

Translating humorous children's poetry? Content matters most

December 12 2023, by Myrthe Timmers



Credit: Kindel Media from Pexels

Translating poetry is notoriously difficult. Translating poetry in such a way that the humorous nature of a poem remains intact is even more difficult, even though it is precisely jokes that can encourage children to read more, notes Ph.D. candidate Alice Morta.

"Form and content merge in [poetry](#), which makes it very challenging for

translators to do both aspects justice at the same time," Morta states. "They often choose to prioritize one of the two aspects. They keep the rhyme that is so important for nursery rhymes or focus on the content. I wanted to know what this means for humorous [children's](#) poetry."

Humor encourages reading

Funny poetry may often be considered "less literary" by adults, but children love it, Morta discovered. "I translated two English poems into Filipino, one of the official languages of the Philippines, beside English. In one I focused more on the form, in the other more on the content. I presented these two translations to children aged 8 or 9.

"What I found was that the children were inclined to read more poetry after these sessions, even if they had initially said they didn't like poetry. They were also more inclined to read more in Filipino after being reading the humorous poems translated into Filipino, their less-used language for reading in Philippine schools."

Content over form

Humor helps get children reading, but is it better for translators to focus on form or content? "My research shows children think content is more decisive in making the humorous poems funny," Ross states. They liked the [poem](#) better if the humorous situation or the humorous character was kept intact than if there was a play with rhyme or meter."

It was noticeable though that [boys](#) reacted differently to the poems than [girls](#). "I hadn't expected to find [gender differences](#)," Morta says, "but after reading Roald Dahl's poem The Dentist and the Crocodile some boys were quite disappointed that the dentist was not eaten by the crocodile, while some girls found it a little scary. The girls were more

sympathetic than boys to the child in the poem Sick, even if she was only pretending to be unwell."

Does it always work this way?

"I would like research to be done on how children from other [age groups](#) respond to humorous poetry," Ross continues. "We need humor to get and keep children reading, also because reading makes them learn something about norms and values, as well as about themselves.

"At the same time, adults determine what is good and what children get to read. By zooming in on what children themselves think, you get some surprising results. I'm curious to see what happens when you let even more children have their say. Will there still be an emphasis on content? And what happens to the differences by gender?"

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: Translating humorous children's poetry? Content matters most (2023, December 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-humorous-children-poetry-content.html>

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