Translating picturebooks: Re-examining interlingual and intersemiotic translation

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Abstract: The paper explores picturebooks and their translation, analyzing the three Finnish translations of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, all of which are based on a different illustration version. The paper approaches picturebook translation from the viewpoint of Jakobson’s (1959) renowned classification of translation types, namely intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic, focusing on the latter two. First, the paper examines the idea of book illustration as intersemiotic translation, analyzing how the illustration versions differ in recreating the story. Second, the paper provides examples of how the translations of picturebooks are, in fact, negotiated from the combination of verbal and visual information and therefore suggests that the translation of a picturebook does not fit into Jakobson’s typology as such; instead, it is, to certain extent, a combination of interlingual and intersemiotic translation. The paper therefore suggests that the types of translation should not be considered as exclusive of each other.

Keywords: picturebooks, multimodality, interlingual translation, intersemiotic translation

1. Introduction

Picturebooks often travel from one country and culture to another. The translator of a picturebook receives a source text and converts it into a target text that is understandable for target culture readers. One of the largest differences between the translation of picturebooks and, for instance, traditional novels is that picturebooks are pronouncedly multimodal; their message is created in the intrinsic interaction of words and images. From the translator’s point of view, a picturebook can hence be thought of consisting of two separate parts, the *verbal source text* and the *visual source text*, which nonetheless operate seamlessly to create the text’s overall meaning. The translators of such texts interpret information offered by two separate modes.
When presented together, the words and images of a picturebook afford new kinds of meaning. As picturebook scholar Perry Nodelman (1988) states, the information offered by the words of a picturebook change the way the reader construes the meaning of the images, and the images change the way the reader interprets the words. This gives us a reason to suspect that visually presented information might, in some cases, alter the way in which the words are translated in multimodal texts combining words and images. If the image, in one way or another, changes the meaning of a certain word with which it is presented, the translation of the word might no longer be what could be considered as its most obvious “word-for-word” translation.

The paper examines the three Finnish translations of The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter. The Tale of Peter Rabbit is an exceptional picturebook in the sense that it has been re-illustrated dozens of times. The publisher of the book failed to register the book for copyrights in the United States when they first started marketing the book in the country in the early 20th century. Therefore anyone could compile a new set of illustrations and market the book without restrictions (Mackey, 1998). Out of the various illustration versions, three have been translated into Finnish. The original book (Potter, 1978/1902), illustrated by Potter herself, was translated in 1967, a version illustrated by Cyndy Szekeres (Potter, 2002) was translated in 2003, and a slightly abridged version of the story illustrated by Lisa McCue (Potter, 2005a) was translated in 2005. Reading the same verbal story coupled with three different illustrations provides quite an exceptional opportunity to examine whether certain words are afforded different kinds of meanings when presented together with different images.

This paper examines picturebooks and their translations in the light of Roman Jakobson’s (1959) typology of different types of translation, namely intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation, focusing on the latter two types. The aim of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, the paper sets out to examine Pereira’s (2008) idea of book illustrations as an example intersemiotic translation. Pereira suggests three ways through which book illustrations may translate verbal information: by reproducing linguistic elements in the illustration literally, by emphasizing specific narrative elements and by adapting the images to a specific ideology. Following Pereira’s example, the paper analyzes how the different illustration versions of the book differ in recreating the story. Secondly, and more importantly, the paper sets out to examine if the images of a translated picturebook have affected its translator’s word choices. In the light of examples drawn from the translations of The Tale of Peter Rabbit, the paper re-examines Jakobson’s description of types of translation by considering where the translation of a multimodal source text such as a picturebook would stand in this typology. The translation of a book from one language to another would traditionally be considered as an obvious example of interlingual translation. However, the paper aims to demonstrate that the translation of a picturebook includes elements of both interlingual and intersemiotic translation separately, as well as a combination of them both—a type of translation not represented in Jakobson’s classification as such.
2. Interpreting Jakobson’s typology

Roman Jakobson’s translation typology identifies types of translation in the following fashion:

1. “Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
3. Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.” (1959/2000: 114)

Following Jakobson’s description precisely, intersemiotic translation involves converting verbal signs into signs of a non-verbal sign system. Examples of this would then include translating verbal text into music, film or painting. What needs to be emphasized is that, according to Jakobson’s original idea, the direction of this procedure is not reversible: Jakobson perceives intersemiotic translation as interpreting verbal information by means of, for instance, illustrations, but not the other way around. However, within subsequent research, Jakobson’s idea seems to have been slightly misquoted. For instance, Weissbrod (2006, p. 42) quotes Jakobson’s intersemiotic translation as translating “a sign” into another semiotic language, Torop (2002, pp. 598–596) quotes it as “the interpretation of the signs of a sign system with the signs of another sign system”, and Kaindl (2013, p. 261) as “the transfer between sign systems”. Torop and Kaindl both mention translating images into verbal language as an example of such practice. All of these authors report quoting Jakobson directly; yet, they do not comment on why the definition has been revised.

It was not Jakobson himself but others who broadened the notion of intersemiotic translation. For instance, Toury (1994, p. 1113) defined intersemiotic translation as translation involving two different sign systems, “whether one of them is verbal or not”. The difference between this definition and Jakobson’s original is significant: according to the original typology, translation always involves verbal language or, to be more precise, always has verbal language as its starting point. The difference between these definitions hence comes down to how we define translation itself. Broadening the definition of intersemiotic translation—and, consequently, of translation itself—allows us to move away from the traditional notion of translation as language mediation (cf. O’Sullivan, 2013; Kaindl, 2013) and allows for a more inclusive and in-depth discussion of translation as information mediation. Therefore the present paper, too, opts for a broader definition of intersemiotic translation, defining it as conveying information from one sign system to another.

3. Picturebooks and translation

3.1 Picturebooks as multimodal source texts

Following Jewitt (2009b), the paper posits that all modes of a multimodal text are of equal importance: the words and images of a picturebook play equally important roles in creating the story of the book. What this means is that when studied separately, each mode of a multimodal ensemble is incomplete and cannot represent all meanings present in the multimodal whole.
Research addressing the translation of multimodal texts should, for this very reason, always cover the analysis of each of the modes involved.

As stated above, picturebooks combine two different modes, the visual and the verbal, images and written language, but how does this affect the readers of picturebooks? Lemke (2002, p. 303) discusses what he calls “the essential incommensurability” between different modes: A verbal text is never able to produce the same and only the same meanings as an image, and vice versa. In Lemke’s words, this incommensurability inevitably leads to genuinely new meanings being created in the combination of modes (ibid). When we read picturebooks, it is possible for us to find meanings that are present only when the two modes are presented together; meanings that are not present in either mode alone. It is then possible that the genuinely new meanings created within the multimodal source text are conveyed to the translator’s interpretation of the verbal text and, moreover, to the translation choices the translator makes.

3.2 Picturebook illustrations as intersemiotic translation

As Pereira (2008) aptly remarks, book illustration and creative fields of translation, such as the translation of poetry, share similarities. Both require a re-creation of the elements of the verbal source. Moreover, both reflect the artistic conventions of the time of the production. Lastly—and, for the purposes of the present discussion, most importantly—both involve procedures such as addition, omission, explicitation, condensation. Both the illustrator and the translator make choices, emphasizing certain elements of the source while downplaying others. Pereira suggests three ways through which images can translate words: illustrations may literally reproduce linguistic elements (referred to as literal intersemiotic translation), they may emphasize specific narrative elements, and they may adapt the story to a specific ideology or artistic trend. The paper will now assess Pereira’s ideas by analyzing the illustrations on the first spread of the each illustration version of The Tale of Peter Rabbit to see how they differ in creating a pictorial setting for Potter’s story.

Pereira suggests that literal intersemiotic translation occurs when linguistic elements—referents, whether concrete or abstract; shapes, colours, and so on—are “fully (or mostly) reproduced in the picture” (2008, p. 109). Pereira claims that by depicting the characters and events described in the verbal text and not changing any of the details, the illustrator offers “a faithful description” of what is expressed verbally (ibid. p. 111). It is easy to imagine how, for instance, an image of a rabbit and the verbal label “rabbit” would appear as reproductions of the same information. However, I claim that this is only seemingly so. As Nodelman (1988, p. 193) asserts, the words and images of a picturebook convey “the same” information only very superficially.

Let us consider, for instance, how the rabbit mother is represented in the opening illustrations (represented by the sketches in Figures 1–3). All of the illustrators have depicted the rabbit mother, also mentioned in the verbal text. One could therefore claim that the verbal information has been translated intersemiotically in a literal manner and that the mother is faithfully described by pictorial means in each of the illustrations. Yet, comparing the illustrations with each other quickly reveals that each offers a rather different depiction of the character. Potter’s drawing (sketched in Figure 1) depicts a realistic-looking animal; a dam, vigilantly watching over her young.
Figure 1. A sketch representing the opening illustration by Beatrix Potter, presenting the rabbits as realistic-looking animals.

The two other illustrators offer a more caricature-like depiction of the character. McCue’s illustration, represented by the sketch in Figure 2, presents the mother with a scarf on her shoulders, smiling as she watches her children.

Figure 2. A sketch representing the opening illustration by Lisa McCue, depicting the rabbits dressed in simple garments.
Szekeres has taken the stylization the furthest (sketch in Figure 3). Her character is anthropomorphised to the point of resembling a furry little human. The character’s clothing—a long dress and an apron—could even be said to endorse a somewhat stereotypical gender role. To sum up, there are countless ways of converting verbal information into a visual form. As the visual representations may differ from each other radically, it might be counterproductive to claim them all as literal translations of the verbal. The paper therefore suggests that literal intersemiotic translation is quite problematic as a concept.

Figure 3. A sketch representing the opening illustration by Cyndy Szekeres presents humanlike characters living in a fully equipped home.

Pereira’s second claim is that illustrations may emphasize narrative elements of the verbal text, such as points of view, actions, themes, and so on. This undoubtedly seems to be the case with the illustrations analyzed in the paper. Those familiar with The Tale of Peter Rabbit will remember the way Potter’s story depicts Peter as the rascal son of the family; his sisters are more obedient, perhaps even passive characters. While this information is not yet available verbally on the first spread of the book, there are hints of Peter’s personal traits on the re-illustrations of the story. In McCue’s illustration, Peter is hanging from a branch (the small rabbit wearing a jacket on the right-hand side in Figure 2). While Szekeres’ depiction of Peter (on the far left in Figure 3) is more subtle than McCue’s, her illustration, too, represents Peter as more active than the sisters who merely hold toys. In Potter’s original drawing, it is impossible to even distinguish between the rabbit children. The underlying theme of the disobedient child is hence emphasized in the re-illustration versions.

Comparing the way in which the rabbit children are depicted also exemplifies Pereira’s third claim, namely that the illustrations may bring about a specific ideology and values to the story. As with the rabbit mother, Potter’s illustration—presenting the rabbit children as realistic
rabbits—provides in interesting comparison to Szekeres’ drawing. The way the illustrator depicts the girls in neat little dresses and aprons and the boy with his arms in the air, the jacket carelessly unbuttoned, hints at stereotyping of genders: the girls are serene and obedient, the boy is wild and lively.

All in all, picturebook illustration is an illustrative example of intersemiotic translation. As with the translation of verbal texts, no illustrator will produce the exact same translation as someone else. Each illustration version represents the events differently, creating a unique visual context in which the verbal story is interpreted. In other words, the choices made by the illustrator affect the way in which the translator interprets the verbal source text, as discussed in the following section.

4. Analysing the translations of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

This section of the paper presents the analysis of the three Finnish translations of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. The aim of the analysis was to elicit whether the images of a picturebook may have affected its translator’s word choices, as could be expected based on the above discussion on how picturebooks convey information. The method of analysis employed for this purpose, multimodal comparative analysis, is adopted from Garavini’s (2014) research on picturebook translation: the original and the translated picturebooks were first read separately, analyzing the word–image interaction. The second stage of the analysis involved comparing the verbal source text with its translation, focusing on any apparent changes or manipulations of the text. In the last stage of the analysis, these changes were compared to visually presented information to determine whether the images provided a motivation for the changes made.

The analysis strongly suggested that the transfer of information from one language to another had involved the processing of information conveyed by the visual sign system. The analysis identified three different ways in which the illustrations had affected the translation process. First, in all three illustration versions, there were instances of contradiction of information between the illustrations and the verbal text: the illustrations contested the verbal text by presenting some details of the story in a manner not consistent with the verbal text. It seemed that the translators had felt the need to modify the verbal text in order to avoid contradiction in the translation. The second and third category have to do with the fact that illustrations offer a significant amount of detailed information about the characters, settings and actions in the story, hence enriching the translator’s interpretation of the verbal story. The second category represents examples of how the translators had verbalized information conveyed only by the illustrations. The third category includes examples of how the illustrations had specified the meaning of certain words, resulting in translation solutions that are more precise than their source language counterparts. The categories are presented with examples below.

4.1 The illustrations contest the verbal text

The comparison of the verbal source and target texts revealed a series of changes and omissions which, in the following stage of analysis, turned out to be related to a contradiction between the information presented in the visual and verbal modes: the verbal source text expressed something in one way and the visual source text expressed it in a way that was contradictory to
the verbal. An example of such contradiction is the word “blackbird” in the book illustrated by Szekeres: the birds are labeled as black in the verbal source text but they are presented as brown in Szekeres’ illustration. These instances of contradiction had been approached using various strategies. It hence seems that the translators may have felt the need to modify the verbal information in order to avoid contradiction in the translation.

One strategy that had been used to eliminate the contradiction was moving from hyponyms to hypernyms: translating the item with an equivalent more general in meaning so that contradiction between image and verbal text no longer existed. The translation of the word “blackbird” in Szekeres’ illustration version is an example of such a strategy. In the translation of the book, the word “blackbird” (mustarastas, “the black thrush” in Finnish) had been substituted with the name of the superordinate species (an expression with a more general meaning), “thrush” (rastas). The translator hence avoided naming the colour altogether, and contradiction between word and image was eliminated from the translation. In other words, the information conveyed by the signs of the verbal system was conformed to the information conveyed by the visual.

The second strategy used to eliminate contradiction of information was simply omitting the item that was presented differently by the two modes of the multimodal source text. The third strategy employed for the purpose was ignoring the information presented verbally and replacing it with the information presented visually—replacing the information conveyed by the verbal system with the information conveyed by the visual system. An example of such translation strategy can be found from both McCue’s and Potter’s illustration versions. Interestingly, the contradiction of information in these examples is culture specific: the species of firs that grow in different parts of the world look different. The cones in McCue’s drawing (sketch in Figure 2) could not pass as fir cones in the target culture: the species of firs that grow in Finland have elongated cones that point downward, while pines have cones that are round and sit upright—exactly like the cones in the drawing. The cones in the actual illustration are small, but the cone motif is repeated in a larger size in a vignette along the borders of the page; in other words, the shape of the cones can hardly go unnoticed.

Further, the firs that grow in the target country have branches that start quite close to the ground and hang downward, whereas the branches of pines only grow in the upper third of the trunk. The branchless trunk of the tree in Potter’s drawing (sketch in Figure 3) is therefore more likely to be interpreted as that of a pine in the target culture. Both translators have replaced the verbal information (“fir”) with their interpretation of the visual (“pine”, mänty). Even though the translation solutions conform to visual information, they may still be thought of as being based on a verbal sign: the verbal source text item has simply been replaced by information extracted from the illustration. The following category, on the other hand, represents translation solutions that have no counterparts in the verbal text whatsoever.

4.2 The illustrations are verbalized

The comparison of the verbal source and target texts revealed a range of target text items which did not have equivalents in the source text. These additions turned out to be closely associated with visually presented information, since most of such items proved to have an equivalent in
the visual source text in the third stage of the analysis. This means that the translators, either consciously or unconsciously, verbalized information that was presented only visually in the multimodal source text.

An example of such an addition can be found from the translation of Potter’s original book. Potter’s illustration in this part of the book presents a white cat, sitting on the edge of a pond in the middle of a garden. The cat is staring down at the pond in which orange fish are swimming. The verbal source text reads: “A white cat was staring at some gold-fish”. The sentence has been translated as “Lammikossa uiskenteli kultakala ja lammen rannalla istui valkoinen kissa sitä vaanimmassa [A goldfish was swimming in a pond and on the edge of the pond there sat a white cat staring at it.]” The translation includes information which has no counterpart in the verbal source, but may be extracted from the visual source text. In other words, the translation of the sentence has involved complementing the message of the verbal system with information derived from the visual system. Illustrations offer a significant amount of additional, (seemingly) superfluous information about the characters, settings and actions in the book, and some of this information had been explicated into verbal information in all of the three translations. These additions are obviously not necessary in order for the target culture reader to understand the text. Moreover, one may ask whether changing the text in such a way is beneficial for the translation: the firm ring of Potter’s carefully chosen words seems to be lost in the wordy Finnish version.

4.3 The illustrations specify the meaning of the verbal text

Comparing the verbal source and target texts also indicated that various target text items were more precise in meaning than their source text equivalents. The motivation behind these specifications of meaning became evident when these items were compared with the visual source text. Again, the illustrations offer a significant amount of detailed information about the settings and actions in the story. When verbal signs are complimented by the details of the visual signs, the combination of visual and verbal information may result in a meaning more precise than what the verbal signs express alone.

A clear example of such specification of meaning are the translations of the word “plant” in a scene where Peter Rabbit knocks over a couple of plants. In two of the illustration versions, the word is presented together with an image of distinctively small plants that grow in pots of clay (in the third illustration version, this scene has been omitted both verbally and visually). The word “plant” has been translated into Finnish as “seedling” (taimi) in one translation and as “seedling pot” (taimiruukku) in the other. Visually offered information may be suggested to have specified both translators’ interpretation of the particular source text item: the combination of verbal information (“plant”) and visual information (“small”/“growing in a pot”) has clearly specified the meaning of the item.

As well as nouns, the data offered various examples of verbs that had been translated with expressions more precise than the original. A particularly illustrative example of such modifications are the translations of the verb “to eat” in a scene where Peter Rabbit eats vegetables. In the three illustration versions, the action of eating is presented in rather different ways. In Potter’s original illustration, the rabbit is eating two radishes at a time, with its head
tilted back and eyes half-closed with pleasure. Szekeres has depicted the scene very differently: the rabbit is holding a radish, from which only one small bite has been taken. It seems to be staring into the distance and its mouth is tightly closed. In McCue’s illustration version, the action of eating is depicted as the most animated of all. The rabbit is leaning against a cabbage with its face beaming with delight. It is holding two radishes, one of which it is just about to take a large bite of. It is surrounded by half-eaten radishes and French beans.

The different atmospheres of the illustrations have also been conveyed to the translations: in the translation of Szekeres’ illustration version, where the action of eating per se was left to little attention, the verb “to eat” is translated with the expression “to taste a little” (maistella hieman). In the translations of McCue’s and Potter’s illustration versions, which depicted the action of eating as fast as well as delightful, the verb has been translated as “to gobble” (ahmia) and as “to relish” (herkutella), respectively. One could claim that the combination of verbal information (“to eat”) combined with visual information (“take pleasure in eating”) results in a translation more precise in meaning (“to relish”). In these cases, the information coming from the visual and the verbal source text combine to define and delimit the meaning of a particular item. The visual and verbal information become semantically associated, and their concurrence delimits the meaning of the whole.

5. Conclusions: Fitting picturebook translation into Jakobson’s typology

The words and images of a picturebook convey distinct but related aspects of meaning. When presented together, they—discreetly but effectively—repurpose each other. The choices made by a picturebook illustrator will therefore affect the way the reader interprets the verbal text and, consequently, how the translator of the book will transfer the story from one language to another.

The aim of the paper has been to propose that the translation of picturebooks does not entirely fit into the translation typology presented above, which defined interlingual translation as translating verbal signs by means of some other language and intersemiotic translation as translating from one sign system to another. The translation of the analyzed books had been interlingual in the sense that most verbal signs of the target text were based on a verbal sign in the source text at least to some extent. On the other hand, their translation had also been intersemiotic in the sense that the translated texts included information only present in the visual source text; a clear example of transfer of information from the visual sign system to the verbal. Some of this information had no equivalent whatsoever in the verbal source text—the information had simply been added—and some of it had replaced verbal information in order to avoid contradiction.

However, the analysis of the data also strongly suggested that the transfer of information from the multimodal source text had often involved negotiating meaning from the combination of the different sign systems. The verbal signs had been adapted and adjusted by extracting details from the visual signs. Largely similar observations have also been made about the translation of illustrated technical texts (Ketola, 2015; 2016). This aspect in the translation process of an
illustrated text represents a combination of interlingual and intersemiotic translation: translating a message created in the combination of a verbal signs and another sign system, namely images. This type of translation is not represented in Jakobson’s classification as such. This is not to say that the typology is insufficient; rather, it suggests that the types of translation should not be considered as exclusive of each other.

Translation studies has traditionally considered its subject as a predominantly verbal activity, ignoring the other accompanying multimodal elements of texts (Kokkola & Ketola, 2015, pp. 219–221). The message of multimodal texts, such as illustrated texts, comics and audiovisual material, is created in the interplay of various modes. The translation (and subtitling) of these texts is therefore never a purely interlingual operation. Translation is a richer interpretative process than traditionally assumed: the process of interpreting verbal signs by means of other verbal signs—determinately labelled as “translation proper” by Jakobson—is often enriched by information derived from modes other than the verbal.

6. References
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