Adaptation in Children’s Literature Translation: A narrative theory approach

Essay by Cat Mansfield

Introduction

While questions of ‘faithfulness’ and ‘equivalence’ to the source text often predominate in discussions about the translation of adult literature, critics such as Stolt (2006:70) argue that a different approach is evident in children’s literature translation: “The most prominent position is not occupied by the tradition of faithful translation but that of adaptation, whereby hardly any limits are set to the arbitrariness of the adapter.” In this essay I will draw on Somers and Gibson’s theory of the active identity-constructing nature of narrativity to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of adaptation in children’s literature translation, drawing on examples from leading theorists in the field.

Children’s literature and narrative identity

It has long been posited that humans use narratives in order to impose structure and moral sense on our experiences and thereby better understand our lives (for example, see White 1987). Somers and Gibson (1994:39) propose that narratives also help us to construct our identities and guide our actions: “People are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives.”

Somers and Gibson identify four types of narratives: ontological (or personal), public, metanarratives and conceptual narratives. In this essay I will draw particularly on the two concepts of personal and public narratives. Ontological, or personal narratives, are “the stories that social actors use to make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives.” (Ibid:61). Public narratives are “those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual” (Ibid:62), such as family, workplace, church, and government. Both types of narrative are central to the key concept of “narrative identity.” Somers and Gibson (Ibid:65) write that “the narrative identity approach embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over space and time.” The construction of our narrative identity involves a complex relationship of the personal and public narratives to which we
subscribe. The narratives which we select, or ‘subscribe to’, contribute directly to our sense of self, or narrative identity, which informs and directs our actions.

This understanding of narrative as central to the construction of our identities can help us to understand the importance attached to storytelling for children in many societies. By telling children stories we provide them with narratives in which to inhabit, to begin the process of narrative identity construction which we practice throughout our lives. We construct our personal narratives by selecting from countless experiences, “the vast array of open-ended and overlapping events that constitute experience” (Baker 2007:155), using “causal emplotment” (Somers and Gibson 1994:59) to give these experiences the meaning and form of a narrative. Children, like adults, construct their narratives by selecting from events at home, at school, or with friends. However, a child’s experience is limited. By providing children with stories, we offer them experiences to add to their repertoire. The fact that children often act out their favourite stories in play, and may even be influenced to choose certain actions rather than others as a result of the stories which they have appropriated as part of their narrative identity, demonstrates how they are learning to interpret and select narratives to construct reality. As children, just as adults, we constantly develop and adjust our sense of self, selecting from the various narratives available to us.

The narratives which we can appropriate or ‘subscribe to’ are not limitless. Somers and Gibson (Ibid:73) emphasise that the availability of narratives at any given time is connected to power struggles, with certain narratives dominating over others: “There is only a limited repertoire of available representations and stories. Which kinds of narratives will socially predominate is contested politically and will depend in large part on the distribution of power.” Our access to narratives therefore depends on power relations. Somers and Gibson (Ibid:38) write that “stories guide actions; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories” [my italics]. The idea that some people can “be located” within narratives is important here; while we all select from available narratives to construct our narrative identity, which narratives are available to choose from can be controlled and restricted by people in a position of power. I would argue that this is the case with children’s literature, as the narratives made available for children to inhabit through literature is controlled by adults.
The role of translation

Many children’s literature theorists have discussed the imbalance of power between adults (the producers) and children (the consumers). Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996:43) point out that adults are “more powerful than children socially, economically and physically.” It is adults who produce and circulate books for children. In the case of translated children’s literature, another significant adult is introduced: the translator. As Oittinen (2006:36) puts it, “even though translators need to translate for children, it is the adults who select the books that need to be translated, it is the adults who translate them and buy the translations for children. It is also the adults who usually read the book aloud.” The translator takes a pivotal role in determining which narratives will be available for appropriation by the child. Lathey (2006:7) writes that “translators in the UK have historically exercised a degree of control in presenting their interpretations of prevailing value systems.” This may be done in two ways. Firstly, in many cases the translator is instrumental in choosing the text to be translated. Secondly, the translator may introduce significant changes to the text.

In my introduction I highlighted Stolt’s observation that an “adaptation” approach is taken more often in the translation of children’s literature than adult literature. Some critics attribute this to the low status of children’s literature, which gives translators greater freedom to change the source text (see Andersen 2000). However, we can also interpret it as evidence of the translator’s sense of responsibility towards the child reader of the target text. This relates to the adult position of power over children; translators of children’s literature make decisions on behalf of the child reader regarding which narratives should be made available to them, and whether elements – either in content or style – are inappropriate for them. In other words, translators actively adapt elements to fit in with the public and private narratives to which she or he subscribes regarding what a child should think and be.

Adaptation and ‘child image’

O’Sullivan (2005) argues that decisions about what to include and exclude in children’s literature translation are based on two key factors: the ideological aim of transmitting cultural norms and the translator or publisher’s beliefs about the extent to which the child reader can understand foreignness.

It is clear that some translators of children’s texts introduce changes in order to fit with certain beliefs dominant in the target culture. From the perspective of narrative theory, we can interpret this to mean that one or more aspects of the source text clash with a dominant
public narrative in the target society, as perceived by the translator. Øster (150) gives the example of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Den lille pige med svovlstikkerne* [*The Little Match Girl*], originally published in Danish in 1846. In a 1944 American translation, the ending is changed so that instead of dying and being reunited with her grandmother in heaven, the little match girl is taken in by an elderly woman who brings her up as her own grandchild. The American translator is writing for children living in a time and place far removed from that of the original target audience. The translator appears to have felt that the original ending clashed with contemporary narratives about childhood, for example, the narrative that children need to be protected from thoughts of death. At the time and place when the source text was written, the death of children was a common event. Rather than sheltering children from it, a dominant public narrative told that children should be reconciled with death through the Christian message of the afterlife. In the time and place of the target text, this public narrative has changed and the translator adjusts accordingly.

As with most – and perhaps all – instances of adaptation in children’s literature, the above example illustrates how the translator makes changes to fit in with the narratives she or he subscribes to, both public and personal, about children and childhood. As Øster (2006:150) puts it, “translations are often adapted to the adult’s conception of what children are... The author’s as well as the translator’s approach will often be based on their child image and that of the society of the day.” The translator writes with an image of the target child reader in mind, and this image – which I will call the ‘child image’ – is based on the narratives regarding childhood in which the translator is embedded.

Adaptations are also made when there is apparently little different between the narratives about childhood dominant in the source and target culture. I will take the example of Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Långstrump* [*Pippi Longstocking*], cited by O’Sullivan (2005:83). First published in 1945, the book initially met with critical acclaim in Sweden. However, in the 1960s it came under criticism for its protagonist’s rebellious character, leading to public debate about whether Pippi was a suitable role model for children. The potentially problematic role model element had already been repressed in the 1965 German translation. For example, in an episode in which Pippi and her friends are playing with guns, the German Pippi instead gives them a lecture on the dangers of playing with firearms: “Translation had already acted as a filter absorbing some aspects of the text considered unacceptable in the target culture because they celebrated disrespect for adult authority and ridiculed the norms of child-rearing and civilised society” (Ibid:83). However this example does not point towards a clash of dominant narratives between the two countries. It rather highlights the German translator’s personal response to elements in the book which clash with narratives she
subscribes to regarding child image. Temporal shifts in narratives appear to be work again here to some extent; changing fashions in child rearing, which led to the debates about Pippi in Sweden, may be affecting the translator. However, what is interesting is that the translator has actively chosen her side of the debate – the opposing side to the target text author – and acted on it. It is interesting to see how she seems to feel a personal responsibility to protect German children from exposure to the narratives represented by Pippi; and therefore she has actively suppressed the m. The fact that Swedish children have been exposed to these elements does not affect her decision.

**Suppression of foreign elements**

This leads us to the second part of O’Sullivan’s assertion, regarding ‘foreignness.’ Many translators explain their choice of domesticating strategies in children’s literature by asserting that children will be confused by signs of foreignness in a text. Oittinen (2006:43) expresses a common belief when she suggests that, if a book contains many foreign elements, “the child reader may very well be unwilling to read the translated text, finding it too strange.” However, O’Sullivan (2005:91) points out the lack of empirical evidence for such a theory, noting that there have been no major studies into adult or child responses to foreign elements in literature. Furthermore, she notes that children are constantly coming up against “foreign” elements; everything that they experience for the first time is foreign in their eyes: “This foreignness initially has nothing to do with cultural difference” (Ibid:93). It seems, therefore, that the extent to which ‘foreignness” in a text is appropriate for children is decided for them by the adult translators.

The impulse to exclude ‘otherness’ in the foreign text may be seen as a strategy to give the child the impression that the narratives embedded in the text – which usually reflect the dominant narratives of the target text society – are unchanging and eternal. There is actually nothing eternal or universal about the dominant narratives of a particular time or place. Narratives are in fact highly temporal: Somers and Gibson (1994:59) identify “temporality, sequence and place” as key attributes of narratives. The question of which public narratives will dominate at any particular time or place is a matter of power play, and changes over time. Knowles and Malmkjer (1996:59) note that one strategy used in children’s literature in order to transmit ideology is that of reification, in which “relations of domination which are in effect transitory, historical states are presented as though they were timeless, natural and permanent.” Again, the translator acts on behalf of the child and the child image to which they subscribe, protecting the child from the influence of narratives from
‘foreign’ societies, creating an illusion of permanence and universality of the target culture narratives as a way of encouraging the child to subscribe to these.

The shifting nature of narratives

Perhaps the greatest strength of narrative theory is its fluidity and rejection of categorising or totalising approaches. Although we can note a general trend towards adapting aspects of translated children’s literature to the dominant public narratives of a particular time and place, narrative theory allows us to recognise that translators are not simply the ‘instrument of their culture’ or motivated by one ideology; like all people they are complex individuals whose identities are constructed by an intricate pattern of different narratives. As Baker (2007:154) puts it, narrative theory “recognises the complexity of being embedded in crisscrossing, even competing, narratives.”

At certain times and in certain places, one particular public narrative will become so dominant that all other narratives must submit to it or be eradicated. Thomson-Wohllyemuth describes how in socialist East Germany, all literature was strictly censored in order to contribute to the creation of “a new kind of personality, the so-called ‘socialist personality’.” (p48). Through literature, both adults and children were guided to embed themselves within this narrative, enlisting it in the construction of their own narrative identity. Thomson-Wohllyemuth (2006:51) describes how translated literature for children was chosen for the role models that it provided: “literature that depicted brave, active and energetic heroes the children could use as a role model.” Here, the choice of narratives from which children were encouraged to construct their personal narratives was strictly limited and controlled by a central body; any elements which clashed with this narrative would not be published.

However, in most cases where publishing is not controlled by one ideological body, translators are able to draw on many facets of their own complex narrative identity. As a result, often within a single text we see a range of different, sometimes conflicting strategies. O’Sullivan (2005:99) asserts that, rather than taking a fully foreignising or domesticating approach, most translators of children’s literature adopt “a combination of the various strategies”, suggesting a combination of narratives at play, stopping any one approach dominating over the others. Lathey (2006:14) gives an example of a translator of Collodi’s Pinocchio who seems to struggle to identify her implied reader, torn on one side by the demands of her academic background and on the other hand by her child image. Lathey (Ibid:14) describes this as “the dilemma of an academic translator who privileges accuracy
but at the same time wishes to convey the liveliness of a text imbued with the language and concerns of childhood." This suggests a conflict within the translator’s narrative identity, between the parts of her personal narrative drawn from the academic world and the narratives she subscribes to about childhood, leading to inconsistency within the text.

We have argued that it is narratives about the child - and what is appropriate for the imagined child reader - that guide most of the decisions made by translators of children’s literature. I would argue that narratives about the child are also the source of much of the variation within translated texts. While there may be dominant public narratives within a given society regarding aspects of childhood, each person also subscribes to their own personal narratives about childhood based on their own experiences. After all, the one thing that all adults have in common is that they have all been a child; and yet, for each adult that experience may have been dramatically different. Oittinen (2006:41) sums up the complexity of each translator’s child image: “On the one hand, it is something unique, based on each individual’s personal history; on the other hand, it is something collectivised in all society. Anything we create for children reflects our views on being a child.”

Conclusion

O’Sullivan (2005:105) argues that the voice of the translator is more “audible” in translated children’s literature than in adult literature; that the voice of the translator often diverges from the source text author’s voice, allowing us greater insight into the translator’s personal beliefs. I have argued that the translator takes a more active role in children’s literature translation out of a sense of responsibility for the target text child reader, and a desire to adjust the text to fit with the narratives about childhood to which the translator subscribes. As well as helping us to understand translators’ motives for adaptation, narrative theory allows us to embrace and accept the contradictions inherent within texts, as well as cases which go against the norms for adaptation, rather than labelling them as ‘deviations’. In the words of Somers and Gibson (1994:76), a narrative theory approach is “less concerned with ‘deviation’ and more fascinated with ‘variation.’” Narrative theory gives us an insight into the intricacy of each person’s view of childhood, helping us to understand the complex reasons behind choices in the translation of children’s literature.

Word count: 2,935
Bibliography


