The Translation of Neologisms in Children's Literature: A Case Study

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Abstract: In this text, I analyse how neologisms are translated in one children's book, Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, as translated to Swedish by Meta Ottosson. In my book, *Translating Expressive Language in Children's Literature*, I expand this material to look at neologisms from sixteen children's books to Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian. I offer typologies for translatorial strategies and use textual and statistical analysis to understand how they are translated and why. Here, I set out to discover what strategies are available for translating neologisms and what choices translators have to make in terms of what to prioritise and how. Using textual analysis, I find that this particular translator is not as creative when it comes to neologisms as the original author was, and this therefore affects how the text is read by the target audience. The translator removed nearly half of the neologisms and also used creative word-formation and translation methods only one-third of the time in the target text compared to how they had been employed in the source text. This method could have been influenced by the target country's view of translating children's literature.

In this article, I look at how neologisms are translated in children's literature, using examples from Roald Dahl's book *The BFG*. I analyse nearly 160 neologisms from the book along with how they are formed in both the original English text and the Swedish text as

translated by Meta Ottosson. I also offer possible methods for translating neologisms. When it comes to translating neologisms, translators tend to have to choose whether to prioritise the method of word-formation or the function of the neologism (which includes the sound and the meaning as well). For children's literature, translators may also want to consider what the child readers will understand. In this sample, I find that the choices the translator makes tend to flatten the way the character is perceived, because of decreasing the number of neologisms by nearly half as well as simplifying how new words are formed. In my book, *Translating Expressive Language in Children's Literature* (2012)[1], I expand this material to look at neologisms – and other forms of figurative language, such as idioms, wordplay, and names – from sixteen children's books to Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian, in order to suggest tools for handling such language in literature for young readers. Here, I would suggest that the translator may have been influenced by editorial and/or societal views of children's literature, particularly children's literature.

Dahl's *The BFG*, in brief, is a story about the Big Friendly Giant, who is the sole non-human-eating giant and who is thus an outcast among his kind. He "kidsnatches" Sophie, a little girl who lives in an orphanage, and together they set out to stop the other giants. Their plan involves dream-catching, dream-making, and a trip to meet the Queen of England. The giant has taught himself English from a book he "borrowed", and his grammar and usage are less than correct, which adds to his charm. However, by the end of the book, he has learned proper English and has even become an author. This book, along with many of Dahl's other works, was translated by Meta Ottosson, who has translated dozens of books from Danish, German, and English to Swedish.

In *The BFG*, the giant explains his use of language as follows:

[1] Note that some of the material in this article is repeated in the book, though in a much expanded-upon format.

‘Words,’ he said, ‘is oh such a twitch-tickling problem to me all my life. So you must simply try to be patient and stop squibbling. As I am telling you before, I know exactly what words I am wanting to say, but somehow or other they is always getting squiff-squiddled around.’

‘That happens to everyone,’ Sophie said.

‘Not like it happens to me,’ the BFG said. ‘I is speaking the most terrible wigglish.’ (53)

A neologism is a new word. Depending on the language, new words can be created through a variety of methods, such as creating, borrowing, combining, shortening, blending, and shifting (Algeo, 3). About creating, Algeo writes: “[s]ome new words are made from nothing or, at least, not form existing words. This source is the least productive of the six; most new words derive in one way or another from old words.” (4) Interestingly, however, creation is a very common method in this sample, which perhaps is because a novel allows for more room for an author to be creative and/or because children – the main readers or read-to of Dahl’s books – are creative in their own language usage and this might then be reflected in the text, although it is worth noting that not all children’s books are as creative or include neologisms.

Algeo claims that the most productive method of creating new words is “to combine existing words or word parts (technically known as morphemes) into a new form. Such combinations are said to be of two types: compounds and derivatives. The difference is that a compound combines two or more full words or bases, whereas a derivative combines a base with one or more affixes.” (4-5) As will be seen below, compounds were relatively frequent in this corpus, while there were no derivatives. Other methods can include back-formation, creation by spoonerisms or other accidents, or even by violations of the word-formation rules, but there is no room here to go into these in more detail.

In *The BFG*, I analysed 159 neologisms. I generally did not include misspellings or mispronunciations (such as the giant's use of "cannybull" for "cannibal" or "langwitch" for "language"). I found that the following types of word-formation were prevalent: creation (76.7%) and modification (32.1%). Twenty-seven of the words were formed from compounds of already existing words (16.98%). Five of the neologisms were spoonerisms (3.1%), which I consider a form of modification. Methods could be used in combination, which is why the total is over 100%. Clearly, Dahl's main method was creation, which can be said to reflect the way children and less-educated people (such as the giant, who is self-educated) use language, and which thus has a realistic function in the text. See Table 1 for the data in more detail.

Type of Formation	Number	Percentage
creation	122	76.7%
modification	51	32.1%
agglutination (compounding)	27	16.98%
spoonerism	5	3.1%

Table 1: Types of word-formation in *The BFG*.

When it comes to translation, first translators have to recognise any neologisms in a text. Then they will need to analyse three major aspects of each new word. The first is to try to understand what the function of the neologism is; that is, why it is used in the text in general and why in this specific part of the text. The second is to attempt to see what the new word is

composed of; this means how it was created, what bases or affixes were used in it, if any, and other relevant issues of formation. Finally, the translator should consider how much sense is in the neologism; some neologisms may work primarily on how they sound, whereas others have a definite meaning, or some hidden information, such as an allusion. One the translator has understood what the neologism is, how it was formed, and what its function in the text is, s/he will then be able to find an appropriate strategy for translating it, while also considering whether to privilege the sound of the word or any possible meaning associated with it, or the function or the method of word-formation, or if it is possible to do all of the above.

I have found no texts that analyse the translation of neologisms in particular, other than my own research, though I have certainly found research on the formation and usage of neologisms, and on the translation of figurative language. I believe many types of figurative language offer similar challenges to the translator and require similar kinds of analysis before a strategy is chosen, as I discuss in more depth in my book. Therefore, based on the other strategies for translating figurative language, such as idioms, names, or allusions, that I have analysed in my research, I consider the following five translatorial strategies to be some of the major possibilities for translating neologisms (and they can be used on their own or in combination): adaptation, compensation, deletion, direct retention, and replacement. Adaptation means using the original neologism but changing the spelling or some other part of it, usually to better suit the target language. Compensation involves employing neologisms, but in different places/amounts than the source text; this is a very common method for handling figurative language or complicated literary devices, such as wordplay. Deletion is, of course, the removal of a neologism. Direct retention means keeping a word as it is in the source language, regardless of how it looks or sounds in the target tongue. Finally, there are two different kinds of replacement:

replacing the neologism with another neologism or with something other than a neologism; the latter could be another form of figurative language or could be standard language. See Table 2.

Translatorial Strategy	Description
adaptation	to use the original neologism but change the spelling or some other part of it, perhaps to better suit the target language; this also includes translating phrases
compensation	to employ neologisms, but in different places/amounts than the source text
deletion	to remove a neologism; this may be part of a larger strategy of abridgement or adaptation, and may not be motivated by the neologism itself
direct retention	to keep a neologism as is
replacement with a neologism	to replace a neologism with another neologism
replacement with a non-neologism	to replace a neologism with an already-existent word

Table 2: Strategies for translating neologisms.

I asked Meta Ottosson, the translator of Roald Dahl's works to Swedish, if she found it difficult to translate neologisms. She wrote me by email:

"Yes, but it's mostly fun! I couldn't always have the "jokes" or wordplay where he had them. Had to take the opportunity and put them in there when I could and when they worked in the context." (27 December 2007, my translation)

Many authors seem to have fun creating words, so it is not a surprise that translators, too, would enjoy working with them. And, as noted before, it may be that children's literature in particular allows for such fun. As I will discuss below, however, I am not sure this is actually always the case.

As stated above, creation is the most common method of word-formation, which Algeo called the "least productive" (4) of the different processes for word-formation. It could be argued that creating words is the most creative and demanding of the word-formation processes, but that it is also the most natural method and therefore suitable to the type of text and to the audience, as well as to the characters. One might wonder whether definitions would be offered in the text, to help ease the use of these words for the child readers. But there are no real definitions in the book (as there are in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, where Humpty Dumpty defines words for Alice), except when Sophie has to explain to other people what the giant means, although the meaning is usually clear from the context, especially given that the words are frequently adjectives. For example, though "fizzwiggler" is never defined, the phrase "filthy old fizzwiggler!" (39) suggests that it is not positive. Sometimes, too, the meaning is reinforced by the use of more than one neologism at a time. Two other examples are from *The BFG*. The giant shouts, "It's disgusterous!…It's sickable! It's rotsome! It's maggotwise!" (51), and the use of words that are

close to actual English words together with the fact that these four adjectives are used in a row helps make it very clear what is meant. It is the same situation when he says, “How wondercrump!...How whoopsey-splunkers! How absolutely squiffling! I is all of a stutter.” (53) Definitions may be beneficial for the translators, as they can make it clearer whether a word has been created totally from nothing, or whether it is actually based on something already existent in the source language or another language, though the context, as seen in the previous quotes, can be enough on its own.

The most common strategy by far in this case study is replacement in general (98.1%), with approximately half of the examples using replacement with a neologism and half with a non-neologism. Adaptation appeared 5.03% of the time and deletion 3.77%, while compensation was employed 1.26%. Compensation was never used on its own in this sample, but it was used in combination with other strategies twice. Since strategies can be used in combination, the total amount is over 100%. See Table 3.

Translatorial Strategy	Number	Percentage
adaptation	8	5.03%
compensation	2	1.26%
deletion	6	3.77%
direct retention	0	0%
replacement with a neologism	77	48.4%
replacement with a non-neologism	79	49.7%

Table 3: Frequency of the strategies.

Since replacement is such a broad category, I divided it up into replacement with a neologism (48.4%) and replacement with a non-neologism (49.7%). The numbers for these two types are extremely close. In five cases, these two overlapped. An example of this was the translation of “quifflerotters and grinksludger” (116) to Swedish as “smulgråtar och svikare” (124), where the first word is a neologism but the second is not.

After studying the strategies used here, I next analysed the way the neologisms were formed in the Swedish text. The most common method was using a non-neologism (49.7%), which, of course, is not a method of word-formation at all, but rather reflects the use of words in the target text; in other words, standard word choices are used in place of newly created words. Creation came second at 25.2% of the time, followed by modification at 16.4%, compounding at 13.2%, spoonerism at 10.7%, and deletion at 4.4%. See Table 4.

Type of Formation	Number	Percentage
creation	40	25.2%
modification	26	16.4%
none (i.e. deleted)	7	4.4%
non-neologism	79	49.7%
agglutination (compounding)	21	13.2%
spoonerism	17	10.7%

Table 4: Word-formation in the translation.

For ease of comparison, see Table 5 for a list of which strategies of word-formation were used in the source and target texts.

Type of Formation	Percentage in Source Text	Percentage in Target Text
creation	76.7%	25.2%
modification	32.1%	16.4%
none (i.e. deleted)	n/a	4.4%
non-neologism	n/a	49.7%
agglutination (compounding)	16.98%	13.2%
spoonerism	3.1%	10.7%

Table 5: Comparison of methods of word-formation.

Except for agglutination, the numbers are drastically different. Creation is used three times as much in the source text as in target text, and modification is used twice as much in English as in Swedish. Meanwhile, spoonerisms are used more than three times as often in the target text. Oddly, I had expected agglutination to be the main area where the methods differed, because compounding is much more common and accepted in Swedish (and other Scandinavian languages, and German, etc.) than it is in English, so I wondered if either the translator would be

tempted to use it more to domesticate the language or, alternatively, to try to avoid it completely, in order to help the giant's way of talking sound even more unusual. So the similar percentages were interesting here. Compounding was used a bit less in Swedish (16.98% versus 13.2%), but the difference was not as significant as for the other methods.

Perhaps the creativity levels here seem low in comparison to Dahl's original choices in creating new words, but given the time pressures and other constraints that translators often are working under (such as illustrations, or editorial guidelines, or ideas about what is appropriate for children, or target readership expectations), it may be better to acknowledge how challenging this task can be and how well a translator has done to create new words even 25% of the time. Also, translators may not feel they have the right to be as creative as original authors; although translation is, of course, an act of interpretation and rewriting, an art more than a science, translation theory and general contemporary views of translation often give the impression that a translator is a servant of the author and text rather than another author him/herself. This is a perspective that must be challenged. I would suggest, however, that in the modern era in many European countries, including the UK (where Dahl's work comes from) and Sweden (where the translations were produced and published), we are increasingly viewing translation as a creative process, and a translator as an artist, a creative person, in her/his own right, although this is often combined with the older perspective, where a translator serves the text. So the translator cannot usurp the author and must serve the author and text's aims, but should feel free to be creative to a certain extent while doing this. A hard balancing act indeed.

What all this means, is that for nearly half of all the neologisms in this text, they have been translated by non-neologisms, which to me is a rather high number. The BFG does not speak with correct grammar in English – he says "I is", for example. Such grammatical errors cannot always be easily reproduced in Swedish (in part because in Swedish, the verbs are all the

same, no matter what the person, so there is no equivalent error for saying “I is” or “he are”). This suggests that it is even more vital to retain the neologisms, to reflect the giant’s way of speaking, and perhaps to compensate for the loss of his incorrect, or, to be more charitable, his unique, grammar. So the lack of wrong grammar and the decreased number of neologisms weakens his idiolect, and thereby his personality. In English, the giant’s transformation from a poor speaker to a good one (as evidenced by learning to speak properly and by the fact that he even writes a book) is emphasised, while this change is not as clear in Swedish given his different use of language. Instead, he tends to speak in spoonerisms and/or to repeat the same neologisms in Swedish, which perhaps might make him seem silly and stupid rather than creative. For example, whereas he speaks “wigglish” in English (53), he speaks “kapparalja” in Swedish (54), which is a spoonerism of “rappakalja”, which means “nonsense.” So in Swedish, he seems to be the sort of person who falters and gets confused while speaking, while in English he speaks quite confidently, making up words as needed. That is to say, he is a creative, fluent speaker in English, if not a strictly correct speaker, and he is someone who can communicate as needed, whereas in Swedish, he appears bewildered by the act of speaking and the need to communicate. Indeed, this difference in character is emphasised by how the phrase “quacky as a duckhound” (66) is translated to Swedish as “dummare än jag” (68), or “stupider than me”. To be fair, his neologisms in English are sometimes spoonerisms too, such as “jipping and skumping” (38), but the frequency of spoonerisms in Swedish is much higher. In other words, there is less creativity here. There are occasionally oddities, too. The word “grobsquiffer” (73) in *The BFG* is translated to Swedish as “puttefnask” (72); given that “fnask” is a slang word for “prostitute”, this strikes me as a rather strange, and perhaps inappropriate, translation for a children’s book. Although many Swedish-language children’s books are very playful with language (Lennart Hellsing’s texts are just one example), it could be that publishers are more conservative with translations,

more concerned about getting words "wrong", and thus more likely to edit out creativity and fun in such texts. Or it could be that translators simply do not have enough time to play around with language, given their often tight deadlines.

To summarise, neologisms are quite hard to analyse, because the rules for word-formation vary among languages and also because this is a case where the context should be taken into consideration (of course, one can argue that all analyses of translations should study the context, but that is not always possible or, perhaps, necessary). The method of word-formation that was most common in the English text that forms the case study here was creation, but the translator of *The BFG* did not use creation nearly as much as Dahl had. Instead, the neologisms in Dahl's works have been weakened in Swedish, so that, for example, the giant tends to speak more in spoonerisms or in pre-existent words rather than in words that appear completely new.

Perhaps this translator decided to prioritise the entertainment value of the neologisms rather than their other functions. Or, as already mentioned above in the list of constraints, the translator may not have had the time to spend thinking about new words. Or she may not have had ideas for what tools to best use to translate neologisms. Or she – or her editor/publisher – may not have felt that child readers should be encouraged to be playful with language in the way the BFG is, and that therefore the creation of new words in the target text was not welcome. I would suggest that editorial practices in Sweden are such that a translator can be creative and playful (see Erik Andersson's published diary about his translation of J.R.R. Tolkien's books for an example, 2007), but my research often reveals a more limited view in regard to translating children's books in particular (see Epstein 2012, among others). That is to say, the translation of works for young readers is frequently more conservative than the original works, with language simplified and challenging elements removed.

My conclusion is, then, that the translator may have felt it was better or easier for child readers to experience neologisms that were closer to Swedish words or to not see as many neologisms at all, or that it was just better or simpler for the translator herself to use such translatorial strategies. In other words, the neologisms are not as free or as suited to the characters, particularly the Big Friendly Giant himself, in the target text as they are in the source text. The BFG has an idiolect, one that reveals much about him while potentially also affirming positive views of multilingualism and diastratic variation. While Sweden is not quite as diverse as the UK, it certainly is a country with a multitude of dialects, minority languages, and, of course, idiolects, and Swedish literature does feature these to a certain degree, if perhaps not quite as much as English-language works, which is evidence that publishers and editors are open to linguistic variation in books. When neologisms have as many functions in a text as the ones studied here seem to, translators may want or need to give themselves (or may want or need to ask their editors or publishers for) more flexibility when attempting to find appropriate strategies for translation. They may also want to consider the audience of the target text and not assume that the child readers will not understand creative neologisms, as I suspect may have happened here. Children are some of the foremost users of linguistic variation, given their growing levels of active language usage, and both enjoy and participate in play with words, and deserve to have it translated in texts aimed at them. Publishers and editors need to be accepting of idiolects, diastratic variations, and multilingualism in both original and translated texts, and therefore must allow translators enough time to work on their translations.

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