

Below standard?

On translating children's literature

Marta Morros Serret

In the years that I have been working as a professional translator of illustrated books for children, I have, over time, realized how diverse children's literature is and how important it is, not only in the life of a child, but also in their future adult life. The books that we read as children transform us and remain in our memories forever.

Nevertheless, it seems that children's literature, compared to adult literature, has historically been relegated to a minor category, socially, professionally and academically. Likewise, children's rights issues have also been historically marginalized* and somehow, as a domino effect, translation of children's literature has been treated as a minor category of literary translation, to the detriment of the working conditions and rights of translators of children's literature.

Why is that so? Maybe because there is the general belief that the world of adults is more "serious and important" or maybe because children's literature is created for small human beings that

have not yet developed all their potential intellectual capacities. Whatever the reasons, this does not justify that, in the publication of children's books, many publishing companies consistently neglect to use professional standards: e.g. not hiring professional translators, not facilitating translation contracts, not respecting translator's rights and, in some cases, especially when minority languages are involved, translating books from other mainstream languages.

Why hire a professional?

The answer to the above question actually should be obvious, but let me nevertheless explain: first of all, children's literature has its own particularities, which makes the translation of children's books a specialist task. Some of these special characteristics are:

- Orality, especially in books for young children, because they are meant to be read aloud, which makes the cadence and fluency of the sentences immensely important.
- Rhymes: many books play with internal rhymes, a characteristic that helps

children to maintain their attention and makes it easier for them to remember the different passages of the book.

- Word repetitions that must work in different contexts and sentences, which also serve as a pull to keep children captured by the story and to engage them in its reading as a game, by allowing them to anticipate what is going to be said and letting them pronounce that particular word.
- Play on words that make the book fun to read and encourage reading in general.

- The correlation between pictures and text, an imbrication that often determines the translator's choices, especially when there is a pun to preserve.

Secondly, hiring a professional translator is important because when dealing with children's literature, we are dealing also with children's education. The books are supposed to amuse children but also raise their passion for reading and motivate critical judgement, so they can become informed adults and responsible citizens in the future. Quality children's literature goes a long way to ensure quality education, which is one of the goals (no. 4.7) of the [World Education Forum's Incheon Declaration](#) within the UNESCO framework of Sustainable Development Goals. To me, the connection is clear: quality education means quality literature and quality literature needs quality translation, which means professional translation.

Thirdly, hiring professional translators means that publishing houses are committed to both children and children's authors, who deserve to read a good translation and be well translated, respectively. Why should a publishing company make the effort to choose the best authors and best stories, but then not hire a professional translator? Considering the challenges that children's literature present, it should be obvious that hiring a professional translator would be the best option for the sake of the book.



A page from *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* ('Visible World in Pictures', 1658) by John Amos Comenius, regarded as the first children's book

When all this is so obvious, you might wonder why publishing companies in many cases choose not to go with the professional. For me it sometimes seems

that publishing companies forget the important aspects of the first word ‘publishing’ and only worry about the second word: ‘company’. If it’s all about the money, some publishing companies may think that paying the fee of a professional translator and respecting translators’ copyrights is a waste of money. Well, it’s actually the other way round, because a well-translated book could be a success, whilst one that is poorly translated will definitely not and could make the publishing company lose a lot of money.

Moral and economical rights

The bottom line is that, whether we like it or not, professional translators have moral and economic rights under both the auspices of the international law, like the [Berne Convention](#) and the [Nairobi Recommendation](#), and under many national laws, like the [Intellectual Property Law of 1996](#) in Spain, the country where I currently live and work. Without going into detail on the articles, two concepts are at least clear: these laws state that translators have moral and economic rights, and none of them claims that children’s literature translation is exempt from them.

In preparing this article, I reread CEATL’s clear and comprehensive [Hexalogue](#): the six commandments of “fair play” in literary translation, and whilst reading them one by one, I just kept reaffirming myself that, yes, all of them should also apply to the translation of children’s literature. Why not?

I would like to draw attention to the Hexalogue’s 5th commandment on share in profit, one of the most infringed by children’s books publishing

companies in Spain, which reads: “The translator shall receive a fair share of the profits from the exploitation of his/her work, in whatsoever form it may take, starting from the first copy”.

Let me present an example: in Spain, due to the fact that authors’ copyright is usually 10 % and for its translations this is generally reduced to 8 %, the share of translated literature subject to authors’ copyrights should be 2 % – copyright-free books are supposed to be increased up to 8 % – although more often than not it amounts to 1 % and, to make things worse, lately it’s been lowering to 0.5 % while in children’s literature translation, many publishing companies do not share any percentage at all.

“When dealing with children’s literature, we are dealing also with children’s education”

Let’s now do some simple maths. Translators earn one euro out of a hundred; ten euro out of a thousand; a hundred euro out of ten thousand; a thousand euro out of a hundred thousand. The magnitude of the difference is daunting. From my point of view, being asked to have less than 1 % reaches the limits of humiliation and really shows the greed of some publishing companies.



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Marta Morros Serret
Photo: Ilze Fogele

Working together from Bologna

In the last few years, CEATL and FIT have made a joint effort to promote good editorial practices in the translation of children's literature. At Bologna Children's Literature Fair in June, the two hosted an international panel titled "Down the rabbit hole: working (and surviving) as a translator of children's literature", where representatives of both organizations discussed the issues that arose here.

No matter what comes of further cooperation and fruitful talks, one thing is not up for discussion: hiring a professional and respecting translators rights is worth it economically for both the translators and the publishing houses, who will sell more books if the quality of the translation is good.

But apart from being profitable from a financial point of view, the most important thing is that quality translation has a human worth because, as I highlighted above, children's literature is linked to children's education and thereby to a culturally sustainable future. Translating

children's literature serves, in the famous words of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, as "windows and mirrors": windows from where the child can see and understand other cultures and mirrors in which their own cultures can be reflected. Or more simply put, in writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words, "stories matter, many stories matter". Following this line of argument, I would add that children's literature matters and thus, doubtless, translating books for children – and translating them well – matters a whole lot.

**As argued in Jonathan Todres & Sarah Higinbotham, 'A Person's a Person: Children's Rights in Children's Literature', 45 Columbia Human Rights Law Review 1 (2013)*