

Principles of Translating Children's Literature

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Abstract

Although in translation studies the translation of children's literature seems to have been somewhat neglected, it provides a very fertile ground for investigation. Research mainly focuses on the adopted translation strategies, which range from omissions and deletions to adaptations and, therefore, radical modification of the source text. This paper aims to take a closer look at some of the techniques used in the translation of CL and the reasons that govern the translators' decisions in implementing such techniques, among which the target readership with its special needs and general knowledge level.

Keywords

children's literature, adaptation, translation, explications

Within the field of translation studies, the translation of children's literature has been either ignored or insufficiently explored. The situation may stem from the fact that children's literature, which is mostly considered as belonging to peripheral literature, has not seemed to promise a fertile ground for research and analysis as far as translation is concerned. In fact, translating for children requires, on the translator's part, good knowledge of the child's psychology, special communication and linguistic skills – he should be knowledgeable not only of the language appropriate **for** children, but also of the language **of** children – plus special attention played to the semiotic part involved in the work, since texts written for children are often accompanied by illustrations and peculiar arrangements of the text on the page.

There are different trends referring to the translation of children's literature depending on the ways of considering CL itself, either as a peripheral part or as an important component of mainstream literature, with its own rules and norms. The linguists of the School of Tel Aviv define children's literature by integrating it in a "literary polysystem" (Shavit, 1986: 5). They are of the opinion that

the translator may take whatever liberties he chooses in translating CL, which suggests that they favour adaptation to the detriment of translation proper. They provide as arguments for their approach a certain number of features of CL, among which the scarce readings and life experience of the readers, which make them reluctant to the new and the strange.

The Tel Aviv scholars, who place great emphasis on the principle of acceptability, seem to ignore aspects referring to the loyalty to the original. Therefore, other scholars oppose this radical approach and propose, for the explicitation of new concepts introduced by the translators, the insertion of prefaces and footnotes in the target language. In this perspective, children's literature is not a special literary genre and that is why it should be written and translated as any other piece of literature.

Three important aspects need to be taken into account in the case of CL translation. One refers to the fact that the translator should make the message of the original accessible to children, without ceasing to be good literature. The second aspect refers to encouraging and promoting the international perspective and understanding of young readers. The third points out that, when the aim of the translation is purely pedagogical, a number of changes are allowed in the ST. These are motivated by the fact that the child may not have any knowledge of the foreign culture or because the translator considers that there are certain values in the ST which are not appropriate for the target culture (moral, religious or political values). In all these cases, suppression or change is recommended. It is in this context that the concept of "degree of adaptation" (Klingberg, 1985: 14) is used. It indicates the level of adaptation of the source text, operated by the author himself, so as to suit the needs of his target readership, which has to be maintained in the TT.

The translation of both texts for adults and for children broadly follows the same guidelines. But although there is a common theoretical framework for both translation types, the practice of translating children's literature reveals a number of specific problems which require the analysis of the main factors influencing the translation process. One of them is the asymmetry present in the process. An adult writes for children and another adult translates for them, that is for a group of people whose linguistic competence, experience and knowledge of the world are not fully developed.

Although the content, the structure and the language level are already adjusted in the source text, the translator has to produce a text adapted to other readers, who belong to a different culture and who may be of different ages.

A second factor concerns the fact that the translations are indirect, because there are always two types of readers: children on the one hand, and parents, teachers, editors, etc., on the other. The latter group exerts a tremendous pressure upon the translator. He will have to operate a series of omissions or adjustments of religious, political or pedagogical aspects present in the source text.

The third factor represents the children's limited world experience, which forces the translator to deal carefully with the rendering of cultural references. Thus, all the elements belonging to the socio-cultural context need to be handled with the help of more or less extended adaptations or explications. The use of these techniques depends on the function of each translation. Informative books do not need any adjustment, but when the function is to facilitate the familiarisation with another culture, a series of annotations and explications are to be given especially under the form of forewords or epilogues, which would provide children with a useful instrument for good comprehension of the text.

The translation of children's literature raises certain problems which derive from the special target readers, as well as from the aesthetic and linguistic characteristics of this genre. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, it is mainly governed by rules and conventions which guide the translation process in general. In the translation process, the principle of acceptability is of great relevance, particularly during the recent decades, when the reader and his needs have been the main focus of the transfer mechanism. The author's original goal cannot be faithfully rendered in the target language if the reader does not know what the text is supposed to do. For a text to be received as a piece of purposeful linguistic communication, it must be seen and accepted as a text. "Acceptability does not necessarily imply that the receiver believes the specific content of the text. It does require that the addressee be able to identify and extract those contents" (Neubert & Shreve, 1992: 70). The receiver must be able to determine what kind of text the sender intended to convey and what was to be achieved by sending it. One of the main goals of the

translation is to make the translation acceptable to an audience that does not know the conventions which govern the source culture.

The group of Tel Aviv scholars offers some norms upon which the translation of children's literature should rely. One principle is the adjustment of the text so as to make it appropriate and useful for the child, in compliance with what the target society considers educationally acceptable at a given moment in time. Another argument refers to the adjustment of plot, characters and language so as to suit the society's perceptions of children's ability to read and comprehend.

The relationships between these two principles have differed at distinct periods of time. Thus, in times when children's literature had highly didactic meanings, the first principle, based on the understanding of CL as a tool for education, was dominant. Nowadays, the perspective has changed and the second principle, that of adjusting the text to the child's level of comprehension, is the rule. Yet, it is possible that these two principles may not always coincide, and even be antagonistic. For example, it may be considered that a child is able to understand a text involved with death and yet, at the same time, the text may be regarded as harmful to his mental balance. In such a situation, the translated text may totally delete one aspect in favour of another, because the translator hesitates between the two above-mentioned principles.

The technique of abridging the text in the target language is an important issue in the translation of CL and it is mainly viewed in the light of the text affiliation to already existing models in the TL. The process of adjusting the text to suit a certain pattern does not only consist of omissions of certain elements. A manifestation of text adjustment is also represented by elements that the translator considers necessary to add to the original. These added elements are the best indicators of the coercing force of the model, since adding new elements to an already shortened text implies that the translator regards them as indispensable.

A certain degree of manipulation of the original text is encountered especially when adult books are transferred into the children's system. In this case, the main reason for all abridged texts for children is based on the supposition that children are usually incapable of reading lengthy texts. The decision of what to omit is the result of the need to revise the text in compliance with two main

criteria, in addition to system affiliation. First, the norm of morality accepted and demanded by the children's system, and second, the assumed level of comprehension of the target readership.

Consequently, a translator's decision to adjust the text so as to be suitable for children means that he has to shorten it and make it less complex at the same time. These two procedures may contradict each other because fewer elements are required to fulfil more functions. As a result, the translator needs to manipulate the text very carefully, in order to maintain the balance between the above-mentioned principles.

The simplest manipulation of the text consists of deleting undesirable elements or whole paragraphs. However, this option is not always available to the translator. Sometimes, the need to delete certain scenes may be highly problematic, especially when they are regarded as indispensable for the development of the plot. When a translator assumes that a certain paragraph will not be understood by children, he will make changes and deletions in order to adjust it to the appropriate level of comprehension.

The complexity of the translated text is affected by the need to shorten the text and the demand for a less complicated end product. When shortening a text, translators have to make sure they also reduce the ratio between elements and functions, and have less elements carry even fewer functions. In contrast to adult literature in which the norm of complexity is prevalent, the norm of simplified models is still prominent in CL. "This norm tends to determine not only the themes and characterization of the text, but also its options concerning permissible structures" (Shavit, 1986: 24).

A frequent strategy adopted when translating CL is adaptation. The main difference between translation and adaptation is that translation is an equivalent bilingual activity, with functional and intentional purposes, while adaptation is a bilingual activity which reflects the change of intentional and functional structure of the ST when translated into the TL (PascueFebles, 2000: 56).

In CL, adaptations have been used since its very beginning. The terms "fairy tale" and "adaptation" used to appear in the same context and were used interchangeably, which was quite logical given the fact that the initial form of fairy tales was oral. Sometimes, the importance of these adaptations was reduced to cultural particularities (Cinderella's shoes were made of silk in China, whereas in Europe

they were of crystal); other times, the author's intentions were completely modified, as was the case with Defoe and Swift's books. During certain periods, the distinctive trait of adaptations was their status of anonymity, the invisibility of the "second" author.

The somewhat marginal status of children's literature is also reflected, as can be noted, by the treatment of this literary genre in translation. Over centuries, the approach to the translation of children's literature has varied with the very perspective on CL. However, a common feature of all approaches to translation in this particular field is the greater freedom translators seem to be taking, and which mainly takes the form of adaptations, omissions and explicitations as preferred strategies. These are dictated by the special target readership, with its limited knowledge of the world and of cultural, social and religious concepts.

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