

Translating children's literature in Africa:

'African culture conveyance through intercultural adaptation'

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Introduction

Children's literature is all the more often the subject of translations because the child is still less able than the adult to read in a foreign language and that certain countries, have a richer heritage in children's books than others. Enrichment of literature in some countries is done through translation. To the question "How to write for children?" arises its twin "How to translate for children?", raising with it questions about methods, different practices and techniques to apply in translating the literature in general, and specific constraints to be taken into account during the process of translating.

Translating for children is very specifically included in the work of translating for youth in general. Defined by R.-M. Vassalo as "a light-brained reader" (2001, 45), the child does not possess the same knowledge and the same cultural, linguistic and affective abilities as an adult. If the writing of children's literature complies with these requirements, the translation does the same. And it will be a "Target-specific translation" (Ateliers, 2001, 51), in the sense that it is focused on the target reader having a unique and different perception, with certain particularities that are clearly circumscribed. The translator has to create a new reading relationship that takes into consideration the specificities of their readership in order to create a state of intimacy with the author.

African countries have a diverse and rich oral traditional literature dedicated for children and this explains the necessity for translating children's literature from and into various African languages to facilitate culture exchange and particularly extend the African culture to the other part of the world. This paper will demonstrate typical and concrete examples of African stories that have been translated into various African languages and will show the role of translating Children's African literature into European languages. It will as well discuss the best practices of translating children's literature in an African context, best theories to resort to and best techniques to apply for all those interested in translating African indigenous stories from and into various languages.

1. Importance of translating children's literature

The first African language literature was essentially oral; its influence is still apparent today. This literature has been and is still being transformed into written and communicated to different parts of the world through translation. The latter is used to a significant degree in the production of children's books in Africa via intercultural adaptation which is a constant feature of children's literature. Indeed, this literature develops its own discourse through its borrowings, even its adaptations to a large number of texts (in the broad sense) written or oral.

As Stephens observes (1992: 86), this tendency to cultural craftsmanship all the more attracts children to the fact that, in their relationship to the adult world, they proceed in the same way as the authors for children in their relationship to the general literature: Because children pass through what is, by definition, a (trans) formation phase, children construct their individuality in relation to certain models they imitate or reject.

Although it is commonplace, intercultural adaptation in the children's book poses particular problems because of the risk of ignoring its hypotheses. This difficulty is amplified during the translation process. To the constraint of age is added that of the cultural environment of the child. In Africa, literature for children is very commonly the subject of translations in particular the picture book. The market is buoyant, it is to satisfy the demand of the readership of some countries less present in this literary category. However, it is not clear exactly to what degree translation is utilised. Specifically, translation is used much more extensively in the African languages.

Rwanda, one of the African States that adopted a mother tongue as the official language, is understandably committed to publishing youth and children's books in Kinyarwanda. For instance, Bakame Editions, the first Publishing House to publish children's books in Rwanda have produced well about 200 titles since it was established in 1995. Some titles are a product of translations from some other African or European languages whereas others are originally generated from Rwandan Oral Traditional literature. As a matter of fact, many Kinyarwanda published children's books are translated into modern languages such as French and English to extend Rwandan culture to other populations. Therefore, writing in African languages and translating African Stories into various African (and European) languages enable culture

exchange and preserve the rich oral African tradition that has been a bit dormant for long when it comes to translating it.

2. Purpose and propositions

The purpose of children's literature is to serve as entertainment for the child, to stimulate his or her creativity and imagination as well as his or her cultural flourishing. The translation of children's literature could well contribute to the enrichment of language and culture while creating a cultural and contextual environment around the child.

In order to better transfer and disseminate culture in to children, the translation model is unavoidable. This is where intercultural adaptation finds its roots in translating children's literature. An adequate intercultural adaptation requires the use of translation theories and techniques, and the technical model to translate children's literature is certainly adaptation. Different translation theories which justify the translation process of children's literature, require the translator to reproduce the same charm, effect in the reader of the original version as in the reader of the translated version.

These theories allow a certain flexibility for the translator to be able to recreate the cultural context relative to the culture of the target reader under linguistic, social, historical and national conditions. Resorting to these theories and applying intercultural adaptation as the best technique when it comes to translating children's literature seems obviously to be a good solution to difficulties and challenges facing Translators of children's literature.

3. Children's literature and literature for children

When dealing with translation of children's literature or rather translating for children, we need to ask questions about what it is and flesh out what that means. It is not just defining children's literature as such, but rather textual abstractions like style and vocabulary. These issues may be viewed from at least two perspectives: that of the reading child and that of the adult. Children's literature can be seen either as literature produced and intended for children or as literature read by children.

Therefore, it seems that compared to literature written for adults, children's literature tends to be more directed toward its readers. This is very important: for me, this is the key to translating for children, which, as I find it, should rather be defined in terms of the readers of the translations. Some specialists in children's literature describe children's literature as literature produced specifically for children. Here, they exclude all other writing and pictures

that children may read, and suggest that we differentiate between child behaviour and the literature read by children and produced for children. The Swedish children's author, Lennart Hellsing, on the other hand, defines children's literature from a sociological or psychological angle: children's literature is anything the child reads or hears, anything from newspapers, series, TV shows, and radio presentations to what we call books. If we take the African child's view into consideration, we could also include not just literature produced for children, but also literature produced by children themselves, as well as the oral tradition. Seen from a very wide perspective, children's literature could be anything that a child finds interesting. For a baby of a few months, a leaf, an ant, or a piece of paper can be "literature." Perhaps the real issue is the use of books for different purposes.

In all events, if we really take the African child's point of view into consideration, we cannot avoid the question: How do African children themselves see children's literature? How do they react to it? How do the reactions of children and adults differ? It may be simplistic to limit ourselves to books published for children only. If we take music for example, African music (with lyrics) is popular among various age groups, even children. African children love songs and love to hear sounds. With their quick capacity to grasp new things and concepts, they even succeed to memorise some lyrics without even knowing what it means or in which language the song is written. Otherwise, African children even use to create their own lyrics and use them in a sound or song they love. That's part of their creativity and they love it. Therefore, children's literature is all of what can pass through the ear of a child. What to consider is just the issue of intentionality: if the original author has intended or directed her/his book to be read by children, it is a children's book. If an adult finds something for her/himself in a so-called children's book, is it not an adult book, too? Look at the little *Kirikou's* adventures, *Snow white* series, *The adventures of Tintin*, or again *La Fontaine's Fables*, are they children's books or adult fiction?

Barbara Wall makes the following distinction: "If a story is written *to* children, then it is *for* children, even though it may also be for adults. If a story is not written *to* children, then it does not form part of the genre *writing for children*, even if the author, or publisher, hopes it will appeal to children." A book originally "written *to* adults" may become a story "written *to* children," even if this was not the intention of the author of the original, because the functions of the original and its translation may be quite different. If we think of the translator as an author, the author of the translation, we might apply Wall's ideas, too. As Wall points out, "adults . . . speak differently in fiction when they are aware that they are addressing children." Here we could ask once more: Is *Kirikou et la sorcière* really children's literature

(it was intended for child readers by the author) or is it a book for adults (adults read it, too)? And what happens to the story in translation? The only thing that seems quite certain is that children and adults, even as readers, differ from each other in many ways.

The difference lies first and foremost in the readers, and this also influences the ways adults write for children. Yet, like adult books, children's books, too, are read for various purposes, such as the aesthetic and recreational. Even scholars in the field of children's literature consider the aesthetic function very important.

The German scholar Klaus Doderer (1981), who looks at children's literature from various angles, asserts that children's literature has different functions and different purposes, although he always places the highest value on the aesthetic function. Doderer asserts that pedagogy decreases the aestheticism of literature and denatures it. Children's literature often (usually?) has a dual audience: children and adults. For instance, if a child reads *Kirikou et la sorcière*, she/he probably pays attention to the crazy adventures of the little Kirikou. In some cases children in their readings pay too much attention to nonsense and crazy comedy, perhaps trying to contextualize with some of the comedy and adventures they know from school. A grown-up tunes into different, more logical levels in the story. Thus there would be a more refined, demanding level for adults and a conventional, less demanding level for children. If a text written for children is written in such a "refined" way and is thus interesting from an adult point of view, an adult may be interested enough to read the text, which means that she/he approves of it and may buy or borrow it for her/his children.

In this way, Shavit writes, even children's authors mainly write for adults. Barbara Wall brings up the same problem: "If children's books are to be published, marketed and bought, adults first must be attracted, persuaded and convinced." Many specialists in children's literature claim that children's books should not be manipulative in the pedagogic sense. So does Lennart Hellsing, who, in defining children's literature, excludes school, stressing that all pedagogic art is poor, but that all good art is intrinsically pedagogic. Yet he recognizes that children's literature can teach the child language, orientation to time and place, and social orientation; it should also influence the child directly, activate and allure the child's creative powers and strengthen her/his emotional life.

Moreover, I prefer to speak of translating for children instead of the translation of children's literature, as translators are always translating for somebody and for some purpose: translators are not just replacing old things with new ones. Translating for children rather

refers to translating for a certain audience and respecting this audience through taking the audience's will and abilities into consideration.

4. Translating Children's Literature and Translating for Children

Translation for children involves rewriting for new target-language audiences. Translating for children involves adapting the text to their level of understanding, their cultural knowledge and beliefs. Children are dynamic, imaginative, experimental, interactive and unstable. Very often, a translator for children should take into account the "extra linguistic" aspects of translation such as illustrations, formulae, and even music and drama, all of which are central issues in translating for children, especially in translating picture books for children who cannot read.

a- Translation for African children: An Intercultural Adaptation Model

We define intercultural adaptation as the process through which persons in cross-cultural interactions change their communicative behaviour to facilitate understanding. Put another way, intercultural adaptation refers to the adjustment of communicative behaviour to decrease the probability of being misunderstood when speaking with someone from a different culture. For our purposes, understanding occurs when individuals can interpret messages such that the communicative goals of interactants are attained. We assume that the process of intercultural adaptation is goal driven.

Translators of picture books translate whole situations including the words, the illustrations, and the whole (imagined) reading-aloud situation. Illustration is a many-faceted phenomenon in translation: on the one hand, illustrations go along with translations and their originals; on the other hand, illustration can be understood as a form of translation as such. When translating, a specialist translator edits the source text in relation to certain readers and reasons. Every act of translating for children, too, has a purpose, and all translations should be domesticated according to this purpose. Translators, especially those translating for African children, translate for some special audience(s), "super addressees". Behind every act of translation are assumptions about the future readers of the translation, their social category and their cultural context. In this case, translators should ask themselves a question: am I translating for the reading children or the listening children?

In his definition of translation, Vermeer stresses the important role of the “client” of a children’s book. But who is the real client of children’s literature? Is she/he the reading/listening child? Or is she/he the adult reader or parent? As stated, the answer to the problem is loyalty: translators, including translators for children, must be loyal to their audiences. Adaptations are made for various reasons, and one of the reasons may well be loyalty to children. As long as there has been literature, there have been adaptations.

Yet very often adaptation is seen as a negative phenomenon: compared to its original, the adaptation is of little value; it is secondary, a non-original. But what is an adaptation? Is it a version, an imitation, an abridgement, or a copy? In other words: can we really tell the difference between adapting and translating?

Within research on children’s literature, “translation is often found faithful to the original, while an adaptation is not,” because it is “changed” or “altered.” However, literature for children is adapted for several reasons; enable the child reader/listener to “understand better”; to know what happens in a different world from his/her own, enjoy and find him/herself in a story. Adaptation simply means “cultural reinterpretation”. According to Riita Oittinen, “all translators, if they want to be successful, need to adapt their texts according to the presumptive readers.” When translating for African children, we should be able to adapt or translate all cultural elements that can mislead or create a confusion in the African child reader’s mind. How can a translator translate cheese for African children? How about snow, bait, or in general how to translate a concept that does not exist in African context/culture?

Our translation should be objective: either we want to transfer the content as it is in order to let children get aware of how other children think, react, behave, what they like, what they do, their conceptions and perceptions of the world. In this regard, cultural elements can be maintained if they really have a meaning in the target reader’s culture. Or, we want to completely adapt an enjoyable story or literature in another context so that it can well fit in it. This is in the light of letting other children enjoy the same story, the same literature but naturally in their context. Therefore, we should in this way adapt cultural knowledge and belief to avoid confusion, misinterpretation or misunderstanding.

5. Why and how to translate literature for children

As a Rwandese, I find translating for children a real interesting and natural topic. In Rwanda, the writing tradition is not yet implanted in the Rwandese roots, and for this reason we are requested to translate books from other languages, and we should translate a lot, especially

for children. One natural reason for importing culture and children's literature through translations is to let children travel the world through their readings and discover the world around them. As I mentioned above, I see children's literature as literature read silently by children and aloud to children. Since I deal mainly with the translation of illustrated stories for children (e.g., picture books), I am referring to children under school age (seven in Rwanda).

However, childhood is a fluid concept, so many of my observations about translating for children under school age apply to translating for older children as well. Children's literature has its own special features: children's books are often illustrated and often meant to be read aloud. Illustrations are of major importance in children's literature, especially in books written for illiterate children. The illustrations in picture books may often be even more important than the words, and sometimes there are no words at all.

a- Best practices of translating children's literature in Africa

- 1- When translating for children, the translator should behave as a writer and translate as naturally as they can.
- 2- Before starting the act of translating, the translator should read several times the story, understand it, analyse all the elements that go with it. They should just preview the story in the image of a child.
- 3- If possible, translators should meet the author and try to find out more about the setting/context in which the story was created (social/political/etc.).
- 4- Translators should let their mind to follow their pen when producing the first draft.
- 5- When stuck on a meaning or a context, it is advisable to take a short break, try to imagine whatever elements can be linked to that meaning and context and discern which one can really fit naturally in the translation setting. A good translation should sound real and natural.
- 6- Read your translation aloud. It should flow smoothly to the ear.
- 7- It is very difficult to translate a bad text or a story that you haven't well digested. By bad text I mean, a text which lacks coherence and cohesion, a text that you cannot yourself explain to others while you understand every single unit of words. So as a translator-writer you will certainly be asked to help editing the story you translated and you should be able to explain it as you were the original's author.

- 8- Translating children's literature is very complex. It requires too much editing and proofreading. Let your translation rest for a couple of weeks before looking at it again.
- 9- Keep editing the translated text till the last minute. When translating into a foreign language better find a native speaker of the language of your translation to read your text and see how naturally it will sound to him. In doing so, tell them that it is not a translation but an original text. A good translated book should be 100% equivalent to the original in terms of content, effects and message.
- 10- As a translator you can choose to preserve the names of characters, or domesticate them. What really matters is for the characters' names to sound naturally in a target-reader's mind and cultural knowledge.
- 11- When translating a children's story, a translator should preserve its original soul and find the equivalent meaning in the target language. Remember the same effect should be reflected in the translated story as it is in the original
- 12- Translation is a creative process. Be ethical while re-creating a story.

In general, translating a story is not difficult if you have the words. But to translate a culture, an ethos, calls for imagination, creativity – and a great deal of hard work. There are some considerations, however, that seem to operate, going by our own experience with translating books for African children. The very first appears to be that the translator – as much as the writer and illustrator – needs to understand and love children, be sensitive to their concerns, and accommodating of their sensibilities. Without that, a translation will, in all likelihood, be competent or even good but not great.

The most important consideration while translating for African children is that children be attracted to the book, the pictures and words. You can be translating for an audience that did not have chance to live with books or an opportunity to be introduced to them. This way going, you should be able to attract a child to discover that new object. One way of testing the text, therefore, is to read it aloud. How does it sound? Does it resonate with the spirit of poetry, the cadence of music, the energy of dance? Little children are often read to and older ones appreciate it. Even adult people like us enjoy a story or a poem or a text well told, well read.

When translating a book for children (let's say, of 4 to 10 years), remember this:

- It must be simple;

- It must communicate;
- It must reflect the register and romance of the language of the original;
- It must be true to the register and romance of the language of the translation;
- It must inspire the child to read on;
- It must appeal to all children. That is, it must be challenging enough for a child who knows the language and encouraging enough for a child who is learning the language.

6. Children's literature translation theory and strategy:

Foreignization versus Domestication

When translating any kind of foreign literature, there are two macro strategies that can be applied to the text. Either the translator chooses to maintain the “foreignness” of the text (disturbing the reader when foreign elements appear in the text), or he or she decides to translate the text as if it were written in the target language, domesticating the text and promoting fluency of reading. These two translating strategies are also intrinsically related to the motivations of the translation process. If the educational motivation is stronger, then a foreignization technique is likely to be applied, allowing the reader to discover new words, worlds, and cultures, although the didactic message of the text may require domestication. If the translator is more concerned with fluency then the text is naturalized and the reading task facilitated. It is in this regard that the domestication technique is applied to enable the reader feel more comfortable and find themselves in their readings.

Let's have a say on these translated books by Bakame Editions

1. **Imvugo Idasanzwe - The Magic Formula** – La Formule magique: Original story written in German (Dikum Dakum) by Ibrahima Ndiaye and translated in Kinyarwanda by Agnès Gyr-Ukunda
2. **Ubucuti bw'Imbeba n'Inzovu** - True Friends: Original story written in Kiswahili by John Kilaka. First published in Germany (Gute Freunde: ein Bilderbuch aus Tansania) by Baobab Publishers and translated into Kinyarwanda by Agnès Gyr-Ukunda
3. **Uruhimbi rwa Nyanka** – Le Secret de Nyanka – The Secret of Nyanka: Original story written in Kinyarwanda by Denyse Umuhuza and translated in English and French.

4. **Guruka Kagoma Guruka** - Fly Eagle fly: Original story written in English by Christopher Gregorowsky and translated in Kinyarwanda by Valentin Utaruhijimana.
5. **Mimi Hogoza** - Mimi Mystery: Original story written in English by Michael Daniel Ambatchew and translated in Kinyarwanda by Bakame Editions.

As one may observe, the cultural transfer and adaptation of children's stories open new horizons to child-reader because the child needs to develop culturally. A concrete instance is "The Little books for little hands" a series of titles which speaks out for itself. Indeed, following the success of these little books for little kids, several African publishers, including Bakame Editions, took the initiative to launch the project to translate and illustrate the same stories in several African languages to the delight of different children from different backgrounds and cultures.

The success of these translations was surprising. Bakame Editions has sold several copies, made a second edition and the public does not stop asking for them. As for the title "Ubucuti bw'Imbeba n'Inzovu" this is a typical African story originally written in Kiswahili by John Kilaka, first published in German by Baobab Publishers and translated from German to Kinyarwanda by Agnès Gyr-Ukunda. The Kinyarwanda translated version received the Bologna Ragazzi New Horizons Award in 2005. After this success, the demand in the German written version increased and the book was later on translated into 27 foreign languages. In short, translating children's books written in African languages into other languages is of primary interest to both publishers and readers. It can book more recognition for publishers and may even generate some income.

Conclusion

While translating for children, one should take into account their specific purpose and specific audience. In fact, some publishers choose to translate their books for the same audience as the one of the original texts while others translate their books for a totally different audience. In this context, the translator needs to use a different theory and different techniques based on the purpose of their translation and their specific target audience. It is the job of the translator to acknowledge the relationship between the linguistic and visual systems, and to choose a method of translation or adaptation that makes the text readable for the intended target reader.

Translating children's literature is not an easy task. Often regarded as a simple activity, it may be affected by various constraints, which may differ from culture to culture. The

translator must consider not only the target language and culture, but also the needs of target readers and cultural norms. When translating, we are always adapting our texts for certain purposes and certain readers, both children and adults. The translation process as such brings the text closer to the target-language readers by speaking a familiar language. What really matters in translating for children is how well translations function in real situations, where the reader of the translation meets the “intimacy” of the translator, the author and the illustrator.

I believe that translating our language into another language or translating another language into our own is enriching it. What is more interesting is this transfer that takes place between two or more different cultures via words, ideas, way of living, moods of the moment and time. The influence of lifestyle and people's philosophy, all this must help the translator to enter the souls of people through languages. Translations of children's books are the most delicate, given the sensitivity of these young readers.

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