MULTIPLICITY OF IDENTITIES IN TRANSLATING LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

Cristina CHIFANE*

Abstract: *Generally speaking, translation would not be possible or at least would lose its function if the overall concept of communication in the global village affected the protection and promotion of diverse languages and cultures. As a consequence, preservation of elements of cultural specificity in the translation of children's books in dominated languages such as Romanian would be part of the struggle to ensure distinctness and connectedness. Apart from the national and cultural identities involved in the process of translating books for children, this paper aims at dealing with the problem of linguistic identity and the translator's dilemma regarding the possible loss of identity of one of the two languages and cultures submitted to the translation process. In the game of identities, the translator for children is in search of a balance trying to find a new voice and new means of expression in the source language and culture. The new acquired identity of the text should not immediately imply a rejection and exclusion of the old identity of the same text especially since capturing and rendering the essence of the original author's personal style is a matter of true art and sensibility from the translator's part. Last but not least, the target readership of translated books for children includes a heterogeneous group of children of various ages ranging from readers of picture books to adolescent readers of modern novels with their own identities, characteristics and preferences as well as different cultural constructs, experiences and challenges.*

Keywords: *game of identities, children's literature, translator's role, target readership, variables.*

1. Introduction

Translation in general becomes a matter of preserving or losing identities or of acquiring new identities since global communication should allow for the protection and promotion of diverse languages and cultures: "If translation is proverbially a bridge-building exercise, and much is said about how it bridges gaps between cultures, it must not be forgotten that translation has as much a vested interest in distinctness as in connectedness" (Cronin, 2006: 121).

From this perspective, preservation of elements of cultural specificity in the translation of children's books in dominated languages such as Romanian would be part of the struggle to ensure "distinctness" as well as "connectedness". The very act of translating and spreading the ideologies in books for children belonging to smaller countries is a necessary step towards accepting the multiplicity of identities.

Rejecting "globalisation as homogenisation, standardisation and banalisation", Cronin (*ibidem*: 127) warns against a double threat: self-translation into a "single literary culture" and "a single literary language" or massive translation of "a single literary culture" and "a single literary language" into every other culture and language. Interestingly, he provides the example of Rowling's books which acquired international

* "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galaţi, cristinachifane@yahoo.com. The paper of Cristina Chifane was supported by Project SOP HRD – PERFORM/159/1.5/S/138963.

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

fame leaving other cultures and languages in the shadow and worrying about the cultural and linguistic consequences of that fame.

Apart from the national and cultural identities involved in the process of translating children's books, one can refer to other types of identities too. Linguistic identity has to be taken into consideration since it is evident that different languages have entirely different language structures and characteristics which become part and parcel of their linguistic identity. For example, the linguistic framework of Romanian folk tales differs to a great extent from the linguistic framework of the English folk tales. Whereas the former abound in complex syntactic structures, use of phrases, idioms, proverbs and sayings, regionalisms and archaisms, the presence of connotative proper names etc., the latter have a much simpler and straightforward linguistic structure focusing on the development of action proper. This is just an illustration of the linguistic differences between two languages and the same type of text in these languages. The question which arises is related to the translator's dilemma regarding the possible loss of identity of one of the two languages and cultures submitted to the translation process.

From my point of view, translators in general and translators for children in particular should find a balance in this game of identities. When translating into the target language (TL) and culture, translators actually find a new voice and new means of expression and implicitly a new identity for the original text in the source language (SL) and culture. The important thing to be remembered is the fact that the new acquired identity of the text should not immediately imply a rejection and exclusion of the old identity of the same text. This would only lead to the subdual and loss of identity of usually the so-called dominated language and culture. In the afore-mentioned example of the English and Romanian folk tales, translators of Romanian folk tales into English might be tempted to simplify syntactic structures or to replace regionalisms, phrases or idioms with more neutral terms to adjust the text to fit in the TL and culture but if the objective is to bring Romanian linguistic and cultural specificity abroad then this domesticating strategy would not fulfill the initial purpose.

The situation becomes even more problematic when translators for children have to think of an author's personal style and identity which most often distinguishes one author from another and makes his/her text stand out in a variety of other texts. Capturing and rendering the essence of an author's unique style into the TL is a matter of true art and sensibility from the translator's part. Besides, willingly or not, traits of the translator's identity and perception of child, childhood and the translation process are relevant in his/her translated texts. Ideally, he/she should preserve his/her objectivity and to a certain extent forget about his/her identity including personal feelings or thoughts in favour of the author's identity and his/her target readers (TRs)' identities.

Last but not least, one can refer to a multiplicity of identities of the TRs. The TRship of translated books for children includes a heterogeneous group of children of various ages ranging from readers of picture books to adolescent readers of modern novels. Each of these categories of readers has its own identity, characteristics and preferences.

What's more, children in different languages and cultures are confronted with different cultural constructs, different experiences and challenges. To conclude, multiplicity of identities is something a translator for children should be prepared to deal with especially since it gives birth to the following characteristics of CLT (children's literature translation): asymmetry, variety, a specific consumer-supply relationship and full or partial localisation.

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

2. Asymmetry

No matter if they circulate as source texts (STs) or target texts (TTs), books for children generate an asymmetrical type of communication. Adults are the ones who initiate and support the whole process: they write, translate, publish and sell books for children. The adult roles are extremely diversified: critics, theoreticians and members of prize-awarding committees speak or write about these books, translators transform them to fit the expectations of the target-readers, librarians recommend them, publishers decide to release them on the market, parents choose them and buy them for their children, officials in the Ministry of Education introduce them into the school curriculum and teachers reveal their beauty to children. O'Sullivan has clearly considered asymmetry as a defining characteristic in translating literature for children:

> The asymmetrical communication is mirrored when children's literature is translated: the various steps from the selection of texts to the details of how individual lexical items are to be translated are subject to the assumptions of publishers and translators as to what children can understand, what they enjoy, what is suitable and acceptable. (2008: 117)

Educational, sociocultural, ideological and aesthetic factors condition adults' choices with respect to children's books, but my opinion is that they should give children more credit in terms of understanding and acceptance. In this respect I agree with House who has noticed that translators for children "apply idiosyncratic cultural filters, often under the guise of adapting the text to the assumed needs of the young readers in the target culture (TC), or under the guise of seeking to impose lofty educational values on the texts" (2004: 685).[71] Once again, children and especially teenagers are more curious and more open-minded than adults are willing to see.

Besides the imbalanced relationship between adult influence and child reception, there are other asymmetrical connections which are easily identifiable when translating literature for children. One of them is the distinct situation of translations for children in the Anglo-American environment in comparison with what happens in Eastern countries. The key aspect is in fact that while in Romania and other Eastern countries the translation of Anglo-American children's fiction is dominant, in Britain and America translated literature occupies a marginalised position, as shown by the number of books on the publishing market.

On a wider scale, transformations in translation "are conditioned by interlanguage asymmetry on the syntagmatic, paradigmatic, or semiotic level" (Gak 1993: 35). On the syntagmatic level asymmetry attracts a lack of correspondence between the number of signifieds and signifiers in the chain of speech. In this case, free translation is used to find a corresponding expression in a TL for one word in a SL.

When dealing with paradigmatic asymmetry, translators have two options: either to resort to translational transformations (if the linguistic units are used in a

[71] According to House (2004: 685-686), the cultural shifts and changes so prevalent in the translation of children's books are owed to a number of distinct reasons: adult preconceptions regarding what books for children should contain or leave out; children's limited knowledge of the world and of different cultural contexts which encourages translators to engage in adaptations and explanations; the different traditions in children's literature in the source and target communities or the trend to opt for translation in the case of those books which are perceived as culturally "neutral" or "international".

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

secondary function) or to give up translational transformations (if the linguistic units are used in their primary function).[72]

Finally, translation can be described as involving "a transfer of elements across semiotic borders" (Koster, 2000: 26). Thus, asymmetry occurs on the semiotic level when a signified denoted in one language does not have a signifier in another.

To sum up briefly, asymmetry is a relevant element in CLT functioning on different levels and helping translators for children decide upon the best solutions.

3. Variety

Translating literature for children reflects the concept of variety in a multitude of ways: children's texts belong to a wide range of genres and subgenres; the TRs preferences are extremely diverse because of the age group, level of understanding and sociocultural affiliation; many translation theories, models, concepts, norms, principles and strategies are suited for this field.

A heterogeneous category, children's literature "is near impossible to define … in such a way as to include this enormous variety" (Desmet, 2007: 29). Different classifications usually include the following genres: picture books, traditional literature, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, modern fantasy, biography and autobiography and non-fiction or informational books.

Moreover, in accordance with the age group to which they belong, children are more likely to be drawn towards a particular genre. During infancy through pre-school they prefer picture books but while they grow up they gradually expand their reading choices to fit one of the reading purposes: recreational interests, self and personal issues, social relationships and social issues. Unfortunately, teaching practice has shown that more and more adolescents in Romania read just for utilitarian purposes rather than for individual development or enjoyment. Perhaps things would change if children were given questionnaires regarding their reading preferences and the national school curricula would be more flexible to allow for changes suiting the children's interests.

As to any rule, there are exceptions, that is children who still devour books but these cases are less frequent than before evidently due to the overwhelming influence of other means of communication (TV, internet etc.).

Out of the variety of past and present translation theories (the prototype theory, the polysystem theory, the skopos theory, the corpus-based translation theory and the audio-visual theory), some are more likely to show their relevance in translating literature for children. The same idea holds valid in the case of translation models which vary from iconic or diagrammatic representations to conceptual and theoretical models. In my opinion, analogue models are important in CLT because translation scholars could have a clearer visual representation of the stages of the translation process and of the agents involved in the respective process. In addition, the functionalist interactive models focus on the translator's communicative purpose or goal giving him/her the

[72] Gak defines the primary function as 'the initial function for which a certain linguistic unit has been created' (1993: 36). This is always meaningful and can be demonstrated in opposition to other units. On the other hand, she identifies three types of secondary functions: "(i) neutralisation, in which the basic distinctive features of the poles of the opposition are nullified; (ii) transposition, in which one of the poles of the opposition is used in the function normally reserved for the other; and (iii) desemantisation, in which a given unit loses its own meaning" (*ibidem*).

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

power to decide upon the best translation strategy. As a consequence, translators for children make use of a variety of translation strategies ranging from syntactic to semantic or pragmatic and oscillating between conservation and substitution.

4. Consumer-Supply Relationship

Since modern society is primarily based on a consumer-supply type of relationship, translating literature for children displays all the peculiarities of such a relationship. In this case, the consumers are meant to be children and adolescents whereas the suppliers are the publishing houses which can have this kind of literature as their sole targetship or as a category among others. In-between the two sides various marketing mechanisms are involved.

There are undoubtedly some factors that influence the book market and have been noticed by Thomson-Wohlgemuth ever since 1998. The impact of mass-media and electronic media, the governments' cost-cutting policies and their reorganisation of public spending as well as the decreasing influence of institutions such as libraries on publishers' decisions constitute alarming signs affecting the book market.

Closer to the image of young adults, children in contemporary society have many more possibilities to acquire knowledge about other cultures of the world: they can watch TV programmes, search the information on the internet or even travel abroad with their parents.

According to Thomson-Wohlgemuth, some countries have started to adjust their children's literature to the new notion of childhood:

> Girls are now depicted as smart and technically skilled; children are encouraged to protest against parents; they have many friends from immigrant and other foreign families; mothers are no longer simply housewives but career women, who can nevertheless cope easily with both children and household, whereas men are shown as "housemen" with endless time for their children. (1998: 84)

Moreover, one new development is "escapism" characterised by the children and adolescents' need to find refugee into a world of fantasy by means of books ranging from science fiction to adventure stories leading back into the past (*ibidem*). A new concept of adolescence has also arisen postponing the end to the refusal to deal with the harsh realities of modern electronic media which has influenced children's reading habits leading to bad family relationships, loss of contact with friends and reality altogether, isolation, passivity, lack of creativity and initiative, anxiousness and aggressive behaviour (*ibidem*: 85-87). Trying to improve things, publishing houses have resorted to electronic books or audio books to meet modern readers' expectations.

In the supply chain, translators should occupy a dominant position but this is usually not the case due to their poor status, low pay and tight deadlines. As Robinson (2007: 7-19) has argued, publishers demand reliability, timeliness and low cost although all these objectives are rather difficult to achieve without their willingness to meet translators halfway and respect their work and efforts.

With the aim of making profit in mind, publishers of children's literature are forced to be cautious in their selection of books to be published. Thomson-Wohlgemuth (*ibidem*: 89) warns against the danger of popular literature and mass-market books which are published cheaply in large editions and are the most profitable area for publishers therefore becoming a threat to high quality children's books. I disagree with his opinion since I consider that there is enough place on the market for all categories of

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

books. Throughout time, the publishing houses have changed their attitude towards translated books. If in the past these books were underestimated as not selling very well and causing more problems than benefit for the company, over the years between 30 and 70 per cent of children's books published in Europe were translations (Jobe, 1996: 519). The situation is of course different in UK with fewer translations because of its dominant position.

In addition, international book fair and co-productions represent two key events of the children's book market (Thomson-Wohlgemuth, *op. cit.*: 90).[73] Mutual exchanges should be positive but reality often contradicts expectations to the benefit of Western countries which commercialise their products in the Eastern countries.

All in all, the traditional supply chain consisting of author-publisher-editor-publisher-printer-bookstore in the case of the ST is reiterated with translated books with translator instead of author. The translator might go to the publisher or the publisher might ask for a particular translator because he/she has heard of his/her work and specialisation in the field (a desirable situation which would indicate professionalism and reliability).

5. Localisation

"Frequently used in commercial circles in English-speaking countries" (Hatim and Munday, 2004: 321), the concepts of globalisation, internationalisation and localisation could be used to explain the intricacies of the translation process of children's literature. If they want the books they translate to be read worldwide, translators of books for children need to find an equilibrium between the degree of internationalisation and the degree of localisation a text can withstand and readers are willing to accept.

As a major characteristic of CLT, localisation is understood in the following terms: "taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold" (LISA, 2003 cited in Pym, 2004: 29). Roughly speaking, localisation covers domesticating translation strategy but in fact there are numerous other nuances and subtleties.

Localisation is related to at least two further concepts: internationalisation and globalisation. Whereas the former is the process of generalising a product so that it can handle multiple languages and cultural conventions without the need for re-design, the latter addresses the business issues associated with taking a product on the world market. Pym attempts at a clear distinction among the terms:

> We might say that there is one wide process called "globalisation", of which "internationalisation" and "localisation" are parts. In order to globalise, you first make your product general in some way ("internationalisation"), then you adapt ("localise") to specific target markets ("locale"). (*ibidem*: 30)

[73] In Thomson-Wohlgemuth's opinion, the Frankfurt Book Fair and the Bologna Children's Book Fair are places where publishers can meet to seek out new trends in the sector and to do business (*ibidem*: 90). At book fairs publishers can also agree on conditions for co-production, a wide spread publishing strategy meaning that a publisher has two or more editions printed at the same time in order to cut costs.

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

Nevertheless, using a standard terminology is not so simple due to the complexity of factors and processes involved. Let us assume that internationalisation covers the processes whereby the culture-specific features are taken out of a text in order to minimise the problems of later distributing that text to a series of locale. If this is the case, then this is the explanation for the lack of interest in children's books from dominated languages and cultures which insist on preserving elements of cultural specificity and make them known worldwide. I do not think that the solution would be internationalisation just for the sake of avoiding later distribution problems because these might occur in spite of this strategy. From my perspective, paradoxically as it may seen, internationalisation does not necessarily ensure the international success of children's books.

"Marked by a strong directionality" (Pym, 2010: 139), localisation implies a movement from the central languages toward the more peripheral languages. The movements in the other direction have been called "reverse localisation" (Schäler, 2006 cited in Pym, *ibidem*) and these many-to-one patterns become more important in the context of economic globalisation. Adapted to suit our purposes, the concepts of "localisation" and "reverse localisation" would explain the massive translations of children's books from authors of English-expression and the still relatively few number of Romanian books for children translated into English. Instead of full localisation translators of children's literature might resort to partial localisation which would indicate adaptation and at the same time preservation.

This new approach would also involve a re-configuration of the old paradigm of translation in the sense that the source and TTs, languages and cultures could no longer be conceived as separate and stable concepts. Even if localisation apparently seeks standardisation, diversification is impossible to be ignored since the entire process would be pointless without the linguistic and cultural difference among various types of texts.

Used in industry to refer to the efforts of adapting a Web site, application or other product for any over-seas market, translation which becomes or leads to localisation holds valid in literary translation as well therefore in translating literature for children too. Adapting to another culture is "a very complex and subtle task" (Bias and Mayhew, 2005: 327) with many practices and conventions. At this point, I see localisation not as a mere form of domestication, but as a generic term calling for some degree of adaptation to a particular country or locale.

In order to reconcile the approaches to globalisation as either involving cultural homogeneity or cultural heterogeneity, theoreticians [74] have chosen the term of "glocalisation', a hybrid term applying to localisation in the context of globalisation. To put it in a nutshell, no matter how local a given product looks, it will retain a number of features of the original product. In industry, the original product is the global one whereas in literary translation for children, the original product would be the text in the SC and language.

Adding to and arising from their cultural setting, books such as the *Harry Potter* series are indications of how glocalisation works especially since many types of translation have been applied to these books from faithful to radical with explanatory in-between.[75]

[74] See Gambier and Van Doorslaer, 2009; Robertson and White, 2003.

[75] According to Nexon and Neumann (2006: 54), "the faithful translation seeks to preserve as much as possible the cultural specificity of the original" while the radical translation is meant "to

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)

6. Conclusions

To sum up, asymmetry, variety, consumer-supply relationship, multiplicity of identities and localisation are all important factors contributing to a clearer understanding and assessment of translations of literature for children. There are some "delicate matters" which require special attention. Adult readers of books for children have to give children more credit in the sense that they are able to comprehend many things adults might consider they are unlikely to grasp. All in all, the powerful influence of mass-media has favoured children's access to information so authors and translators should be aware of the new identities children have.

Bibliography

Bias, R.G., Mayhew, D., *Cost-Justifying Usability. An Update of the Internet Age*, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, San Francisco, 2005

Cronin, M., *Translation and Identity*, Routledge, New York, 2006

Desmet,,M.K.T., *Babysitting the Reader. Translating English Narrative Fiction for Girls into Dutch (1946-1995)*, Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishing, Bern, 2007

Gak, V., "Interlanguage Asymmetry and the Prognostication of Transformations in Translation", in Zlateva, P. (ed.), *Translation as Social Action. Russian and Bulgarian Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 32-39

Gambier, Y., Van Doorslaer, L., *The Metalanguage of Translation*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2009

Hatim, B., Munday, J., *Translation: An Advanced Resource Book*, Routledge, London, 2004

House, J., "Linguistic Aspects of the Translation of Children's Books", in Kittel, J., House, J. *et alii* (eds.), *Traduction: encyclopedie internationale de la recherché sur le traduction*., Walter de Gruyter GmbH&Co., Berlin, 2004

Jobe, R., "Translation", in Hunt, P. (ed.), *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, Routledge, New York, 2004, pp. 512-523

Koster, C., *From World to World: An Armamentarium for the Study of Poetic Discourse in Translation*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 2000

Nexon, D.H., Neumann, Y.B., *Harry Potter and International Relations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006

O'Sullivan, E., "Translating Pictures", in Rosenberg, T., Schwenke Wyile, A. (eds.), *Considering Children's Literature: A Reader*, Broadview Press, Claremont, 2008

Pym, A., *Exploring Translation Theories*, Routledge, New York, 2010

Pym, A., *The Moving Text:Localisation, Translation and Distribution*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2004

Robertson, R., White, K., *Globalisation: Analytical Perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003

Robinson, D., *Becoming a Translator: An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Translation*, Routledge, London, 2007

Thomson-Wohlgemuth, G., *Children's Literature and itsTranslation: An Overview*, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Surrey, Surrey, 1998

---

dissolve" it. Furthermore, "explanatory translation represents a middle space of interchange" creating "a zone of encounter" between texts and thus becoming "a mode of glocalisation".

BDD-A14582 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:01:17 UTC)