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Why not translate metaphor in French crime fiction? The case of Caryl Férey's *Utu*

Ellen Carter, University of Auckland, New Zealand, and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris

ABSTRACT

Crime fiction's positioning as a low status popular genre has implications for the translation of textual markers normally associated with high literature. I present an empirical case study of metaphor translation in the 2011 English-language edition of French crime writer Caryl Férey's novel *Utu* (2004), showing that the translation contains 31% fewer metaphors than the source text. To analyse this difference, I examine the translation through literary theory and through the practice of established crime fiction translators to reveal gaps in our understanding of cross-lingual metaphorical norms in crime fiction. I then look at how metaphors are cognitively processed and argue that metaphor matters in crime fiction because it influences readers' emotional engagement with texts.

KEYWORDS

Caryl Férey, *Utu*, metaphor, equivalence, cognitive narratology, cognitive processing, digital humanities.

1. Empirical findings

The French crime writer Caryl Férey has published two novels set in New Zealand. The second of these, *Utu* (2004), was translated into English by Englishman Howard Curtis (Férey 2011) and published by New York-based Europa Editions, which specialises in crime fiction in translation. In this article, I analyse how the metaphors in *Utu* were translated and how this relates to an understanding of crime fiction as a popular genre, where less cognitive effort is assumed to be expected by and from readers – a view I challenge in my conclusion. In Férey's French source text (ST), I identified 813 multi-word metaphors (I do not count single-word metaphors that have been lexicalised to a lesser or greater degree) of which 230 (28%) are 'original' metaphors for which I can find no usage prior to Férey, whereas for the remaining 583 metaphors I have found at least one prior usage and thus label these 'stock' metaphors (Newmark, 1988: 108). In the English target text (TT) the total metaphor count falls by 31% to 560, with 162 (29%) original and 398 stock metaphors. Identifying metaphors is, of course, subjective: if someone else were to count, their total would likely be different. However, the ratios of retained to reduced and original to stock are not likely to alter markedly.

Figure 1 shows the pages where metaphors occur in the two texts. The trend lines smooth the volatility in the ST and TT distributions to reveal that the TT's lower metaphor count obtains throughout the novel.

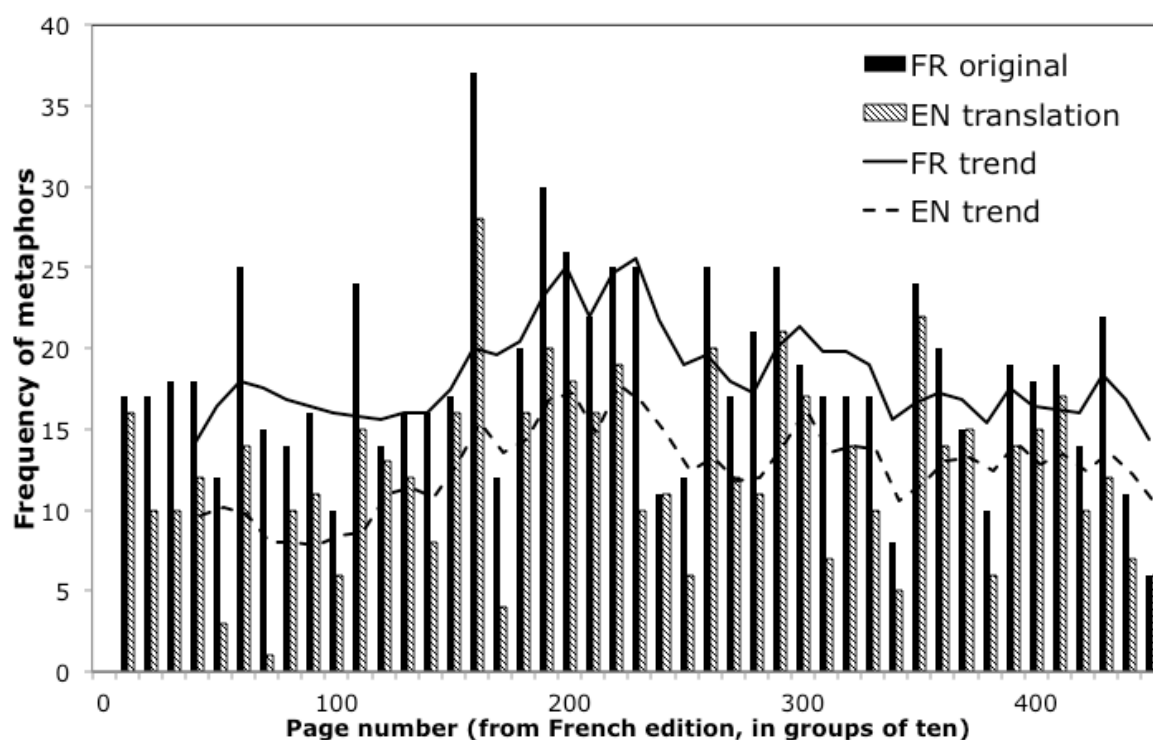


Figure 1: Distribution of metaphors in *Utu*'s French (2008a) and translated English (2011) editions. Metaphors are grouped by ten-page blocks based on the French text's page numbers and excluding blank pages. Trend lines are five-period rolling averages.

Much of this reduction is due to the 321 metaphors (sixty-two original; 259 stock) that appear in the ST but which converted to sense in the TT. As an example of an original metaphor converted to sense:

Il suivait les cours du bout des neurones (ST: 73)
He paid little attention in class (TT: 63)

Although this conversion to sense results in an idiomatic TT, an equivalent original metaphor could have been developed, for example, "He paid neuron service in class", which plays on the relationship between "du bout des lèvres" and "to pay lip service". An example of an ST stock metaphor converted to sense in the TT is:

Les fils du maire nageaient dans leur smoking (ST: 83)
The mayor's sons were in tuxedos that were way too big for them (TT: 71)

In this case, a common target language (TL) stock metaphor could have been used: "The mayor's sons swam in their tuxedos".

However, this metaphor deletion or reduction is not entirely one-way traffic since sixty-eight metaphors (three original; sixty-five stock) are added to the TT where no metaphor existed in the ST.

I repeated this analysis for samples from two other Férey novels translated by Europa Editions. In *Zulu* (2008b, English translation 2010) the TT metaphor count is 14% lower than the ST, while in *Mapuche* (2012, English translation 2013) there are 11% fewer metaphors in the TT. Possible explanations for this lower deletion rate include that *Zulu* and *Mapuche* garnered prestigious French prizes and praise, perhaps moving them closer to literary fiction; or that *Utu* has a lower per page metaphor count in the ST, making its figurative language less apparent.

2. Theoretical findings

Having demonstrated a difference between the relative metaphorical content of *Utu*'s ST and TT, in this section I take a step back to explore what the metaphorical content of *Utu*'s translation 'should' look like according to translation theories. Regardless of whether a metaphor's role is primarily cognitive (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3, Richardson 2004: 4, Schäffner 2004: 1257) or linguistic and textual (Goatly 2011: 43), when it surfaces in a ST translators need to decide 'how' and 'whether' to translate it, taking into consideration metaphors' dual aesthetic and cognitive aspects.

First, how are metaphors translated? In relation to metaphor, Christina Schäffner notes "two main concerns in Translation Studies, the translatability of metaphors, and procedures to transfer them from a source language into a target language" (2004: 1256). 'Translatability' is perhaps most pressing for original metaphors in which emotive shock and cognitive impact have not yet been dulled by prior exposure (and for which translators have not yet found solutions). Peter Newmark suggests that original metaphors: "(a) contain the core of an important writer's message, his [*sic*] personality, his comment on life, and though they may have a more or less cultural element, these have to be transferred neat; (b) such metaphors are a source of enrichment for the target language" (1988: 112). While some may balk at labelling a crime fiction author 'important', Férey has been hailed as "the future of French crime writing" (Busnel 2012) so he has perhaps earned the right to enrich English directly through his original metaphors and indirectly through his high proportion of figurative language (to which I return below). By not retaining seventy-one of Férey's original metaphors, the TT perhaps commits German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz's contentious "basic error of the translator [which] is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (quoted in Benjamin 1973: 81). Translated crime fiction has demonstrated itself capable of influencing the target language: translations from English have influenced the form of Swedish language crime (but not literary) fiction, which has adopted the English use of adjectival modifiers after verbs of saying (e.g. she said calmly) although this grammatical construction is rarely used in Swedish (Gellerstam 2005: 212).

Metaphor transfer procedures are widely discussed in literary theory and fall into six broad categories (given that I share Fludernik *et al.*'s (1999: 385) view that similes are metaphors since their cognitive processing is similar): (1) use exact TL equivalent of ST metaphor, for example, stubborn people are mules in both French and English; (2) seek another metaphor with similar sense, for example, where an English speaker has a frog in their throat, a French speaker has a cat (*un chat*); (3) replace with literal paraphrase (Dobrzyńska 1995: 599, van den Broeck 1981: 77); (4) turn non-metaphor into metaphor; (5) metaphor addition from zero (Toury 1995: 83); or (6) metaphor deletion. *Utu*'s translation uses all six of these procedures but as a tool to analyse the translation this list in isolation does not help because it offers no suggestion as to the relative weights that should be given to those procedures that keep the ST and TT metaphorical content constant (1 and 2) versus those that result in a TT with lower (3 and 6) or higher (4 and 5) metaphorical content.

To explore this prioritisation, the 'whether' of metaphor translation can be considered from the perspective of equivalence, which for Schäffner is "probably the most controversial notion in Translation Studies" (2004: 1255). She examines equivalence from four theoretical translation perspectives. First, linguistic-based approaches, for which the ST "is to be reproduced in the TL [target language] as closely as possible, both in content and in form" (2004: 1254). Second, textlinguistic approaches which prize communicative equivalence where the "TT and ST are of equal value in the respective communicative situations in their cultures" (2004: 1255). Third, functionalist approaches where "[t]he yardstick for assessing the quality of the target text is, thus, its appropriateness for its purpose, and not the equivalence to the source text" (2004: 1255). Finally, approaches influenced by Cultural Studies and postmodernism (Hermans, 1998: 64), which reject any reliance on equivalence as interfering with the exploration of cultural difference central to translation.

While the first mode would expect all Férey's ST metaphors to be reproduced in the TT, the fourth approach would find my analysis irrelevant. This leaves textlinguistic and functionalist approaches, which both focus on whether the TT meets TL norms, and thus would support a lower metaphorical content in the TT *if* its communicative situation – English-language crime fiction – calls for a lower metaphorical content than French-language crime fiction, thereby making the TT metaphorically fit-for-purpose. However, I have found no evidence in scholarly literature for higher relative frequencies of metaphor in particular, or figurative language in general, in contemporary French- versus English-language fiction corpora — relative frequencies of figurative language have been calculated for limited samples of French and English non-fiction texts, for example Salager-Meyer (1990) and Boers and Demecheleer (1997) — let alone crime fiction, thus I cannot determine whether the different metaphorical frequency of *Utu*'s ST and TT give them equivalent

metaphorical value relative to their communicative situations. Moreover, nor can I assess how *Utu's* ST compares to norms in French-language crime fiction, which varies from the highly figurative – for example, the 175 books by San-Antonio, nom de plume of Frédéric Dard, whose language was so inventive that it spawned its own dictionary (Le Doran *et al.* 1993) – to the very literal (for example, Georges Simenon).

It is worth noting that this dearth of language- and context-specific metaphor frequency data may be temporary given the growing interest of digital humanists in the natural language processing of metaphor. The Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA), a research agency within the United States intelligence community, is currently funding a multi-year 'Metaphor Program' that "will exploit the use of metaphors by different cultures to gain insight into their cultural norms" (IARPA n.d.). Researchers such as Neuman *et al.* (2013) are developing algorithms to automate the identification of metaphors in four language/culture pairings — American English, Iranian Farsi, Russian Russian, and Mexican Spanish —, approaches that could then be adapted to cross-lingual crime fiction corpora.

3. Combining empirical and theoretical findings with translation practice

Overlaying my empirical and theoretical findings does not reveal answers about *Utu's* translation, but questions about the frequency of metaphors in French and English crime fiction, both in the original language and in translation. Since theoretical approaches do not help in this instance, in this section I turn instead to practitioners' statements for support.

As mentioned, both textlinguistic and functionalist approaches aim to produce a fit-for-purpose TT naturalised for the target reader. I hypothesise that *Utu's* TT has fewer metaphors than its ST in order to meet the perceived needs of an American English crime fiction reader used to a lower (but unquantified) metaphor count in home-grown crime fiction. If true, this would typify 'normalisation', whereby translators (un)consciously change idiosyncratic ST features to conform with TL norms (Laviosa 2002: 54). Among experienced crime fiction translators, at least one disagrees with naturalisation:

If a detective novel set in Paris makes its characters speak and think in entirely fluent English – even while they plod along the Boulevard Saint-Germain, drink Pernot and scoff a *jarret de porc aux lentilles* – then something must be wrong. Where's the bonus in having a French detective novel for bedtime reading unless there's something French about it? Don't we want our French detectives to sound French? (Bellos 2012: 41).

As well as having translated crime fiction by both Simenon (2013) and Fred Vargas (2004), Bellos's appreciation for idiosyncratic translated language may have been forged during his tenure directing Princeton

University's program in translation and intercultural communication, or through his translation of *Life: a user's manual* by Georges Perec (2008). However, other translators of crime fiction into English seem more in favour of naturalisation:

the success of such [translated crime] fiction clearly depends on engaging the interest of the modern, general reader by eliminating all linguistic quirks of the original (Bernard Scudder quoted in Cornwell n.d.).

When a book is marketed as a crime novel, therefore, I feel that the translator is duty bound to make it readable. It is not a question of merely translating what the French says, but of recreating it in an acceptable and friendly form for the British reader. It must flow. The reader must not feel that the text is too much of an effort to read (Elfreda Powell quoted in Cornwell n.d.).

In crime fiction, the important thing is impact. The translation must be readable at high speed without any hold-ups, the reader must never be brought to a stop by some mysterious phrase or word [...] The translation has to be literate but never literary (Margaret Crosland, quoted in Cornwell n.d.).

in the context of crime (and any new fiction, for that matter) the translator is responsible for creating the feel of the book and the image of the author. It is important to make the work as fluid as possible in order to attract a readership (Ian Monk quoted in Cornwell n.d.).

Although David Bellos cites cultural examples he is making a linguistic plea to 'sound French', which is at odds with the others' linguistic goal of a fluid, flowing, non-literary, quirk-free text.

The latter group's parsimonious judgements ignore the fact that English-language crime writers use figurative language (which may slow down the reader) to great effect. Let me offer into evidence two examples (although there are many more). First, Peter Temple, the only crime writer to have won Australia's top literary prize, the Miles Franklin award: "It was in a new brick-veneer suburb built on cow pasture east of the city, one of those strangely silent developments where the average age is twelve and you can feel the pressure of mortgages on your skin" (2007: 1), an adapted metaphor that makes visceral the stress of servicing a mortgage. Second, Reginald Hill, winner of the 1995 Crime Writers' Association Cartier diamond dagger for lifetime achievement, who describes a baby as having "the usual number of limbs which waved spasmodically in the air like those of a bouleversed beetle" (2009: 71), an original metaphor adopting the French verb 'bouleverser', meaning 'to overwhelm or turn upside down'. Alongside such acclaimed (yet both quirky and fluid) English-language crime writing, why cannot translated crime fiction also offer readers figurative language that requires cognitive effort to process?

4. Readers and metaphor in translated crime fiction

Having shown a lack of consensus over how to handle linguistic features such as metaphor among those who translate crime fiction, I now use

cognitive literary studies to explore why metaphor may matter to translated crime fiction consumers, in other words, readers. Since little work in cognitive literary studies directly addresses the crime fiction genre, I instead approach from literary fiction: if I can show what makes a work 'literary' and how its readers cognitively process metaphor perhaps the obverse will illuminate genre fiction.

In a review of empirical studies of literariness, David Miall and Don Kuiken find that components of reader response "may be based on psychobiological, cognitive, and psycholinguistic processes that do as much to shape institutional 'conventions' as they are shaped by them" (1998: 339). In so writing, Miall and Kuiken support the view of Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky (who illustrates ideas in his *Theory of Prose* (1990) using mystery fiction by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Charles Dickens among others) in his essay 'Art as technique':

The process of 'algebraization', the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition [...] And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (original emphasis, 1965: 12).

This comment offers three explanations for the perceived differences in cognitive effort required in reading literary versus popular genres such as crime fiction. First, 'economy of perceptive effort' implies that crime novels are cognitively easy reads. Second, 'function as though by formula' echoes the 'formulaic' criticism commonly levelled at crime fiction. Finally, crime fiction operates as an antipode to the foregrounding technique of (literary) art: it makes objects 'familiar', makes forms simple, and decreases the difficulty and length of perception.

Miall and Kuiken suggest a three-component model to explain literariness's lengthening of perception "involving foregrounded stylistic or narrative features, readers' defamiliarizing responses to them, and the consequent modification of personal meanings" (1999: 121), partly related to empathy (Keen 2007: 87, 94). So, if in literary fiction, "in order to achieve art's end, these normal cognitive processes must be disturbed, deformed, slowed down" (Tsur 2008: 4), then we might expect that in crime fiction they must be calmed, smoothed, speeded up.

Or must they? Perhaps the cognitive processing required to read crime versus literary fiction differs in quality rather than quantity? Marketing makes it hard for a reader to approach a text ignorant of its genre; thus a brain reading literary fiction expects to 'notice' form just as it expects to

'notice' content in crime fiction (Functional magnetic resonance imaging, which detects changes in blood flow in the brain, could study which feature types increase cognitive processing for different genres.). If I am correct in hypothesising that *Utu's* ST has a higher-than-average metaphor frequency, this observation offers one explanation for why Férey's rate of metaphor usage presents a translation challenge: his novels ask readers to not only process content – clues – but also this higher than expected amount of figurative language. If *Utu's* metaphors divert readers' minds away from the plot to non-genre-standard stylistic appreciation, perhaps Howard Curtis and Europa Editions sought a lower TT metaphor count to refocus readers' attention on the plot. If so, this changes how ST and TT readers engage with the text since plot provokes an intellectual complicity between reader and writer while metaphor activates affect and emotional collusion.

Using cognitive narratology brings us to a similar conclusion by adopting terms from artificial intelligence and psychology. Prior experience is stored as repertoires (Herman 1997: 1047; Jahn 1999: 174) in a reader's memory that can be draw on to reduce the duration and complexity of cognitive processing when current inputs match previously-stored stereotypical knowledge. Herman argues that understanding a text requires access to a variety of such repertoires, which trigger pre-existing knowledge and thus interpretation:

It is not that stories are recognizable only insofar as they tell what their recipients already know; rather, stories stand in a certain relation to what their readers or auditors know, focusing attention on the unusual and the remarkable against a backdrop made up of patterns of belief and expectation (1997: 1048).

So a story with a high proportion of pre-patterned backdrop activates more repertoire matches and more efficient cognitive processing than one with many new and novel elements.

I hypothesise that crime fiction genre markers in a book's paratext predispose a reader to selectively activate plot-related repertoires – *cherchez la femme* → follow the money → the butler did it – to speed up processing. Crime novels are not called page-turners for nothing; speed comes from efficient cognitive processing made possible by an implicit promise that the way will not be strewn with literary obstacles. In other words, that the novel-to-formulaic ratio will lie within an expected (low) range of values; ranges that will vary by genre and by culture. This cross cultural variation offers a potential explanation for crime fiction enjoying a higher status in France compared to Anglophone countries, but does not answer whether crime fiction has a higher status in France because it contains more literary elements or vice versa.

But what if a crime novel uses non-stereotypical language for which a reader does not have pre-prepared repertoires? Then a reader's cognitive

processing effort is similar to that typically required by literary fiction. This difference in required effort perhaps lies behind the approach of Curtis and Europa Editions to translating *Utu* into English; the reduction in the quantity of metaphors of all types was not so much in order to smooth quirky language as to level narrative sequences that do not fit TL genre repertoires and thus would require readers to expend more cognitive effort than promised by *Utu*'s genre. In other words, the goal was to bring *Utu* in line with perceived genre expectations in English.

To close this section, it is worth noting that despite popular novels' apparently simple structure and language, they may be cognitively costly in other ways:

for some readers, the author's use of the formulaic conventions of a thriller or a romance novel would increase empathic resonance, while for other readers (perhaps better educated and attuned to literary effects), unusual or striking representations promote foregrounding and open the way to empathetic reading (Keen 2007: xii-xiii).

Thus a crime fiction reader may spend cognitive effort being stressed by suspense, while a romance reader is affected by arousal and a literary fiction reader by metaphor and other formalist alienation effects advocated above by Shklovsky. Each reader seeks the cognitive cost associated with that genre because each believes the payoff will be positive; which version of cognitive engagement one chooses depends on mood as well as stable factors such as background and education.

5. Conclusion

For Fredric Jameson, "Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (1996: 106). To judge by sales of over 75,000 copies and the three French prizes it has won, *Utu* fulfils the crime-fiction-genre contract between Férey and his French public but I hypothesise that Europa Editions felt that if it left *Utu*'s figurative content untouched, the novel would break the genre contract with its American English-language public. In choosing to reduce the frequency of metaphors, *Utu*'s TT may have been recategorised (Spolsky, 1993: 79) from the genre of French crime fiction (whether in French or translation) into that of English(-language) crime fiction. Further evidence on figurative language prevalence in the various language sub-corpora, were it available, would offer a more conclusive demonstration of the expectations of the genre in each language.

But what broader purpose is served by my pointing out how *Utu*'s translation changes the novel's metaphorical content? First, I have shown that readers are not cognitively processing the same text when reading *Utu* in French or in English. Second, European crime fiction translated into

English is perhaps a victim of its own success. Through long exposure to Scandinavian, French, Italian, Spanish or German translated crime fiction, English-language publishers, critics, and translators have developed such a strong sense of what a foreign thriller 'should' be that when a European author writes against these norms – for example, by using figurative language – it is tidied up for Anglophone eyes. This exemplifies the notion of the language of a translation as being a 'third code' (Frawley 1984: 168) containing linguistic translation universals (Baker 1993: 243) that distinguish the language of a translation from either the source or target languages.

The development of such a 'translated crime fiction-ese' is exacerbated by the low status crime fiction has in translation. Translators of crime fiction both into French ('À l'ombre du polar' 2004) and into English (Cornwell n.d.) bemoan the conditions under which they work, including tight deadlines, word limits and pedestrian prose. Even *Utu's* translator Howard Curtis laments: "I've translated quite a few writers who perpetrate some very clunky prose [...] My response is usually to try improving it in some way, because if I reproduced the clunkiness I know readers would blame me, not the writer!" (2011). But one crime fiction translator's 'clunky' prose is another author's distinctive voice, which is sufficiently appreciated by source culture readers to attract foreign commissioning editors. In translated literary fiction voice is vaunted, so why not allow crime fiction translators the time and resources to produce similarly careful translations, which will perhaps encourage them to retain metaphorical quirks in crime fiction?

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Biography

Ellen Carter is a doctoral student jointly enrolled at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Her research interests centre on how cultural outsiders write, translate, and read cross-cultural crime fiction.

E-mail: ellen.carter@gmail.com

