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## The Translator of Picturebooks and Multimodality. Between Postulates and Reality

### Abstract

This study presents some of the results stemming from my research on picturebook translations for children and young adults in the context of multimodality, and in particular, the strategies used by translators of this specific type of multimodal message. The aim of the study is to determine whether translation scholars' postulates on picturebook's translation are reflected in reality. In order to determine this, I will investigate the choices of translators of this medium and their awareness of multimodality. I intend to conduct a series of individual in-depth interviews with picturebook translators. The first interview has already been conducted and analysed, and in this paper I present the results of this analysis. In the examples cited from the supporting material, it can be observed that the translator took into account the relationship between the textual and visual layers, changing the original text in accordance with the visual layer.

**Keywords:** multimodality, children's literature translators, picturebook, literary translation

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Context of the study

The picturebook<sup>1</sup> as a medium is a form of communication, which involves the intentional use of two codes (modes<sup>2</sup>): verbal and visual. In the case of books for young children, a third code (mode), aural, is used as well since picturebooks are traditionally read aloud by adult intermediaries, such as parents

1 '[...] a picturebook is a multimodal entity formed by the verbal, the visual, and the aural. You cannot exclude any part of it without losing the general idea. That is why we spell picturebook as one word.' (Oittinen *et al.* 2018: 1).

2 For definition of "mode," see: e.g. Maćkiewicz 2017.

(see: e.g. Oittinen *et al.* 2018: 43). As Michał Borodo explains, non-textual modes “[...] should not be viewed as merely an embellishment or illustration of the textual, but as separate modes that in concrete circumstances possess equal meaning-making potential” (Borodo 2015: 23). The relationship between the meaning of individual modes may be different: “sometimes the meaning of two messages can be aligned, other times they can complement each other, and still other times each of the messages can be used to refer to other aspects of the meaning” (Jewitt 2009: 25).

Multimodality can be manifested by multisensory perception, i.e. the reception of a message using multiple senses simultaneously, as in the case of an audiovisual message. Through these different modalities, the reader experiences a combined verbal, visual, and auditory narrative. This process makes “the reader believe the characters and understand their position” (Oittinen, Pitkäsalo 2020: 101). For Riitta Oittinen (2008: 5) a picturebook is a “polyphonic form of art” in which many voices, above all the voice of the author and the illustrator, interact.

Translating picturebooks is demanding for many reasons, and translators of this medium have a great responsibility, as their impact on the mind and imagination will influence the young reader (Oittinen, Ketola, Garavini, 2018: 4). Oittinen (2008: 5) describes the translation of picturebooks as a semiotic process in which the translator interprets the text and the illustrations simultaneously. Indeed, since a picturebook is an iconotext, its translation is on the border between interlingual and intersemiotic translation (see: Jakobson 1959). As highlighted by many translation scholars (see: e.g. Oittinen, Ketola, Garavini 2017; Ippolito, 2014), the translation of a picturebook should therefore take into account its multimodal nature, and the translator should not focus herself solely on words, but should also be able to decipher possible interactions between verbal, visual, and aural codes. Oittinen (2000: 114) even mentions that one of the requirements for a translator should be to specialise in the arts.

The multimodal approach to translation also assumes that the reader must be able to activate his or her own imagination to interpret the text independently (Ippolito 2014, Borodo 2015, Nieres-Chevrel 2003). The reader simultaneously reads verbal and visual signs in order to establish basic connections between them. The reading experience becomes an immersive and creative activity, with the reader playing an active role in the sequence of word-image relationships. It is the reader who establishes this contact between the textual and visual layers and it is the reader who discerns hidden meanings (Ippolito 2014: 78).

The study presented here fulfils the call made by Anthony Pym in 2009 for the humanisation of translation studies (“Study translators, then texts,” 30). In response to this demand, translation studies have placed the figure of the translator, the previously overlooked “human factor,” at the centre of attention, and I would like to place the translators of picturebooks in the spotlight as well.

## 1.2. Purpose and methodology

In the context of such translation scholars’ postulates, the aim of my study is to find out whether they are reflected in reality. To determine this, I intend to investigate the choices of translators of picturebooks and their awareness of multimodality. In the current paper I would like to present the analysis of the first interview which I have already conducted with the translator Jacek Mulczyk-Skarżyński. He graduated in Romance Studies from the University of Warsaw, specialising in Canadian theatre, and is a well-known

French language teacher celebrity on social media<sup>3</sup>, as well as a translator from French to Polish (mainly of children's picturebooks and the play *Five Times Albertine* by Michel Tremblay). Mulczyk-Skarżyński was called a translator-cannibal by Aleksandra Chrupała and Joanna Warmuzińska-Rogóz (2011) because when translating a text, he wants to be its co-author and make the target text better than the source text.

Before the interview, I had analysed in detail three picturebooks by Mélanie Rutten: *L'Ombre de chacun*, *La source des jours* and *La forêt entre les deux*, published by Éditions MeMo, and their Polish translations by Mulczyk-Skarżyński: *Mój Cień*, *Źródło* and *Mój las*, published by Wytwórnia. These three books tell one story, but backwards. It is a lyrical and philosophical story about growing up, the journey of life, coping with one's emotions, and friendship. Rutten is a photographer, author, and illustrator of literature for children and young adults. The book *L'Ombre de chacun* received an honourable mention in the international 2014 Ragazzi Awards at the Bologna Children's Book Fair. The analysis of this material consisted of verification of how the text co-creates a message with images and sounds and how these relations are treated in translation.

An individual in-depth interview (IDI, see: Kvale 2021, Babbie 2005, Miński 2017) conducted on the basis of this material allowed me to check whether the translator was aware of the multimodal nature of picturebooks and whether he utilised that knowledge in the translation process. The interview was non-standardised and partly structured, I asked ten open and closed questions, but their order was modified depending on the replies, and I also returned to some questions for clarification. The interview was conducted online via the Zoom platform, lasted about one hour, and was recorded. I then conducted a 1.5 hour follow-up interview. I asked the following questions, focusing on the approach the translator had to the multimodality of picturebooks before, during, and after the translation process:

#### **Before translation:**

1. [image] Did you pay attention to the illustrations before translation, did you analyse them, and why? Were you interested in the person of the illustrator/author? Did you search for information about her?
2. [sound] Was the sound of the original text important to you? Did you read the original text aloud to yourself or to someone else, e.g. a child?
3. Were you aware of the multimodal nature of picturebooks?
4. Did you know what multimodality and the picturebook were?

#### **In the process of translation:**

1. Did you receive instructions from the publisher on how to translate a multimodal picturebook, if yes what were they? Did you have complete freedom or were you given guidelines?
2. Describe the process of translation. What strategies did you use in these particular translations?
3. Did you encounter difficulties and/or challenges with the illustrations or the wording of the text?

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<sup>3</sup> [At:] <https://www.panodfrancuskiego.pl/o-mnie/> [date of access 5 July 2022].

4. Was the translation of the picturebooks different from other translations of other types of texts you have done before?

**After the translation process was completed:**

1. Did you check whether the text of the translation fits with the illustrations?
2. What was the process like after your translation was finished? What is the role of the publisher and the corrector?

## 2. Interview analysis

### 2.1. Before translation (questions 1–4)

Mulczyk-Skarżyński admits that he didn't take the illustrator's biography into account, concentrating solely on the book he was given to translate; instead, he focused on the relationship between the illustrations and the text. He stresses that it is always important for him when translating to match what is seen in the illustrations with what is read in the text, but it is the illustration as a rather<sup>4</sup> unchangeable element that determines the final wording of the text in the target language.

When asked about the sound layer of the books, Mulczyk-Skarżyński said that he read the books aloud, the originals as well as his own translations, but he "did not test the texts on children", using for this purpose his "inner child", i.e. his own sensitivity, without evaluating them as "good" or "bad". Interestingly, this concept of inner child can be found in translation studies, for example by Riitta Oittinen (2000: 7).

The translator did not know what multimodality or picturebook was; he was not familiar with these concepts and was not invested in the theoretical perspective, nor did he compare his work on translating picturebooks with his work on the previously translated play. He just translated the commissioned text as best as he could.

### 2.2. In the process of translation (questions 6–8)

When asked to describe his process of translation, and what strategies he used in these particular translations, Mulczyk-Skarżyński replied that his translation process consists of reading the whole book first and then translating it page by page. He often takes notes, as he emphasises that he reads the book differently in order to translate, and then he reflects on the translation suggestions. He translates short books, so that in one day he produces the first version of the translation, and then verifies the overall text, comparing it with the original. Like many other translators, he takes note of the small number of synonyms in children's books and "corrects" them, for example by replacing the constantly repeated "il a dit" (he

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4 In the case of translating picturebooks, as well as comic books, both modes (verbal and visual) can undergo a transformation. The translation includes not only the text itself, graphic elements may also be subject to change. In comics, sometimes even heroes are redrawn, and even entire panels, elements of illustrations can be removed or replaced by others (Kaindl, 1999; Ippolito, 2014; D'Arcangelo, Zanettin, 2004).

said) with “szepnął” (he whispered), “wykrzyknął” (he shouted), “uspokaja” (he soothes), “oznajmia” (he states), “pyta” (he asks), “odpowiada” (he replies), etc., thus enriching the text in his opinion.

Mulczyk-Skarżyński looks at the illustration, imagining the situation and the emotions associated with it, which helps him choose the right verb. In the studied material, there is much evidence that the translator was inspired by illustrations in the translation process. One example is an excerpt from the beginning of the story *My Shadow*, introducing how main characters Bunny and Deer met (see Fig. 1 A and 1 B below):



Figure 1. A

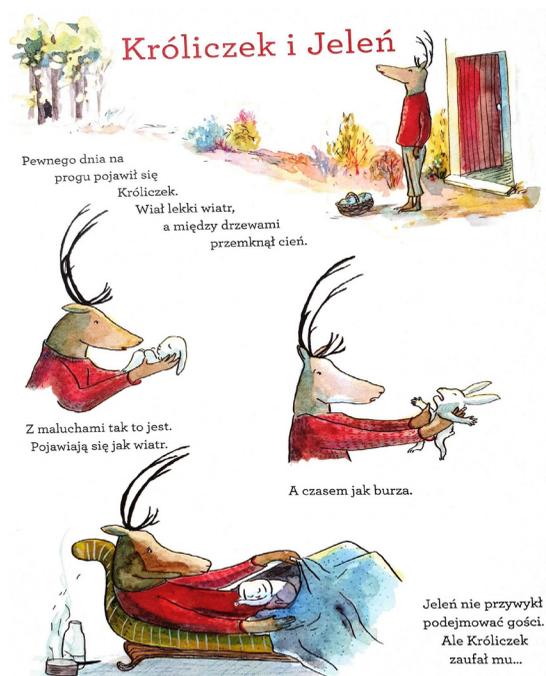


Figure 1. B

A: The original text: Rutten, Mélanie (2013) *L'Ombre de chacun*. Éditions MeMo: Nantes; 3.

B: The translation: Rutten, Mélanie ([2013] 2015) [*L'Ombre de chacun*. Éditions MeMo: Nantes]. *Mój Cień*. Translated into Polish by Jacek Mulczyk-Skarżyński. Wytwórnia: Warszawa; 3.

In this example, the sequence “(...) le petit Lapin est arrivé” (the little Bunny has arrived) is translated as: “na progu pojawił się Króliczek” (the little Bunny appeared on the doorstep). Thus, the translator decided to make two changes: firstly, he changed the verb *arriver* (in Polish “przybyć, przyjść,” in English “to arrive”) to *pojawić się* (“apparaitre” in French, “appear” in English); secondly, he added a placeholder “na progu” (on the doorstep). It can be noticed that the translator used the multimodal character of the picture because in the picture one can see the doorstep of a house, probably the house of the Deer, and in front of it a basket lying with, as it may be assumed, the Bunny inside.

This is followed by the original description of the setting in which the event took place: “Il y avait un peu de vent. Et une ombre peut-être” (There was a light wind. And maybe a shadow). In Polish, the translator treated this sentence more poetically and modified it considerably: “Wiał lekki wiatr, a między drzewami przemknął cień” (A light wind blew, and a shadow flitted between the trees). This is again a clear reference to the illustration, which shows the black figure “Shadow” (depicted as a character on the first page of the book), hiding among the trees, barely visible, hence probably the verb *przemknąć* (“to flit”: to move somewhere, next to something, someone quickly, quietly and imperceptibly<sup>5</sup>). In the original, one can read that perhaps there was a shadow that day, but the translation makes it quite certain.

According to the translator, the text does not have to be identical in meaning to the original. He does not translate literally but makes use of the strategy of adaptation and localisation, which he understands as transferring the text to the field of the target language so as to lose as little as possible from the source language, while also making it “as tasty as possible for the recipient and at the same time for the original text,” and “not what the author had in mind.” The text passes through the translator’s sieve, his sensitivity, and interpretation — it is a literary translation, where emotions also come into play, and many passages may be ambiguous. It helps that the stories in the picturebooks are universal to humans, so young people can relate to the emotions displayed in, for example, a game of hide-and-seek.

The translator was given a fairly free hand because the publishing director of Wytwórnia, Magdalena Kłos-Podsiadło, knows his work and the way he translates. However, the translator indicated that in some cases it was not him who decided on the final wording of the text. I chose the two most noteworthy examples. In the first example, the illustration presents a bed on which lies the Deer and on the Deer’s belly lies the Bunny (see: Fig. 1 A and 1 B above).

In the original text one can read: “Le Cerf a dû tout apprendre. Mais le petit lui faisait confiance.” (The Deer had to learn everything. But the little one trusted him.). And in the translation: “Jeleń nie przywykł podejmować gości. Ale Króliczek zaufał mu...” (The Deer was not used to receiving visitors. But the Bunny trusted him...).

Two differences can be noticed; the first one is a change in the sense of the sentence (in the original “The Deer had to learn everything,” in the translation “The Deer was not used to having guests”) — probably the proofreader (and writer) Joanna Olech changed it, but the translator wanted to leave it as it was in the original version.

The second change was a use of an ellipsis at the end of the sentence in the translation. As Mirosław Bańko writes: “[the three-pointed colon has] a rather unambiguous function: it highlights the surprise of an unexpected meaning appearing in a certain context for the reader. But in order for a colon to have such a function, the meaning must indeed be unexpected.”<sup>6</sup> In this fragment of the book, the appearance of an ellipsis does not seem justified because there is no surprise, unexpected situation or meaning; it only leaves a strange suspense in the context of a book for young children, which can be read as a certain ambiguity that does not appear in the original. The ambiguity is additionally reinforced by the illustration with the Bunny lying on the Deer’s stomach, and even the change of the verb tense in the second sentence

5 *Przemieścić się*: “przemieścić się gdzieś, obok czegoś, kogoś szybko, cicho i niepostrzeżenie” [at:] <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/przemknac;2510665.html> [date of access: 5 July, 2022].

6 “[trzykropek ma] funkcję dość jednoznaczną: uwydatnia niespodziankę, jaką jest dla czytelnika pojawienie się w pewnym kontekście nieoczekiwane znaczenie. Ale żeby taką funkcję *trzykropek* mógł pełnić, znaczenie to musi być istotnie nieoczekiwane” [at:] <https://sjp.pwn.pl/poradnia/haslo/trzykropek;6378.html> [date of access: 5 July, 2022].

(the original uses the Past Continuous (*le Temps Imparfait* in French) — he was trusting him — while the translation uses the Past Simple (*Czas Przeszły Dokonany* in Polish) — he trusted him). Seems to intensify this effect (he trusted... — or maybe he shouldn't trust, maybe something will happen?). It is worth stressing that in the original text, the Deer is a parental figure, caring, baking cakes, watching over the Bunny, comforting him when he is afraid, etc. (which can be seen also in the translation). However, the ellipsis may also function here as a bit of a reflective commentary, inviting the reader to ponder on this rather than making it final and definitive, which would be the case if a full stop was used as end punctuation. Through punctuation, the translator guides the aloud-reader how to read, when to stop, and when to make haste (see: Oittinen 2000: 32–37, 2003: 132).

The second example shows the scene on the volcano, which was the goal of the heroes' journey to overcome fear (see: Fig. 2 A and B below).

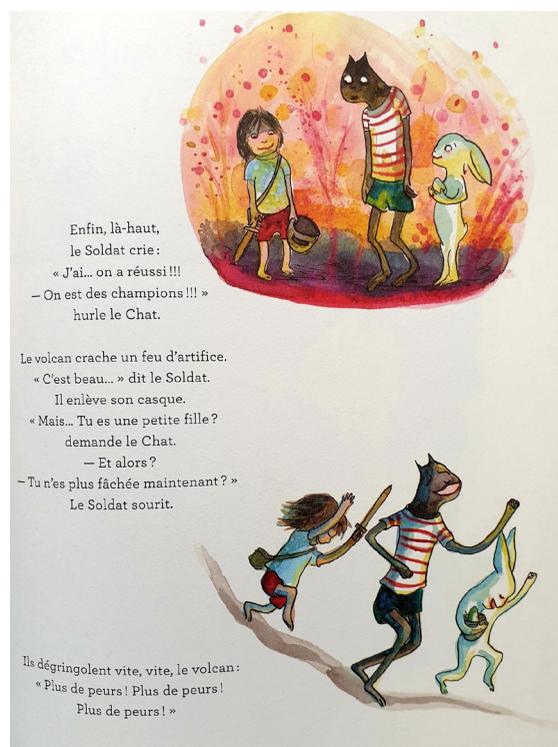


Figure 2 A



Figure 2 B

A: The original text: Rutten, Mélanie (2013) *L'Ombre de chacun*. Éditions MeMo: Nantes; 36.

B: The translation: Rutten, Mélanie ([2013] 2015) [*L'Ombre de chacun*. Éditions MeMo: Nantes]. *Mój Cień*. Translated into Polish by Jacek Mulczyk-Skarżyński. Wytwórnia: Warszawa; 36.

In the original text, the Cat merely asks the Soldier the question: “Are you a girl?”, while in the translation the effect of surprise and astonishment on the part of the Cat is clearly marked in three places: first with

an ellipsis, then with a question mark followed by an exclamation mark (“an exclamation mark placed after a question mark increases the emphases,”<sup>7</sup> i.e. the exaggerated emotionality of the utterance), and finally with the adjective “zdumiony” (astonished) describing the Cat. The Polish reader was not given the opportunity to confront this situation with his or her own thoughts. The emotions they should feel were imposed on them; they should be shocked, surprised. In the original, the reader/listener reads or hears an ordinary question, which can be interpreted freely because it is not emotionally charged, and it appeared because the soldier was wearing a helmet and only her eyes were visible. There is a certain amount of stereotyping in both versions; the reader of both versions probably thought up to that point that the Soldier was a boy. However, the difference in the presentation of this information is significant; for the French reader the information that the Soldier was a girl was not that shocking, while the Polish reader remains in consternation. It is possible that the publisher or proofreader modified the sentence uttered by Cat; however, the translator does not remember if this change was his decision.

When asked if the translation of picturebooks differed from other kinds of translations he had done before, Mulczyk-Skarżyński replied that, of course, one translates a text intended to be read aloud to children differently from a text intended to be spoken onstage in the theatre. Although a picturebook is read aloud by an adult to a child, this is not – in his opinion – comparable to reading onstage by an actor, where breathing is important, and the actor must be able to pronounce the text well. There are also differences between a written text and a spoken text; a written text has a more developed poetic layer and uses full sentences, while a spoken text makes use of repetitions and sentences are suspended, undeveloped, and natural, which is expected onstage. In contrast to Mulczyk-Skarżyński, the Swedish scholar Ulla Rhedin compares reading a picture book and attending a theater show: “the aloud-reader “acts” the text for the child and the illustration in a book is close to set design in the theater.” (Oittinen 2003: 132).

### 2.3. After the translation process was completed (question 9–10)

The translator was aware of the importance of illustrations in a picturebook. The illustrations helped, did not cause problems, and created the mood as Mulczyk-Skarżyński emphasized, but as he himself admitted in the interview, he had no theoretical knowledge; he translated spontaneously, guided by his emotions, in order to best render the emotions contained in the moving story (as the translator himself said, he was moved while creating the translation, but he also received letters from parents saying that they cried while reading the books to their children).

Finally, after Mulczyk-Skarżyński compares the translation with the original version, he sends it to the publisher. At the end the text goes through proofreading and then “negotiations,” as the translator calls the conversations between him, the publisher, and the proofreader. According to the translator, it is difficult to reconcile all the relationships between the translator, the publisher and the proofreader, and in the end, it is the translator’s name that appears on the book cover, even though it is not the translator who makes all the decisions. As we can read in the conclusion of the article by Natalia Paprocka and Paweł Łapiński (2017) “La traduction comme négociation entre traducteur et éditeur. Sur l’exemple de la trilogie dystopique Méto et sa traduction polonaise”: “in literary translation, the final version of the text is

7 “Wykrzyknik umieszczony po pytajniku zwiększa emfazę” [at:] <https://sjp.pwn.pl/zasady/415-94-6-Laczenie-pytajnika-z-wykrzyknikiem;629840.html> [date of access: 5 July, 2022].

the result of cooperation between several entities of the translation process. The translator undoubtedly plays an important role, but he is not alone [...]. The final version of the translation appears as a kind of compromise between sometimes divergent visions, resulting from more or less long and difficult negotiations between the translator and representatives of the editorial world" (my translations from French).<sup>8</sup> When asked about the role of the publisher in his work, he emphasised that at the beginning he was not given any specific guidelines on the methods or strategies he should use when translating a given book, but later during negotiations there were discussions on where a given word would "fit better," or what the publisher suggested would be different. It is worth noting at this point that *L'ombre de chacun* was his first translated book (2015), so he was not yet experienced and unable to defend his translation decisions. He admits that he would now translate many passages differently, or disagree with changes suggested by a proofreader or publisher.

### 3. Conclusion

With this study, I wanted to place the translators of picturebooks in the spotlight, like Anthony Pym's call for action suggests (2009). As I mentioned in the beginning of this study, the translation of a picturebook should take its multimodal nature into consideration, and the translator should not focus solely on words, but should also decipher interactions between verbal, visual, and aural codes. In the examples cited above, it can be seen that the translator took the relationship between the textual and visual layers into account, changing the original text in the process of translation and adding new meanings to the text based on what is seen in the illustration. However, the multimodal approach to translation also assumes that the reader must be able to activate his or her own imagination and to interpret the text independently, and as we saw in the third example (see: Fig. 2), Mulczyk-Skarżyński did not give the Polish reader the opportunity to confront the given situation with his or her own thoughts; the emotions they should feel were imposed. Therefore, the translation scholars' postulates regarding the translation of multimodal texts were only partially realised. As the translator stressed during the interview, he wanted to improve the book, even sometimes adding meanings of which the author herself was not aware. What mattered to the translator was not "what the author had in mind," but the story itself, and how it could be rendered in Polish.

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8 Paprocka, Natalia & Paweł Łapiński (2017) "La traduction comme négociation entre traducteur et éditeur. Sur l'exemple de la trilogie dystopique Méto et sa traduction polonaise" [In:] *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem* R. XXIII nr 1 (35), (ed.) Marzena Chrobak & Jerzy Brzozowski, Kraków; p.128.

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