

## TRANSLATING NATIONAL HISTORY FOR CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY OF *ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

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### Abstract

Mark Twain's classic novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is arguably about the history of the United States in terms of slavery and race relations. How, then, can this be translated to another language and culture, especially one with a very different background in regard to minorities? And in particular, how can this be translated for children, who have less knowledge about history and slavery than adult readers? In this article, I analyse how Twain's novel has been translated to Swedish. I study 15 translations. Surprisingly, I find that instead of retaining Twain's even-handed portrayal of the two races and his acceptance of a wide variety of types of Americans, Swedish translators tend to emphasise the foreignness, otherness, and lack of education of the black characters. In other words, although the American setting is kept, the translators nevertheless give Swedish readers a very different understanding of the United States and slavery than that which Twain strove to give his American readers. This may reflect the differences in immigration and cultural makeup in Sweden versus in America, but it radically changes the book as well as child readers' understanding of what makes a nation.

**Key-words:** Mark Twain; Literature; Translation

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## Introduction

Mark Twain's classic novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is arguably about the history of the United States in terms of slavery and race relations. How, then, can this be translated to another language and culture, especially one with a very different background in regard to minorities? And in particular, how can this be translated for children, who have less knowledge about history and slavery than adult readers?

All languages have multiple dialects, which vary according to geographical, sociocultural, political, historical, religious, temporal, and ethnic boundaries and factors. There is a range of dialectal language, and it is not always easy to tell when something is a dialect, and when it is a completely separate language, but for my purposes here, dialectal language involves words, phrases, pronunciations, or grammatical usages that are employed differently or solely by one specific, frequently regional, group.

Authors write in dialect when the realistic portrayal of a particular setting, time period, or style of language is essential to the story and/or the characters. Quite simply, dialect serves as a marker of a specific time and/or place. Writers of children's books typically must be more selective than writers of adult fiction when deciding to use dialect, as children who are not experienced readers, or who have not been exposed to a variety of dialects, may have trouble understanding the language if it is not either the standard they learn in school or the dialect they use at home and/or with friends. They thus could miss whatever it is that the author wanted to emphasise through the dialect usage. So having orthography show dialect or including words or phrases specific to a place, social class, period in time, or job may distract or bewilder young readers. Also, adults—whether the authors themselves, editors, translators, parents, teachers, or anyone else involved—may resent or disapprove of the presence of dialect, because they could feel that it encourages children to use non-standard language or that it otherwise disturbs their linguistic education and training. Since the standard is generally what is taught in schools and expected to be used at places of employment, adults may worry that exposing children to anything other than the standard could harm them or affect their future possibilities. All this in turn may lead writers for children to use dialect sparingly or in more simplified ways than writers for adults would, and it could thus affect a translator's practice as well. I will return to this issue of how adults use, or possibly abuse, their power over child readers later.

When a children's book writer uses dialectal language, the translator needs to analyse and understand the function of the dialect/s in the work, the contextual implications of the dialect, the audience and their probable expectations for and opinions about the dialects, and the source and target languages and their dialects and the cultures behind those dialects, in order to choose how to translate the dialect in a way that achieves the most useful and aesthetic effect possible. In other words, research and analysis are the first steps. So the starting point here, then, is how and why dialect is employed in Twain's work.

### Twain's *Huck Finn*

Dialect is used throughout Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain includes an "Explanatory" at the beginning of his book that refers to his use of dialect; it is interesting to note that this explanation has disappeared in all the Swedish translations. It reads: "In this book, a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary "Pike-County" dialect; and four modified versions of this last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech. I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding." (Twain, 2003:n.p.) The description of the dialects he uses reveals how essential he felt it was to portray the different characters, and this relates to their regional and racial backgrounds. This in turn reflects the situation described in the book, which is the system of slavery that was in place in the United States in the nineteenth century. The novel is the story of, among other things, what happens when someone considers and acts against the unjust system in which he lives. The protagonist is a child and Twain's book can be said to be describing this aspect of national history to and for children, from a child's perspective.

But one other important point to bring up here is whether *Huckleberry Finn* is a children's book at all. The issue of whether Twain's work should be considered a text for children or not has been heavily debated and will not be solved now in my article, though my own opinion is that it is a children's adventure story that can also be enjoyed by adults and may in fact be appreciated and understood more by some adults than by some children. Although Rampersad feels that *Huckleberry Finn* is "adult fiction readily accessible to young readers" (cited in Fishkin 138), others disagree, as I clearly do. For example, the fact that it was originally published with illustrations makes some believe that it was meant for children. And the fact that libraries and teachers tried to ban and/or censor the novel, and in some cases succeeded in doing so, because critics thought the book immoral and the humour crass, among other reasons, and they "questioned the appropriateness of [it] for young readers" (Twain, 2003, 761) and/or because they disapproved of the lying and thought it was a bad example for kids (762) suggests that at the very least, the book was marketed as being one for children. (Even today, one might add, adults question whether this is a book for children. *Huckleberry Finn* "was fifth on the list of most challenged or banned American books in the 1990s." (772)) Alternatively, if Twain really did adamantly write that *Tom Sawyer* "is not a boy's book, at all. It will only be read by adults. It is only written for adults..." (666), this clearly shows how he viewed his works. And yet, he also wrote in a letter that he "began another boys' book," referring to *Huckleberry Finn* (678). So, obviously, at some point, he thought of both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* as books for boys. He even wrote a sarcastic letter in response

to the attempted censorship, saying “it always distresses me when I find that boys & girls have been allowed access to them [TS and HF]” (771). However, Whitley disagrees that the two books belonged to the same genre by saying “*Tom Sawyer* is, more than anything, a boys’ book because its hero can always go home again.” (156) He writes that “Huck seems to find a home by the end of *Tom Sawyer*, but in *Huckleberry Finn* someone cuts the elastic. In the later novel, Jackson’s Island is but a way stage on an inevitable and final journey away from home” (156). So perhaps Whitley feels that this book would not be considered suitable for children because Huck does not go home again.

While it is unclear whether Twain considered his books to be for children or not, children did and continue to read these works (which may be enough of a reason to call it a book for children), and Fishkin notes that the tradition of books for boys was a model for *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* (3). She writes: “Twain’s innovation of having a vernacular-speaking child tell his own story *in his own words* was the first stroke of brilliance; Twain’s awareness of the power of satire in the service of social criticism was the second. Huck’s voice combined with Twain’s satiric genius changed the shape of fiction in America.” (3) Perhaps this suggests that Twain used his work to critique both society and the genre of boys’ adventure stories.

Fishkin writes that by calling *Huckleberry Finn* a book for boys (at this time, books for children were separated into books for girls and books for boys; to some extent, this is still the case today), Twain was using his power as an author to be subversive and to subtly get a message across to the readers. She writes that “many readers took him at his word, and read *Huckleberry Finn* as a ‘boy’s book,’ a companion volume to its predecessor, *Tom Sawyer*. But such a limited reading denies the corrosive satire of white society (and of the many ‘texts’ that undergird its position of alleged racial superiority) that is at the book’s ‘core.’ (63). The novel is, on one level, an exciting adventure story, a tale for boys (or for all children, depending on one’s perspective), but on another level, it is “a critique of race relations in the post-Reconstruction South” (69). This critique, I would say, must be carried over in translation.

Two of the translations I analyse here also brought up the issue of whether this is a book for children or adults, and they had opposing views, which in turn reflects how the translations were marketed and distributed. In Malm’s introduction to his translation of 1969, he writes that the book was “one of the greatest children’s books in world literature – for mature youth of all ages!” (8)<sup>1</sup> It is not clear how he defines “mature youth,” but this does suggest that he considers the book to be for children and young adults (and adults, too, obviously). Sandgren, however, translating just five years earlier, disagrees. In his introduction, he writes:

In Mark Twain’s time, there was no separation of books into children’s books and non-children’s books – and it was probably not the author’s intention that his *Huckleberry Finn* would gradually be pulled completely over to children’s literature. Many of the book’s sections are extremely adult—just think of the realistic glimpses the author gives of life in the

small towns along the river—how realistically he describes the laziness, the cruelty, the superstition and mass psychosis, the vengeance and the atmosphere of lynching. Such things are not written for boys but for adults. (introduction, n.p.)

Twain’s book is about race relations and morality, and it serves up the message and the introduction to national history in a rather easy-to-digest way. The adventure story intrigues children (apparently, it was thought that this would intrigue boys, not girls; this would be a fascinating point of discussion but is beyond the scope of this piece) and they receive a lesson and a moral at the same time. All this is portrayed in part through the dialect, so then the question is how translators can translate the dialect, and thereby the issues of identity, nationhood, and history, in another tongue. It may not be possible to fully do so, but translators should at the very least try.

### The Translation of Dialect

In general, translators – whether of fiction for adults or that for children – have several broad choices when it comes to dialect. In Table 1, I give my list of translatorial strategies for dialect, which is different from other strategies recommended or analysed by other researchers (see Epstein 2012 for more on my strategies and how this compares to others’ lists of strategies).

**Table 1:** Strategies for translating dialects.

Translatorial Strategy	Explanation
deletion	to remove phrases, sections, or even entire chapters; this may be part of a larger strategy of abridgement or adaptation, and may not be because of the dialect itself
standardisation	to standardise the language, using standard spelling, grammar, and word choices in place of the non-standard ones in the original
replacement	to pick a dialect or slang word in the target language that geographically, socioeconomically, culturally, stereotypically or emotionally is a close match to the dialect in the source language, and thus creates a similar feeling for the reader of the translated text, or simply choose any dialect or sub-cultural jargon or slang in the target language
addition	to add new words or sentences to a section with special language
explanation	to add paratextual material to explain the language usage and its implications
compensation	to employ temporal or regional special language, but in different places/amounts than the source text
grammatical representation	to use non-standard grammar
orthographic representation	to use non-standard spelling
vocabulary representation	to use non-standard word choices

adaptation	to adapt a dialectal or slang word to the target language
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There are pitfalls and difficulties associated with each of these methods, and translators must attempt to find a way to express the dialect in the target language without exaggerating how it is used or what it means. Dialects have to be translated carefully, so that they portray the characters, location, and/or story in the source document without mocking them. It is likely that a combination of translatorial strategies might need to be employed within any given text, and indeed, that is what many of these translators do.

### Power and Translation

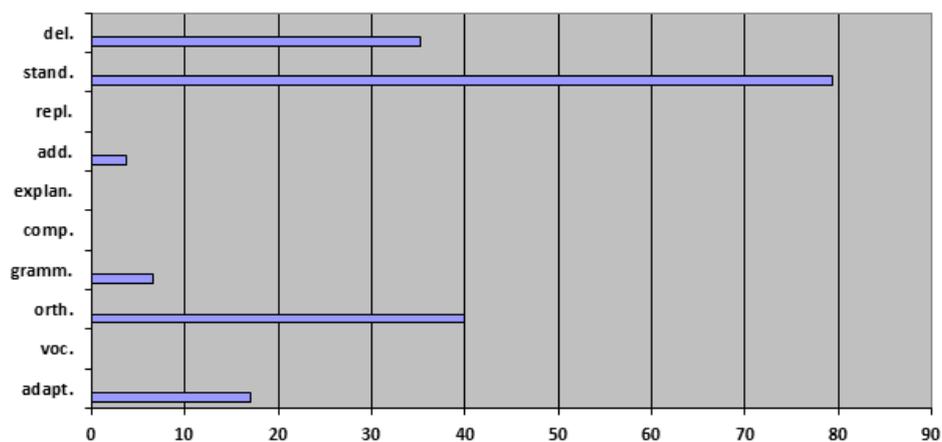
Power plays a role in how translators choose (or are forced/encouraged to choose) to translate. In recent years, translation studies scholars have begun using postcolonial theories as a way of analysing the role of translation and translators in communicating across cultures. They have found that colonising cultures could use selective translation, and thus selective translation strategies, as a way of accessing and retaining power over colonised peoples. What languages and texts are translated, and how, relates to the ideology of those who are, or wish to be, in control. As described by Tymoczko and Gentzler in the introduction to their book, translations are “one of the *primary* literary tools that larger social institutions—educational systems, arts councils, publishing firms, and even governments—had at their disposal to “manipulate” a given society in order to “construct” the kind of “culture” desired” and translations and books were chosen for “their [those in power] own purposes pertaining to ideology and cultural power” (xiii, emphasis in the original). The manipulation of literature with the express intention of affecting the audience is therefore an ethical area that demands more study and attention.

### *Examples from Twain*

In order to get a sense of what translators thought and did, I analysed seven representative sample passages of dialect<sup>2</sup> in Twain’s novel and I compared its fifteen translations to Swedish, a language whose culture contains few Africans or other minorities, and whose history includes no serious involvement with slavery. Based on these seven passages, I found that standardisation is the primary translatorial strategy (60%) (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Orthography was used to represent the dialect 40% of the time and vocabulary 17.1%, while grammatical representations were only employed 6.67%, a number I found low considering how many dialects have a grammar that differs to some extent from the standard dialect. Englund Dimitrova, too, had found that “in translating dialect, and more specifically dialect in direct speech, [there are] the observed tendencies towards the choice of more standard, conventional linguistic forms” (2004, 135). What

is lost in a text when the dialect is standardised in translation can be a major part of the story, as it is in *Huck Finn*. Swedish readers may not understand the characters and the plot nearly as well as readers of the source text. The examples here tended either to erase or exaggerate the dialect; there was no middle way.

**Figure 1:** The strategies in order from most to least interventionist, in percentages.



By interventionist, I mean how much a given strategy changes a text; I consider the deletion of sections to be very interventionist. Fifteen translations were analysed for each passage and in some cases, multiple strategies were used within one translation (for example, a translator might delete part of a passage and standardise the rest).

To exemplify this in action, we can look at several quotes. The first one is from Huck Finn’s father, who is uneducated himself and is against education for his son. He is also white. The quote is:

“Looky here – mind how you talk to me; I’m a-standing about all I can stand, now – so don’t you gimme no sass. I’ve been in town two days, and I hain’t heard nothing but about you bein’ rich. I heard about it away down the river, too. That’s why I come. You git me that money tomorrow – I want it” (1999:25).

The language reflects his lack of education and his attitude towards his son. A typical translation is the Swedish one by Sven Christer Swahn:

“Hör nu, passa dig väldigt noga. Jag tål inte hur mycket som helst, så försök inte vara fräck. Jag har varit här i stan två dagar nu och alla människor påstår att du är rik nu. Det skvallras om det längs hela floden. Det är därför jag är här. Du ska ge mig alla de där pengarna – jag behöver pengar” (2001:27).

The back-translation to English is:

“Listen now, you take good care. I won’t tolerate anything, so don’t try to be fresh. I have been in town two days now and all the people claim that

you are rich now. People are talking about it along the whole river. That's why I'm here. You are going to give me all that money – I need money.”

Finn's language has been more or less standardised in the Swedish translation. It may be that Swahn, the translator, thought that it was not possible to represent this particular American dialect in Swedish, but surely Huck's father's grammar and pronunciation could be translated in some way, perhaps by creating dynamically equivalent mistakes, such as “Det är därför jag kommer”, “That is why I come/am coming,” instead of “Det är därför jag är här”, “That is why I am here,” for the original “That's why I come.” The translator could also have written “mej” instead of “mig”, as a more orthographic representation of the way the word sounds. It is also possible that Swahn felt that Swedish children ought not or need not be exposed to dialectal language, and that he used his power as a translator to make sure this did not happen. Whatever his reasoning, Swedish readers miss out on a significant aspect of the story.

Also, some of the phrases sound formal and correct in Swedish. Examples include the phrase quoted in the previous paragraph, and “jag tål inte hur mycket som helst”, “I won't tolerate anything,” and “alla människor påstår att du är rik nu”, “all the people claim that you are rich now.” If Swahn had used an orthographic representation of Huck Finn's father's language, readers at least would be able to hear his voice in a way that they presumably cannot when it has been standardised; representing the pronunciation through spelling is not the same as using a dialect, but it does say something about the character and his way of talking.

It is rather unfortunate that the varieties of English Twain employed in *Huckleberry Finn* are not really noticeable in Swedish. Because of the storyline, Twain's book has to take place in the American South, so choosing a Swedish dialect and/or relocating the story wholesale to Sweden would not have been a good option. It would probably have been odd for Swedish readers to read, say, the dialect from the northern region of Lappland while knowing that the characters were American. Also, a translator could probably not keep the exact same words in dialect that were in dialect in the original or have quite the same linguistic issues. But it would have been possible to use non-standard spelling or grammar wherever possible, pronunciation-based spelling (including eye-dialect) instead of standard spelling, and occasional words in dialect, and to attempt to have approximately the same number of “errors” as in English. In this way, Swedish readers would at least recognise that the characters do not use standard language and do not all speak identically, which is something Twain highlights in his Introduction. In standardising the dialects in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the translators apparently focused on the words in the text and their meaning within the story, so the plot itself is clear enough to Swedish readers; but the ways the characters speak, which in turn reveal their location, educational background, social class, race, and other such details, have not come across in Swedish, so that some of the atmosphere and sense of the source novel is not carried over. In other words, the national history has been lost to a certain extent; the book

becomes plot-based and not nation-based. Huck’s adventure is retained, but not the reasons for his adventure or for Twain’s writing of it, which are, of course, in part to do with the history and status of African Americans and European Americans in the nineteenth century.

The next stage involved comparing three passages in particular (see Table 2). I was especially interested to know if all characters were standardised equally in translation. Sample 1 has Huck’s style of narration, and this has been standardised in 73.3% of the translations. Huck’s anti-education father, as reflected in Sample 34, has had his language standardised frequently, too, though not as much (53.3%). Finally, the language of Jim, the main black character in the novel, has been standardised only 6.67% of the time. The Swedish translations have something in common with the German translations, which Berthele has described as making Jim seem deficient (he does not seem foreign, just “unable to speak *any* language properly” (608, emphasis original)), though Berthele points out that later translations to German tend to standardise Jim’s language (604), which may reflect a cultural shift in how minorities are portrayed, or reveal a sense of guilt. As Twain took pains to explain, all of the main characters speak a non-standard dialect in the novel; therefore, that the white characters tend to speak standard Swedish while the black character does not certainly implies more than a degree of racism. Here, translators may be abusing their power by inflicting their own opinions (or those of their editors or publishers) on Swedish child readers. Children may read these works and get the impression that minorities are cognitively deficient, if they have been taught that non-standard dialects are less worthy of acceptance and respect and are markers of a lack of intelligence; given that the standard dialect is usually employed in schools and the media, children may indeed get the message that to speak using anything else is a negative sign.

**Table 2:** A comparison of standardisation in three passages.

Sample	Standardisation (%)	Speaker
1	73.3%	Huck (white)
3	53.3%	Huck’s uneducated father (white)
5	6.67%	Jim (black)

Sample 5 is a section of Jim’s speech and it is as follows:

“Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout’n for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck; I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free ef it hadn’ ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won’t ever forgit you, Huck; you’s de bes’ fren’ Jim’s ever had; en you’s de only fren’ ole Jim’s got now” (1999:125).

In Swahn’s Swedish:

“Snart ska jag tjuta av glädje och jag tänker säga, alltsammans är Hucks förtjänst. Jag är en fri man och det skulle jag inte blitt om det inte vatt för Huck, Huck klara det åt mig. Jim ska aldrig glömma det, Huck, du har vatt gamle Jims bästa vän, och nu är du hans ende vän i världen” (2001:95).

Translated back to English:

“Soon I’ll shout with joy and I’ll say, it’s all thanks to Huck. I am a free man and I wouldn’t have been if it hadn’t been for Huck, Huck do it for me. Jim will never forget it, Huck, you been old Jim’s best friend, and now you are his only friend in the world.”

Much of Jim’s dialect is gone, but its non-standardness is shown to some extent. The main remnants are the past particles “blitt” and “vat”, which to be correct should be written as “blivit” and “varit”, and the phrase “Huck klara det åt mig”, which, in standard Swedish, would be “Huck klarade det åt mig”. Orthographically, grammatically, and in their implied pronunciation, these translations show some aspects of Jim’s way of speaking and thus convey his dialect to a certain extent, but TL readers cannot get the same sense of the character that English readers can. Jim’s skin colour is a vital part of the plot and while it is not only shown through his dialect, the language he uses does contribute to the racially stereotyped way other characters and readers see him, which helps explain why representing his dialect in translation is important to the story.

Johnsson, another translator to Swedish, frequently uses representation as his strategy. His version of this passage is:

– De ä dej jag har att tacka för’et, Huck, sa han. Skulle aldrig ha blitt en fri man, om du inte hade vari. Du ä den enda vän gamle Jim har. (1964:73)

The back-translation is:

“It’s you I have to thank for’t, Huck,” he said. “Would never have been a free me, if you hadn’t been. You’re the only friend old Jim has.”

This passage has been shortened, which thus means that some of the dialect has been removed. However, Jim’s style of speech is preserved to a degree, if only through orthographic and grammatical means. “De ä dej” is a pronunciation-based depiction of the standard “det är dig”, or “it is you”, and “för’et” is a shortened version of “för det”, or “for it”. “Vari” is used for “varit”, while Swahn used “vat” for the same word, but as in Swahn’s translation, here “blitt” stands for “blivit”. This way of talking is not a Swedish dialect in and of itself, but it does show that Jim does not speak in a “fine,” upper-class way, and that he can be sloppy with his pronunciation and grammar, and it emphasises this fact more than the other translation does. So target-language readers might assume that Jim is less educated or from a lower class, but there is nothing particularly ethnic about his

style of speech in the target text, even if it is contrasted in the translation with that of the white characters simply by being more extreme.

In sum, then, these translations very clearly change the text and mislead child readers by showing minority characters as being unable to speak a standard dialect, and also by suggesting that the standard version equates to being highest on the hierarchy. Again, this is very different from what Twain does in the original. Whereas all the characters speak in dialect in Twain's novel in English, changing this in Swedish gives a different impression to the Swedish child readers. They may not understand the social and racial background of Huck, Jim, and the other characters, nor will they share Huck's growing understanding of morality and of Jim's equality and humanity.

## Conclusion

Mark Twain carefully employs dialects in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as one of the ways of representing American history through an adventure story. Readers of the English text will understand that all the characters speak in a dialect and they will also learn about American history while experiencing Huck's adventures and his increasing awareness of the role slavery has had in the United States. On the contrary, readers of any of the Swedish translations will experience a very different text. They will get a sense of minority characters as deficient, and possibly as deservedly in inferior situations in life, and they will not get a full picture of slavery and its part in American history. While adult readers, one could argue, would possess more outside knowledge to complement what they read in fiction, child readers may not, especially when it comes to the history of a foreign country. The implication is that translators must be very aware of the power they wield, and should choose strategies very consciously, so as to allow readers – of any age – the greatest exposure to an accurate portrayal of a nation and its history. If this does not happen, then readers may be exposed to racist ideology that can in turn affect society for generations to come.

## Notes

1. All translations from Swedish translations are by me.
2. The passages were from pages 13, 15, 22, 59-60, 111, 237, and 295-6, and they included Huck, his father, Jim, Tom's aunt, Miss Watson, and non first-person narration.
3. Note that percentages exceed 100% because some texts use multiple strategies in one passage.
4. This is the sample given above, which starts "Looky here – mind how you talk to me..."

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