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# Translating Vulnerable Voices into French: The Child Narrators in Emma Donoghue's *Room* and Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English*

Virginie Buhl

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**Virginie Buhl**  
**Translating Vulnerable Voices into French :**  
**The Child Narrators in Emma Donoghue's *Room* and Stephen Kelman's**  
***Pigeon English***

**Présentation en français**

*Cet article propose une étude de deux voix narratives enfantines au prisme de la notion de vulnérabilité : la construction des deux jeunes personnages centraux repose sur l'association de la force et de la fragilité ; sur le plan narratif, les deux récits émanent donc de narrateurs faillibles ; si leur langue atypique peut être jugée défailante, elle permet cependant de décentrer et de renouveler la perception du monde livrée au lecteur. La recréer en français constitue en soi un voyage périlleux qui met au jour la vulnérabilité de celle ou celui qui traduit aussi bien que celle du texte à traduire et celle du texte traduit.*

**Abstract**

*This paper deals with two child narrators: Emma Donoghue's 5-year-old Jack (*Room*, 2010) and Stephen Kelman's 11-year-old Harrison Opoku (*Pigeon English*, 2011). Jack's voice delivers the tale of a life spent in captivity in a garden shed. His peculiar voice and mind style challenge both the language use and the world view of the adult readers for whom Donoghue wrote *Room*. Harrison's narrative voice is Kelman's recreation of a silenced voice, that of a Ghanaian immigrant child who discovers England. His creolized language also offers a decentred perspective on the world that surrounds him. These youthful voices - at once vulnerable and resilient - unravel their stories with striking linguistic inventiveness. Donoghue and Kelman were both praised for their ability to create the "authentic" child-like narrative voices of modern-day Tom Sawyers.*

*What in Jack's and Harrison's voices and highly original narrative style is vulnerable to translation? Rewriting such novels in French is a linguistic and cross-cultural challenge: what pitfalls and lurking dangers can jeopardize the translation process when it comes to recreating a juvenile voice? The translators had to be both faithful to the source text and creative. They also needed pay close attention to tone, register and verisimilitude so that the French-speaking narrators of *Room* and *Le Pigeon Anglais* would catch and retain their adult readers' attention with the same endearing and powerful enthusiasm that resonates in the source texts. Coupled with a prospective study of style in the source texts, the approach taken to try and answer these questions is retrospective in so far as it partly draws upon the translator's reflective analysis of one of her own published translations. This analysis is nurtured by theoretical readings and seeks to reach across to another translator's work.*

**Keywords:** literary translation – cognitive stylistics – child narrator – mind style – reflectivity

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on two child narrators: Emma Donoghue’s 5-year-old Jack (*Room*, 2010) and Stephen Kelman’s 11-year-old Harrison Opoku (*Pigeon English*, 2011).

Jack’s grim tale of a life spent in captivity in a garden shed is transfigured by his peculiar voice and mind style, which challenge both the linguistic habits and the world view of the adult readers for whom Donoghue wrote *Room*. Harri’s narrative voice is Kelman’s recreation of a silenced voice, that of a newly-arrived Ghanaian immigrant child who discovers a British housing estate rife with gang violence where some children are stabbed by others.

These youthful and vulnerable voices unravel their stories with a striking linguistic inventiveness. Donoghue and Kelman were both praised for their ability to create the “authentic” child-like voices of modern-day Tom Sawyers. Both novels sold very well and were shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. The novels’ reception in France was more contrasted. While the French version of *Room* published by Stock was a commercial success, *Le Pigeon Anglais* did not fare so well, as Gallimard’s sales figures clearly show<sup>1</sup>.

The main questions that will firstly be addressed are related to the fictional, narrative and stylistic quality of such voices, using the lense of vulnerability. Then I will focus on translating issues: What in Jack’s and Harri’s voices and narrative style is vulnerable to translation? Rewriting such novels in French is a linguistic and cross-cultural challenge: what pitfalls and lurking dangers can jeopardize the translation process when it comes to recreating a juvenile voice? How can a translator take a *caring* approach to the source texts and their narrative voice as well as to the target audience’s needs and expectations?

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Book title	Author	Publisher	Date of publication	Sales estimate*
<i>Room</i>	E. Donoghue	Stock	24/08/2011	12 900 copies
<i>Room</i>	E. Donoghue	Stock / Livre de Poche	30/01/2013	23 038 copies
<i>Le Pigeon Anglais</i>	S. Kelman	Gallimard	08/09/2011	1 020 copies

\* See [www.edistat.com](http://www.edistat.com), for the methodology used to produce these figures, which date back to July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.

### **The child figure in retrospect: a voiceless minor reborn as a subaltern fictional construct**

It may seem paradoxical to focus on child narrators in adult fiction, all the more so as the etymology of the word *enfant* focuses on the child's *inability* to speak.

The problematic of the child language and consciousness is radically signified by *enfant*, the French term for child, and its Latin cognate *infans*, "unspeaking". The English derivative, "infant", defines one who cannot speak and whose progressive attempts at articulation must be translated by adults into a world of discourse not yet fully inhabited by the child. (Goodenough, Heberle & Sokoloff, 1994 : 3)

Historically, children have long been at best voiceless characters both in society and literature either because of a temporary inability to use the language of adults or because adults relegated them to the passive position of the well-behaved learner who should listen:

The etymology of the word "infant" ("without voice", "he who does not speak") posits the child narrator almost as an oxymoron, and points to the difficulty of giving voice to a character who is both chronologically and intellectually removed from the writer. Moreover, until recently the silence of the child was the product of rules for good behaviour such as "Speak only when you are spoken to" or "children should be seen and not heard". Giving a voice to a fictional child thus undermines generations of educators [...]. Indeed children's voices are a relatively recent phenomenon in literature. In fact in both society and literature the child's very existence was barely recognised until writers such as Mark Twain or Charles Dickens drew them out of their silent obscurity. (Benson, Jaëck & Durrans, 2016: 1)

The 19<sup>th</sup> century appears to be a turning point in that respect, with the first major English-speaking writers who crossed the border between adult and juvenile language, retrieving and recreating some of the child's lingo. In 20<sup>th</sup> century adult literature, the child narrator remains a minor voice in so far as it is only an occasional feature in novels such as Emile Ajar's 1975 *La vie devant soi*, Howard Buten's *When I was five I killed myself* (1981) or, more recently, Mark Hadden's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005).

Yet, despite their narrative prominence, aren't such child narrators still subaltern in so far as they are instrumental in their adult creators' narrative? Is their voice only a *means* for writers to reconnect with juvenile creativity and challenge linguistic and cultural norms?

[M]any texts written from a child's viewpoint are brilliantly creative, subversive, or compensatory precisely because children speak from a realm as yet unappropriated, or only partially appropriated, by social or cultural intentionality. (Goodenough, Heberle & Sokoloff, 1994: 4)

A relevant example of the ideological appropriation and use of a child's narrative voice is Scout, the young narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee. Her naïve viewpoint mainly serves to highlight the contradictions inherent in a racist American society. Don't such narrators inevitably serve their creators' *own* purposes and express *their* concerns? Undeniably, *Room* and *Pigeon English* tap into the creativeness of young children's language to provide their readers with a highly original reading experience. Both novels also express some of the concerns of contemporary societies towards the younger generation: how can our children stay safe? Can a child grow, stay healthy and thrive in a cramped, confined environment? What makes migrant children even more vulnerable than the others?

More generally speaking, literature reflects the 20<sup>th</sup> century's growing interest in children's perception and worldview, and draws upon many studies focusing on their specific cognitive approach both to their environment and to language and meaning.

The development of verbal consciousness in the child is crucial to two fundamental concerns of literary theory: how subjects are constituted or constitute themselves and how meaning itself is established. (Goodenough, Heberle & Sokoloff, 1994: 4)

This is not only a concern of literary theory but also for anthropologists, philosophers and (cognitive) linguists. It justifies the hermeneutical approach taken in this paper and the use of cognitive stylistics to analyze not only the linguistic and literary specificities of child narrators, but also their strengths and weaknesses with regard to expressiveness, verisimilitude and translation. As no child leaves adults indifferent – they can arouse negative

or positive reactions and feelings but seldom leave grown-ups unresponsive – notions such as violence, vulnerability, resilience and empathy will be used to explore what is at stake for those who undertake to translate such voices. The approach taken in the following sections of this paper combines the prospective analysis of parallel corpora taken from both novels and the retrospective, reflexive insights of a translator engaged in research. Indeed, the author of this paper is also the author of the translation of *Room* under scrutiny and will occasionally speak in her own name.

### **The child figure as an epitome of paradoxical vulnerabilities**

The two young narrators under scrutiny for the purposes of this paper appear to be fictional cross-breeds of vulnerability and resilience.

Jack, the 5-year old in *Room* is a young boy born and raised in captivity after his mother was kidnapped and locked in a garden shed. Just like his “Ma”, he is at the mercy of their captor, whom he calls Old Nick. Old Nick has a power of life and death over them. Because he is expendable, Jack is even more vulnerable than his mother who was first kidnapped to be a sexual slave. Besides, the older he grows inside the small space he shares with his mother, the more likely he is to be perceived as a danger or a cumbersome presence by Old Nick. Yet the boy turns out to be the reason why his mother has been able to survive captivity and keep her sanity, as he naively explains: “Before I came down from Heaven Ma left [the TV] on all day long and got turned into a zombie that’s like a ghost but walks *thump thump*” (Donoghue, 2010: 11).

Jack not only escapes from the garden shed but also helps rescue his mother. The physical attributes that make him a frail child then turn out to be assets: his small size, slim body and sickly look help his mother convince her captor that Jack has died; they make it easier to roll up his body and hide it in a large carpet to get it out of the shed as if it was a corpse to be disposed of. Even when he is out of the safe and familiar environment he was born and raised in, Jack turns out to be more resilient than his mother, who attempts to commit suicide a few weeks after they start living in the outside world. Though unsettled, puzzled and initially very uncomfortable, displaced Jack proves to be very adaptable. Not only does this character

overcome his vulnerabilities with regard to his new fictional environment but also his vulnerability with regard to his readers. Indeed, the reader could lose interest in Jack's story once he is freed from the captivity that made him so special. But in fact this is when his displacement and the discovery of the outside world reveal Jack's difference even more and highlight the strangeness of the "ordinary" world. Being outside raises ontological questions about himself and puts his cognitive abilities and linguistic skills to the test. But as shown in the samples below, his cognitive and linguistic response is up to the challenge. The growing awareness of his peculiar and unique way of being human, which results from his past experience of seclusion and captivity with his mother, fosters portmanteau words such as "me-and-Ma" and a specific use of "roomers" that can be described as a semantic distortion of the standard use:

### Corpus sample 1

Source text	Target text
But what I actually meant was, maybe I'm a human but I'm a <b>me-and-Ma</b> as well. I don't know a word for <b>us two</b> . <b>Roomers?</b> (Donoghue, 2010: 274 <sup>2</sup> )	Mais moi, ce que je voulais dire, c'est que je suis peut-être un humain mais aussi <b>un Nous-les-deux</b> . Je connais pas le mot pour « <b>moi et Maman</b> ». <b>Un humain de la Planète Chambre, peut-être</b> . (Donoghue/Buhl, 2011: 343)

As a newcomer to England, 11-year-old Harry too is very vulnerable in a country and housing estate which seem so alien to him. The curiosity and thirst for knowledge that he shares with all children turn him into an amateur detective after another boy is stabbed to death. Just like his language, his investigative method is creative and culturally hybrid. Thus, together with his friend Dean, he uses a combination of techniques inspired from the American detective series they have seen on TV and a kind of intuition that draws upon African divination. The excerpts below show not only their resourcefulness but also Harrison's own inventive use of police jargon.

### Corpus sample 2

Source text	Target text
I was <b>on binocular duty</b> and Dean was in charge of making the notes. He had to write down whatever I saw <b>for evidence</b> . (Kelman, 2010: 153)	Moi j'étais <b>aux jumelles</b> et Dean devait prendre des notes. Y fallait qu'il écrive tout ce que je voyais <b>comme preuve</b> . (Kelman/Richard, 2011: 195)

<sup>2</sup> The highlights are mine in all of the parallel corpora presented in this paper.



Just as Harri and Dean are playing detective, Harri is playing with English syntax, inserting “binoculars” into the set phrase “on duty” and opting for prepositional shortcuts such as “for evidence” instead of saying “to find evidence”, which is plain, standard English.

However, Harri’s strength proves to be a weakness in the end, as finding the truth and identifying the young killer only serve to get him into trouble. He can be very perceptive and intuitive but because of his naïve mind and failure to grasp the linguistic and social codes of the inner-city housing estate he’s living in, he ignores the warning signs that could save him and keeps believing in the powers of magical thinking.

If I eat the crab apples I’ll get all the superpowers I need. Then I’ll be protected. It was Altaf who gave me the idea. I got tired of waiting for a radioactive spider to come bite me so I’m going to use the magic poison fruits instead. Then the bad guys can’t defeat me and I’ll be safe the whole summer. (Kelman, 2010: 247)

As a consequence, he does not see the danger he is in, which turns him into yet another victim for local gangs.

Harri’s vulnerability as a character is not only intra-fictional. Even as *Pigeon English* was celebrated as a highly original book narrated by an endearing protagonist, even as it sold thousands of copies, some reviewers and readers felt unconvinced, especially by the character’s lack of maturity for an 11-year-old<sup>3</sup> and by the verisimilitude of the language he uses<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, some African critics found Harri wanting on other grounds: the dubious, contrived ethnicity of his Ghanaian pidgin and the fact that he was created by a white English writer who has never been to Africa<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> “With the exception of Harri’s growing interest in girls and a sexuality on the verge of emerging, much of his narration seems immature for his age. For the most part Harri comes across as a bit slow, a bit simple, for an eleven-year-old and sounds more like an eight-year-old.” “*Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman – a review”, in *Jason’s blog* (29/08/2013) <https://weneedtotalkaboutbooks.com/2013/07/22/book-review-pigeon-english/>

<sup>4</sup> “[...] here, as often in the first half of the novel, Harri’s voice feels laboured and faux-naïf.” Aspden, Rachel, “*Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman – review”, in *The Guardian* (13/03/ 2011). <https://www.theguardian.com/>

<sup>5</sup> “Stephen Kelman is a white social worker, which led some West African critics to wonder about the desirability of a white Englishman (who has apparently never set foot in Africa) writing from the point of view of an African boy. [...] Critics owned that Stephen Kelman ‘touches deeply on the sensibilities of West African culture’, especially through Harri’s concern with superstition, his love for nature and his strong family bonds. Yet, objections were raised concerning the writer’s use of pidgin English: ‘I found it hard to get past the jarringly ungrammatical pidgin English.’” (Letissier, 2017: 7)

### **Narrative Vulnerabilities: children recounting what they don't fully comprehend**

The narrative perspective also exemplifies the paradoxical vulnerability of Jack and Harri. These two child-narrators partly fail to understand what is going on in the complex environment they are living in. When Jack is first described in a closed room that is very familiar to him, his mother protects him from the grim reality of their captivity as much as she can by lying to him. He does not know that the outside world exists for real. Once he and his mother escape, Jack is suddenly immersed in a new, alien environment that feels and sounds like another planet to him. The experience of displacement and immersion in an alien country that Harri is living is also a radical shock, at once cultural and social, as he lands not only in a foreign country but also in a deprived urban area rife with violence and dominated by gang rules. In addition, both characters come fully equipped with their juvenile culture and cognition but face a reality which challenges their cognitive tools and skills – that of an adults' world. Thus, they are aliens on more than one count, as displaced humans and as children.

This de-centered perception has often been studied by linguists specialized in narratology as a vulnerability – a flaw, a lack of understanding, or, at best a fallibility. Admittedly, the first thing an adult reader expects when opening a book that delivers a story told by a child narrator is to find a story with missing parts, or a distorted tale. Such gaps and distortions are due to the fact that the truth partly eludes those narrators whom Wayne C. Booth has defined as unreliable narrators. For Booth, unreliable narrators are narrators whose own norms and values contrast more or less sharply with the norms and values of their adult readers (Booth, 1983: 155). Greta Olson's analysis emphasizes the fact that the distortions are *not* a willful alteration of facts; they arise from the child narrator's own vulnerability which fosters epistemological uncertainties, hence the notion of fallible narrators:

[F]allible narrators do not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased. Fallible narrators' perceptions can be **impaired because they are children with limited education or experience**, as in *Huckleberry Finn*; or, as in the case of Marlow from *Lord Jim*, their reports can seem insufficient **because their sources of information are biased and incomplete** (Olson, 2003: 101, the highlights are mine).

However, the descriptions and the events that make up Jack's and Harri's stories cannot be described as perception without interpretation or meaning. Their child-like matter-of-factness is not devoid of attempts at making sense of what is happening to them or around them, quite the opposite. Children try to understand, they relentlessly try to *explain* things. The problem is

that their observations do not necessarily focus on what adults pay attention to and that their explanations may differ significantly from those adults will provide. That is why child narrators tend to deliver de-centered and off-the-wall accounts of life which make their tales an interesting and challenging reading experience.

Apart from de-familiarizing adult readers, what are the uses and effects of such a narrative style? Coupled with the naïve, enthusiastic tone and engaging energy which provide a refreshing reading experience, the gap between what is described and what adults readers understand fosters humour and irony. W. C. Booth also highlights that narratives in which the voice of the implied author is rarely or never perceptible require much more participation by the reader in the hermeneutic and semantic activity (Booth, 1983: 301), as is the case when readers have to unravel child narrators' tales.

Alex Clark from *The Guardian* brilliantly summarizes the strengths and vulnerabilities of such narratives:

It's the lot of most children to see more than the adults in their lives but to struggle with how to decode it: observant, helplessly impressionable and hungry for incident, their interpretations of the environment and occurrences that surround them are hit and miss – sometimes uncannily spot-on and sometimes spectacularly amiss. That inherent unreliability makes fictional children appealing vehicles for dramatic irony, protagonist-witnesses of a story of which they have only a partial understanding, whose gaps in knowledge and comprehension mirror their readers' experience and occasionally leave us terrified in the face of their ignorance<sup>6</sup>.

He goes on to stress their potential weaknesses – among which are caricatured, over-simplistic or excessively naive portrayals of children, and sentimentality. To exemplify Harri's and Jack's attempts at explaining puzzling events, I have chosen the sample below.

### Corpus sample 3

Source text <i>Pigeon English</i>	Source text <i>Room</i>
Asweh, there's so many germs here you wouldn't believe it! Everybody's scared of them all the time. <b>Germs from Africa are the most deadliest, that's why Vilis ran away when I tried to say hello to him, he thinks if he breathes my germs he'll die.</b> I didn't even know I brought the germs with me. » (Kelman, 2011: 9)	Ma standing beside Lamp and everything bright, then <i>snap</i> and dark again. Light again, she makes it last three seconds then dark, then light for just a second. Ma's staring up at Skylight. <b>She does this in the night, I think it helps her get to sleep again.</b> (Donoghue, 2010 : 27)

<sup>6</sup> Clark, Alex, "Pigeon English by Stephen Kelman – review", in *The Guardian* (19/03/2011). <https://www.theguardian.com/>

The excerpt from *Pigeon English* provides the reader with Harri's naive interpretation of a classmate's racist behaviour towards him. Does he really believe that Vilis is afraid to die or is he protecting himself from this unpleasant reaction by thinking the other boy is a coward? Is this one of the instances of what a critic called a heavy-handed faux-naïf style? Admittedly, for an 11-year-old, Harri may strike us as gullible. However, Peter Hollindale argues that children are diverse and childness is a composite (Hollindale, 1997: 76 & 79). He also points out that our perception of maturity in juvenile characters may be skewed by experience:

In recent years children have matured physically at an earlier age than they used to, and have also moved at an earlier stage from activities linked with childhood to those associated with adolescence. Partly under the influence of the media, commerce and marketing, and peer-group fashion, they have seemed to leave childhood behind much earlier. We may doubt whether external behavioural maturity is accompanied by the emotional maturity to cope with it, but it is still an observable fact of life. (Hollindale, 1997: 86)

As far as Jack is concerned, intra-fictional parameters such as his age (only 5 years old) and the fact that he has been raised in permanent contact with his mother may help readers to accept his lack of emotional maturity combined with an advanced intellectual development. However, the passage taken from *Room* clearly shows that he fails to understand what his mother is doing – i.e. using light to signal and send a message. But how could he understand that she is trying to escape when he does not even know the outside world exists? His perceptiveness is not sufficiently developed to give meaning to what he sees, so he falls back on a simple explanation that relates to his own experience of using visual tricks and counting to go to sleep. He expresses the epistemological uncertainty highlighted by Greta Olson (Olson, 2003 : 101) by saying “I think”, showing that he is unsure he has found the right explanation. These cognitive considerations lead me to focus on style as a reflection of how children's minds process reality and use not only reason and deduction but also imagination to do so.

### **Prospecting for distinctive traits in juvenile mind styles in *Room* and *Pigeon English***

What signs of textual childness should we look for in the two young narrators' narratives? The notion of mind style appears to be a relevant tool that serves to map out the strengths and weaknesses of such narratives. To define and explore mind style, Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short (*Style in fiction: a linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*) first used Roger Fowler's 1977 definition.

Cumulatively, consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another, give rise to an impression of world view, what I shall call a “mind style” (Fowler, 1977: 76).

They proceeded to deepen the analysis of the cognitive perceptions of specific narrators or authors and focused on the traces such perceptions leave in the narratives under study, hence the term mind style. This approach provided the foundations of a methodology which they described as follows: “In studying style, **we have to select what aspects of language matter**, and the principle of selection **depends on the purpose we have in mind**” (Leech & Short, 1981: 14, the highlights are mine).

I have applied this methodology extensively to my study of Emma Donoghue’s *Room* as part of my PhD dissertation<sup>7</sup> to exemplify Jack’s mind style. My research objective was to select specific features that reflect the child narrator’s own approach to and understanding of life and the world he is living in. I chose to focus on the features that de-familiarize adult readers the most: the greater the gap between adults’ linguistic and cognitive expectations and the children’s narrative, the better. Admittedly, these are easier to prospect for. But deviant, creative language use was all the more interesting to me as it is the most challenging for the translator. As a novel’s incipit is usually packed with such traits, we will now examine the beginning of *Room* and *Pigeon English*, looking for stylistic features which evoke childness – i. e. a juvenile mind style that convincingly conjures up a child’s world view in the reader’s mind.

#### Corpus sample 4: *One dies, the other survives* - INCIPIT 1

Source text	Target Text
Today I’m five. I was four last night <b>going to</b> sleep in <b>Wardrobe</b> , but when I wake up in <b>Bed</b> in the dark <b>I’m changed to five, abracadabra</b> . Before that, I was <b>three, then two, then one, then zero</b> . (Donoghue, 2010: 3)	Aujourd’hui, j’ai 5 ans. Hier soir j’en avais 4 quand <b>j’ai été</b> me coucher dans <b>Petit Dressing, mais abracadabra !</b> il fait encore nuit et je me réveille dans Monsieur Lit <b>avec mes 5 ans</b> . Avant, j’avais <b>3 ans, et 2, et 1 an, et encore avant 0 an</b> . (Donoghue/ Buhl, 2011: 13)

The most striking stylistic features in the source text are the following:

- The syntactic shortcut Jack takes at the beginning of the second sentence by saying “going to” instead of “when I went to” immediately signal a child’s erratic grammar. It also shows that the child’s expressivity and enthusiasm prevail over normative language.

<sup>7</sup> Buhl, Virginie, 2021. *La défamiliarisation d’une langue à l’autre : traduire la voix de l’enfant-narrateur en français*. Thèse de doctorat, Paris 3, École doctorale Sciences du langage. Sous la direction d’Isabelle Collombat. En ligne (accès restreint) : <http://www.theses.fr/s154268>

- The idiosyncratic use of some nouns, which are written with capital letters and used like first names, shows that Jack, as a captive, personifies objects and considers them to be friendly, human-like items.
- Magical thinking is perceptible in “changed to”, especially as it is used next to “abracadabra”. It sounds as if Jack thought some fairy had turned him into a 5-year-old by magic overnight.
- Jack’s perception of time and the way he reflects upon his growth is described as a countdown. Most adults’ retrospective view is reorganized in a chronological order so this description also challenges the adult reader’s worldview.

### Corpus sample 5: *One dies, the other survives* - INCIPIT 2

Source text	Target Text
<p><b>Me and the dead boy</b> were only <b>half friends</b>, I didn’t see him very much because he was older and he didn’t go to my <b>school</b>. He could ride his bike <b>with no hands</b> and you never even wanted him to <b>fall off</b>. (Kelman, 2011: 4)</p>	<p><b>Moi et le gars qu’est mort</b>, on était qu’à <b>moitié copains</b>, je le voyais pas beaucoup parce qu’il était plus âgé et qu’il allait pas à mon <b>bahut</b>. Il savait faire du vélo <b>sans les mains</b> et même que tu avais jamais envie qu’il <b>se casse la binette</b>. (Kelman/ Richard, 2011: 14)</p>

The most striking stylistic features in the source text are the following:

- The word order immediately signals a juvenile mind style: “me and the dead boy” sounds like the common childish syntactic deviance in which children put themselves first. Also, the collocation fosters an uncanny feeling for a few seconds: is Harri friends with a ghost?
- With “half-friends”, a creative word formation based on half-brother, Harri’s unconventional use of English appears to suit his own nuanced view of human relationships and friendships.
- The dead boy could ride his bike “with no hands”; this memory conjures up another uncanny, surreal vision through the description of a fairly common bike riding skill.

A quick look at the target texts featured on the right-hand side shows that both translators had to pay close attention to tone, register and verisimilitude so that the French-speaking narrators of *Room* and *Le Pigeon Anglais* could catch and retain their adult readers’ attention with the same endearing and powerful enthusiasm that resonates in the source texts.

### **The perils of translating juvenile mind styles**

Parting with academic norms, I chose to entitle the aligned corpora samples “One dies, the other survives” for two reasons.

Firstly, because Jack survives whereas Harri Opoku dies. Their fates as characters and as linguistic beings are radically and tragically different. Harri’s voice is brutally silenced by the one of the violent youths he was trying to emulate (behaviorally and linguistically) and expose as a criminal. The English pigeon he thought was his guardian angel may be perceived as indifferent and paternalistic: the bird<sup>8</sup> seems to know more about life and death than anyone else in the novel, yet it is powerless or unwilling to protect Harri either by warning him against danger or by raising the alarm.

Jack’s survival as a character will inevitably lead to a gradual metamorphosis of the linguistic inventiveness and off-the-wall worldview that make him so peculiar. The transient quality of child language and culture means they are bound to change and ultimately morph into adult, normative language and reasoning. Examples of how fast Jack adjusts as soon as he is out of the room will be presented and analyzed next as we discuss translation issues.

Secondly, “One dies, the other survives” is also relevant because translation is often said to destroy the source text so as to identify what will survive in the target text. Hence the sense of violence and betrayal often attached to this endeavour, and especially to literary translation. Thus we are now going to examine how vulnerable the source text is as a translation material and how perilous translation is as a journey across languages and cultures.

### **Juvenile mind styles as victims of the cross-linguistic, cross-cultural journey of translation?**

Delving into the vulnerability of translation and reflecting upon translation as a perilous journey shouldn’t just boil down to prospecting for mistakes and awkward translation choices. As a translator I think that passing judgment on a translation is what people do when they have nothing more interesting to share about the translated text. As researchers in translation

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<sup>8</sup> This bird is a complex epitome of power, persecution – a vulnerable creature whose voice can only be heard by Harri – and domination – it oversees, overhears a lot and its command of English is closer to the norm despite its oral quality. Paradoxically, while the English title of the novel reverses the word order so as to point to *pidgin English*, the title chosen for the French version is closer to standard syntax and brings the well-spoken Pigeon anglais to the fore, thereby erasing any hint to ethnicity and Creole.

studies, we put source and target texts under such close scrutiny that we inevitably question some of the translation choices that were made by professionals. The epistemological value of such analyses and comments depends on the purpose they serve. My objective in the following pages is to highlight the challenges raised by rendering juvenile mind styles in French and the creativity that can be used to do so.

Starting with N. Richard's translation of *Pigeon English*, one of the pitfalls exemplified in the previous sample consists in exaggerating certain features that are considered teenage-like and suburban. For example, the use of a casual register, with slang words that can sound very dated (e. g. "bahut" or even more strikingly "se casser la binette") and may be at odds with Harri's juvenile naiveté. Georges Letissier writes about "the difficulty for educated writers to articulate, let alone do justice to, a form of speech at variance with their own linguistic practices" (Letissier, 2017: 3). Just like writers, translators may find it difficult to recreate a youth speak that is neither the language they use as adults nor the one they used themselves as children or teenagers, a language that is in keeping with the time and age of the character using it – or at least that strikes a convincing note in readers' minds. This may sound highly subjective, but when I quoted "se casser la binette" at a graduate conference at Oxford, there seemed to be a consensus that no young boy today would use it.

As far as my translation of *Room* is concerned, I have also made choices that other translators or some readers may regard as questionable; the choice of "Petit Dressing" & "Monsieur Lit" to translate "Wardrobe" and "Bed", rendering the animist mind style of Jack is a case in point. Similarly, when translating "Roomers?" in the first corpus sample presented in this paper, I decided upon "**Un** humain de la Planète Chambre", which focuses only on Jack, instead of Ma and Jack. Also, this translation choice makes the semantic of "Roomers" more explicit and adds an extraterrestrial touch to it, which is consistent with Jack's world view in the rest of the book but is nonetheless an addition. Finally, I have also opted for a semantic rendering of the question mark which corresponds to Jack's epistemological uncertainty. The reflexive analysis of a larger sample of my translation of *Room* shows that this is not only an explicitation tendency inherent in the process of translation<sup>9</sup> but also that as a professional translator I am prone to writing translations that seek to *help* the reader understand. It is a tendency I may have to fight when translating texts or passages that deliberately seek to leave

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Delisle defines this translation strategy as follows: "l'explicitation est le résultat d'un étoffement qui consiste à introduire dans le texte d'arrivée, pour obtenir plus de clarté ou en raison de contraintes imposées par la langue d'arrivée, des précisions sémantiques non formulées dans le texte de départ, mais qui se dégagent du contexte cognitif ou de la situation décrite » (Delisle, 2013: 212).



the reader in the dark or that seek to foster a more active participation in their hermeneutic activity.

Thus, both Richard and I have *singled out* some latent stylistic features in the source texts to *enhance* them – or should I say hyper-translate them. This is consistent with a view of translation as *creative destruction*: some things are inevitably lost in translation but the choices made by translators also contribute to a re-creation(al) process. Just like children discovering language and playing with it, translators turn themselves into sorcerer’s apprentices: they may toy with and distort the target language so that it can accommodate some of the inventiveness and strangeness of the source text. Relevant examples of such destructive creativity may be found in the samples from *Pigeon English* presented below. Harri’s world view often comes across as an enthusiastic expression of wonder and astonishment which partakes of his naïveté. The naïve mind style is illustrated below by the underlined word sequences which are emphatic. The words highlighted in bold letters serve to enhance and express such feelings but also borrow from Ghanaian Pidgin English.

### Corpus sample 6

Source text	Target Text
1/ She painted one fingernail pink and the next fingernail green, and the next one pink again, in a pattern. It took a <u>very</u> long time. She was <u>very</u> careful, she didn’t make a single mistake. It was <u>very relaxing</u> . (Kelman, 2011: 45)	1/ Elle s’est fait un ongle en rose, l’autre en vert, celui d’après encore en rose, et ainsi de suite. Ça a pris <u>rudement</u> longtemps. Elle était <u>super soigneuse</u> , elle a pas fait une seule erreur. Ça a été <u>hyper à la fraîche</u> . (Kelman/ Richard, 2011: 64)
2/ <b>Asweh</b> , it was <u>very vexing</u> . ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 45)	2/ <b>Jtejure</b> c’était <u>rudement</u> fâcheux. ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 65)
3/ I got new trainers. [...] <b>Asweh</b> , they’re <b>bo-styles</b> . [...] It was a <b>dope-fine</b> <sup>10</sup> piece of luck. [...] I even tried them on the corridor where the floor’s <b>proper</b> shiny and they made a mighty squeaky sound. ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 144)	3/ J’ai des nouvelles baskets. [...]. <b>Jtejure</b> , elles sont <b>stylées</b> . [...] C’était un <b>hyper</b> coup de bol. [...] Même que je les ai essayées dans le couloir où le sol est <b>rudement</b> brillant et elles ont hyper couiné. ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 184)

We can observe that the word “very” and its pidgin slang equivalent “proper” are translated in a variety of ways by N. Richard, maybe to avoid repetition. They give the impression that Harri’s vocabulary is more varied than it is in English, and its ethnicity is lost. Also, the choice of French slang gives Harri’s French mind style a smack of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus,

<sup>10</sup> “Dope-fine” is most probably Ghanaian English but I have not been able to find it in the Ghanaian English lexicon I have used for my research. Stephen Kelman explained that he borrowed from the hybrid sociolect he heard on the streets of his Luton neighbourhood, which may explain why the “dope-fine” entry is missing from dictionaries based on the Ghanaian English spoken in Africa.

“rudement” may elicit memories of children’s stories set in the 1960s, such as *Le Petit Nicolas* by Sempé & Goscinny. Similarly, “à la fraîche” rings much like the kind of argot that adult readers may associate with movies such as *Les Valseuses* (1974) by Bertrand Blier<sup>11</sup>. There is, however, some inventive use of the French language, with unexpected collocations such as “hyper coup de bol”, which is *one* way of representing Harri’s peculiar idiolect.

Moving on to examine short corpora samples from *Room*, the items below illustrate Jack’s striking ability to adapt to his new linguistic environment as soon as he is outside the garden shed, and the shift in his language that matches a fast-changing world view.

### Corpus sample 7

Source text	Target Text
the Raja dog (Donoghue, 2010: 144)	Raja le Chien (Donoghue/Buhl, 2011: 187)
the Ajeet man ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 144)	le monsieur Ajeet ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 187)
the Naisha baby ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 144)	le bébé Naisha ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 187)
the baby Naisha ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 144)	le bébé Naisha ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 187)
the baby Naisha ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 145)	le bébé Naisha ( <i>Ibid.</i> : 188)

This may just sound like “baby talk”, but Jack’s peculiar use of nouns *in* and *outside* the garden shed shows that his cognitive and linguistic skills enable him to process a new reality.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, while being a captive Jack described objects almost as if they were people: “The names of the objects, preceded by the zero article and written with an initial capital letter, function as proper nouns, suggesting Jack has a personal relationship with objects” (Pillière, 2018: 235). By contrast, almost as soon as he escapes and sees animals and human beings in the outside, Jack is able to process the fact that there are *multiple* living creatures in this world. But as he does not have a personal relationship with them, the way he describes them *reifies* them. The linguistic traits which reflect that world view are the use of “the” and the unexpected word order that can be observed in the Source text column of sample n° 7. The first baby girl he sees seems to confuse his ability to categorize human creatures: is she a “Naisha baby” or a “baby Naïsha”? In any case, Jack’s slightly erratic use of nouns and names soon gives way to a more standard use of first names: “Ajeet” and “Raja”(Donoghue, 2010 : 145).

<sup>11</sup> Especially Gérard Depardieu’s iconic cue “Alors, on n’est pas bien là ? Paisibles? À la fraîche? »

My own rendering of those stylistic traits relies on two syntactic categories which do not quite coincide with those of the source text. Indeed, I chose “Raja le Chien”, which makes him a special kind of creature compared to the reified humans. This may appear as a questionable choice in so far as it does not match with E. Donoghue’s stylistic treatment of this animal. However, it *does* give extra reality to the dog that bit Jack and it *does* matches the fact that the boy is more familiar with animals (having seen real ones in the garden shed) than with human beings who are neither his mother nor Old Nick. So it is consistent with Jack’s experience of the world at that stage in the story. Besides, the syntactic structure of *Raja le Chien* is quite familiar to Jack since one of his favourite TV shows is *Dora the Explorer*<sup>12</sup>. Why didn’t I translate “the Naïsha baby” into “le/la Naïsha bébé” ? This is a more questionable choice than the previous one and it can be described as a loss or as a homogenization<sup>13</sup> of the target text. I have no memory of the reason why I may have decided to translate this item in that way – or may have overlooked this discrepancy in the source text. In hindsight, I can only suggest that I may have decided against that option as I had already introduced some degree of heterogeneity with “Raja le Chien” in the target text.

### Conclusion - Translation as empathetic creative salvation?

We have just seen that some of the pitfalls when translating juvenile mind styles pertain to re-creating a complex language: an unstable mix of mature and immature language, of slang, childish words and standard language which will be assessed by individual readers who use their own experience of child language to gauge and appreciate its verisimilitude.

How should we describe the person at the helm in this hazardous cross-linguistic and cross-cultural journey? Traditionally the translator is described a go-between – or *passeur* – and

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<sup>12</sup> These observations and reflections show that methodologies based on examining aligned corpora should also take into account the intra-textual and intra-fictional coherence of the whole source text. As J. Delisle shows, « les mots d’un texte perdent leurs virtualités de signification et acquièrent un sens en fonction du contexte et des compléments cognitifs dont ils s’enrichissent. [...] Un texte n’est pas une simple succession de phrases ». (Delisle, 2013: 217). Such methodologies inevitably lead researchers to hit upon what *appears to be* discrepancies because the whole context is missing, « la critique se focalisant alors sur des réalisations micro-textuelles décontextualisées mettant en évidence l’absence de correspondance exacte » (Collombat, 2019: 84).

<sup>13</sup> My study of homogenization in translation draws upon a paper by Julie Tarif published in *Palimpsestes* : « De l’homogénéisation des associations lexicales créatives dickensiennes : le style dickensien mis à l’épreuve en traduction ». I will thus borrow the definition used in her paper, Antoine Berman’s. « L’homogénéisation [...] consiste à *unifier* sur tous les plans le tissu de l’original alors que celui-ci est originairement hétérogène. [...] Face à une œuvre hétérogène – et l’œuvre en prose l’est presque toujours – le traducteur a tendance à unifier, à homogénéiser ce qui est de l’ordre du divers, voire du disparate » (Berman, 1999 : 60).

translation as a voyage which can be perilous for the source text but is also a *rebirth*. So, couldn't the translator also be seen as a *humane* (i.e. sensitive and fallible) *carer* who saves the source text to deliver it into a new culture, to other readers? Such a process highlights the vulnerability of the source text: translation necessarily transforms it in unexpected ways; translators are only human and to err is human. Translation choices reflect one specific text interpretation and one special way of rendering the source text among many others. As I. Collombat argues, translation is the art of interpretation in the hermeneutic and *artistic* sense of the term, and should be fully recognized as such: “une œuvre littéraire [...] représente bel et bien une actualisation interprétative de l'un des sens globaux possibles de l'œuvre” (Collombat, 2019: 89). Therefore, she calls upon translators to seize as many opportunities as possible to explain their translation choices and *educate* critics on their *artistic choices*, imperfect though they might appear to be (*Ibid*: 90).

Indeed, if translation can be aptly described as a perilous journey during which translators prey on the source text, after predation comes creative salvation. Yet, without denying that translators are artists in their own right, I wish to draw upon another paper by Collombat to argue in favour of the *carer* metaphor. The selective and oriented rendering of meaning and style in translation is achieved through the *humane* mediation of the translator who builds a rational but *empathetic* relationship with the narrative voice perceived in the source text. This narrative voice elicits a response from the translator that is both rational and emotional through a process called “rational empathy” (Collombat, 2010).

In the long run – because translating a novel takes time –, this response develops into a form of attachment towards the narrative voice. Even more so when the narrator is a child narrator designed to be both unsettling and endearing for the adult reader. Hence a conception of translation as, ultimately, an empathetic creative endeavor to salvage as much of the source text in the best way possible by a translator who will try to *take care* simultaneously of the source text and of the target readers.

As G. Letissier wrote in *Voicing Inarticulate Childhoods in Troubled Times*:

Paradoxically, it is not the fact of being granted a voice which is in itself conducive to an escape from an oppressing situation, but rather **the realisation that moments of creativity, or release, may be salvaged from within an adverse, inimical environment, thanks to these vulnerable voices, which are seldom represented in the realm of fiction.** (Letissier, 2017: 11, the highlights are mine)

This applies to child narrators, but it can also be applied to translators themselves: literary translators *do* work in an adverse inimical environment where they often are in a subservient position; they are oppressed by the stylistic constraints of the source-text; often constrained by the market place and the publishers' conditions; however, they definitely are the '*vulnerable voices, which are seldom represented in the realm of fiction*' and offer transformative moments of creativity that salvage the source text.

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