“NOTHING BUT THE BEST IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE YOUNG.” DILEMMAS OF THE TRANSLATOR OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Abstract: No doubt the world without Winnie the Pooh, Pippi Longstocking, Pinocchio or Moomin Trolls would have been less colourful. Characters from fairy tales imperceptibly slip into young readers’ minds and tend to stay there forever. Children accept them unconditionally and do not ask questions about their descent. Children’s response to books is usually very spontaneous: a love at first sight or an immediate dislike. Therefore, it is very important that they receive “the best” – not only beautiful and wise books but also books that are skillfully translated. Discussing the role of the translator of children’s literature, this article focuses on the child–translator relationship and the translator–author dichotomy. It points to different attitudes toward the translator’s creativity and “visibility.” It examines terminological ambiguities of such notions as “adaptation,” “reconstruction,” “rewriting” and “translation.” Finally, it deals with translation challenges that arise from didactic, entertaining and aesthetic functions of children’s books.

Keywords: children’s literature, adaptation, reproduction, retelling, foreignization, domestication

Only one sort of children’s literature should never ever be written, books which are botched together in an early morning break by a writer [translator] who thinks it isn’t of any importance as they are “only” children’s books.

(Bridget Stolt)

For centuries scholars have been concerned with both the theory and the practice of translation, but until quite recently “scarcely anything has been said about the translation of books for children and young people” (Reiss
This discipline developed within Translation Studies in response to the psycho-pedagogical research that focuses on young recipients. Addressing their needs, translation scholars attempted to formulate child-friendly translation theories. They observed that:

translators cannot work without a hypothesis of a recipient. In this way, they control their moves with regard to the supposed presence and participation of someone whose opinion should be considered and who has got every right not to be ignored in the profit and loss account that from now on becomes a joint work of a translator and a recipient (Święch 1976 qtd in Adamczyk-Garbowska 1988: 137; trans. K.A).

However, as Mikhail Bakhtin claimed, a translation for children is not always intended for a particular, real child. Usually it is created for a “superaddressee” – an abstracted concept of a child (Oittinen 1993: 68).

This approach shapes the translation process itself: translators develop their own view of child readers and attribute specific traits to them. Consequently, they translate with “special regard to [the child’s] (supposed) interests, needs, reactions, knowledge, reading abilities” (Klingberg 1986: 11) as well as “experience of life and knowledge of the world” (Puurtinen 1995: 22). Generally, divergent views on how children’s literature should be translated stem from translators’ different images of the child and their assumptions about the psychological and physical abilities of the addressee.

Translators, then, must decide which kind of child readers they translate for: “naive or understanding, innocent or experienced” (Oittinen 1993: 68), because “if our child is wise and responsive, we do not have to explain to him/her as much as we would, if our child was dull and ignorant” (Oittinen 2000: 34). Thus, translation for younger and less sophisticated readers will require much interference in order to make texts “easier to assimilate.”

The relationship between the translator and the child reader, however, is friendly and uncondescending because translators do not look at the world only with the adults’ eyes. Each translator was a child once; they still carry that child within themselves (Oittinen 2000: 26). The person who translates children’s literature

should reach out to the children of her/his culture. The translator should dive into the carnivalistic children’s world, reexperience it. Even if she/he should try to reach into the realm of childhood, the children around her/him, the child in her/himself. This reaching into the carnivalistic world of children, this reaching out to children without the fear of relinquishing one’s own authority, is dialogic (Oittinen 1993 qtd in O’Sullivan 2005: 79).