



Mark Twain or *Marc* Twain: Lessons from Translating Twain's Oeuvre into French

JT Eissenberg

MA, French Studies, New York University

MS, Library & Information Science, Long Island University

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ABSTRACT

Translating and publishing a work of literature in a foreign country faces many hurdles. Mark Twain's short stories and novels were very quickly published and translated in France, but the speed of their appearance did not save them from these hurdles. By analyzing the experience of publishing Mark Twain's work in France we can better understand the linguistic and temporal challenges that translation contends with.

Introduction

In December 2025, I was offered the chance to dig through a crate of books donated to NYU's Institute of French Studies and choose one or two of the yellowed and tattered treasures to keep. Amongst the unorganized pile, I happened upon one that caught the eye: a collection of Mark

Twain short stories translated into French. Being a fan of literature and the French language, I decided to keep this book and rescue it from the mound of second-hand (or perhaps many more-hand) monographs and add it to my own personal library.

When I chose the book, I knew very little of Mark Twain, but I knew he was born Samuel Clemens in Missouri in 1835; he was a humorist, and he sometimes used words that would shock our modern sensibilities. Even knowing as little as I did, in my mind I associated Twain with *Americana*, that slippery word that evokes red barn doors, fireworks above a state-fair, and dusty red, white, and blue pinwheels. He wrote about the rolling hills of the South and the mighty roar of the Mississippi. He wrote about characters with famous American names like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. He wrote in a dialect as American as apple pie on windowsills and the star-spangled banner. So it was with a strange sense of mismatching and incongruity that I read the “Contes Choisis” (Chosen Tales) translated from English into French by Gabriel de Lautrec in the early 1900’s. It got me thinking about how popular Twain was across the Atlantic. Were his works easily accessible to a French Readership? How was his work translated? Were his publications in France much different from the original? Inspired by the serendipitous arrival of a translated collection of Mark Twain short stories into my hands, I began to wonder what it meant for a text to be published thousands of miles from where it was written?

What I found was a fascinating history mired by translational controversy and publishing adaptation. French audiences could relatively easily access Twain’s oeuvre, but translations weren’t always faithful to the original. By looking at the different publications of Twain’s work in France, especially the short story “Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog” and its translation woes, a great deal about the difficulties and complications of translating and publishing in a foreign context can be learned.

“Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog”

My copy of translated short stories by Mark Twain, published in the early 1900’s (after the death of Twain), opens with a short introduction by the translator, Gabriel de Lautrec, noting the difficulties of translating humorous short stories into a language different from the original text. He writes that humor is often based in untranslatable wordplay or is too culturally specific (i.e. a topic Americans find funny doesn’t mean French people will find it funny). For M. Gabriel de Lautrec, however, Twain was different: “*Il est plus accessible*” (He is more accessible)^[1]. Twain’s

stories were seemingly more easily adaptable to French. Despite Lautrec's claim, translating Twain into French was complicated, as seen in the translation history of "Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog," one of the stories - "*choisis*" - included in the compilation. As one of Twain's most popular short stories, it underwent a relatively quick translation, but the controversy surrounding the translation, spurred in large part by Twain himself, presents a more nuanced understanding of the accessibility Lautrec attributes to the American author.

On November 18th, 1865, Mark Twain published "Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog".^[2] The story was originally published in "The New York Saturday Press" in a column entitled "Afternoon Amusements To-day" (sic.). At the time, Twain was writing short stories for newspapers in California to earn money while living in San Francisco. For one month on the west coast (January 20 - February 22, 1865), he lived at Angels Camp, which would go on to serve as inspiration for the events of "Jim Smiley".^[3]

In this short story, the narrator is on a mission for a friend. His friend, who only exists in the story as a frame for the main action, asked him to search for Simon Wheeler in the mining camp where he was staying. Should the narrator find Mr. Wheeler, he is charged by the friend to ask Mr. Wheeler about a Leonidas W. Smiley. The main action of the story consists of the narrator writing back to his friend about what happened when he asked Simon Wheeler about Leonidas Smiley at a remote, western mining camp.

When the narrator asks Simon Wheeler about his friend's friend Leonidas Smiley, Wheeler sits him down, "blockades him with a chair" and in a boring, monotonous voice blathers about a completely different person who lived in the mining camp: Jim Smiley. Jim Smiley is a gambling addict, Wheeler tells. But in a world before DraftKings and FanDuel, Smiley sees himself limited to betting on the animals that live in and surround the mining camp. "Rat-terriers, chicken cocks, and tom-cats" were just some of the subjects of Smiley's gambling. Smiley also bet on frogs and how far they could jump. He claimed that his frog, that he trained, was the furthest jumping frog in all Calaveras County. When an outsider to the camp comes to visit, Smiley sees an opportunity. He proposes to risk money that his frog could out jump the frog of the newcomer. One problem: the outsider doesn't have a frog to serve as his champion. Hurriedly and desperate to gamble, Smiley volunteers to catch one for his adversary in the nearby swamp and runs off to accomplish his goal. While Smiley is wading around in the muck searching for a frog, the outsider, left alone with Smiley's toad, loads up the creature with "quail-shot" to weigh

him down. When Smiley returns with a second frog, the two gamblers watch with interest as both frogs are made to jump. Naturally, Smiley's frog is incapacitated and the newcomers frog wins, leaving Smiley "surprised", "disgusted", and eventually irate when he discovers the ruse.

EARLIEST TRANSLATION

The "Jim Smiley" tale was one of Twain's most popular works and as such was the subject of international interest from far-away countries like France. It was first translated into French by Marie-Therese Blanc, a well-known French literary critic who went by the pen name Bentzon. She titled her translation "La Grenouille Sauteuse de Comte de Calvaras," and it appeared in "*La Revue des Deux Mondes*," a French periodical in July, 1872.^[4] Like the original published in 1865, her version was published in a periodical instead of a bound book. Both the original and the Bentzon translation were also preceded by introductions of the author. In 1865, when the original appeared, Twain was still rather unknown. The introduction describes him as "a favorite contributor to the San Francisco press" who will soon be a regular of this New York based paper. In comparison by the first French publication, Twain is already well known and his work is described as a "*type du genre*", or an epitome of the genre. Whereas the introduction published with the original English version in 1865 is laudatory of the comedy in "Jim Smiley", Bentzon writes that it is difficult to understand the roars of laughter that the story has solicited. Then comes the first French translation of the Jumping Frog story that Bentzon says conserves in the best possible way the jeering tone of the original.

SUBSEQUENT TRANSLATION

Despite Bentzon's confusion regarding the success of Twain's story, "Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog" must have been appreciated by some readers across the Atlantic because in the early 1900's Gabriel de Lautrec also took a stab at translating the tale into French when he put together the collection of short stories that I found at the Institute of French Studies, "*Contes Choisis*." This small, pocket size book is 283 pages long and 8 inches tall. The cover is plain, with some ornamentation around the title. The exact date of its publication is unknown, but databases indicate it was sometime before 1920. It was published by Nelson, Editeurs who operated out of 189 Rue Saint-Jaques in Paris, but also had offices in London, Edinburgh, and New York. The copy that I have of "*Contes Choisis*" was printed in Great Britain. The main bibliographic difference between this version and the original from 1865 and the first French

translation in 1872 is that the “Jim Smiley” story is not a stand alone piece, but accompanied by other Twain stories. In fact, the story in question does not appear until page 177. Whereas in both “The New York Saturday Press” and “*La Revue des Deux Mondes*” were both periodicals that published Twain’s work on occasion, this book is dedicated to the humorous tales of Twain.

Similarly to the other editions, the book opens with an introduction to the work of Twain and his style of humor, as noted earlier. Both the introduction and the format of this book attest to the growing respect for the works of Twain in Europe.

TRANSLATION COMPARISON AND CRITIQUE

The first translation of Twain in France that appeared in “*La Revue des Deux Mondes*” was, according to scholar Mark Wilson, “fairly skillful.”^[5] Mark Twain, however, did not share that opinion and he eventually made that sentiment well known when in 1903 he published “Jumping Frog in English, then in French, then Clawed Back Into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil.”^[6] As the sardonic title suggests, “Jumping Frog in English” is not simply a revision of “Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog,” but rather a re-translation of the Bentzon translation back into English. In this 83 page publication, published by Harper & Bros. Publishers, the original 1865 English version is included, as well as the 1872 Bentzon translation, and then Twain re-translates the Bentzon version back into English to show how useless and unfunny the translation job was. He writes that the 1872 French version is “no more like the Jumping Frog” than “I am like a meridian of longitude.” Interestingly, this version is published with illustrations which testify to the ever growing popularity for this story and Twain himself.

Twain is not the only person who has noticed that in the process of translating, comedic and humorous elements are lost. Translation and humor scholars have long confronted this problem. Patrick Zabalbeascola, for instance, writes about the ways translators and humor studies scholars should work together to best overcome the difficulties of translating funny works. In his article “Humor and Translation - An Interdiscipline” he advocates for the cooperation of translators and humor scholars. He notes that historically, like Bentzon, translators have traditionally tried to remain faithful to the words in the original text.^[7] But “this formula quite frequently fails to work”, writes Zabalbeascola (Twain would agree). He goes on to describe a way of translating humor that starts by identifying joke types, for example wordplay or taboo. Then, by using binary branching as a form of mapping, the translator can “attempt to establish what type of criteria will guide their hand.” For Zabalbeascola, translating

humor is a very malleable practice where strict rules and dogmatic attention to the words on the page are potential pitfalls that disrupt translation practices. The translator should be willing to adapt, change, and modify the original source work in order to best translate humour. One of his final conclusions is that “sameness... does not entail that funniness will be preserved”.

When Twain published the 1903 version of “the Jumping Frog” he was expressly concerned with the loss of humor that the story went through. By looking at some examples from the 1903 text that combines three versions, we can see where the process of translation might have stripped the original of its tone.

In one moment, Jim Smiley, desperate to gamble on something, mindlessly places a bet with the town priest whose wife is sick. He unceremoniously and unsympathetically wagers that the priest’s wife will die from the illness. In the original Twain version, the phrasing looks like this:

Smiley up and asked him how she was, and he aims she was considerable(sic) better — thank the lord for his inf’nite mercy — and coming on so smart that with the blessing of Providence she’d get well yet; and Smiley, before he thought, says,” “Well, I’ll resk two-and-a-half she don’t anyway.

In “La Grenouille Sauteuse de Comte de Calvaras,” published in 1872 Bentzon translates the passage to this:

Smiley lui demande comment elle va, et il dit qu’elle est bien mieux, grâce à l’infinie miséricorde, tellement mieux qu’avec la bénédiction de la Providence elle s’en tirerait, et voilà que, sans y penser, Smiley répond: — Eh bien, ye gage deux et demi qu’elle mourra tout de même.

Twain’s 1903 retranslation of Bentzon’s work into English directly mimics the French grammar, demonstrating to his American audience what French readers would be reading:

Smiley him demanded how she goes, he said that she is well better, grace to the infinite misery, so much better that with the benediction of the Providence she herself of it would pull out and behold that with without there thinking Smiley responds: “Well, I gage two-and-half that she will die all of the same.”

The original passage is filled with vernacular and frontier speech that lends a certain abruptness and uneducation to the character of Jim Smiley. The humor comes from the incongruity of the gravity of the the potential death of the priest's wife with Smiley's thoughtless desire to gamble on it. In the French version, however, the word choice does not depict the uneducated and mindless nature of Smiley that makes this part of the story so funny. In Bentzon's translation, Smiley does not "resk", but "gages", a more grammatically correct and less humourous lexicon. This switch from a regional dialect to a more standard form of language in translations has been looked at before. When analyzing the translations of other Twain writings into Romanian, Alexandria Mitrea notes that Romance languages, like Romanian or French, tend to be "far more formal" than English. This formality was one of the reasons the Bentzon translation displeased Twain to such an extent.^[8]

A similar loss of humor appears in the translation's treatment of the name of Jim Smiley's jumping frog. In the 1865 original, Twain named Smiley's frog Daniel, but Smiley always calls him "Dan'l". To name a frog a human name like Daniel is the type of mismatch humor that Twain enjoyed, but by having the characters refer to the frog exclusively as "Dan'l", the author also adds a level of familiarity and camaraderie that one wouldn't expect between a man and a frog. In Bentzon's translation, this layer of comedy is lacking as the frog is referred to simply as "Daniel". By choosing the correct name, without shortening, Bentzon erases a layer of comedy in her translation that made the original so famous. Twain caught on to this humourless naming of the frog in the 1872 translation. When he published the 1903 compilation of the different versions of the "Jumping Frog", his re-translation back into English kept the name "Daniel" as Bentzon wrote it. It is doubtless that Twain recognized the comedic impact a more familiar version of the name had ("Dan'l") and so, in order to prove the lack of humour of the translation, he chose to keep Bentzon's use of "Daniel" in his re-translation of the story.

By reading the different publications of “Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog,” a great deal about the process of translating can be learned. To start, translation is an exercise that requires a deep knowledge of subject matter and cultural currency. Zalbaleascola wrote about the need for translators to be interdisciplinary and when translating humor, translators should be up to date on new humor related scholarship. The experience of “Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog” also teaches how translation work is never finished or static. The first French translation appeared in 1872, but was critiqued by Twain and then another appeared in the 1910’s. Different French translations doubtless popped up as time progressed.

Finally, the translation lessons gleaned from the experience of “Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog” was made possible through bibliographic comparisons of the different early publications I focused on: the 1865 original, the 1872 French translation by Bentzon, the 1903 Twain retranslation, and the 1910’s French translation of short stories that set me off on this adventure. It was thanks to the different editions and publications of this short story in newspapers then in the form of bound books that the difficulties of translating and the never ending nature of translation were revealed.

Author Bio:

JT Eissenberg is a dual-degree master student in French Studies and Library Sciences at New York University and Long Island University.

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