readers are ultimately laughing at different things. The foreign public does not need or want to understand all the complexities of the English cultural code, just as the British of the Raj were not interested in the cultural semiotics of their Indian subjects. A 'quaintly opaque' translation adds local colour and reaffirms difference,⁴ serving the commercial purpose of reminding foreigners what a quirky, eccentric people the British are.

Above all, this reflects a new balance of power on the world stage. The British packaged in this way are no longer in a position to impose norms and set standards; rather they are being allocated a distinctly marginal role in relation to more central (American? Continental European?) cultures. No doubt the Portuguese, after centuries of commercial domination by the British, will feel a certain glee in seeing the master caricatured in this way. And, like many other foreign publics, they will no doubt be enjoying the luxury of no longer needing to know what our intricate insular cultural semiotic system really means.

⁴ This adds a new dimension to Lawrence Venuti's notions of the 'domestication' and 'foreignization' in translation (1995). His definitions presuppose Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony, and so his advocacy of the foreignizing translation, designed to allow the subaltern a voice, has a somewhat patronizing ring. Nowhere does he entertain the possibility that an English work might be subjected to a foreignizing translation for the reasons given above.

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