

# Translating Scotland's Heritage

The impact of translation fluency on visitor experience

## I. Introduction

My research project investigates the representation of Scottish history, memory and culture to French-speaking visitors through the translation of interpretive material in Scottish heritage sites.

### Why translate heritage?

Outside of Translation Studies, there is an expectation, often unconscious, that translated texts should not read as translations. That is to say that a premium is placed on the fluency or fluidity of translated texts. Yet, this fluency can be disrupted either through deliberate intervention or unintentional errors in translation.

In the context of tourism, translation quality has often been strongly criticised by both users and Translation Studies scholars (e.g. Snell-Hornby, 1996; Valdeón, 2009; Sumberg, 2004). In the more specific field of heritage tourism, the translation of interpretive material serves to inform the international visitor's understanding of a place and plays an essential role of the circulation of cultural knowledge. Although there has been little research on the translation of interpretive material and its impact on the visitor experience, heritage translation tends to face the same criticisms as tourism translation (see Quétel-Brunner & Griffin, 2014 and Valdeón, 2015). In that case, poor translation quality stands as an obstacle to fluidity; and impedes the readers' access to cultural knowledge.

## II. Defining translation fluency

How can we define fluency in the context of heritage translation?

### Fluency grammar and beyond

Grammar and syntax are usually the first things to come to mind when thinking of fluency. In other words, when reading a fluent text, one expects correct spelling, word order and an adequate use of prepositions and punctuation. Human beings, are not infallible and an excellent translation may contain an occasional error without causing prejudice to the text. Yet, it is easy to imagine how a text riddled with grammatical errors would make for a rather difficult read and prevent the text from being understood.

[Type here]

For the anecdote this is something that I experienced a few years ago when visiting a Scottish castle with my family and the impact on visitor experience was great: we enjoyed our visit, and the utter irrelevance of the translation was thought to be rather amusing at the time. Yet, we retained little else from our visit. In this case the poor translation quality completely obscured our understanding of the site. Turning this experience into a research topic, my hope is that it will contribute to our understanding of how translation influences visitors' engagement with heritage.

In the context of tourism, Patrizia Pierini points out that fluency, in the form of "solid, well-written, grammatically correct content is crucial to gaining the user's trust." (2007, p.99). By doing so she suggests that there is more to translation fluency than grammar and syntax and implies that the respect of target language genre conventions also plays a part in the fluency of translated texts.

#### Fluency as a balancing act between source and target language conventions

It is then possible to think of translation fluency in terms of adherence to TL genre conventions. And the degree of respect for these conventions in turn has the potential to make the reader feel "at home" in translation, or on the contrary to make them feel a certain degree of alienation.

A translation may be correct grammatically speaking and yet still lack fluidity if it does not respect these conventions. An unexpected tone, style or even content might disturb the reader just as much as grammatical errors. Yet, Mirella Agorni (2012) warns that over deference to TL conventions in the translation of tourism texts could be to the detriment of the idea of novelty and authenticity that is usually sought by visitors (2012, p.6; see also Dann, 1996). This rings particularly true in the more specific context of heritage translation.

To better understand the issues at the heart of heritage translation, it is also interesting to turn to Heritage Studies and more specifically to heritage discourse. For Laurajane Smith (2006, p.28) heritage discourse is intrinsically related to the construction of national identity, and for this reason, translating heritage in the most fluent or transparent way that is possible has the potential to skew the representation of the host culture to the foreign visitor. In this context, strict adherence to TL genre conventions could undermine the cultural encounter.

Heritage professionals seem aware of this cultural gap when it comes to translation. For example, Sally Gall from the interpretation department at Historic Environment Scotland explains that because of the inherent differences that exist between cultures, it is expected that international visitors will feel some degree of alienation in translation.

[Type here]

### III. Evaluating fluency in heritage translation

To evaluate fluency in the context of heritage translation, I am turning to Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (or SFL) (1961). SFL is particularly adapted to survey the strategies employed by the translator in this context. On the one hand, because according to Lousie Ravelli (2006, p.302) SFL is well suited to the analysis of museum discourse and on the other hand because SFL provides a repeatable and scalable benchmark for comparative translation analysis.

In SFL, the creation of meaning is broken down into three dimensions or metafunctions:

- Ideational meaning – the subject matter of the text
- Interpersonal meaning – considers the relation between author and reader
- Textual meaning – is concerned with the form, or how the text is composed

Using SFL, it is possible to break down the differences that exist between English and French heritage texts. According to a case study by Guillot (2014, pp.74-89), English heritage texts tend to contain accessible information requiring little or no prerequisite knowledge, they are rather informal in terms of tone, often containing markers of orality and are rather short, overall, they make for accessible texts. French heritage texts on the other hand contain more specialised information and can assume prerequisite knowledge from the reader, their tone is rather formal and texts tend to be longer, overall, they feel more academic to the reader.

A French text, translated into English while maintaining French genre conventions could feel overly academic. Conversely, an English text, translated into French could appear to the reader as being too simple or informal. Yet, highlighting these differences allows to better understand and contrast heritage practices across cultures. In this respect, the accessibility of English heritage texts reflects current trends in heritage management with an increasing concern for accessibility and visitor engagement.

By way of example, I recently carried out a project for the Falkirk Community Trust and translated the exhibition material at the Kelpies Visitor Centre. For practical reasons there was an obvious shift in translation from spoken word to written text with the addition of some pieces of information. The result was that the translation felt somewhat more academic than the original English. However, I also strived to retain as much of the informal tone from the original as was possible, so that the readers would get a glimpse of the way heritage is experienced in the UK.

[Type here]

## IV. Conclusion

Translation fluency can be understood in varying ways, depending on where one stands. But, in the context of heritage translation, fluency should also be balanced with a certain degree of adherence to SL conventions to give the reader something to experience of the host culture.

At any rate, it is also necessary to engage more with international visitors to better understand how translation mediates their experience of, and engagement with, the host culture and its heritage. This is something that I will (hopefully) be able to attempt in the months to come – if and when people are able to travel again.

## V. References

- Agorni, M. (2012) 'Tourism communication: the translator's responsibility in the translation of cultural difference'. *Pasos. Revista de turismo y patrimonio cultural*, 10 (4), pp. 5-11.
- Guillot, M.-N. (2014) 'Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Translation: The case of museum texts as interlingual representation'. In: House, J. (ed.) *Translation: a multidisciplinary approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 73-95.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1961) 'Categories of the theory of grammar'. *Word*, 17 (3), pp. 241-292.
- Pierini, P. (2007) 'Quality in web translation: An investigation into UK and Italian tourism web sites'. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 8 85-103.
- Quétel-Brunner, B. and Griffin, K.A. (2014) 'Heritage Interpretation and Foreign Language Provision at Irish Visitor Attractions'. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 9 (2), pp. 95-113.
- Ravelli, L.J. (2006) 'Genre and the Museum Exhibition'. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, 2 (2), pp. 299-317.
- Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- Snell-Hornby, M. (1999) 'The Unlimate Confort: Word, text and the Translation of Tourist Brochures'. In: Anderman, G. and Rogers, M. (eds.) *Word, Text, Translation: Liber Amicorum for Peter Newmark*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, pp. 95-103.
- Sumberg, C. (2004) 'Brand Leadership at Stake'. *The Translator*, 10 (2), pp. 329-353.
- Valdeón, R.A. (2009) 'Info-promotional Material Discourse and its Translation: the case of the Asturian tourist board texts'. *Across Languages and Cultures*, 10 (1), pp. 21-47.
- Valdeón, R.A. (2015) 'Colonial Museums in the US (un)translated'. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 15 (3), pp. 362-375.