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Translating for Children: Responsibility, Dialogue and the Role of the Translator

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Translators occupy a privileged position when translating works written for a young audience as they are simultaneously ideal readers and authors of the target texts. The apparently easy task of translating children's literature relies on the translator's responsibility to keep the author of the source text and the readership in mind. If we consider children's literature as an opportunity for young readers to shape their own image of the world and – with reference to youth literature – reflect on their identity, translations can nurture a silent dialogue between the reader and the book during reading. This paper outlines the position of children's literature in academia and the shared multidisciplinary dimension with translation in order to discuss the value of translations and the role of translators as responsible for nurturing a narrative dialogue with young readers.

Keywords: children's literature, literature as dialogue, translation, translator's responsibility, young readers

Children's literature has come a long way from being the “great excluded”¹ from highbrow, adult literature, to the status of an academic discipline at universities around the world. From a broader perspective, the peripheral position of children's literature was originally outlined in 1986 by Zohar Shavit. As a “legitimate field of academic scholarship” (Shavit 1992: 1), it attracted the attention of different disciplines: pedagogy, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, history, semiotics, and more. Children's literature

¹ This expression was borrowed from Natalie Babbit by Francelia Butler in the first volume of a collection called *The Great Excluded: Critical Essays on Children's Literature* published in 1972. Butler championed the cause of children's literature in academia and was aware of the (lack of) status of this discipline in Europe to the point that she spurred a critical debate in the United States “to stimulate the writing, teaching, and study of children's literature by humanists” (as cited in Higonnet 2022: 1).

offers various avenues of exploration, especially given its relatively recent emergence as a field of study. An example of the crucial role played by art history and pedagogy in the definition of children's literature as a multidisciplinary area of research is its evolution in Italy. Benedetto Croce's² devaluation of children's literature³ diminished its perceived relevance as a subject worthy of academic study.

However, a number of scholars in the humanities developed a new, different approach to define the core characteristics of children's literature in academia. Among others, Antonio Faeti at the University of Bologna introduced a groundbreaking critical analysis of illustrations in children's books and periodicals in *Guardare le figure* [Look at the Pictures] (1972), where the role of the "figurinaio" (illustrator) becomes central to understanding how illustrations took on the responsibility of portraying life in all its nuances, including its darkest aspects. This was possible precisely because illustrators, while engaging with the core values of society and canonical literature, had the freedom to express their ideas and entertain their audience beyond the standardised channels.⁴ Their social impact and sensitivity to difference facilitated a critical approach to texts, allowing them to explore narrative gaps, and foster open, direct communication with young readers. "Communication" is key to the revolution initiated by Faeti, in which children's literature was given the task of developing the ability of young people to relate to the world around them.

Anna Maria Bernardinis, at the University of Padua, traced the steps of the evolution of children's literature in academic research. Bernardinis argues that the true potential of children's literature lies in the cultural heritage passed down through generations. It bridges past and future, fostering the present dialogue between the author and the reader, who come together within the pages of the book.

Following in Bernardini's footsteps, Renata Lollo at Università Cattolica in Milan viewed children's literature as a crossroads⁵ where the book becomes the focal point of a cooperative dialogue between the author and the reader in a "generative process resulting from the extension and specialisation of children's literature that benefited the publishing industry"⁶ (Fava 2019: 404). The intersection of several disciplines discussing

² Benedetto Croce (1866 – 1952) was an influential Italian philosopher whose work in aesthetics is particularly prominent. He developed a theory of art, giving art and imaginative knowledge precedence over other human ways of expression.

³ For a recent interpretation of Croce's stance towards literature for children and its development in the current academic debate in Italy, see Sabrina Fava (2019).

⁴ Faeti describes "figurinaio" as professionals of the masses, as those who disseminate the communicative power of the extraordinary, the heritage of an ancient tradition full of contradictions that expressed itself through fear, the uncommon, the unpleasant. According to Faeti, among the pioneers of such visions are Wilhelm Busch and Heinrich Hoffmann, with works that showcased mischievous or marginalised characters.

⁵ Lollo explored this relation in depth over her research career. In her essay focusing on the actors of the triadic relationship (2021a), she delved into the apparent simplicity of children's literature to unearth the complex relations between the adult and the child, with the book as "crocevia di relazioni" (crossroads of relationships), revealing issues of freedom, identity, power and culture.

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian are by the author of this paper.

the complexity of children's literature has illuminated new perspectives in the study of this subject in academia.

Similarly, translation attracted the interest of scholars from different fields after the Second World War. James S. Holmes stated that this interest came not only from “the adjacent fields of linguistics, linguistic philosophy, and literary studies, but also from such seemingly more remote disciplines as information theory, logic, and mathematics” (2000: 173) in search of a common theoretical ground. This ground was to become known as Translation Studies (TS), originally conceived by Holmes at the crossroads with linguistics and Comparative Literature. Holmes's work reflected the inherent tension between the precision required by linguistic studies with their prescriptive nature, and the descriptive approach of literary studies, which explored the multitude of ideological and historical elements in the receiving contexts to better understand the dissemination of literary works.

A turning point in the evolution of Translation Studies was Gideon Toury's (1995) *Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS)* in which he examined, among other cases, the Hebrew translation of Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* to provide an example of the benefits of a comparative text analysis combined with cultural details of the receiving context in order to describe the translation choices in the Hebrew text. Toury's approach found fertile ground in connection with the so-called “cultural-turn” initiated by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere at the end of the 20th century, when the “description of the translated text in its socio-historical setting has proved to be particularly relevant to the study of translations for children” (Lathey 2006: 13).

Translators' identity

The cultural turn in TS examined various aspects of the production of translated texts to generate reliable data for research: from the role of “patrons” or initiators of translations to the function of publishing houses as distribution networks, and to the characteristics of the target audience.

In relation to the book as product, the study of peritextual material can effectively define the way publishers offer translations to the public, or how translators in prefaces or postfaces discuss with readers the value of translations.⁷ This material “informs the researcher about the conventions, concepts and expectations of a society regarding translated texts” (Tahir Gürçağlar 2011: 113) and becomes particularly useful to understand the position of translated children's literature through time and between cultures. Gillian Lathey's work on “invisible storytellers” (2010) exemplifies the relevance of paratextual sources to trace the history of translations for children into English. Translators are experts in the undetected art of telling stories, from one language to another, from one culture to another. Their impact on the shaping of core literature and of generations of readers has been crucial to the point that rewritings, adaptations and

⁷ Among the numerous edited collections of such material, André Lefevere's *Translation/History/Culture* (1992) provides a diachronic overview of the multifarious visions of translation by different writers, philosophers, theologians, etc., which provided an insight into their concept of the act of translating.

translations have contributed to the diffusion of works that were originally written for adults but soon became favourite books for young people around the world. Such was the fate of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in the 18th century, to name but a couple of well-known literary characters that captivated adults and children alike (O'Sullivan 2005: 32).

Translators' identities have gained attention very recently, owing to the work of scholars who have dedicated their studies to the strategies, cultural contexts, training, and prizes that have helped translation to become recognised as a challenging task requiring specific knowledge, dedication and preparation.⁸ More specifically, translation for children does not just involve the ability to understand another culture through its language, literature or society, but brings with it the responsibility of establishing a relationship with young readers, who are learning to familiarise themselves not only with the act of reading, but also with a different point of view that may prove challenging for their own growth as human beings (Metcalf 2003; González Davies 2008). Thus, translation connects and shares the diversity that defines the world, an objective that becomes even more significant when adults act as mediators, helping young people develop their taste for reading.

Loyalty in translation: a moral principle

The cooperative dialogue (mentioned above) between authors and readers (Lollo, as quoted in Fava 2019) occurs when authors are free to express themselves through the creation of a work of art regardless of the audience that will ultimately read it.

In children's literature, translators as counterparts to authors in a target culture⁹ do not always enjoy the same freedom of expression as authors. In fact, as stated by Virginie Douglas and Florence Cabaret, "moral, social and linguistic norms are much more binding when one is translating for children" (2014: 14) and the role of the translator carries a greater sense of responsibility towards the intended audience of the translation. Moreover, a professional translator should subject their work to what Christiane Nord calls "loyalty", a "*moral* principle indispensable in the relationship between human beings who are partners in a communication process" (1991: 94, emphasis in the original).¹⁰ In literary translation, the communication process mentioned by Nord exists as a dialogue at a distance between the author and their readers. Such dialogue is central to children's literature because it plays a role in the development of young readers by exercising their imagination through reading.

⁸ This awareness is the result of various studies, also focusing on the history of translation in specific countries, which proved useful to the definition of common strategies generally adopted in children's literature. See, for example, Nike Pokorn (2012) and Gillian Lathey (2016).

⁹ Emer O'Sullivan revises the narrative scheme originally conceived by Giuliana Schiavi in 1996 to create the figure of the "implied translator", who is able to reflect on the young reading audience in their own time and translate according to their propensities and capabilities.

¹⁰ This interpretation was conceived in the theoretical framework of the "Skopos" theory, where the purpose of the translation activity is the main driver for the translator's choices. This theory was originally defined by Hans Vermeer in 1978 and further expanded by Justa Holz-Manttari (1984), Katharina Reiss (1995), and Christiane Nord (1991).

The idea of the literary dialogue in translation as a means of understanding the world and other cultures is championed by Aidan Chambers and Anthea Bell, especially within the Anglophone culture that notoriously translates very few books from other languages.¹¹ Firstly, translation in Anglophone countries is still very limited: it comprises approximately 3% of overall publishing.¹² Secondly, translators tend to disappear in the process,¹³ whereas their impact on the final text is fundamental if we consider their professional responsibility towards the author and readership. In fact, Riitta Oittinen recognises that the text, as an outcome of the translation process, depends on the nature of translators as individuals with a specific cultural background; through their work they “complement, adapt the texts on the basis of their viewpoint of their own culture and language” (2000: 84). Moreover, this work shows loyalty to the author and to the target readers because it considers the whole communicative context surrounding the translation. By “communicative”, Oittinen seems to point to the dialogic nature of a narrative text that requires an active attitude from readers “who accept and reject, who react and respond” (ibid.).

Chambers, on the other hand, values translators as “synapses” (2005) able to connect people in different times, spaces, cultures; in children’s literature, their work from Oittinen’s ethical perspective is an opportunity to help young readers explore and “enjoy their human potential to the fullest” (2006: 37).

Translators, with their work, can become initiators of reading habits within the broader context of human cooperation through literature that begins early in life, as it involves the relation that adults and children build around the book.

Cooperating with readers

Reading to children from a very early age is a cooperative activity involving an adult figure that acts as producer, mediator, competent reader, as well as the child. Children are not passive receptors; at any age they are able to interact actively with the adult and with the physical book to begin their path to become mature readers and responsible citizens (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer 2011). This cooperation is the core of the research by Lollo on the triadic relationship between the adult, the book, and the young reader. She recognised the pivotal role that adults play in the creation and dissemination of

¹¹ Anthea Bell is a renowned translator into English who contributed to the academic discussion of translating for children through her own experiences. For a profile of Bell, see Lathey (2010); for a view on the complex reception context in Anglophone countries, especially in the UK, see Bell’s essay *Grounds for Cautious Optimism?* (2006).

¹² It suffices to mention the Three Percent project by the University of Rochester, which emphasises the importance of translation as part of a country’s literary production, “vital to maintaining a vibrant book culture and to increasing the exchange of ideas among cultures” (Three Percent 2018).

¹³ This issue has been widely discussed by Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator’s Invisibility* (2018) to substantiate an innovative view on “the ethics and politics of translation” (x), and in children’s literature by Lathey (2010). Bell, for example, considers the invisibility of the translator a positive value for translation (2006: 48) because it means that the reader manages to fully immerse in the narrative without noticing any difficulty with the language or with cultural markers in the story.

literature for children; as authors, illustrators, creators they offer their work of art to the scrutiny of anyone willing to engage in a dialogue. Most importantly, authors do not write with a specific audience in mind because they “dominate and at the same time serve the construction of fantasy, that is, by shaping it through words” (Lollo 2021b: 72). Therefore, their creativity is free from the ties of a potential reading audience. As such, they cannot anticipate the multitude of interpretations that their work can inspire in readers. It is the same with illustrators, whose artistic endeavours reach beyond the boundaries of their culture, communicating with a variety of individuals that will delve into their artwork and interpret the message in their own space and time.

Beyond the creative role, the adult cooperates also as a competent mediator, offering young readers the literature they believe is useful for their development, mindful of their own path as readers. Such exchange is mutually beneficial: the adult can make use of their critical skills as a mature reader, the child feels actively involved in their development through a reading experience that provides the tools to help them navigate not only through literature, but through life. As Chambers points out, “I’m a reader first, a writer second. Reading makes me. Writing remakes me. I’d be lost if I didn’t read, wouldn’t know myself. By reading what I’ve written I find out what I’ve become” (1993), stating that the fact of being a reader first, helped him define his potential as a human being, and then as an author. From this point of view, children learn social conventions through reading, they can reflect on their identity and on their role in the community. Again, Chambers (2020) has shown how young readers approach their journey to adulthood by experiencing an empathic bond with characters, share their emotions, understand a point of view that may differ from their own in a process of recognition. Readers exercise their critical ability in this dialogical interpretation of texts, where they can discover new meanings and accumulate knowledge on a specific topic, or revise their beliefs and complete their reading journey by discovering they have gained a new insight on their view of the world. This process of discovery invites readers also to explore their inner selves, to help them better relate to the world around them.

The experience of the adult mediator crosses the path of the growing child in this mutual exchange through reading. The past reading experiences of adults become particularly meaningful when the adult embraces the challenges of translation as a profession.

The “easy” task of translating for children

The complexities of the translation task have been outlined so far in terms of loyalty, a responsibility that translators uphold as part of the ethical consideration of their work. But first and foremost, translators are ideal readers that at the beginning of the reading process immerse themselves completely in the narrative and participate in the re-creation of the implied reader.

In this sense, reading becomes “involvement and an emotional, physical state” (Oittinen 2006: 38) that readers both young and old can experience as a pleasure or even as an unsettling experience, sometimes accompanying the reader long after the

reading has ended. Young readers get involved more deeply, as “the more the child gets out of the reading situation, the more she or he wants to read” (ibid.). This view echoes Lollo’s thoughts on the importance of deriving a positive feeling from reading, adding a step further in the cooperation and pedagogical responsibility of the adult as mediator.¹⁴

Translators as ideal readers re-live the stories they wish to translate every time they process the text: in the beginning they enjoy the pleasure of reading, then, through the translation and the revision of their work, they explore in detail characters, settings, dialogue, and narrative style and balance their strategies according to their specific translation objectives. Lathey (2016) and Oittinen (2000) discuss such strategies, bearing in mind that much children’s literature is meant to be read aloud. This read-aloud process accompanies the translation stage and, owing to the growing awareness of its importance, translators are more willing to share their experiences with the lay public in interviews and other media.¹⁵ It is from this heightened awareness that the pedagogical potential of translated literature emerges, playing a key role in guiding young readers to explore literature beyond the borders of their culture.

The pedagogical nature of translated literature

Adult mediators, as competent readers themselves, can provide guidance to young readers and model their ways to discuss reading experiences. In the field of translation, more information on how translators translate, the publishing framework where translations are offered (e.g. book series), the staff promoting and disseminating translations, are all suitable examples of how young readers can better understand the challenges that translators face on each step of the way towards the final text.

The pedagogy of translated literature also includes examples of good practices or critical reviews of quality children’s literature for professional educators. The steps forward in research in children’s literature are traceable in specialised journals that offer the tools to select, evaluate, and use literature in class. For example, *Bookbird* publishes articles dealing with translation, exploring translated texts from cultural, historical, linguistic, and educational points of view, bringing to the fore the complexity of the translation act. The dialogical nature of a narrative text opens up to a new audience when filtered through the cultural background of translators, who may “have opinions on education and childhood reading” (Lathey 2010: 6) that direct their choices of which works should be translated and how. Moreover, the study of translations from

¹⁴ Lollo (2021b) expands the concept of pleasure into the development of a deeper communicative relation between text and reader. The pleasure derived from a good story is only a superficial reaction to the text because a deeper, profound relation is established through reading and re-reading. This is the foundation for autonomy and independence in the process of self-discovery in young readers.

¹⁵ For example, Patricia Crampton declares that “she dictates her translations directly into a tape recorder” (as quoted in Lathey 2010: 188) and subsequently has them typed to revise the text in view of the style and metrics she wishes to maintain. Bruno Berni, a prolific translator from Scandinavian languages into Italian, stated in an interview (2018) that while translating Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales he used to read his translations daily to his young daughter to test her reactions, and consequently revise the text where needed.

a diachronic perspective can inform specialised readers about the social, cultural, economic, and political conventions that stood between the source author and the target text itself, including the possibility of a different narrative dialogue that results in the translation work.¹⁶

Educating young readers is another direction that has been followed recently, as shown by Lathey (2016, 2018, 2020). As an example, she mentions the project “Translation Nation”, which involved some of the most well-known translators in the UK where they worked shoulder to shoulder with pupils aged seven to eleven and shared their interest in the art of translation. Such initiatives are aimed at helping Anglophone children overcome their insularity and broaden their understanding by exposing them to different views of the world. The Book Trust (n.d.) has been working on the “In Other Words” project, focusing on an active exchange between UK publishers and international publishers in acquiring/selling outstanding books in different languages.¹⁷ Italy, on the other hand, a country that has a long-lasting experience in translation, has given special prominence to translation skills and translators with the “Translators’ café” at the annual Children’s Book Fair in Bologna. Participants in the Fair can join in to discuss the translation profession. A glance at the Fair programme shows the diversity of languages – with a preponderance of English – the active participation of publishers, illustrators, translators, associations dealing with international rights and children’s literature, and translators in training. The Children’s Book Fair also supports the career of young translators with the contest “In Altre Parole”, where the winner is awarded a certificate and prize money that corresponds to the rights acquired by the Fair to publish the winning text. The initiative is disseminated through the official portal of the Fair and the translator’s work benefits from the resonance of the Fair’s media network.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the elements that children’s literature and translation have in common in the academic context. From their initial status of neglected fields of study to recent advancements in research, their multidisciplinary character has paved the way to new perspectives witnessing the vitality of both academic fields.¹⁸ As the identity of translators has gained prominence in research to better understand the position of translated texts, especially in children’s literature, the responsibility of translators towards their young audience is filtered through their own experience as readers.

¹⁶ In the research of the English translations of Gianni Rodari’s works from the 1960s to today, there is a clear example of how the impact of each translator (five overall) reflected different views of the pedagogical relation between writers and the receiving public (Alborghetti 2023).

¹⁷ Lathey (2020) mentions this project, and its recent developments are clearly described on The Book Trust website stating that the project “aims to forge new contacts between publishers across continents, improve knowledge about how to work with translators and ultimately result in new talented voices being introduced to English-speaking children” (The Book Trust n.d.).

¹⁸ See, for example, the recent publication co-edited by Mihał Borodo and Jorge Díaz-Cintas on Translation and Young Audiences dedicated to the intersection of “translation, audiovisual media, comics, children’s literature and fan activities” (2025: 1).

In fact, each translator brings with them a personal reading background that informs their choices in their translation practice. Far from being an easy task, translating for children requires an array of skills that must take into consideration the translation context, the asymmetry in the relationship between adult (author or translator) and child reader, the interplay between text and image – the “*multimodal character of children’s literature*” (Van Coillie and McMartin 2020: 22) – and professional training.¹⁹ Moreover, the target reception context needs to welcome translations as an integral part of its network. Academic research provides tools to explore the art of translation in its deepest dimension, it questions the strategies, the motives, the context, and the diversity of each translation. The contribution of scholars, especially in the field of education where reading is recognised as a process starting very early in life, lies in the ability to discover the dialogical act that resurfaces from the translated text, unveiling the elements that make each translation unique, throughout time, space, languages and cultures.

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¹⁹ Lathey provides a detailed, practical guide to prospective translators in the last chapter of *Translating Children’s Literature* (2016).

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Prevođenje za djecu: odgovornost, dijalog i uloga prevoditelja

Prevoditelji zauzimaju privilegiranu poziciju pri prevođenju djela namijenjenih mladoj publici jer su istodobno idealni čitatelji i autori ciljanoga teksta. Naizgled jednostavan zadatak prevođenja u dječjoj književnosti oslanja se na odgovornost prevoditelja da pritom ima na umu i autora izvornoga teksta i ciljnu čitateljsku publiku. Ako dječju književnost promatramo kao mogućnost za mlade čitatelje da oblikuju vlastitu sliku svijeta i – s obzirom na književnost za mlade – promisle o vlastitom identitetu, prijevodi mogu potaknuti tihi dijalog koji se odvija između čitatelja i knjige tijekom čitanja. Ovaj rad iznosi pregled položaja dječje književnosti unutar akademske zajednice te njezine zajedničke multidisciplinarnе povezanosti s prevođenjem kako bi se raspravila vrijednost književnih prijevoda i uloga prevoditelja kao odgovornih nositelja dijaloga s mladim čitateljima.

Ključne riječi: dječja književnost, književnost kao dijalog, prevođenje, odgovornost prevoditelja, mladi čitatelji