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Challenges in Children's Literature Translation: A Theoretical Overview

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Abstract

There is an increasing demand for the translation of children's literature nowadays, and this demand is accompanied by an increased need for researchers to study the nature and features of such a discipline. It is worth mentioning that the term "children's literature" in English-speaking countries is a broader term covering children, adolescents and sometimes young adults. The present paper aims to highlight some comprehensive theoretical aspects concerning children's literature translation. Special attention is paid to the issues which have generated intense and ongoing debate among theoreticians as to which translation strategies and procedures would be more beneficial to the target-language child reader. Before elaborating on such issues, this paper casts some light on the various definitions of children's literature and its characteristics, its status and the influence it exerts on the potential readership. The ambivalence of children's literature – the texts being addressed to both children and adults – constitutes one of the biggest challenges for the author and the translator of children's literature alike. Such a phenomenon is investigated in this paper and illustrated with some book titles. Another feature which is tackled in this paper is that of asymmetry, which refers to the unequal communication levels between adults and children. Finally, conclusions will be drawn regarding the most popular theoretical trends in children's literature and children's literature translation.

Keywords: children's literature, translation strategies, polisystem theory, scopos theory, ambivalence.

Introduction

There are some reasons behind the assumption that children's literature is a minor and peripheral literary form in many cultures, including that of Albania. According to Zohar Shavit, this is due to the fact that the emergence and development of children's literature have followed common patterns across different countries (1996: 27). This condition of inferiority derives from the history and tradition of this body of literature, which are strictly bound to those of childhood, representing a minority group that has historically suffered a status of inferiority and subordination to other groups.

Thus, the main system of literature tends not to attribute a high value to literature for children, which, in turn, has resulted in limited literary research. The most evident repercussion of this peripheral status on the translation of books for children has been identified by many (Shavit, O'Sullivan, among others) in the marked tendency of translated children's books towards 'acceptability' introduced by Toury, 'domestication' introduced by Venuti, or, in other words, Schleiermacher's well-known principle of 'bringing the author towards the reader' (49).

The great freedom allowed to translators and/or editors, and the high degree of rewriting, abridging, adapting, and other kinds of intervention that books for children have undergone, seem to derive from the specific attitude adopted towards the genre in the target context; the more this was considered peripheral, marginalized, and of little literary merit, the more freedom seemed to be allowed in translating works for children. Klingberg, in his book *Children's Fiction in the Hands of Translators*, states that the extent to which the characteristics of young readers are taken into consideration can be referred to as the degree of adaptation and that it should be preserved in translation because the original should not change as far as the level of difficulty or interest is concerned (1986).

Definitions of Children's Literature

Several attempts have been made on the part of scholars to provide a unanimously accepted definition of what can be considered children's literature. There are scholars who even go so far as to question the existence of children's literature. As Jack Zipes (2001) puts it, in "Why Children's Literature Does Not Exist," "There has never been a literature conceived by children for children, a literature that belongs to children, and there never will be." Another researcher who raises the question whether there is a need to define children's literature at all is Riita Oittinen, who argues that works of literature and whole literary genres acquire different meanings and are redefined again and again. It might, therefore, well be that today's adult literature is tomorrow's children's literature (1993: 42,43). Gulliver's Travel proves this definition right. According to Klingberg, the term children's literature can refer to different concepts, such as literature recommended to children, literature read by children, and literature published for them (2008:8).

The cultural concepts of "children" and "childhood" also change radically with time, place, gender, and perceiver, and so the corpus of texts ("children's literature") is unstable. Childhood two hundred years ago (and consequently the books designed for it) may seem so remote from current childhood and its texts that a distinction might be made between "historical children's literature", or books that were for children, and "contemporary children's literature," books that address or relate to recognizable current childhoods (P. Hunt 1996; Flynn 1997).

The body of texts can be seen as a symbiotic movable feast: the book defines its audience, which is children, and that in turn affects how children are generally defined as well as how they will actually be in the future. In this context, the term "children" is increasingly being interpreted as "comparatively inexperienced/ unskilled readers." (Nell & Paul: 2001: 43) Jacqueline Rose, who, in The Case of Peter Pan (1984), carefully uses the term "children's fiction," suggests that children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written, but that it hangs on…. the impossible relation between adult and child….". Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enters the space in between (ibid: 44).

Characteristics of Children's Literature

Before we elaborate on the challenges of children's literature translation, it is essential to refer to some peculiarities and characteristics of children's literature as such. One of the characteristics of children's literature is its ambivalence due to its dual readership. To Rurvin and Orlati, ambivalent texts are those "written for and received by both adults and children at various textual levels of both production and reception" (2006: 159). This is a challenge for a translator and an issue of concern in children's literature translation. To quote Metcalf: "More children's books than ever before address a dual audience of children and adults, which on the other hand comes with a dual challenge for the translator, who now has to address both audiences in the translated literature" (2003: 323). Preserving multiple levels in the text—the conventional one to be simply realized by the child reader, the other one only understandable to adults—is one of the biggest challenges for translators of children's literature (Frimmelova 2010: 35). The Harry Potter saga is a very good illustration of an ambivalent text. Hundreds of pages and a seven-book compilation cannot be appealing to teenagers only, not to mention the linguistic complexities and layers it encompasses due to the author's sophisticated style of writing.

Asymmetry is another feature of children's literature, which characterizes the relationship between the writers, who are adults, and the readers, who are children. When the partners in communication are not equal, communication structures are asymmetric. Children's literature differs from adult literature in that the authors of children's books and their audience have different levels of knowledge and experience. It is adults who decide on the literary form, and it is they who decide

what to publish and what to sell, without giving children a chance to decide for themselves.

Another important characteristic of children's literature, seen from a pedagogical viewpoint, is that it educates the child reader. As Puurtinen points out, adults expect children's literature to help in the development of the child's linguistic skills. Therefore, there might be a stronger tendency for authors and translators of children's literature to normalize the texts by grammaticising them, in order to avoid the readership learning faulty grammar from the books. (Puurtinen: 1998)

Theoretical Aspects of Children's Literature Translation:

There are two main trends in translation procedures: source-oriented translation and target-oriented translation. The first approach advocates the preservation of the source language and cultural characteristics (being faithful to form and meaning), whereas the latter favors the "merging" of the source text into the target language culture, bringing it closer to the readership. Instead of aiming at an adequate translation, the translator should aim at an acceptable translation, considering the fact that children's reading abilities are not as advanced as adults' and their knowledge of the world is limited. "It is the task of the translator to decide how she/he will compensate for the children's lack of background knowledge without oversimplifying the original and forcing children into simple texts that have lost any feature of difficulty, foreignness, challenge and difficulty". (Ztolze 2003: 209)

In the late 1980s, Klingberg, in his *Children's Fiction in the Hands of the Translators*, criticized what he perceived as the most common way to translate books for children. In his view, the main aim of this activity should be to enrich the reader's knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures. Yet, most translators' interventions in source texts—what he categorizes as 'cultural context adaptations', 'purifications' 'modernizations', 'abridgements' and 'serious mistranslations'—hinder that aim. Klingberg suggested that translation strategies which tend to preserve the foreign spirit of the originals should be preferred, so that the child reader can become acquainted with the country and the culture from which those books come.

Zohan Shavit has made an important contribution to the translation of children's literature in that she utilized the polysystem theory introduced by Itamar Evan-Zohar to explain the translational pattern of children's literature. Polysystem theory had a strong impact on research into the translation of children's literature, because it elevated a genre regarded as minor to a central object of research. "The polysystem is conceived as a heterogeneous, hierarchized conglomerate of systems which interact to bring about an ongoing, dynamic process of evaluation within the polysystem as a whole. Evan Zohar' polysystem theory places literature in two positions: in the center and periphery. The closer to the periphery the lower the cultural status of the subsystem is within the polysystem. Translated literature

constitutes one of the subsystems and it might position itself either in the center representing a significant part of a country's literature or remaining in the periphery and imposing less influence." (Baker, 1998: 176)

According to Shavit, unlike contemporary translators of adult books, the translator of children's literature can take great liberties with the text as a result of the peripheral position of children's literature within the polysystem. That is, the translator is permitted to manipulate the text in various ways, by changing, enlarging, or abridging it, or by deleting or adding to it (1986: 111). "In viewing translation as part of a transfer process, it must be stressed that the subject at stake is not just translations of texts from one language to another, but also the translations of texts from one system to another -- for example, translations from the adult system into the children's." (Shavit 1986: 111)

Another translation theory that has made a great contribution to the translation process of children's literature is Vermeer and Reiss's Scopos theory. The scopos (purpose) of translation is the main criterion of this theory, which shifted attention from the source-oriented approach to target-oriented procedures, thus putting the reader at the center of this process. As a result of this approach, the status and responsibilities of the translator changed as well, allowing more freedom to resort to strategies that meet children's special demands as the primary readers. "The translator is "the" expert in translational action. He is responsible for the translational action". (Vermeer 223: 223) According to scopos theory, the translator is considered a "cultural product" and the process of translation "a culture-sensitive procedure". (Vermeer in Mary, and Kaindl: 1994). In the context of children's literature, scopos theory brought about significant changes to the status of translators, readers, and the translation process.

Conclusion

The study of children's literature is a well-established discipline and many scholars are contributing to it, despite the misconception that children's literature is of less importance and less sophisticated than adult literature. On the other hand, translation studies of children's literature is still embryonic, and only in the last two decades have theorists begun elaborating translation strategies with a focus on children as a target group and their reading competences and demands.

The primary aim of this paper has been to give an overall view of children's literature and its translation from a theoretical perspective. Even though an attempt has been made to provide a panorama of the current situation of this field, it was impossible, due to the length constraints of this paper, to cover all the facets of this discipline.

However, it can be concluded that there is no definitive definition of children's literature because of the wide range of topics, genres, and elements it covers, as well as the fact that this kind of literature is written by adults and addressed to children.

There are scholars who believe that there is no such thing as children's literature due to the fact that the child reader is a passive actor who is offered everything that adults consider appropriate for them.

As far as the characteristics of children's literature are concerned, it was observed that such texts appeal to children as well as adults, and such ambivalence constitutes one of the biggest challenges for both writers and translators. Asymmetry was another feature of children's literature that was highlighted in this paper. Asymmetry refers to the relationship between writers, who are adults, and readers, who are children. Additionally, from a pedagogical viewpoint, the purpose of children's literature is to educate.

In analyzing the theoretical aspects of translation, it was observed that different theoreticians have different approaches as to whether to preserve the culture of the source text during the translation process or simplify it and replace culture-bound words with their equivalents in the target language. Finally, we must say that, no matter what strategy the translator resorts to, he/she must produce a text which conveys elements of the unusual, but it must be acceptable and easy to read and remember, without underestimating children's knowledge of the world.

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