

A Corpus-based Study on the Consistency Between Picture Book Translation and Children's Psychology

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Abstract. Picture books are created for children and read by them. The uniqueness of children's psychology influences translation strategies for children's picture books. With the corpus as a research tool, data statistics and analysis are conducted on six children's picture books written by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Axel Scheffler, and translated by Ren Rongrong. The consistency between picture book translation and children's psychology is explored from four aspects: children's cognitive level, emotional needs, rich imagination, and play behavior. This can help fully respect the uniqueness of children's psychology during the translation of children's picture books and highlight the children-oriented translation concept.

Keywords: picture book translation, children's psychology, corpus, children-orientation

1. Introduction

Picture books are the first reading medium that children come into contact with and one of their main cognitive activities. By "stimulating children's observation, imagination, memory, and thinking," picture books can "promote children's cognitive development" and "enhance their comprehensive abilities" [1]. Children's reading levels, acceptance capacities, and aesthetic needs differ from those of adults. Therefore, we should adhere to a children-oriented translation philosophy, "starting from their own innate life desires to liberate and develop them" [2], respect the particularity of their psychology and translate picture books that align with their reading habits.

Julia Donaldson is a renowned author in the UK, and Axel Scheffler is a prominent illustrator in Germany. The six co-created works of the "Smart Beans Picture Book Series" have won multiple international book awards. Ren Rongrong is an outstanding children's literature translator in China. He devotes himself to reproducing the styles of the original picture books. By leveraging corpus as a research tool, this paper conducts data statistics and analysis on the six picture books translated by Ren Rongrong, exploring how the translator manifests the children-oriented translation philosophy and fully respects children's psychology. Thus, this study provides reference for the research on the consistency between picture book translation and children's psychology.

2. Children's psychology and picture book translation

Children's psychology is a crucial factor in picture book translation. Translators should "attach importance to children's interests, respect their cognitive laws, and pay attention to their practice and thinking" [3]. The target audience of children's picture books is mostly children aged 3-6. With relatively low cognitive levels, children are emotionally susceptible and easily attracted by stimuli such as sounds and colors, who often exhibit concrete thinking. They have an urgent desire to engage in the outside world, possess rich imagination, and demonstrate obvious tendencies towards play and entertainment in their behaviors. These characteristics of children's psychology that distinguish them from adults determine the unique charm of children's picture book translation.

3. Corpus-based research methods

This study retrieves and downloads the PDF files of the six English books and their corresponding Chinese translations from authorized websites. The author then extracts the content, converts it into plain text files (TXT) and Word documents, and imports the TXT files into CorpusWordParser for word segmentation, which is supplemented by manual inspection and revision to ensure accuracy. The corpus alignment software ABBYY Aligner is adopted to construct a parallel corpus of English-Chinese translations of the six books, with sentences as the basic alignment unit. By means of corpus analysis tools such as WordSmith 8.0, various corpus analyses are conducted to explore translation methods adopted by the translator in light of the psychological characteristics of children.

4. Analysis of the consistency between picture books and children's psychology

During the golden period of children's education, reading exerts a vital impact on their growth and lifelong development. In this process, paying attention to children's psychology can help them better immerse themselves in the educational value of children's books and realize the practical significance of such works. This study explores the characteristics of children's psychology in four aspects—cognitive level, emotional needs, rich imagination, and play behaviors—and takes Ren Rongrong's translations as the research object to analyze the various considerations made by the translator based on respecting the characteristics of children's psychology.

4.1. Cognitive level

Children who read picture books often have relatively low cognitive levels, making it difficult for them to understand and perceive complex linguistic structures. Therefore, the translator has considered two aspects: vocabulary and syntax.

4.1.1. Vocabulary

Words are divided into content words and function words. In the study of content words, the translator demonstrated distinctive ingenuity in translating English adjectives into Chinese. The translator adopted five methods for adjectives: amplification, omission, adaptation, division, and negation. Specific data is shown in Table 1. Among them, when the same translation method was applied to the same word multiple times, it was counted as one instance; when multiple determiners were added to or omitted from the same word simultaneously, it was recorded as a single instance.

Table 1. Translation strategies for adjectives in picture books

Picture Books	The Gruffalo	The Gruffalo's Child	The Smartest Giant in Town	A Squash and a Squeeze	Room on the Broom	The Snail and the Whale
Amplification	3	5	6	1	7	5
Omission	5	4	9	1	2	6
Adaptation	1	0	3	0	2	0
Division	0	3	1	0	0	0
Negation	0	1	1	1	0	0

As can be seen, the strategies of amplification and omission are used relatively frequently. The amplification strategy is mostly adopted to match the visual information in the illustrations or emphasize certain content of the picture books. For instance, in *The Gruffalo's Child*, the translator amplifies “eyes” [4] to “红眼睛” [5] to align with the characteristics of the owl's eyes in the illustration. Omission is employed to omit unnecessary information that does not affect the main content of the picture books. For example, in *The Snail and the Whale*, all preceding determiners of “smooth black rock” [6] are omitted, with only the noun “岩石” [7] retained. This is because the core intention of the sentence is to contrast the little snail's desire to sail far away with other snails' willingness to stay only on the rock, and at this point, the specific characteristics of the rock are no longer crucial. In terms of the adaptation strategy, the translator respects the concreteness of children's thinking and converts abstract adjectives into concrete expressions. In *The Smartest Giant in Town*, the translator adapts “perfect home” [8] to “温暖舒适的家” [9], making the abstract concept of “perfection” tangible for children. Additionally, the translator adopts the division strategy, splitting “brave” into “勇敢又胆大”; with the use of the negation strategy, “dry path” is translated as “不这么泥泞的小路”.

Among function words, interjections and modal particles are used relatively frequently. Children are emotionally susceptible and perceive things in a simple and pure way. Ren Rongrong consciously increased the frequency of interjections and modal particles to enhance the emotional appeal of the texts, helping child readers immerse themselves deeply in the picture books.

4.1.2. Syntax

The average sentence length is used to study their translation styles, which can be calculated by dividing the total number of words by the total number of sentences in the corpus. The average sentence length reflects the complexity of the texts. Generally speaking, the shorter the average sentence length, the lower the difficulty of reading and comprehension; vice versa. Specific data on the average sentence length of the six translated versions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Average sentence length in translated versions

Picture Books	The Gruffalo	The Gruffalo's Child	The Smartest Giant in Town	A Squash and a Squeeze	Room on the Broom	The Snail and the Whale
Total Number of Words	1260	1013	1717	791	1413	1105
Total Number of Sentences	122	88	119	63	98	61
Average Sentence Length	10.33	11.51	14.43	12.56	14.42	18.11

As can be seen, the average sentence length of most translated versions is within 15 words. This demonstrates that Ren Rongrong is skilled at using short sentence patterns and relatively simple syntactic structures to adapt to the limited thinking and memory capacity of child readers.

4.2. Emotional needs

Zhou Zuoren emphasized the interest-oriented principle and advocated that “children should be enabled to experience joy and satisfaction while reading literature [10].” The primary mission of children’s picture books is to satisfy children’s inherent interest. Additionally, children have a keen eye for discovering beauty. Therefore, the translated versions should focus on providing child readers with a rich aesthetic experience, allowing them to internalize beauty.

4.2.1. Interestingness

To meet children’s demand for interestingness, the translated versions need to demonstrate distinctive ingenuity in font design. The font design on picture book covers, main content, and illustrations can convey rich emotional experiences. In the font design of covers, the translated versions adopt methods such as font slanting and font size adjustment to make the covers more vivid and engaging. For instance, on the cover of *The Smartest Giant in Town*, content words are enlarged while function words are reduced, so as to highlight the physical characteristics of the picture book’s protagonist. In the font design of the main text, the translated versions mainly adopt two methods: font enlargement and reduction. For instance, the translator enlarged the font of the sentence “别动我的女巫!”. This not only highlights the loudness of the big monster’s roar, but also emphasizes its firm stance in protecting the witch, underscoring the great importance of the witch in the hearts of her friends. In the font design of illustrations, the translated versions embed text within the illustrations. For instance, in *The Smartest Giant in Town*, the translator places the words of gratitude directly in the illustrated cards. Key nouns and verbs are enlarged, and the surrounding area is accompanied by pictures depicting scenes where the small animals receive help from the giant. Finally, a golden crown and the giant are added to the design, integrating the text with the illustrations. Specific font design of the translated picture books is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Font design in some translated versions

4.2.2. Pursuit of beauty

Children are adept at perceiving the beauty in daily life. The musicality of language is a distinctive feature of children's picture books, as child readers are more fond of language with rich rhythm and cadence. In his Chinese translations of picture books, Ren Rongrong attached great importance to phonological beauty. Reduplicated words, repeated chunks, and end rhymes are the three core characteristics of Ren Rongrong's translated versions. Specific data is presented in Table 3. If the same data appears multiple times, it is counted repeatedly.

Table 3. Frequency of reduplicated words, repeated chunks and end rhymes in translated versions

Picture Books	The Gruffalo	The Gruffalo's Child	The Smartest Giant in Town	A Squash and a Squeeze	Room on the Broom	The Snail and the Whale
Reduplicated Words	14	20	25	19	37	12
Repeated Chunks	3	13	2	6	11	7
End Rhymes	36	18	0	26	34	32

The six translated versions all have a relatively high frequency of using reduplicated words, which are mainly applied to onomatopoeia, such as “咩咩” and “吱吱”; additionally, reduplicated words are also frequently used in kinship terms, such as “爸爸” and “姐姐”. The occurrence of chunks like “很久很久” and “更加更加” not only enhances the narrativity of the text but also improves the aesthetic quality of it. In terms of end rhymes, couplets and quatrains are used more frequently than tercets.

4.3. Rich imagination

According to Child Development Psychology, imagination is one of the hallmarks of children's cognitive development, “serving as the foundation for understanding and also a crucial means of maintaining children's mental health.” [11] Rhetorical devices and onomatopoeia are powerful tools for stimulating children's imagination.

4.3.1. Rhetorical devices

The simile rhetoric can make the animal images more vivid and tangible, enabling child readers to imagine reasonable, novel and profound animal images in their minds. Hyperbole can highlight the specific characteristics of a certain animal, bringing the animal’s image vividly to life on the page. There are no obvious similes or hyperbole in *The Smartest Giant in Town*, while both rhetorical devices are used in the other five translated versions. For example, in *The Gruffalo’s Child*, the translator compares the eyes to fire, which makes child readers wonder what kind of wonderful encounter the little Gruffalo will have if she meets the big rat. In *The Snail and the Whale*, when the little snail expresses its wish to sail far across the sea, it says: “世界大得没有边儿,大海深得不见底儿!”. The translator employs hyperbole here. The little snail’s ability to explore and understand the world and the sea is limited, which further helps child readers imagine the outside world.

4.3.2. Onomatopoeia

Ren Rongrong frequently employed onomatopoeia to depict animal sounds, which can integrate children’s visual and auditory perceptions and stimulate their imagination and creativity. The data is shown in the following table. Repeated words are counted multiple times accordingly.

Table 4. Frequency of onomatopoeia in translated versions

Picture Books	The Gruffalo	The Gruffalo’s Child	The Smartest Giant in Town	A Squash and a Squeeze	Room on the Broom	The Snail and the Whale
Frequency of Onomatopoeia	12	3	10	4	25	1

4.4. Play behaviors

In children’s lives, “play is the embodiment of a spiritual pursuit and a way for them to understand, experience, and transcend life.” [12] Through play, children can enhance their social adaptability and promote their emotional and intellectual development. However, children’s engagement is inevitably inseparable from communication and socialization. Children’s plays adapted from picture books are further conveyed to children through performances or storytelling, and all of these rely on the colloquial nature of picture books. This paper focuses on exploring two aspects: inversion sentences and retroflex final particles.

4.4.1. Inversion sentences

Inversion sentences are widely used in spoken Chinese, often emphasizing certain elements by inverting the original word order. The use of inversion sentences helps child readers learn common expressions in spoken Chinese. The following is the specific data.

Table 5. Inversion sentences in translated versions

Picture Books	Inversion Sentences	Type
The Gruffalo	这个菜他最喜欢!	Object Fronting
	咕噜牛根本就没有?	Predicate Fronting
	快得像风,他转身就逃!	Adverbial Fronting
The Gruffalo's Child	那个坏家伙我见过一次.....	Object Fronting
The Smartest Giant in Town	房子旁边站着一只鼠妈妈和一群鼠宝宝.....	Subject-Predicate Inversion

4.4.2. Retroflex final particles

Retroflex final particles refer to the phonetic change of the final vowel of a character caused by retroflexion, which is quite common in both Mandarin and dialects. Mastering retroflex final particles is an essential part of children's socialization and playful activities, and reading picture book stories provides a sound foundation for child readers to learn them. Ren Rongrong used a large number of retroflex final particles. Specific data is presented in Table 6, where each repeated occurrence of the same vocabulary is counted multiple times accordingly.

Table 6. Frequency of retroflex final particles in translated versions

Picture Books	The Gruffalo	The Gruffalo's Child	The Smartest Giant in Town	A Squash and a Squeeze	Room on the Broom	The Snail and the Whale
Frequency of Retroflex Final Particles	12	9	2	5	5	14

5. Conclusion

As children are the target readers of picture books, child psychology should undoubtedly attract extensive attention from translators. When translating these six English picture books into Chinese, Ren Rongrong fully took into account the psychological characteristics of children at specific developmental stages. To adapt to children's relatively simple thinking and low cognitive level, the translator flexibly translated content words and function words, and adopted sentences with short lengths. In response to children's emotional needs for fun and beauty, the translator conducted font design at multiple levels and created high-quality translations with phonological beauty by means of reduplicated words, repeated words, and end rhymes. To satisfy children's rich imagination, the translator employed a variety of rhetorical devices and constructed vivid and lifelike story scenes through onomatopoeia. To cater to children's playful activities, the translator increased the proportion of inversion sentences and retroflex final particles, and ensured the colloquial nature of the picture books, thus laying a foundation for children's participation in games. It is hoped that in the future, more picture book translation research achievements that implement the children-centered translation concepts and follow the laws of children's psychological development will emerge. These achievements can help translators provide high-quality translations that are more in line with children's psychological development characteristics, enabling child readers to shine brightly in the vast starry sky of picture books.

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