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Harry Potter and the Plight of Translation

Rachel R. LeSage

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Harry Potter and the Plight of Translation

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

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Department Of

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By

Rachel LeSage

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Student Name (print or type) Rachel LeSage

Faculty Supervisor (print or type) Dr. Matthew Smith

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT

With global works, there is always a possibility of elements being perceived differently by each culture. The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent linguistic differences in the translations of Harry Potter may lead to perceptual shifts for its readers. The Spanish and French versions of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* are compared to the original English version. It is deduced that there are several points of discord between the target texts and the source text. However, it is noted that due to the mass marketing of the characters appearing as the actors who portray them, many of the idiosyncrasies have collapsed into one overarching image of the characters, even though the actors do not necessarily fit the character descriptions.

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): With global works, there is always a possibility of elements being perceived differently by each culture. The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent linguistic differences in the translations of Harry Potter may lead to perceptual shifts for its readers. The Spanish and French versions of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* are compared to the original English version. It is deduced that there are several points of discord between the target texts and the source text. However, it is noted that due to the mass marketing of the characters appearing as the actors who portray them, many of the idiosyncrasies have collapsed into one overarching image of the characters, even though the actors do not necessarily fit the character descriptions.

Harry Potter and the Plight of Translation

Harry Potter is easily one of the most-read series of all time. Having been translated into dozens of languages, it is accessible all over the world. While the books are officially marketed as children's books, many adults have loved them through the ages. The stories take place in Britain, and were originally written in English. The three main characters in the books are Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger. There are only a few lines in the entire first book that describe these characters. However, a lot weighs on these character descriptions, as they are the only visual clues the reader is given regarding their physical appearance. Any minor modification or shift in a translation can alter the way these characters are perceived. And as these prominent characters are the major points of reference for the visual world they inhabit, these changes might incite a reader of the French or Spanish translation of Harry Potter to envision a fictional realm at odds with the one suggested by the original. Indeed, as I will show, the changes made in the French and Spanish translations not only foreground other features of these characters but also omit certain particularities. The French and Spanish versions of these characters thus stand in subtle contrast to their English counterparts, a contrast that highlights the plight of translation.

The difficulties of translating these beloved books have not gone unnoticed by scholars. However, the current research has focused primarily on translating character names, and different cultural references throughout the series. Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2003), for example, addresses the difficulties in translating proper names. As she makes clear,

“They may not be transparently meaningful – i.e. they may not have a direct translation – but they usually carry a semantic load produced by their role in the story. Moreover, translators also have the difficulty of the lack of a guide which could help them to know

the meaning of proper names in the text. The only clues the translator may find are those given by J.K. Rowling in interviews, in which she explains the meaning of proper names.

However, those interviews are usually available after the novels are published” (p. 130).

In the case of Harry Potter, the fact that so much has to be deduced by the translators without the insight of the author presents a problem. Without the proper insight from the author, it is quite possible that the aforementioned “semantic load” of the names does not carry the same weight in the translated versions of the novels. Rodríguez provides several examples of how this semantic load is absent in the Spanish versions of the novels. One notable example is the name of the “Herbology” teacher. In English, her name is Professor Sprout. In Spanish, the name is simply transferred into the novel as “Professor Sprout”. Since the noun “sprout” refers to a plant that has just begun to come out of the ground in English, her name hints at which subject the professor teaches. “Herbology” refers to the study of herbs, which produce sprouts. However, in Spanish, her name carries no such meaning. For a Spanish speaker unfamiliar with English, “Sprout” is just as meaningless of a word as any of the other made-up words in the stories. However, since the word is clearly Anglo-Saxon, it may have some meaning to them on an indexical level. The problem is that the word is not mysterious to those reading the original English at all. In this specific example, the semantic coherence that binds the character to her profession is lost from the direct transfer of the name.

There is more than one instance in which the names of characters are hinting at some element of the story. One telling example is the name “Sirius Black”. As Brondsted and Dollerup (2004) make clear, ““Sirius’ is the name of the brightest star in the constellation of Canis, the Great Dog, and the name is transferred without any demur by all of the translators” (p.64).

Brondsted and Dollerup focus on the names in the Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, German, and

Italian translations. However, the only language in which this particular surname is translated differently is in Norwegian. In the French and Spanish versions of the book, the character's name is transferred directly as "Sirius Black". Seeing as the character himself is somewhat sinister, the "Black" surname carries some significance with it. Frequently throughout the novels, "black" is used to refer to something evil, such as "black magic". Since "Black" probably does not carry the same significance to the French and Spanish readers, this hint at the potential evil within this character is lost. After reading the novels, it is evident that Rowling meant to give a clue to her readers with this name. Throughout the book in which he is introduced, the main characters frequently see a black dog. This black dog is meant to be a symbol of evil, and the characters don't know why they keep seeing it. At the conclusion, the readers find out that "Sirius Black" has been transforming into this black dog that they keep seeing. However, the readers would have to know that Sirius is the Latin name for the Dog Star, which they may or may not know depending on their level of Latin education. To add to this, the readers in French, Spanish, and many other languages, would also have to interpret that "Black" can mean sinister or evil. If they don't know any English, this would be completely lost to them. This is another case in which the semantic load given to the name does not carry over into the translated versions.

For many translators, a choice has to be made concerning whether to keep the semantic features or phonetic features of the name. For example, with words such as the "remembrall", "time-turner", and "Moaning Myrtle", the French and Spanish translators could not often keep both the phonetical alliteration and the descriptive factors of the name. As stated by Davies (2003), "where a name contains clearly recognizable descriptive elements, translators often opt to preserve the descriptive meaning of a name rather than its form, and go for a literal translation" (As cited in Mussche and Willems, 2010, p. 475). In the preceding cases, the

translators normally chose to keep the literal meanings of the words and not the evocative alliterations. Usually, keeping the literal meaning is more important to the story's plot. The reader, in whichever language, needs to know that the "remembrall" is used to remember things, the "time-turner" helps one to time travel, and "Moaning Myrtle" is a girl who moans and cries in the bathroom. These are necessary parts of the story. Therefore, the phonetic alliteration is lost, but the literal meaning, and the significance that the meaning has to the story, remains. What else is lost by abandoning the phonetic alliterations? The book's spirit of whimsy, which, for some readers, may be just as important as the plot.

A much greater challenge that the translators of the Harry Potter texts face is the translation of the references to British culture into something readily recognizable by readers. If the culture of the target audience is not considered, the book may seem extremely foreign and not relatable to the readers. As stated by Bedeker and Feinauer (2006), "should the translator neglect to keep the intended target audience's cultural and world knowledge in mind while producing the target text, the result is alienation between the target readers' knowledge and the information offered in the translation" (pp. 135-136). Seeing as the original target audience of Harry Potter was elementary school children, the cultural element of the story is possibly the most important. Connecting with the characters through their language, culture, and activities is key to a deeper appreciation of the stories, or at least to enjoying the stories as an experience of identification. However, based on frequent references to places in Britain, the readers should still be able to recognize that the story takes place somewhere in Britain. Plus, with the presentation of the wizarding culture, there are certainly enough foreign concepts added to the text in its original form. This extra layer of challenge for the translators makes these translations particularly interesting. The need to translate the culture into something relatable, while still

seeming British, is a daunting task for the translator when producing the final versions of the Harry Potter texts.

A much simpler and more well-known cultural transfer from the Harry Potter series comes from the Americanization of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The American version is called *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. According to Segovia (2009), “the publishers were apparently concerned that the term ‘philosopher's stone’ would not be sufficiently familiar to most Americans and thus the British title would not convey the ‘appropriate’ message” (p. 6). While Americans would have likely still enjoyed the book no matter what the title was, perhaps the feeling of magic would not have been as present with the word “philosopher” and just as in the case of alliteration cited above, the spirit of whimsy would be lost. Particularly for American children who may not understand that the English they speak is not the same English that children in Britain speak, this could pose a problem. According to an online forum, to many American children, the word Philosopher has “overtones of deep thinking, and evokes issues that one would not expect in children's literature” (as cited in Segovia, 2009, p. 6). While this word hasn't been translated, it was culturally transferred to a more appropriate choice. Undoubtedly, translators in other languages struggled to translate this word as well. It highlights the importance of transferring, in place of translating, with the proper amount of whimsicality and magic contained in each word of the story.

The names in Harry Potter are difficult for translators, and translating the culture into the target language is no easy task either. But what is the significance of these difficulties? What did they end up meaning for audiences all over the world? Are there any valid reasons why a description of the characters could be perceived differently in different languages? By analyzing

three of the main characters, for whom there is adequate description provided, notable differences can be discerned.

For the sake of simplicity, analysis between the source language (English), and the target language (French/Spanish) will be made. There will be little comparison between the two target languages. The protagonist, Harry Potter, is given two brief descriptions of his physical appearance in the first book, *Harry Potter and Sorcerer's Stone*:

“Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning” (Rowling, 1998/2007, p.15).

“Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning” (Rowling, 1998/2007, p.20).

The French translations are as follows:

«Sous une touffe de cheveux d'un noir de jais, ils distinguèrent sur son front une étrange coupure en forme d'éclair» (Rowling, trans. 1998, p.23).

«Harry avait un visage mince, des genoux noueux, des cheveux noirs et des yeux d'un vert brillant. Il portait des lunettes rondes qu'il avait fallu rafistoler avec du papier collant, à cause des nombreux coups de poing que Dudley lui avait donnés sur le nez. La seule chose que Harry aimait bien dans son apparence physique, c'était la fine cicatrice qu'il portait sur le front et qui avait la forme d'un éclair» (Rowling, trans. 1998, p.28).

Firstly, the translation into French reads very well. Overall, this translation succeeds on a semantic and an esthetic level. For instance, in terms of the author's esthetic, the alliteration “knobbly knees” finds an appropriate equivalent in the French translation with the assonance

“genoux nouveaux.” The French translator is able to keep both the word-play and the meaning the same in his version of the text. This is a rare feat. This could cause the French readers to envision the character the same way that English readers envision the character.

However, the small details matter, especially in regards to the mental image they can create. A case in point is the word “tuft”, which is translated here as “touffe”. While these words are cognates, and whose meanings overlap a great deal, the English word almost always bears a connection to hair. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “tuft” as “a bunch (natural or artificial) of small things, usually soft and flexible, as hairs, feathers, etc., fixed or attached at the base.” (Tuft, n.d.). It is very common to see this word used to describe hair in English. However, the word in French is not always used to refer to hair. Every example provided in La Rousse refers to plants, or animal fur. This could suggest that the hair is unkempt, whereas the English version just suggests that there is notable amount of hair on his head. To provide some context: this description of Harry is given when he is a baby. Since he is a baby, there is likely only a small amount of hair on his head. While “tuft” could communicate this, “touffe” likely would not. The words *can* mean the same thing, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they do. Such a small shift in meaning, no matter how subtle, could affect the way that the character is imagined.

Another point to note about the French translation is its verb choice. To translate “they could see”, the verb “distinguer” is used, which means “percevoir par les sens, en particulier par la vue, l’ouïe. (To perceive through the senses, particularly through sight or sound)” (Distinguer, n.d.). This implies that it was difficult to see the cut on his forehead. It was necessary for the characters to perceive what was on his head, as though they had to think about it. As mentioned, in the English version, Rowling simply wrote that the characters “could see” the cut. This implies that they did not have to search for the cut in any way. The cut is a prominent part of his

facial features. If the characters could only “make out” the cut on his forehead, it would seem as though the cut was an afterthought when looking at him. Again, this is a small detail that could have a larger implication: whereas in English the scar is a defining feature of this character, in French it is of secondary importance.

The second instance of character description for Harry has fewer things to note in regards to the translation. One important detail that may not be evident when looking at the description without context is that in the English version, this character description is its own separate paragraph. In the French version, it is simply a part of the preceding paragraph. This would suggest that Rowling was intending to emphasize this character’s importance in the novel. She dedicated an entire paragraph to the way he looked. In the French translation, his appearance is just part of the background information. This suggests that the physical appearance of the character is of minor importance.

The changes in the Spanish translation raise similar questions. Below are the translations of the aforementioned character descriptions of Harry Potter:

1. Bajo una mata de pelo negro azabache, sobre la frente, pudieron ver una cicatriz con una forma curiosa, como un relámpago (Rowling, trans. 1999, p.20).

2. Harry tenía un rostro delgado, rodillas huesudas, pelo negro y ojos de color verde brillante. Llevaba gafas redondas siempre pegadas con cinta adhesiva, consecuencia de todas las veces que Dudley le había pegado en la nariz. La única cosa que a Harry le gustaba de su apariencia era aquella pequeña cicatriz en la frente, con la forma de un relámpago (Rowling, trans. 1999, p. 24).

The word “mata” is used as the equivalent of the word “tuft.” The same aforementioned implications exist with this word. “Mata” is defined as “Conjunto o gran porción de la cabellera.

The entirety or large portion of hair)” (Mata, n.d.). Since “tuft” suggests that there is only a small amount of hair, and “mata” suggests that there is a large amount of hair, there is clear disconnect here. Although this may appear minor, it could slightly shift the way that this character is imagined by Spanish readers. For instance, a reader may assume that Harry, who is only one year old at this point in the story, is a lot older than he actually is.

Another thing notable in this translation is the use of the word “cicatriz”. “Cicatriz” is most often translated as “scar”, not “cut”. Since at this point in the story, the legendary lightning-shape on his forehead would still be a cut, and not yet a scar, it is interesting that the translator chose to refer to it that way. In many ways, it changes the timeline of the story. It makes it difficult for the reader to piece together that this injury just occurred. It makes it appear as though the injury could have taken place many months ago, instead of within the last few hours, as is true of the original version of the text.

Referring to this same scar in the second portion of this character’s description, the Spanish translator chose to precede this noun with the article “aquella.” In the English version, Rowling simply writes “the scar”, using a definite article rather than a demonstrative one. By saying “aquella cicatriz” the translator is pointing out that he is referring to the same scar that was previously mentioned. In the English version, while many assumed that the lightning-shaped scar was what had been left from the lightning-shaped cut, it was not as explicitly stated. Readers had to make this connection themselves. In the Spanish version, it is evident that it is the same scar that was referred to previously. This makes it clear that Harry is in fact the same person as the baby that was described earlier. Through this textual shift, not only is the story’s timeline altered but the reader is prevented from being a more active participant in the plot’s unfolding.

Unlike the French translation, the Spanish version of the text does not keep both the meaning and the alliteration of “knobbly knees.” The translator chooses to keep the meaning by using the word “huesudas”. This is defined as, “Que tiene los huesos muy marcados (Knees that are very noticeable).” (Huesudas, n.d.). “Marcado” suggests that his knees are noticeable, whereas “knobbly” suggests that his knees are thin and pointy. If his knees are thin and pointy, it could potentially be perceived that he is underfed. If his knees are noticeable, perhaps it’s just that his knees are naturally emphasized. This less precise term creates a flatter image of Harry that is less dynamic than what is seen in the source text, just as the failure to reproduce the alliteration diminishes the book’s whimsical tone.

Finally, the Spanish translator chose to add something to the text as well. The English version of the text states that Harry had glasses that were “held together” by tape. The Spanish version says that these glasses were “siempre pegadas”. This implies Harry always has broken glasses, and that his glasses were never unbroken. This could suggest that Harry is cared for less by his family than what is originally implied in the English version. Again, the translations have small differences that can lead to larger implications in regards to how the characters are perceived. This could mean that Spanish readers have a different mental image of these characters than that of English readers. Similar to the French version, in which Harry is given a fuller head of hair that is “harder to see” (“*distinguèrent*”), the Spanish version also exaggerates his hair all while generalizing the appearance of his knees and potentially altering his backstory through the description of his glasses. As a result, in both versions, Harry can potentially come across as flatter and less dynamic.

For the next main character that is introduced, there is only one moment that describes his physical appearance. Ron Weasley is described through the actions of his mother as follows:

1. She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose. (Rowling, 1998/2007, p. 93).

The French version of this character has been translated as:

1. en montrant son plus jeune fils, un grand dadais avec de grands pieds, de grandes mains et des taches de rousseur. (Rowling, trans. 1998, p.104).

Firstly, the French version does not state that Ron is the last of her sons in line. The English version makes it clear that not only is he the youngest, but that he is trailing behind her other sons. This is an important part of his characterization throughout the series. The character is always living in the shadow of his older brothers, and always trailing behind them. By leaving this out, this key element of the character is not presented until later for francophone audiences. This makes the character flatter, and less dynamic.

Ron is also described by the French translator as a “grand dadais”. According La Rousse French dictionary, “dadais” is defined as “Jeune homme sot et gauche dans ses attitudes; niais, nigaud. (A young, dense man who is awkward in his demeanor)”. This would suggest that Ron is thick and tall like a giant. The word “gangling” implies that he is very thin, and tall. By not including how thin he is, Ron could almost appear threatening to Harry since he is described as so much bigger and stronger than him. Since the character is not threatening in any way, this translation could mislead readers.

Moreover, the French translation has no mention of the character’s long nose. This could actually change the way that French readers envision the character, and perhaps suggest that he is very handsome. In the English version, it is clear to readers that he is not handsome in a conventional way by any means.

Finally, the French translator keeps this character's description in the same sentence as the one preceding it. Since he is a main character, it seems more appropriate to emphasize the way the character looks with its own sentence. However, this parallels the French description of Harry, as well. The translator may enjoy combining sentences and paragraphs, and not using them to emphasize character importance. It is a stylistic choice that could lead to French readers having a less defined mental image of the characters.

The Spanish translation of Ron Weasley's character description is as follows:

1. "Señalo al último y menor de sus hijos varones. Era alto, flacucho y pecoso, con manos y pies grandes y una larga nariz" (Rowling, trans. 1999, p.82).

This translation is very attentive to details. Much like with the French version, a potential area of difference I found is the translation of "gangling". The Spanish translator chooses to use "flacucho". This word does communicate that he is very thin, however it does not communicate that he could be clumsy. This is an important difference in the characterization of Ron, and could potentially change the way that he is perceived.

Finally, something to note in the Spanish translation is that it is emphasized that he is the last of the male children in the family. The author uses "hijos" to refer to all of the children, as well as "varones" to note that he is the youngest of the boys specifically. It is an important part of the story that Ron has a younger sister, and this draws attention to that fact. It is easy to forget that there is a young girl standing there, even though she becomes one of the key parts of the story later in the series. This emphasis of the female in the group could lead Spanish readers to have a better grasp on Ron's role in his family, something that is very key to his characterization. These two differences, his build and his position in line, ultimately suggest that his appearance could be more intimidating, and that he carries the weight of being a protective older brother.

For the third and final main character, Hermione Granger, there is not much physical description provided. The English description is as follows:

1. “She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth” (Rowling, 1998/2007, p 105.).

The French translation of this is:

1. « Elle avait d’épais cheveux bruns ébouriffés, de grandes dents et un ton autoritaire » (Rowling, trans. 1998, p.117).

The French translation is very clear. However, the translator chooses to add extra emphasis to how her hair was styled. He called it “ébouriffés” which is defined as “Avoir les cheveux en désordre (To have messy, disheveled, unkempt hair)” (Ebouriffés, n.d.). In English, “bushy” does not necessarily mean that the hair is messy. This word could suggest that Hermione was disheveled, which is not true of the character as she is depicted in the source text. The character is very well-put-together throughout the entire series. This could lead French readers to believe that the character is a bit of a mess, which is not necessarily how the character comes across in the source text.

It is also interesting that the French version says “un ton autoritaire” but the English version says a “bossy sort of voice”. By choosing to use the modifier “sort” it suggests that the character could possibly not be bossy all the time. She could just be bossy at that moment. The Spanish version is translated the same way:

1. Tenía voz de mandona, mucho pelo color castaño y los dientes de adelante bastante largos. (Rowling, trans. 1999, p.92).

Again, “voz de mandona” suggests that her voice is permanently bossy. There is no way for her voice to not be bossy, according to this translation. By including “sort” in the original English, it

allows for the character to be more likeable, with the flexibility to make her voice any way she wants it to be. Thus, in Spanish and French, this character's depth and flexibility is flattened out and hemmed in. Just as "knobbly" and "gangling" were replaced with terms with a more restricted range of meanings, here too the absence of the modifier "sort of" presents a less dynamic character.

All of these discrepancies support the notion that there could be some small differences in the way that French or Spanish readers imagine the characters compared to how English readers imagine the characters. Upon questioning other students, whose L2 was either French or Spanish, they also could find these discrepancies. However, almost all of the students, including myself, agreed that in spite of all of these discrepancies, the grand majority of us imagined the characters looking like the actors who portrayed them in the movies. This suggests that the movies have created an overarching image of the characters that transcends the linguistic idiosyncrasies.

This agreement of how the characters should look is so strong, in fact, that when actress Noma Dumezweni, a black woman, was cast to play Hermione in the Harry Potter stage play, the internet exploded. There were a lot of people that were not comfortable with this decision, which can be clearly seen if one only reads the comments on any article about the matter. However, J.K. Rowling herself replied to the outcry with a simple tweet stating: "Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified." (jk_rowling, 2015). However, other readers have taken the time to find instances in which, they argue, it can only be assumed that Hermione is white. Some point out that she has freckles, was born in a country that was predominantly white at that time, and has a definitively European surname (Granger), though these are not necessarily indicators of race. These claims, however, did not sway Rowling's support of Dumezweni. The outcry that followed this announcement supports the idea that the

mental image of the characters themselves have morphed into the actors, and sheds light on the fact that even with the idiosyncrasies in each translation, readers tend to imagine characters as they are portrayed in visual representations, such as films, rather than how they are described in texts.

However, it is clear that there were differences between how the characters were described in the books and how the actors appeared in the movies. An interactive article was created to show the discrepancies between the descriptions of the characters in the books and the movies. For example, Harry has green eyes in the books, but in the movies his eyes are blue. Hermione has large teeth in the books, but in the movies her teeth are of average size. Ron's nose is long in the books, but in the movies it's very proportionate to his face. Yet somehow, it is difficult to disassociate the linguistic descriptions with the image of the actors who portrayed these characters. It is possible that the overwhelming marketing of the characters as direct images of the actors has influenced the perception of these characters. If prompted, it is possible to note the differences between the actors and the way the characters are described. But, without any sort of prodding, the linguistic differences tend to collapse into a single image of the actors.

The aforementioned information raises three profound questions. Firstly, L2 learners are able to identify the linguistic idiosyncrasies between the source text and the target text (s). However, would L1 readers recognize these same differences? Since it is difficult to project what a reader imagines in their mind's eye, this research could serve as an opportunity for future studies. Secondly, many readers simply imagine the actors who portrayed the characters in the movies. Does this mean that the linguistic idiosyncrasies, however blatant, are irrelevant? This question requires analysis of cultural and linguistic trends globally. Thirdly, these differences create conflicting mental images of the characters' physical appearances depending on the target

language. Do these differences cause confusion among the global community about the way the characters look? Answers to this and all of these questions, including the questions answered by this research, will benefit translators and their readers by questioning the need for consistency among translations for global works.

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