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The Travels of Harry: International Marketing and the Translation of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Books

Gillian Lathey

How does a children’s book become an international bestseller? Viewed historically, there are as many answers to that question as there are children’s classics. All that can be said with certainty is that recently there has been a dramatic change in the trajectory of a children’s book destined for world fame. The travels of Cinderella, Aladdin, Alice, Pinocchio, Emil, Pippi Longstocking, Babar, or Winnie-the-Pooh have been halting and uneven—sometimes with delays of several years between publication of the original and translation and positive reception in other countries. As Emer O’Sullivan points out in Kinderliterarische Komparatistik, Alice in Wonderland only achieved real popularity in Germany in the 1970s, thanks to a new translation. Conversely, Erich Kästner’s modern classic Emil and the Detectives enjoyed two separate waves of popularity in Britain: the first in the 1930s, and the second after the publication of a new translation in 1959, when Emil Tischbein became, on a smaller scale, the Harry Potter of his day. Economic, ideological, political, and cultural factors have all played their part in the international success or otherwise of children’s books, as has the fact that children’s literature is a visual as well as a literary medium: E. H. Shepard’s Winnie-the-Pooh or Jean de Brunhoff’s Babar are recognized everywhere. But there is no doubt that since the advent of Harry Potter, the concept of an international bestseller for children has taken on a new meaning as well as a new epithet: “phenomenon.” Rapid distribution and the effectiveness of global marketing have guaranteed the international success of each Harry Potter title. From booksellers dressing up as witches in Germany to a publicity stunt involving a steam train at London’s King’s Cross Station, the publication of a new Harry Potter
title is an orchestrated event, staged successively across the world with minimal time delay for translation.

As the 2003 CLISS summer school took place, translators were working to demanding schedules on *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and delegates at the Harry Potter seminar devoted a moment’s silent tribute to them all. Never has the role of translators been so essential to publishers and keen readers alike. According to the *Publisher’s Weekly NewsLine* website of 2 July 2003 (just over a week after the publication of Potter no. 5), the Chinese translator was a frontrunner in the race to produce the first translation, with plans for an 800,000-copy first printing in place for 1 October 2003. The Japanese translation of the book, on the other hand, was not expected until mid-2004, with Germany (November 2003), Finland, and Spain (both early 2004) in between. Time patterns of translation still vary across the world, but gaps are decreasing as the international Potter effect gains momentum with the publication of each volume. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was not published in China until October 2000, a delay of three years from first publication in the UK; for volume five the planned time lapse between publication of the original and the translation was barely four months. One thing is certain: if *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* had been translated into forty-seven languages in two hundred countries and sold circa 195 million copies by June 2003 (bloomsbury.com), then no. 5 is sure, eventually, to be published in a similar, if not greater, number of languages.

The publication of a new Harry Potter title is an economic bonanza for all interested parties. Beyond the book lie the forces of global merchandising and branding that rule the world of children’s publishing, as Dan Hade argues in his article “Storyselling.” Once the nonbook rights to Harry Potter were sold in 1998, Time Warner exercised control of world distribution with an iron hand. There are many instances of legal action, for example against several German publishers for producing pedagogical materials based on the Harry Potter books. Similarly, publishers who have bought translation rights have sought to retain control of the text by means of litigation. German publisher Carlsen, concerned about the number of enterprising young readers who could not wait for the translation and read the latest Harry Potter in English, sued Amazon.de for selling the Bloomsbury edition, claiming that different customers were getting different discounts in violation of German law (*Publishers Weekly*).

But what of the translator who sits at the center of this marketing maelstrom? Is the translator simply a pawn in the world distribution
process, or is there a dependence on the translator that places him or her, for once, in a potentially powerful position? To a publisher who has bought the translation rights to the latest Harry Potter title, translation must seem an irritatingly lengthy hiatus when hundreds of thousands of copies of the English-language edition have already been sold. There is little time to match text carefully to translator, and collaboration between editor and translator is compromised. Instances in which publisher or editor and translator have worked together as closely as Aidan Chambers and Laurie Thompson on the translation of Peter Pohl’s *Johnny My Friend*, published by Turton and Chambers in 1991, are few and far between; Chambers has described the process in some detail. Unless an editor is fluent in both source and target languages and has time to spare (particularly unlikely in the present economic climate and with the demand for speedy translations), a translation cannot be scrutinized and controlled in every detail. Translators make decisions and choices on a word-by-word basis that affect the conveyance of the tone, cultural nuances, and style of the original. At this micro level of the text the translator, although subject to editorial deadlines and guidelines, literally has the last word.

The aim of the CLISS seminar was to compare international editions of the first volume of the Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in the American edition), with the effects of global marketing as well as the translator’s opportunities for sovereignty over the text in mind. Working from the outside of the book to the inside, we began by considering what an examination of the “packaging” of different editions might reveal about what Jack Zipes has called the “culture industry” (171–2). Turning next to textual matters, delegates had been asked before the summer school to undertake a close reading of the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in any translation to which they had access. In addition, all were provided with back translations into English of extracts from the French and German versions of chapter one. During discussion of these passages, participants addressed the following questions: how had translators mediated an essentially British text? How did they convey the tone and humor of Rowling’s prose in the translation of proper names, idiomatic phrases, and the representation of spoken language? Was there evidence of Klingberg’s “cultural context adaptation” (12) in the process of translation, and if so, what was its effect? In what follows, I have necessarily selected and synthesized delegates’ responses to these questions both during the seminar and in the course of ensuing e-mail correspondence. Recollections of the seminar were delightfully idiosyn-
ocratic, ranging from disagreements about the exact nature and powers of a philosopher’s as opposed to a sorcerer’s stone, to fine linguistic points and the machinations of the book trade.

Covers, Artwork, and Peritextual Material

Delegates from Israel, Slovenia, Belgium, the USA, Holland, Germany, Austria, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Italy, and Spain brought copies of the book; we also had the bonus of a Latin edition (translated by Peter Needham, 2003) published by Bloomsbury. On comparing the covers of these editions and color photocopies of twenty-five international editions taken from the Bloomsbury website, the most striking finding was the predominance of the American as opposed to the original British artwork. Of the twenty-five editions illustrated on the website, fourteen carry the American cover accredited to Mary GrandPré. Only the British and Greek editions sport the original cover. According to the rubric found in all editions post-2000, Time Warner’s control extends far beyond GrandPré’s artwork: “Harry Potter, names, characters and related indicia are copyright and trademark Warner Bros.” Publicity for the films of the series relies, of course, on the visual recognition of GrandPré’s designs and the descending lightning-flash at the base of the letter P for Potter. Indeed, this trademark is incorporated into a range of scripts from the Cyrillic (Russian, Bulgarian) to the ideographic (Taiwanese).

Yet there is some diversity even in the standard Time Warner cover. On Taiwanese and Hebrew editions Harry ascends intrepidly on his broomstick to the left rather than the right in line with the direction in which Hebrew and Chinese are read, and on what is to Western eyes the back cover of the book; in Taiwan the paperback is sold with a fold-out poster of the cover. Despite Time Warner’s hegemony, Czech, Danish, Finnish, Swedish, French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish publishers have commissioned their own cover art. Successive German editions of Harry Potter titles, for example, retain the impact of Sabine Wilharm’s modernistic perspective and figures. Interestingly, the Japanese version brought along by Yukie Ito is not featured with international covers on the Bloomsbury website and was the most different of all. In an atmospheric pastel drawing of a castle, an owl, and a few shadowy figures, there is no clear representation of Harry. Yukie e-mailed to say how surprised she was by this singularity, noting that the only other cover that almost omitted Harry was the one published in Holland, where there’s a glimpse of Harry’s leg as he disappears from the top right-hand corner of the image. So, rather than the clearly delineated railway engine and bespec-
tacled schoolboy of the British original, the shaded oil pastel of the Japanese edition suggests mystery and the supernatural, adding a mystical element to the reader’s expectations.

Artwork that did not conform to the Time Warner format nevertheless often represented a specific publishing house style: the diagonal flashes of color and the words “Folio Junior” on the French cover convey signals of literary status in its country of origin. As Orna Granot, a seminar participant from Israel, commented: “My main discovery from the seminar was that a book cover is not like any other illustration, it ‘acts’ differently . . . the covers of the different editions showed me more consideration of marketing than art.”

Tone and Humor—A Decidedly British Story

Whereas the visual impact of a book cover can easily be reproduced internationally (reversals notwithstanding), it is not so easy for a publisher or editor to oversee the intricate process of translating an entire text. A review of Harry Potter translations on the Publishers Weekly website in July 2003 refers, for example, to complaints that the Russian translator of volumes two and three of the Harry Potter series, Maria Litvinova, had added new passages. Quite apart from this kind of tampering with the original text, the specifically English nature of the cultural content of the books leads to choices between adaptation or preservation of culture-specific items. The peculiarities of the English boarding school and associated foodstuffs may well puzzle the child reader in the target culture, and Rowling draws on these traditions with a degree of panache that the translator has to try to match. Even for those of us who have never been Harry Potter fans, the close textual analysis essential to the comparison of translation and original does lead to an appreciation of Rowling’s style: the finesse with which she combines a closeness to spoken language, the ironic tone, linguistic creativity, and narrative momentum.

General comments by seminar participants on the translation of the humor, vernacular style, and cultural content of Rowling’s text indicated a range of approaches to the task. Orna Granot wrote retrospectively: “One direct result of the seminar is that I actually sat down and read the Hebrew translation of Gili Bar Hillel. I enjoyed it very much. Some parts are better than others but the main light atmosphere of the writing is maintained.” Gaby Thomson, who worked in the seminar with German-speaking delegates, reported on the consensus of the group that the first chapter (translated into German by Klaus Fritz) was “well done overall”
but “loses its Britishness.” She commented particularly on the phrase at the end of the opening sentence: “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much” (7). A tag taken from spoken language that emphasizes the Dursleys’ smugness—a reader can picture the pair of them saying “thank you very much” with their noses in the air—is typical of the effect Rowling creates by using such idiomatic phrases. In his translation, Fritz replaces “thank you” with an intensifier, “sehr stolz sogar” (very proud indeed). Gaby’s verdict was that as a result of this and other changes “the flavor of the original is gone.”

Names

Proper names in the book also convey tone and humor, and Rowling’s delight in linguistic play is evident in her inventions. I will limit remarks to two examples that were discussed in some detail in the seminar. Returning to the opening line of Rowling’s text, there is, straightaway, a question mark hanging over the translation of “Privet Drive.” Rowling establishes the Dursleys as conventional, middle-of-the-road Englanders who live in the suburban conformity that is instantly familiar to most British readers. That the word “privet” alone conjures up such a setting is demonstrated perfectly at the beginning of Michael Frayn’s marvelous novel Spies (2002). The narrator, a middle-aged Englishman out walking with his adult daughter in Germany, becomes aware of an unsettling, pungent smell that he cannot quite place; nor does he recognize the German word for the shrub, “Liguster,” which his daughter names as its source. Some time later the narrator, a professional translator who admits that he should have known better, suddenly recalls the name “privet” and all the associations of a wartime childhood it holds for him. He laughs at the name of a plant: “so commonplace, so despised and ridiculed, so associated with the repression and concealment of all the wild feelings it seems to have released in me” (31). “Privet,” then, is to an English reader both ridiculous and resonant with the orderliness and repression of a suburban English childhood of the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. Like so many features of the Potter books it represents a return to the England of the mid-twentieth century. Whether English child readers appreciate every reference of this kind or not, the effect is cumulative in representing the Dursleys as archconformists and figures of fun.

So how had translators addressed the ironic resonance of “Privet Drive” in the editions we had to hand? The most obvious choices were to leave the street name in English, as Jean-François Ménard does in the
French translation, or to use the botanical equivalent, for example “Ligusterweg” (literally: “privet way”) in the German version by Klaus Fritz. Given the Latinate nomenclature of the plant world, it is no surprise to find “Gestationis Ligustrorum” in the Latin version, too. Either way, the social associations of Privet Drive are lost. Japanese proves to be particularly interesting in this and other instances, because of the two language modes open to the translator. These are hiragana, the customary script combined with Chinese characters, and katakana, used to represent sound phonetically in onomatopoeia, new words, or foreign words. As Yukie Ito informed us, the name “Privet Drive” in the Japanese translation is simply a katakana or phonetic equivalent that will no more convey a sense of the suburban milieu to the Japanese reader than the strategy of leaving the name untranslated does in the French edition. The most radical change in social status, however, occurs in the Russian translation by I. V. Oranskii. Roehampton MA student Jane Grayson has pointed out that in Russian it is not possible to leave “privet,” since the Russian transliteration of the word means “hello.” Oranskii, translator of the first Russian edition, resorted to “Praivet Drive” (“Private Drive” in English), thereby at a stroke elevating the status of the suburban setting to that of the private estate.

It is, of course, difficult to know how a translator could convey the connotations of “privet” without resorting to cumbersome explanations, or footnotes that would halt the narrative flow and are not appropriate in a children’s text. What matters, as Eirlys E. Davies argues in a fine article on translations of the Harry Potter books, is the overall effect that translators achieve through the knowledge and craft of the practiced wordsmith. Where a cultural reference, a joke, or a pun in the original is lost, reference at another point in the text to a similar setting in the target culture, or the introduction of wordplay in the target language, create on balance a tone and style which match those of the original. Davies argues that the loss of verbal humor in any translation of Harry Potter would disappoint, but a translation that “draws on whatever resources and conventions of wordplay its target language has to offer may succeed in transferring the original flavor, albeit through different examples” (96). One such ploy that impressed and amused the seminar group was Jean-François Ménard’s clever “Choixpeau” (by analogy with chapeau) as a translation for Sorting Hat. Similarly, in her e-mail about the Japanese translation, Yukie Ito indicates that translator Yuko Matsuoka has used the resources of the Japanese language to create alternative effects: “some letters in the books have a different one, like ‘large letter’ or ‘thick letter’. For example the first time the name of Dumbledore was men-
tioned, his name is written in thick letter. I think it’s because the translator wants to emphasize that word or phrase.” This use of typography may well be part of a pattern of compensation of the kind Davies describes.

A second example of the usage of a proper name concerns the magical potential for the child reader of playing with morphological rules to create new words. Rowling’s coinage “unDursleyish,” used by Mrs. Dursley to describe Harry’s parents, provoked discussion of word formation in different languages. It was not always possible for translators to replicate the negative prefix and adjectival suffix in English. As a Germanic language closely related to English, German follows a similar pattern with “unDursleyhaft,” whereas Ménard uses the lengthy phrase: “aussi éloignés que possible de tout ce qui faisait un Dursley” (as far as possible from everything that made a Dursley). According to Japanese delegate Akiko Yamazaki (e-mail communication), the adjective is translated into Japanese by Matsuoka as: “something like ‘not in the tradition of the Dursley family’,” an emphasis on heritage that marks a cultural shift in addition to the loss of humor.

**Dialect, Register, and Social Status**

J. K. Rowling uses “Dursley” as a code word for the lower-middle-class aspirations the family represents, but questions of class—always significant in the English context—also arise in dialogue. This is particularly so in the case of Hagrid, the faithful, soft-hearted giant whose spoken language signals an indeterminate working-class dialect often found in British children’s fiction of the mid-twentieth century. The seminar handout included extracts from Hagrid’s first conversation with Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore distinguished by nonstandard features of pronunciation such as the loss of the final consonant (“flyin” for “flying,” “an” for “and”), and nonstandard grammar (“we was” instead of “we were”). Participants found that both the French and German translators ignored this aspect of Hagrid’s persona and cast his speech in the standard language, while Yukie Ito reported that: “Our Hagrid speaks in a way like people in downtown Tokyo, or working-class people.” Matsuoka has taken Rowling’s intention to heart and sought a localized register to mark Hagrid’s social standing as compared to that of other protagonists.

Translators who transposed the register of Hagrid’s speech may well have done so on the advice of editors, since many educators and parents across the world believe that nonstandard language is inappropriate in a
children’s text. Alternatively, such decisions may be purely pragmatic, since it can be difficult to find an immediately recognizable sociolect in the target language that corresponds to Hagrid’s stylized dialogue. Downtown Tokyo talk is one solution, but the choice of a specific dialect is highly dependent on its associations in readers’ minds, and the risk of unintentionally rendering characters laughable is high. The nuances of British social hierarchies as represented in linguistic register are a challenge to any translator—just as, in reverse, Japanese delegates alerted the group to the difficulties of adapting the English text to a tight politeness structure in forms of address. The very title of Cathy Hirano’s article on translating from Japanese into English, “Eight Ways to Say You,” demonstrates the complexity of matching pronoun to social status. Translators into Japanese also have to consider the flexibility in the use of first-person pronouns in spoken Japanese according to the situation and the speaker’s relationship with the addressee. CLISS delegates from Japan could only begin to explain the intricacies of this system to us; Hisako Shirai’s unpublished MA dissertation, “Japanese Translations of English Texts,” examines many examples of the Japanese translator’s attempts to match this structure to the set of interrelationships between adults and children in the Harry Potter books.

Muggles Fight Back

A summarizing comment on the seminar by Maureen Farrell may seem unexpected in the context of the “culture industry”: “I think my primary reaction to the session was based on some shock at the amount of difference that seemed to be emerging from nuances.” Those “nuances,” namely the translation of culture-specific items, dialect, and Rowling’s wordplay, alerted delegates—some for the first time—to the translator’s art in orchestrating cultural and linguistic difference in the interests of the child reader. Overall, the keynote of the seminar was diversity, with a recognition that global culture does not always lead to homogenization. Latin (2003) and Ancient Greek (2004) versions may be no more than an amusing gag for the learned, but Harry is also playing a part in the revival of politically significant minority languages. A Basque edition was published in 2002; an Irish Gaelic translation by Máire Nic Mhaolain, published in 2004, is to be incorporated into the syllabus of the gaeilsecoileanna or Gaelic Schools (“Order”).

A further indication of resistance to publishing conglomerates is the number of wildcat translations available on the Internet that were mentioned in the seminar. Russian readers impatient for a translation of
the first Harry Potter book, finally published in 2000, could turn to several translations on Harry Potter websites (Inggs 291). Moreover, many eager young readers, like those in Germany and Austria, have bypassed translation altogether and read the latest Potter title in English. Such initiative is a reminder that Harry Potter’s success began by word of mouth among child readers and was not engineered from the start by the publishing industry. Despite the overwhelming pressure toward “making children all alike” (Zipes 188), delegates concluded that the transmission, reception, and mediation of the Harry Potter books across the world, and above all the unique qualities of each language with which translators work creatively and imaginatively, testify to the surprising—if fragile—tenacity of difference.

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