Children’s Literature in Translation

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“Only English books”
The mediation of translated children’s literature in a resistant economy

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Abstract
In 1802 Mrs. Sarah Trimmer, author of an influential monthly publication of reviews, articles and correspondence on children’s books called The Guardian of Education (1802–1806), warned her readers against the corrupting influence of French literature. She argued that “only English books” (1802, 407) could guarantee a Christian basis for moral education. A resistance to translated children’s literature – albeit with different causes – has continued in the UK since Mrs. Trimmer’s day, resulting in a striking imbalance between the numbers of children’s books translated into English (currently around 2 percent of publications for children per year) and from English into other languages. How, then, do publishers, editors, translators, critics and educators mediate those rare children’s books that are translated into English? What effect does children’s limited experience of reading translations have on translation strategies? What kinds of local and national initiatives exist in the UK to encourage the translation of children’s books in the future? And what are the broader implications of this special British situation for the promotion and reception of translations for children?

Introduction
In 1803 the doughty Mrs. Sarah Trimmer published a dire warning to parents in The Guardian of Education, the monthly journal on children’s books of which she was editor-in-chief. The teaching of French to English children, she argued, had become “the occasion of incalculable mischief, by opening a passage for

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that torrent of infidelity and immorality which has been poured upon the nation from the continent through the channel of French books” (Trimmer 1803, 406). Mrs. Trimmer’s conclusion in the face of this intimidating deluge was that “only English books” could guarantee a Christian basis for a moral education (ibid.). A resistance to fiction for children originating outside the UK – albeit with entirely different causes – continues to this day to hamper its publication, resulting in a striking imbalance between the numbers of children’s books translated from English into other languages and those translated into English. Indeed, on a list entitled “What Are the Best Books to Help Children Feel Connected to Europe” in the national newspaper The Guardian on Monday, June 6, 2016 – and in view of its publication just seventeen days before the Brexit vote one might well argue ‘too little, too late’ – all of the books reviewed were written by English-speaking authors with, as an afterthought, a link to a list of translations chosen by Guardian readers.2

This lasting and deep-seated wariness of the entity formerly known in the UK as ‘the Continent’ (pace Mrs. Trimmer) has resulted in erratic fluctuations in the publication of translated children’s books. There have been some highpoints; it is ironic that Mrs. Trimmer’s remarks, although indicative of a strand of contemporary anti-French sentiment, relate to an era when there was in fact a remarkably lively exchange of ideas and literature between France and the UK. In addition to translations, books in French, including Mme de Beaumont’s Magasin des Enfants with the story of Beauty and the Beast (1756), were published in London. A further instance of increased translation activity occurred in the mid-twentieth century, between the 1950s and the 1970s, when British publishers introduced children to a variety of Nordic literature, including the work of Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson (Lathey 2010).

It is not my intention to attempt an exhaustive discussion of the disputed causes of this resistance to translated children’s books but, rather, to highlight the steps being taken to overcome it. Nevertheless, a few basic preliminary and explanatory points should be noted. Firstly, research into global translation traffic indicates that there is a significant imbalance between translations into and from the English language. Recent sociological interpretations of international exchange include those of Johan Heilbron (2010) who posits a hierarchical system that governs world translation flows, with English currently in a central position as the source language for the world’s published translations; or Pascale Casanova’s (2007) political view of inequality and power struggle that identifies dominating and dominated languages, with

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2 Thanks are due to Clémentine Beauvais for alerting me to this list.
English in the dominating category. Sources of data for the analysis of translation patterns are, as researchers admit, inevitably patchy and limited to statistics produced by individual countries or the incomplete UNESCO *Index Translationum*. It is nonetheless possible to echo Lawrence Venuti’s conclusion that “English has become the most translated language worldwide, but despite the considerable size, technological sufficiency, and financial stability of the British and American publishing industries, it is one of the least translated into” (Venuti 1998, 160). Indeed, Venuti goes so far as to call this state of “unequal cultural exchange” “embarrassing” for the US and the UK, since it indicates cultural hegemony and the world dominance of English (ibid., 159). Specific data on translations into English support Venuti’s conclusion: a statistical report on all translated literature in the UK and Ireland compiled by Jasmine Donahaye of Swansea University in 2012 suggests that just 3 percent of all publications is the likely figure for the proportion of translated books in the sample years of 2000, 2005 and 2008 (Donahaye 2012).

In relation to material for young readers, the strong tradition of English-language children’s literature since the mid-nineteenth century and its dominance on the international stage leads both to the saturation of the British market with very little space for imports, and to a high volume of translation from, rather than into, English. This disparity has only increased with the advent of globalization, with the *Harry Potter* series and associated franchises as a notable example of the ascendancy of the English language in relation to the intercultural transfer of children’s fiction. Moreover, the position of English as a lingua franca leads to problems with a lack of confidence in young people in Britain as regards learning new languages (although many are, of course, bilingual), which in turn contributes to a reduced interest on the part of young British readers in European literature. Finally, from the all-important publishers’ point of view, interviews, articles and research suggest that British publishers of children’s books attribute their caution regarding translations to the high cost of production, the difficulty in identifying appropriate translators, the low level of sales, or – given a limited in-house knowledge of other languages – the uncomfortable process of having to trust a translator’s report rather than their own gut instincts (see Flugge 1994; Lathey 2010, 159; Owen 2004).

The UK, a world leader in the global export of children’s literature is, then, at a disadvantage in developing economic and cultural structures for the public reception of translations for children. In countries such as Finland, where translations account for up to 80 percent of children’s books published in any one year, it is indigenous children’s writers who require support in the face of an overwhelming tide of translations. Young readers in the UK, on the other
hand, have limited access to the cultural, linguistic and aesthetic impetus that books originating in other countries provide. So how do publishers, editors, translators, critics and educators mediate those rare children’s books that are translated into English? What effect does an awareness of children’s limited experience of reading translations have on translators’ attitudes to specific translation strategies? What motivates the publishers who do dare to publish translations in an unreceptive market, and what kinds of local and national initiatives exist in the UK to encourage the translation of children’s books in the future? An exploration of these questions will address, in turn, the mediation of translated texts by publishers and translators, the pioneering work of a number of independent publishers determined to redress the balance in British children’s publishing, and local and national initiatives to encourage publishers and to promote children’s interest in the translation process. Each of these approaches and policies raises universal questions concerning the transfer of children’s literature within the global economy.

**Mediation**

Across the history of translation of children’s literature into English there exists evidence of multiple forms of mediation by publishers or translators designed to ease the passage of a ‘foreign’ work into the British market, and into the hearts and minds of young readers. A handful of historical and contemporary examples will indicate the tactics of diverse mediators seeking to align texts with British children’s – or their parents’ – expectations. In the mid-nineteenth century, children’s poet Mary Howitt attached to her translation from the German of the fables of Wilhelm Hey a fey little verse that artfully diminishes the threat of the culturally alien:

**To English Children**
This little book comes from the hand,  
Dear Children, of a friend –  
Throughout the kindred German land,  
Tis loved from end to end. (Howitt 1844, 1)

Howitt addresses children almost as a benign, intermediary aunt would, introducing a “little” book that will not overwhelm them, and emphasizing kinship and friendship with Germany. In addition to such peritextual material by translators, publishers also adopt mediating strategies. One example is the tried and tested marketing ploy of adding the seal of approval of a
well-known British children's writer to a translation. Winnie-the-Pooh author A. A. Milne's introduction to the first British edition of The Story of Babar in 1934, for example, closes with the words “I salute M. de Brunhoff. I am at his feet” (de Brunhoff 1934, 2). Children's poet Walter de la Mare, on the other hand, gently reassures young readers in his 1931 preface to Margaret Goldsmith's translation of Erich Kästner's Emil and the Detectives that “there is nothing in this German story that might not happen (in pretty much the same way as it does happen in the book) in London or Manchester or Glasgow to-morrow afternoon” (Kästner 1931, 13). There is therefore no need, de la Mare insists, for children to be alarmed by Emil's name and the Berlin setting of his adventures.

In the twenty-first century a number of publishers and editors have renewed efforts to render translators visible by introducing information in a child-friendly manner in blurbs, prefaces, profiles and postscripts, thus drawing the attention of young readers to the very fact that they are reading a translation. Guy Puzey, translator of Maria Parr's Waffle Hearts from Norwegian, is presented in a postscript to the book as a good choice because of his location: “Puzey grew up in the Highlands of Scotland, just a short swim from Norway” (Parr 2005, 240). In one original venture, it is the voice of the narrative's young protagonist that announces the name of the translator in the English versions of Johanne Mercier's French-Canadian books, a strategy that maintains the tenor and tune of the reading experience the child has just enjoyed. In a postscript to Arthur and the Mystery of the Egg, Arthur directly addresses young readers:

Daniel Hahn translated the stories. He took my French words, and wrote them in English. He said it was quite a difficult job, but Cousin Eugene said he could have done it much better, only he was busy that day. So we got Daniel to do it, as he's translated loads and loads of books before. (Mercier 2013, 41)

Thus translators become real-life figures to children who might otherwise take linguistic transition for granted.

Such acts of mediation raise the question as to how British children's limited reading of translations might affect translation techniques. Discussion has to be largely speculative for want of a large-scale international and comparative study of strategies adopted in the translation of children's literature. However, taking Lawrence Venuti's (2008) delineation of ‘foreignization’ and ‘domestication’ strategies as a pertinent starting point, it is possible to offer some insights into translators' practices. Venuti's thesis that domestication
amounts to cultural appropriation and that foreignization maintains the reader’s awareness that s/he is reading the product of a different culture is, as translator and critic Riitta Oittinen asserts, a “delicate” one in relation to children’s literature. Oittinen claims that whereas many adult readers “might not find foreignized texts offputting, the child reader may very well be unwilling to read the translated text, finding it too strange” (Oittinen 2006, 43). This argument carries some weight in the British context. Although it is essential to encourage children’s natural eagerness to encounter difference, pragmatic compromises are sometimes necessary.

British translators express a variety of views on this issue. Patricia Crampton, translator of children’s fiction across the second half of the twentieth century, conceded that “there is a need to counteract the reader’s unfamiliarity with customs and cultural markers” (quoted in Lathey 2010, 190). Similarly, prize-winning translator Anthea Bell echoed Oittinen when she commented that “an adult may say: this is alien to us but foreign and interesting. A child may just lose interest” (Bell 1979, 50). On the other hand, Sarah Ardizzone, translator of children’s books from French, aims to achieve a décalage or disjuncture at a linguistic level that is a reminder of the source language. She uses phrases such as “jet-lag,” “being out of kilter” and “slippage” to convey the sense of a “healthy clash and jostle” as two languages meet (quoted in Lathey 2010, 190), thus highlighting the critically neglected significance of the “in-betweenness of languages and cultures” to which Clémentine Beauvais (2018, 10) has recently drawn attention. Even Ardizzone, however, has domesticated place names in her translations for the young, although she has acknowledged regret at altering ‘Nice’ and ‘Paris’ to the more neutral ‘town’ and ‘city’ in her translation of Daniel Pennac’s Dog (quoted in Lathey 2010, 190). Anthea Bell’s statement that the “atmosphere” of a narrative should not be reduced to an “inoffensive blandness,” but rather that “[w]ith each individual book, you must gauge the precise degree of foreignness, and how far it is acceptable and can be preserved” (Bell 1985, 7), is a necessary cautionary note in a situation that calls for subtle linguistic and cultural negotiation to ensure that translations are read at all.

Independent publishers

It is common to hear the complaint from British children’s publishers that translations do not sell well. As a result, mainstream publishing conglomerates issue single translations only sporadically. Of these larger publishing companies, Egmont created at the turn of the millennium a short-lived ‘World Mammoth’ series with the strapline “The finest literature from around the
world,” and Walker Books has published a number of translations in recent years, including Helen Wang’s translation from Chinese of Bronze and Sunflower by Cao Wenxuan (2015), which won the 2017 Marsh Award for Children’s Literature in Translation. It is, however, smaller companies that lead the way in publishing translations. Editors of the 2015 follow-up report to the Swansea University statistical analysis of translated literature in the UK and Ireland indicate that “translations are brought out mostly by smaller and medium-sized independent houses” (Büchler and Trentacosti 2015, 21). Companies of this kind make an invaluable contribution to the pool of translations available to children in the UK. On the logistical front it may well be the case that the small-scale publisher is able to expedite translations with a speed, efficiency and degree of personal contact that larger companies, with their hierarchies and complex marketing and approval systems, cannot match. Publishing a translation entails not only the possibility of limited editorial access to the language of the source text, but also a commitment to the time necessary for the translation process and, ideally, to close collaboration between editor and translator – all of which is easier to manage when only a limited number of employees are involved.

Comments taken from a series of telephone and email interviews with three independent publishers plying their trade at the precarious perimeter of the children’s publishing scene in the UK in 2016 illustrates a phenomenon specific to the British situation, namely the impetus of a personal crusade by directors to address the lack of translations available to their own children. Cheryl Robson’s small company Aurora Metro extended its list to include books for young people after her daughter attended an interview at a prestigious school at the age of eleven and was the only girl to name a book other than Harry Potter as her favorite. (She chose The Diary of Anne Frank.) Robson decided to counteract the explosion of fantasy at the time by publishing “books about serious issues” (personal correspondence, April 16, 2016), and looked beyond the UK to find novels that met her requirements. Eight of the twelve titles on the Aurora Metro Young Adult list of 2017 were translations, with titles ranging from Jean Molla’s Sobibor (2005) on the generational impact of the Holocaust, translated from French by Polly McLean, to a novel recounting the dangers faced by Cubans fleeing by sea to the US (Letters from Alain by Enrique Pérez Díaz, translated from Spanish by Simon Breden, 2008). Sadly, Robson is disappointed that despite her efforts the books have not been reviewed in the press, and that both the book trade and librarians have been reluctant to order them.

A second company, Tiny Owl Publishing, founded in 2014 by husband and wife team Karim Arghandehpour and Delaram Ghanimifard, owes its
foundation to a concern similar to Robson’s, although its remit is entirely different. Delaram Ghanimifard explains the decision she and her husband took to publish picture books from Iran as follows: “Tiny Owl is the result of my family’s confrontation with immigration and facing the lack of translated books, diverse books, and children’s books that reflected our cultural background for my son” (personal correspondence, May 19, 2016). A twofold purpose, firstly to enable her son to encounter his own culture in English, from the insights of thirteenth-century Persian mystic and poet Rumi to “contemporary authors such as Behrangi,” and, secondly, to create the opportunity to learn about literature from other parts of the world “so that he could better understand his classmates” developed into a quest to broaden the perspectives of young British readers: “Many English books are translated in Iran every year and children read them and like them. Shouldn’t this be a two-way road, allowing English children to learn about other cultures as well?” (personal correspondence, May 19, 2016). Currently there are fourteen titles on the Tiny Owl list. In an interview with Clive Barnes for the British section of the International Board on Books for Young People website, Ghanimifard insists that Iranian picture books are just the beginning of the venture, and has plans to match “the best authors that we know with the best illustrators and form a kind of a cultural dialogue” (Barnes 2016).

A third example is the rather larger independent Pushkin Press, founded in 1997 with a focus on literary quality and European fiction and essays for adults. Adam Freudenheim, one of the two managing directors, also refers to his own offspring and the “extreme lack of translations for children” (interview, June 29, 2016) when recounting the background to Pushkin’s decision in 2013 to begin a children’s list. Thanks to the successful adult list, Pushkin already had in place in-house speakers of German, French, Italian and Russian – all of which Freudenheim regards as ‘gateway languages’ providing access to books from a number of countries. Freudenheim and his team select books that have been successful in the source language, or have already sold well as translations in languages other than English. The Pushkin children’s catalogue for 2017 lists seventy-nine children’s titles. Over sixty of these are translations, including the first English editions of modern classics such as Tonke Dragt’s The Letter for the King (2013, translated by Laura Watkinson) or Tomiko Inui’s The Secret of the Blue Glass (2015, translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori), first published in the Netherlands in 1962 and Japan in 1959 respectively. Pushkin’s publication of The Adventures of Shola

by Bernardo Atxaga, translated from Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa, also won the Marsh Award for 2015.

Such a high volume of translations for children from one publisher is unprecedented, and has certainly enriched, shaken and stirred the translated children’s book market in the UK in the last four years. Pushkin’s success may well be attributable in part to an established following of literary-minded adult readers who have welcomed the feast of new and remembered children’s classics, but a careful balance between new titles (for example Anne Plichota and Cendrine Wolf’s French gothic fantasy series translated by Sue Rose) and beautifully presented classics likely to be bought as gifts has reduced the economic risk associated with translations for children. The commitment of Pushkin, Aurora Metro Books, Tiny Owl and other small-scale publishers to translations for the young represents a positive and much-needed contribution to the diversity of reading matter available to children in the UK.

**Initiatives to promote translation and engage child readers**

Neither the commitment of independent publishers nor the mediating strategies of translators and marketing departments alone can shift public opinion towards the reading of translations. The UK’s resistance to foreign literature has led to much head-scratching and institutional debate, with national initiatives on translated children’s literature funded by government arts and education departments, and the input of overseas cultural institutes promoting children’s authors, particularly in London. The UK government’s Arts Council has funded the touring Children’s Bookshow, with its emphasis in recent years on translation, and also currently supports the Book Trust project “In Other Words,” which annually showcases sample translations from ‘outstanding’ books originally written in a range of languages to British publishers at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair. In 2006, in response to advice in the National Curriculum that children should read literature from a variety of cultures, a set of teaching materials entitled *Reading Differences: Introducing Children to World Literature* (QCA 2006) included translations. Moreover, since 1996 the biennial Marsh Award for Children’s Literature in Translation sponsored by the Marsh Christian Trust – awarded biennially because there are quite simply insufficient translated books for an annual award – has drawn attention to translators and authors and illustrators from beyond the English-speaking world.

A new and promising development centering on translators and capitalizing on the existing linguistic knowledge and expertise of children aims to raise
awareness both of the translation process and the qualities of literature written in other languages by encouraging children to translate. Prize-winning translator of children’s books Sarah Ardizzone was, with teacher Sam Holmes, the first curator of the Translation Nation project, administered by charitable trusts and partly funded by Arts Council England. The project, intended for schoolchildren aged seven to eleven, ran from 2011 to 2014 and began both in London, where the first cohort of languages included Amharic, Gujarati, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, Telugu (a Dravidian language spoken in south-eastern India) and Urdu, and on the Kent coast in schools with a large percentage of children from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. A series of three-day creative workshops run by literary translators and volunteer assistants enabled these children to work on the translation of a favorite story from their heritage language into English, with the aim of taking part in a competitive performance. The winning stories appeared on the Translation Nation website. One of the major aims of the initiative was to encourage the next generation of literary translators, and to enthuse monolingual English-speaking children by involving them in the editing and polishing of English versions of stories told or written by their classmates. As Ardizzone comments: “this is a project where we have to tear up the usual job description of what it means to be a literary translator – an energizing if challenging step for everyone’s continuing professional development” (Ardizzone 2011, 7).

Such was the success of this first phase that the project has now developed into a “Translators in Schools” program, whereby trainee or professional translators spend three days on lesson planning, classroom management, visits to schools and on work with a mentor. Those taking part appreciate the opportunity to engage with a potential audience for their work, to develop children’s writing skills in English and their understanding of differences between languages. For all children in the UK, whether mono-, bi- or multilingual, an understanding of translation and the aesthetic and linguistic processes involved is likely to enhance literary and general intellectual development and can only benefit the language-based aspect of diversity in British children’s publishing in the long term. “Translators in Schools” is at present a small-scale project that deserves broader recognition and more substantial funding.

Valiant efforts by independent publishers, translators, government organizations, schools and charities are, therefore, working to make multiple facets of translation a part of children’s lives in the UK. One brief, final point concerning the British context, however, indicates that the profile of translation still requires attention. In the UK of the 1980s and 1990s, there was a substantially funded impetus in larger cities to ensure the representation of children from
a range of ethnic backgrounds in picture books and reading material in schools. Advocacy of diversity and plurality continues in organizations such as BAME in Publishing (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) and Megaphone, an Arts Council and Publishers’ Association-funded mentoring scheme for BAME writers wishing to publish a first book for children. Rarely, however, do such initiatives include any reference to the process of translation, which seems to be regarded as an entirely separate issue. A telling example of this disregard for translation is the list of the fifty best culturally diverse children’s books published on October 13, 2014 in *The Guardian*, where only one title could be classed as a direct translation, namely Marjane Satrapi’s account of her childhood in Tehran, *Persepolis I and II* (2003, 2004), translated from French by Mattias Ripa. Such a sidelining of the role of language in cultural diversity testifies once again to the centrality of the English language and the resulting invisibility of translation. Surely a united front to encourage publishers to embrace the linguistic, alongside the ethnic, variety of modern Britain, including the heritage languages of many children from across Europe currently residing in the UK, would more accurately reflect the country’s multicultural population.

**Conclusions**

What kinds of general questions are posed for research into the economic and political contexts of translation for children by the present fragile situation in the UK? Firstly, with regard to mediation, there is a need for a more precise and broadly based account of relative degrees of peritextual mediation in blurbs, prefaces or child-friendly translator biographies within different countries. Comparative studies on the use of domestication strategies in translations published in children’s literatures saturated with translations as opposed to those, like the UK, that are far less receptive to translations are also essential to an understanding of the impact of translation flows in the field of children’s literature. Sample analysis of translations between selected languages in specific eras or genres might indicate whether translation strategies in a less penetrable economy differ from those in cultures where translations form a much larger percentage of children’s reading material.

Furthermore, a theoretical advocacy of foreignization as a means of introducing children to difference has to be re-examined in relation to the context into which translations are received. The glocalization of globally distributed texts such as the *Harry Potter* series to meet local needs is now a recognized phenomenon; Michał Borodo’s recently published *Translation,*
Globalization and Younger Audiences: The Situation in Poland (2017) is an informative and relevant case study. In the UK, such a study would have to take into account the specifics of a situation where the number of translations is limited. And there is still a need for further empirical research in order to establish children’s responses to, say, two different translations with differing degrees of domestication; Haidee Kruger’s (2012) investigation into the reception of translated children’s literature in South Africa offers one model for this kind of inquiry. Are young British readers, for example, able to tolerate alien names and foodstuffs despite their lack of experience in reading translations? The answer might well be that they are, but whatever the result, such research would have wider international implications for translation practices in impenetrable markets.

In the meantime, both conglomerates and independent publishers require encouragement from government and charitable organizations to introduce British children to books from other languages. Again, comparative international insights into the role of national and local initiatives to support children’s literature, and whether that support is channeled towards indigenous authors or translations, would be welcome. Research into the public role of translators as ambassadors and evidence of children as translators in classrooms or online, too, would benefit from a sharing of experience across a range of countries.

It is, then, possible to illustrate positive developments in the UK, including an increase in the number of translations for children from non-European languages, notably the books published by Tiny Owl from Iran and the winning title of the most recent Marsh Award from China. As for Europe and the cross-channel traffic so abhorred by Mrs. Trimmer, it is ironic that the second spike in the range and volume of translations for children published in the UK cited at the beginning of this chapter occurred in the mid-twentieth century, before Britain joined the EU. Who knows, perhaps Brexit will herald a new golden age of translations for children in the UK, as publishers and translators seek to maintain links with Europe and to overcome the echoing clarion call for “only English books.”
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