



capital translator

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The thrill of translating techno-thrillers: Mission Possible

“Je m’appelle Bond, James Bond”¹

by *Dimitra Hengen*

For those who believe the translating world is divided in two domains, literary translation and commercial translation, translating techno-thrillers can be a quite a risky adventure. Having translated several James Bond, science-fiction, and military action novels into French, I discovered that this enterprise requires military organization, scientific research, logistic capabilities and operational readiness; and, of course, intuitive writing skills.

The mission is indeed risky, and when you start to unfold the strategic map where the action is to take place, the terrain starts looking like a minefield. The traps are numerous and various in nature: technical descriptions of airplanes, radars, artillery sites, submarines, battleships, computer systems, and telecommunication systems. If your mission, as hard as it is, requires you to get basic training in these various existing defense and attack systems, it becomes an even more hazardous task. You have to get acquainted with newly invented spacecraft, genetic species and communication systems for which you have no name in French.

After you have assessed your capabilities and estimated the enemy forces, if you want to prevent your operation from getting off course, you must remember that you are, after all, translating a novel.

As with any military mission, you need to plan as much as possible in advance and provide for a back-up plan for when the enemy shows up in a different place than expected. Now you attach your parachute, close your eyes and jump. You will have time to get scared after you return to your home base — if you return.

First and foremost, organizing the research and hiring experts in the various fields of activity is essential. Obtaining research material on military equipment is an adventure by itself, sometimes requiring intelligence capabilities. When one of the airplanes you have to describe at length in French is the B2 Stealth bomber, a long kept secret, your task starts looking like a spy mission. American and French military specialists joined the mission to assist me understanding how various military airplanes, submarines, and battleships function, how they are organized and how they interact during

military operations. French and American fighter pilots threw themselves into the battle to help me survive dogfights. When thermo-guided missiles started chasing Vertical Take Off and Landing Sea Harriers, I finally learned which button to push to launch flares and chaff decoys.

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Bond

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Science fiction novels tested my survival skills. Managing mining activities on Titan, Saturn's largest moon, with equipment for which I had to invent a French name, is exciting. Discovering blue skinned aliens and dealing with their psychology made me feel as if I was writing a script for *The X Files*. When the author decided to use a specialized enzyme as a "molecular knife" to isolate and snip specific genes to cross both human and alien species, I had to stop for a while and get a crash course in genetics. I also called my doctor friends for help to review my work and keep my sanity.

After this operational stage was under way, the technical translation had been checked by experts and the texts had been reviewed for accuracy by consultants, I was left

with a battlefield scattered with technical parts. Cleaning up the style and organizing the story was not a minor undertaking, either. Following the author's thought like an elegant yet discrete shadow is an essential rule; however, because most action novels are read mainly by men, I had to make sure that the novels did not appear to be written by Barbara Cartland.

This is where my squad of pilots helped again. Since most dialogs were written in a jargon understood only by pilots, army soldiers, and navy seamen, translating US military slang used in the various branches into French slang spoken in the corresponding arms became a rescue mission.

Finally, as long as James Bond stuck to rescuing pretty girls from vicious enemies in his shining fighter plane, I was pleased to follow

him, for I could finally find some humor and even light sex in this otherwise dry masculine literature. But when he decided he had to solve a riddle by referring to Dante's *Inferno* to save himself from enemy fire, I became annoyed. Wasn't he getting off line? Still, overcoming this genre-mixing hurdle, I retrieved my dusty copy of *La Divina Commedia* in its original version and looked for an official translation to retrieve the names of all demons in French. Consumed by these hellish flames, in the end I rescued him and brought him home safely to Admiral M and Miss Money Penny. Mission accomplished. Au revoir, James. 



¹ "My name is Bond, James Bond"

Accreditation News

by William Keasbey

The demand for accreditation sittings in this area continues to be high. Because several people were unable to take the examination here in January because of limited space, we are planning to have another sitting on Saturday, April 24, at 1:30 p.m. in the same place, namely the Alexandria Graduate Education Center of The George Washington University, which is located near the King Street Metro stop in Alexandria. Those who wish to take the examination at this time should obtain registration forms from ATA Headquarters, telephone: 703-683-6100, fax: 703-683-6122, e-mail: Maggie@atanet.org. Please note that you must be a member of the American Translators Association to take the examination. Accreditation is available from Arabic, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German,

Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish into English and from English into Chinese and all of the previously named languages except Arabic. It is highly recommended that all persons who have not previously taken an accreditation examination take a practice test before attempting the actual examination. This test will be graded in the same manner as a real examination and returned to you, so that you can see how the grading process works, how well you do, and what you might need to do to prepare for the actual examination. The practice test is also available from ATA Headquarters.

As an additional aid to those who are thinking about taking the accreditation examination, the Chapter will hold an accreditation orientation seminar on Saturday, March 20, at 2 p.m. in the Cleveland

Park Branch of the DC Public Library at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Macomb Street. The first part of the seminar will provide general information about the accreditation program and an opportunity to ask questions. In the second part we shall divide up by language groups to discuss sample passages that the participants have translated at home with accredited group leaders. The seminar is free and open to all who wish to attend, but participants will derive the greatest benefit from the second part if they do the sample translations and come prepared to discuss them. To obtain a sample passage, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your request to Bill Keasbey, 5031 Alta Vista Road, Bethesda, MD 20814. Be sure to specify which language pair you want, e.g. Spanish to English. 

