

# Revisiting Cultural Aspects of Translation: The Case of “Running in the Family” and “Funny Boy” in French

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**Summary.** In this study, we propose to examine some of the challenges and opportunities afforded to the translators by the culturally rich “Running in the Family” (1982) by Michael Ondaatje and “Funny Boy” (1994) by Shyam Selvadurai, through a comparison of the initial texts – which are laden with Sri Lankan cultural content – and their French translations: “Un air de famille” (1991) by Marie-Odile Fortier-Masek and, respectively, “Drôle de garçon” (2000) by Frédéric Limare and Susan Fox-Limare (2000). After a brief discussion of audience design and communication in translation, we focus on the interplay of implicitation and explicitation, drawing on examples from the texts, in particular from the culinary domain. We consider the translators’ options in light of the imperative to design for a new readership and suggest that relevance – which is a matter of degree – is pursued through a mix of choices of unequal suitability.

**Keywords:** culture, translation, Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai.

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## Introduction

The translation of culture has made the object of constant scrutiny within Translation Studies over the last decades, to the extent that, were it not for the obvious magnitude of the task of unravelling such issues and the inexhaustible supply of texts and pairs of languages, it would be tempting to assume no stone has been left unturned by now. Nevertheless, we believe precious gems are to be found in unexpected places, in particular, those where one does not tread often. That is why, in our contribution, we revisit the question of cultural transfer, taking as a case in point the French translations of novels by two contemporary authors of Sri Lankan origin, Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai.

For the purpose of this study, we envisage culture as the set of beliefs, customs, social forms, values, attitudes and goals, shared – not one hundred percent, but to a substantial degree – by a group of people in a given place or time. We naturally take the view that culture is not static but that it changes, evolves, and is enriched in many ways; it can also sustain losses or undergo transformations which, beyond a certain level, endanger its continuity – at least in a form in which that culture is still recognisable as a continuation of its former self. Between a wish to disparage, ignore, reject, or even destroy one’s own heritage – or that of other groups – and the self-congratulatory stance of those who defend at all cost a perfectible order which they think should be inalterable and try to forcefully make it so, there is a fine line to walk, and we suggest ‘walking’ is the keyword here. We shall return to it shortly.

Safeguarding, continuing, nurturing, transmitting, are some of the many tasks translation accomplishes, as Walter Benjamin pointed out through his use of the word *Fortleben* [continued life]. In fact, translation and cultural sustainability are eminently linked to each other. As the integrated part of our accumulated knowledge, beliefs, and customs, the preservation of culture depends on our capacity and willingness to learn from our predecessors and at the same time transmit to future generations while also sharing with people from other backgrounds, who may show interest in what we created. Contrary to what may be conjectured, to conserve (rather than belittle or tear down) entails renewing and innovating. It is, as philosopher Roger Scruton is fond of repeating, precisely in order to preserve that one must reform, since cultural heritage, in which literature plays such an important part, is not a stack of items on display behind glass in museums (although that is sometimes a use it can be put to), but part of people’s lives, the very thing that enables them to make sense of a complex world, building on the achievements of those who came before them.

The link between culture and agriculture deserves highlighting. Literature, music, architecture, painting: all of these cultivate the mind and the soul, and translation has a role to play – including where one may not expect this should be the case (e.g., opera translation, or the translation of music in general). As Meylaerts pointed out, “*translation contributes to creating culture*” (2013: 519, our emphasis). Sustainable agriculture, sustainable culture, require methods of growing, harvesting, and of using resources in such a way that they are not permanently damaged or depleted. This involves labour – ideally labour of love, but

hard labour nonetheless, as well as an obligation to make choices and bear responsibility for them (one meaning of ‘sustain’ is precisely to hold or bear up from below).

Translation is a paradigmatic example of conservation through innovation, and the creativity and at the same time fidelity requirements upon translators can never be overstated. Indeed, one may be forgiven for thinking that we expect too much of translators, who are engaged in a vital but manifestly impossible endeavour. To use a popular metaphor, translators build bridges – strong ones, or mere fragile overpasses – to take people to the other bank; at times, as Maeve Olohan points out in the preface to her 2000 volume *Intercultural Faultlines*, they have to drill tunnels. Some venture across land, sea or air in makeshift devices and sometimes succeed, if only for a while. There are translators who are cautious, while others are the transgressors in the title of *Crosscultural Transgressions* (2002). Be that as it may, as Hermans points out elsewhere, “[t]ranslation is irreducible, it always leaves loose ends, is always hybrid, plural and different” ([1996] 2010: 210). In other words, not a job for the faint-hearted – especially if one realises what is at stake.

In what follows, we propose to examine some of the challenges and opportunities presented by the culturally rich *Running in the Family* (1982) by Ondaatje and *Funny Boy* (1994) by Selvadurai, through a comparison of the source texts and their French translations, *Un air de famille* (1991) by Marie-Odile Fortier-Masek and, respectively, *Drôle de garçon* (2000) by Frédéric Limare and Susan Fox-Limare. After a short discussion of audience design in translation-mediated communication, we focus on the interplay of implicitation and explicitation, drawing on examples from the texts.

## 1. Communicating with one’s audience

The longstanding and venerable association between translation and travel or transportation barely needs highlighting. Translation would thus be a vehicle of sorts, but can there – should there – be a guarantee that it is a safe one, a comfortable one, or that it will convey its occupants to the destination? Which destination? The road may become bumpy, the driver could be absent-minded, and the passengers have to get off at times and help repair a wheel, read the map, or walk to the nearest hotel if the car breaks down completely. But even walking involves a leap of faith: after all, what is it if not a series of controlled falls? One accepts to lose one’s balance, temporarily, expecting to recover it again and keep advancing that way. With the translator as a road companion and guide.

Since movement appears to be at the core of translation (and travel, and transportation), Schleiermacher’s metaphor (the translator must leave the author in peace as much as possible and move the reader towards the author, or the reverse) seems to make a lot of sense. But in a 2015 study of four English translations of the 1813 lecture, Malmkjær draws attention to the fragility of the metaphor, arguing that it is the least interesting aspect of the Academy speech, albeit the easiest to remember. In particular, she discusses the noun *Wege* [roads, paths, ways] used by Schleiermacher and raises the question of why, according to the metaphor, only one of the travellers – author or reader, but not both – can be moved, making a meeting in or near the middle impossible. The mid-point, Malmkjær

reveals, appears to be the very person of the translator, somehow transformed from a mover into a position (2015: 187); without the translator, author and reader would not meet at all (except, of course, if the reader learns the author’s language).

Schleiermacher recognised that translation takes place

[...] not only between languages, but within them; between closely related languages, peoples and cultures, and between languages, peoples and cultures that differ greatly; between temporally distant languages, peoples and cultures as well as between contemporary languages, peoples and cultures; and there is translation even within one person’s idiolect, when, after a time, a person needs to translate his or her words, to take possession of them once more [...]. (Malmkjær 2015: 189).

This diversity is eminently mirrored in the (multilingual) texts which make the object of our study, as we explain in Section 2. We are reminded of Steiner’s musings in his autobiography, in which he expresses his fascination for “diversities so numerous that no labour of classification and enumeration could exhaust them”, and his belief in the impossibility of repetition, of sameness. “Each leaf”, he writes in *Errata: An Examined Life*, “differed from any other on each differing tree [...]. Each blade of grass, each pebble on the lake-shore was, eternally, ‘just so’” (Steiner 1997: 3).

The cognitive challenge is evident: one has to make sense of nothing less than sheer immensity. A useful visual metaphor to understand what is involved in translating may be that of tapestry. Reflecting on the Latin etymology of the word ‘text’ – from *textus*, which means ‘cloth’ or ‘tissue’ –, Cummins and Şerban, who discuss audiovisual translation, describe the film as a

tapestry where dominant motifs may stand out from a perhaps receding background; where different colours take prominence in different areas of the cloth, appear and disappear, combine and re-combine, and stand alone for a time; where strands of varying thickness or brilliance or texture are foregrounded and then cede that place to others. (Cummins, Şerban 2018: 128).

There is a lot of colour and texture to admire, unravel and weave, in the literary translations which occupy us here, which – as is the case with all translations – are situated in space and time (with everything this entails in terms of historical, cultural, social, political contexts, and other types of contexts) and are made for a readership.

As Cummins and Şerban point out, it is impossible for a viewer (or translator, or reader) to simultaneously focus on every aspect of a *textus*: “[f]rom the amorphous mass of stimuli, some are focused on and, through the attention given them, are differentiated, made explicit; while others, receiving no focused attention, are ignored and fade into an undifferentiated background.” (2018: 125–126). To put it differently, some aspects appear as more relevant than others, some of which become virtually invisible (like the translator’s intervention itself); this does not mean, however, that they can never be brought to the

fore. The question is: which clues did the tapestry weaver leave, who is looking, and in which circumstances.

In their *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Sperber and Wilson – who set out to demonstrate that human cognition is goal-oriented and that communicating means claiming the attention of another person and hence implying that what is being communicated is relevant – explain that,

[...] in aiming at relevance, the speaker must make some assumptions about the hearer's cognitive abilities and contextual resources, which will necessarily be reflected in the way she communicates, and in particular in what she chooses to make *explicit* and what she chooses to leave *implicit*. (Sperber, Wilson 1986: 217, our emphasis).

Relevance theory, which takes a view of communication as an ostensive-inferential process (meaning that hearers infer meaning from the evidence of their intentions that speakers provide), was applied to translation most notably by Gutt (2000). It makes the object of scrutiny in discourse analytical, pragmatics-oriented studies of translation such as Hatim and Mason (1990), who comment on the interplay of effectiveness and efficiency by examining, among others, instances of translators' management of the interaction between 'old' and 'new' information – largely based on assumptions about what the reader may be expected to know already, or needs to be told. Assessing relevance to the target audience is thus a priority for the translator, who needs to decide where his or her priorities lie. As Hatim and Mason remark, this is mirrored in the reading process also, since “the product of reading will vary according to the reader's purpose and motivation” (Alderson, Urquhart 1985: xviii). In any case, relevance is a matter of degree.

Hatim and Mason (1990 and, in particular, 1997) make a strong case for understanding translation as communication, and argue that the pathways of the translators' decision-making processes (which may be deliberate or not) can be partly retraced by looking at the text as evidence of communicative interaction (Hatim, Mason 1990: 4). This, of course, is totally compatible with text linguists Beaugrande and Dressler's view of texts as “document[s] of decision, selection and combination”, in which occurrences are “significant by virtue of other alternatives which could have occurred instead” (1981: 35). Mason's (2000) study *Audience Design in Translation* takes the discussion in the direction of accommodation theory, broadening it to include insights from Bell's (1984) audience design model. According to Bell, style is audience design, and a communicator's design for his or her audience manifests at all levels of linguistic choice.

## 2. The novels, the authors, the translations

There are three languages spoken in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, the language of the majority of the population, Tamil, and English – the language of the former British colonisers. English is still widely used for official and commercial purposes, as well as to facilitate communication between Tamil-and Sinhala-speaking Sri Lankans. It is the native

language of a small number of people, mainly in urban areas: the Burghers, descendants of Portuguese and Dutch colonisers.

Although there exist rich Sinhala and Tamil literatures, these languages are rarely translated. As a consequence, the only Sri Lankan writers known by international audiences are those who express themselves in English. Even among these, international acclaim privileges the authors who have settled outside their country of origin, such as Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai, both of whom live in Canada.

Born in Colombo in 1943, in a Burgher family, Philip Michael Ondaatje is the author of six novels, a large number of volumes of poetry, as well as a book about film editing. *The English Patient* won the Booker Prize in 1992 and was adapted into an Oscar-winning film directed by Anthony Minghella, sporting a star-studded cast which includes Ralph Fiennes, Kristin Scott Thomas, Juliette Binoche, Willem Dafoe, and Colin Firth. Ondaatje received numerous awards for his work and was made Officer of the Order of Canada, in recognition of his stature as one of Canada’s most influential living authors.

Ondaatje resists identification with Sri Lanka, which he left when he was eleven years old because he does not “want to become the representative of a country” (McCrum 2011). Yet he keeps revisiting Ceylon in his fiction, and *Running in the Family* (1982) is a telling illustration of the extent to which he is influenced by his status as Canadian who remains profoundly Sri Lankan. This is not merely about the subject matter of some of his books, but how he goes about the business of envisaging it from the standpoint of a self-defined “mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres”, born and raised in Sri Lanka’s tradition of “tall tales, gossip, arguments and lies at dinner”. He seems utterly comfortable in a space of blurred lines between fact and fiction, real and invented lives, and unreliable reporting of the past: in Sri Lanka, he says, “a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (McCrum 2011).

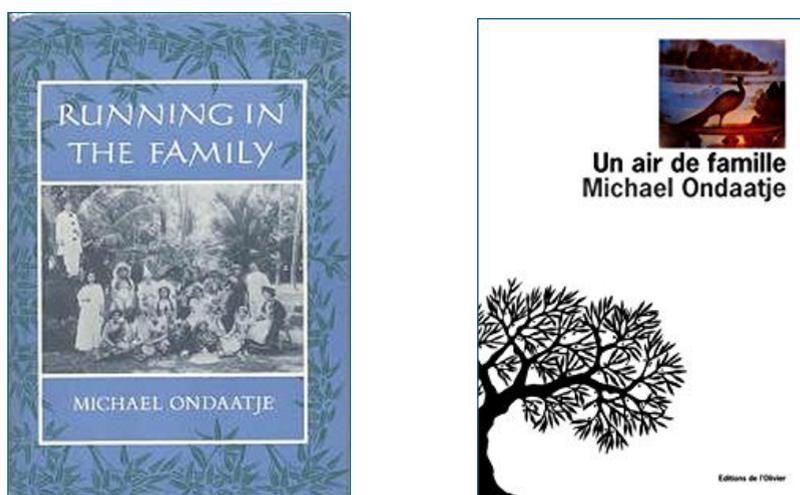


Fig. 1, 2. Book covers of *Running in the Family* in the original and in French translation

*Running in the Family* is a fictionalised memoir, parts of which are poetry. It can also be read as an exotic travel book of sorts but, above all, it is a journey of memory which started with “the bright bone of a dream”. It was translated into French by Marie-Odile Fortier-Masek, an experienced translator specialising in literature but also in philosophy, psychology, and art history. She has translated, among others, authors such as Graham Greene, Alice Munroe, John Cowper Powys, G. K. Chesterton and Truman Capote. Her translation was published in 1991 under the title *Un air de famille*.

Shyam Selvadurai was also born in Colombo (in 1965), to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. Ethnic conflict drove the family to emigrate to Canada when Selvadurai was nineteen. The beautifully written, luminous, coming-of-age novel *Funny Boy* (1994) is set in Sri Lanka, as are Selvadurai’s *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998) and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005); *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) is also partly set in the author’s country of origin.

The backdrop in *Funny Boy* is that of escalating ethnic violence between Tamils and Sinhalese and, although not strictly speaking an autobiography, there is an obvious autobiographical dimension to the novel whose protagonist, Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young boy growing up in a sheltered, wealthy family, has to leave his childhood paradise and enter a world of dilemmas, tensions, suffering and uncertainty, but also discovery and hope. The French translation by Frédéric Limare and Susan Fox-Limare appeared in 2000 and is entitled *Drôle de garçon*.

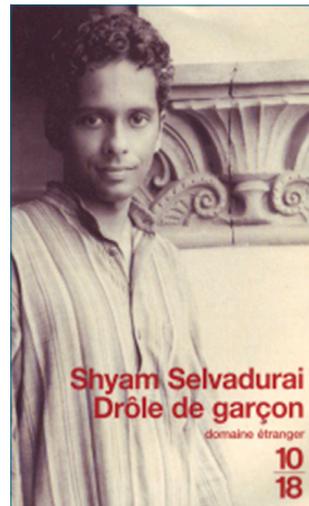
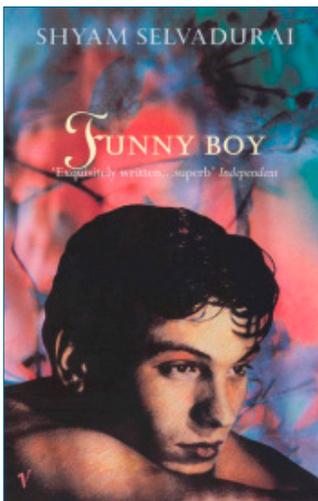


Fig. 3, 4. Book covers of *Funny Boy* in the original and in French translation

There are many aspects of *Funny Boy* and *Running in the Family* which deserve consideration in terms of the challenges they present to the translator. One of them is their in-betweenness, authored as they are by writers who, to use Salman Rushdie’s words, have been “borne across the world” and are themselves, as individuals, “translated men”. Language, Greenblatt points out, is “the slipperiest of human creations; like its speakers, it

does not respect borders (2001: 62). It seems natural, then, that authors such as Selvadurai and Ondaatje (and Rushdie himself) should create work which is multilingual, in the sense that it is characterised by the “the co-presence of two or more languages” (Grutman 2009: 182). But having to deal with such texts forces translation to recognise that it cannot conceptualise itself as the “full transposition of *one* (monolingual) source code into *another* (monolingual) target code for the benefit of a *monolingual* target public” (Meylaerts 2006: 5, emphasis in the original). As Meylaerts explains elsewhere, “[t]ranslation is not taking place *in between monolingual* realities but rather *within multilingual* realities.” (2013: 519, emphasis in the original).

### 3. Choices all the way: The (im)possible necessity of mediation

The mythological saying has it that the world rests on the back of a turtle, supported by another, even larger turtle, and so on, all the way down (an expression of the conundrum of infinite regress). One of the things a translator cannot hope to avoid – although, in view of the constraints inherent in the act of translating, this seems counterintuitive to a degree – is the necessity of making choices between a more or less limited set of alternatives. In other words, there are the choice all the way down. Some of these are more viable, more relevant than others, in view of the type of text, the target audience, and the purposes of the communication. Hatim and Mason (e.g., 1990: 4) insist on the omnipresence, in translation, of “motivated choices”: ‘motivated’ does not necessarily imply deliberateness but, rather, it means there is a particular reason for everything that happens in a translation. Hans Vermeer, the German linguist who was one of the most eminent pioneers of functionalist approaches to translation in the late 1970s and early 1980s (along with Katharina Reiss and Justa Holz-Mänttari), concurs: “there is no random choice, although sometimes it may seem so to an observer and even to an actor” (Vermeer 1996: 102).

Let us start our discussion of choices made by the French translators of *Running in the Family* and *Funny Boy* with a few thoughts about typography. In *Funny Boy*, Shyam Selvadurai uses a large number of Sinhala and Tamil words and expressions; a glossary is provided at the end, for the benefit of the English-speaking reader who cannot be expected to be familiar with them. The implication is that these words are considered ‘new’ information and one which is relevant to give, though not in the text itself but, rather, in a paratext. When Tamil or Sinhala expressions are employed, they merge visually with the English. In the French translation, nevertheless, italics are used in many cases (though not all), making the words belong to a foreign language. Here are a few examples: “*petit vamban*” (p. 41), “*un sari manipuri*” (p. 46), “*succulent pala harams*” (p. 46), “*sous un araliya*” (p. 47), “*une karupi*” (p. 49), “*des pottus*” (p. 52), “*Radha, baba*” (p. 61), “*Aday, a renchéri un autre*” (p. 93), “*le mol gaha*” (p. 97), “*le mahattaya*” (p. 119), “*Ado, Tigre !*” (p. 183), “*Aiyo, Monsieur !*” (p. 189), “*un joueur de tabla*” (p. 263). The French reader is also provided with a glossary and it is interesting to observe that not all the entries in the original list of Sinhala and Tamil words made their way into it. The decision to use italics, however, is particularly telling, if compared with their absence in the published

source text (which we assume was Selvadurai's decision). Indeed, in *Funny Boy*, words in English, Tamil and Sinhala coexist on the page and none is identified as foreign through the use of italics. This, we believe, is a powerful statement which deserves to be carried over in all translations of the book.

Before we tackle the area of food, we would like to raise again the vexed question of the distinction between choice and error in translation, which Malmkjær (2004) recognised as one of the problematic aspects of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS). Due to its emphasis on description, DTS makes it difficult to justify distinctions one might want to make between motivated choice and mere error (incorrect, inappropriate choice – whether deliberate or not). According to Malmkjær, “the unifying characteristic of motivated choices, including manipulation, is the fact that they can be explained with reference to semantic notions such as intention and aboutness”, whereas “one error-identifying factor is apparent inexplicability” (2004: 149). Of course, as Malmkjær points out, there is always a possibility that an explanation exists or, we might add, that one strove to think of an explanation for a choice which, in reality, was a mistake. Example 1.1 illustrates the problem. We are using the following abbreviations: RitF (for *Running in the Family*); FB (*Funny Boy*); Uadf (*Un air de famille*); Ddg (*Drôle de garçon*). The words and expressions in bold make the object of specific comment.

In his peregrinations in search of understanding his father's life, Ondaatje meets Ian Goonetilleke, who runs a library in Peradeniya containing work by Sri Lankan authors. One of his friends, the poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, drowned while bathing in the sea at Mount Lavinia. The sea is not mentioned at this point in the source text, only Mount Lavinia, a town just south of Colombo. Assuming presumably that Mount Lavinia designates a mountain, the translator introduces a misleading explicitation, as can be seen in 1.1 below. The French reader who happens to be in possession of the correct information may recognise the mistake, but this is likely to be the exception rather than the rule; the less informed readers with an eye for detail may realise there a problem when, barely a few sentences later (see 1.2), it becomes clear there is no lake.

### *Example 1*

#### *1.1*

He also showed me the poetry of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, one of his close friends who drowned recently **at Mount Lavinia** [...] (RitF: 85)

Il me montre également la poésie de Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, un de ses meilleurs amis qui s'est noyé récemment **dans un lac du mont Lavinia** [...] (Uadf: 84)

#### *1.2*

He is a man who knows history is always present, is the last hour of his friend **Lakdasa blacking out in the blue sea at Mount Lavinia** where the tourists go to sunbathe [...] (RitF: 86).

C'est un homme qui sait que l'histoire appartient encore au présent, que celle-ci est la dernière heure de son ami Lakdasa **qui s'éteignait dans la mer bleue du mont Lavinia** là où les touristes vont prendre un bain de soleil [...] (Uadf: 84)

We now turn to the fascinating, bountiful world of food in translation. At the intersection between nature and culture, basic need and communication, food stands for nutrition but also an emotional connection with others, identity, creative endeavour. It epitomises history, is central to religious practices, and represents a marker of social status. Food unites and can also separate people. The three excerpts below, from *Running in the Family*, feature coconuts.

### **Example 2**

#### **2.1**

Clarity to leaves, fruit, the dark yellow of the **King Coconut**. (RitF: 2).

Clarté pour la feuille, le fruit, le jaune profond du **grand cocotier**. (Uadf: 11)

#### **2.2**

Sunlight Sunlight

stop for the cool *kurumba*

scoop the **half formed white**

into our mouths [...] (RitF: 91)

Soleil Soleil

s’arrêter pour le *kurumba* frais

recueillir ce **lait à demi caillé**

dans nos bouches [...] (Uadf: 88)

#### **2.3**

Above the small roads of Wattala,

Kalutara, the *toddy tappers* walk

collecting **the white liquid** for tavern vats. (RitF: 88)

Au-dessus des routes étroites de Wattala,

Kalutara, **le gemmeur**, s’avance

Recueillant **le lait du palmier**

Pour les cuves des tavernes. (Uadf: 86)

The French readers who, in their daily life, only see coconuts at the supermarket, on TV, or in their chocolate bar, are likely to perceive as exotic this abundance of (types of) coconuts and the many uses they can be put to. The King Coconut in 2.1 is a bright orange coloured variety of coconut whose water is used for drinking. The fact that the translator, Marie-Odile Fortier-Masek, decomposed the name and translated the words independently of each other, i.e., *grand* [big] and *cocotier* [coconut] is, obviously, problematic, and raises the question of her familiarity with the Sri Lankan world – unless, that is, we assume a deliberate decision was made to simplify the text by reducing somewhat the (large) number of references to entities which do not belong in the familiar environment of the targeted audience.

In 2.2 Ondaatje mentions “cool *kurumba*” and “half formed white”. *Kurumba* (the word is used in the Maldives also) designates the young coconut, whose water is a refreshing drink and whose delicate meat is a treat in itself. While *kurumba* is preserved as such in the French translation, “half formed white”, which refers to the soft meat of the young coconut, becomes *lait à demi caillé* [half-curdled milk] – a clear case of domestication in translation.

Example 2.3 features yet another foodstuff, the toddy. It is the sap obtained by cutting the flowers of coconut trees or palm trees, which is then transformed into an alcoholic drink, the arrack (if the sap comes from a coconut tree) or a very sweet syrup which, when solidified, becomes a kind of sugar called jaggery. The use of *lait* [milk] in the French translation is, again, debatable; it would have worked as a domesticating translation choice had it not been accompanied by the word *palmier* [palm tree], since the fruit of palm trees does not contain milk.

It is always easy to criticise another translator’s work, perhaps much easier than to produce an impeccable translation of one’s own. Between possible error and motivated, warranted choice there is a whole range of intermediary points on the continuum. In the absence of any domestication whatsoever, the numerous cultural references in *Running in the Family* would have required cumbersome explanations – or a decision to let the readers fend for themselves. But Mukherjee’s advice that the literary translator must strive to attain a “secure hold upon the two languages involved, supported by a good measure of familiarity with the culture represented by each language” (2004: 39) does seem in order here.

Excerpts 3.1 and 3.2 contain descriptions of downright feasts.

### **Example 3**

#### **3.1**

We are having a formal dinner. String hoppers, meat curry, **egg rulang**, pappadams, potato curry. Alice’s date chutney, seeni sambol, mallung and brinjals and iced water. [...] It is my favourite meal – anything that has **string hoppers** and **egg rulang**, I eat with a lascivious hunger. For dessert, there’s **buffalo curd** and **jaggery sauce** – a sweet honey made from coconut, like maple syrup but with a smoky taste. (RitF: 145)

Un grand dîner. Sauterelles, curry de viande, **œufs rulang**, pappadams, curry de pommes de terre. Chutney aux dates d’Alice, seeni sambol, mallung, brinjal et eau glacée. [...] C’est mon menu préféré, je fais preuve d’un appétit lascif pour des **sauterelles** et **œufs rulang**. Comme dessert, il y a **du lait de buffle caillé** accompagné **d’une sauce jagrée**, un miel doux fait de noix de coco, rappelant le sirop d’érable avec un goût fumé. (Uadf: 139)

#### **3.2**

Sir John’s breakfasts are legendary, always hoppers and fish curry, mangoes and **curd**. A breeze blows magically under the table, a precise luxury, and I stretch my feet to its source as I tear apart my first **hopper**. [...] (RitF: 174)

Les petits déjeuners de Sir John sont légendaires, il y a toujours des sauterelles, du curry de poisson, des mangues et **du fromage blanc**. Une brise souffle, magique, sous la table. Quel luxe ! J’offre mes pieds à sa source tout en décortiquant ma première **sauterelle**. [...] (Uadf: 164)

*Egg rulang* is a typical Burgher dish. As can be seen in 3.1, the word ‘egg’ was translated into French, and *rulang* is preserved. The reader thus understands an egg dish is mentioned, but that it is not the usual Western omelette. Buffalo curd, first translated as *lait de buffle caillé* (3.1), undergoes more substantial domestication in 3.2, where it is called *fromage blanc* (the presence of the word ‘buffalo’ in example 3.1 may have made the difference). *Sauce jagrée* is also domestication, since the adjective does not work in the same way as the noun ‘jaggery’ in English. Finally, not even target-oriented DTS, with all its liberalism in envisaging solutions more prescriptively oriented approaches might dismiss outright as mistakes, could say much by way of justifying the relevance of *sauterelles* [grasshoppers] as a translation of ‘string hoppers’. The mistake speaks for the translator’s difficulty to familiarise herself with the myriad cultural references (forms of address, humour, food, flora, fauna, etc.) in the text. (For a discussion of culinary terms in the translation by Fortier-Masek of Romesh Gunasekera’s *Reef*, see Jayawardena 2012; a more detailed examination of *Running in the Family* and *Funny Boy* in French translation can be found in Gunasekera 2017.)

Our last example comes from Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*. On page 2, one of the characters is grinding curry paste: “[...] she would rush out, her hands red from grinding curry paste” – an extremely common activity in Sri Lanka. Limare and Fox-Limare, the translators, refer instead to curry sauce (“*les mains rougies par la sauce au curry qu’elle préparait*”, more familiar to the European reader – and perhaps to themselves).

## Concluding remarks

In this study, we have revisited cultural aspects in translation through a discussion of choices – mostly pertaining to the culinary domain – made by the translators into French of Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* and Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, both of them written in English by contemporary authors who are Canadian citizens of Sri Lankan origin. We have commented on issues such as relevance, audience design, translator assumptions, and motivated choices versus choices which may be motivated but seem inappropriate (or, to use a word which Descriptive Translation Studies has virtually banished, incorrect).

Problem-solving in translation is a complex endeavour, and high-quality choices are the outcome of decision making processes in which many factors play a part. It would be difficult not to restate, within the context of a study such as this one, the role of linguistic and cultural knowledge and of attention to detail, since most of the imperfections we have highlighted appear to stem from this. At the same time, flawlessness being an ideal arguably impossible to attain, we are led to conclude that, despite the limitations – and even thanks to their very potential to draw attention to the process of mediation itself – the translations which have made the object of our inquiry can deliver to the French readers a non-negligible, healthy dose of Sri Lankan cultural context, and fulfil honourably, if not with panache, their role as vehicles of transportation. Of discovery. Of translation.

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