TOOTH FAIRIES AND LITTLE MICE: CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND WORDPLAY IN THE TRANSLATIONS OF *MUMMY NEVER TOLD ME* AND OTHER PICTUREBOOKS BY BABETTE COLE

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ABSTRACT: Foreign children's literature has had a significant presence in Spain for some decades. Many picturebooks on the Spanish market today are written and illustrated by authors and artists from different countries. This includes many of the picturebooks by Babette Cole, which have been published in translation since the early 1990s. When observing the translations of Cole's picturebooks, it is possible to find different methods used by translators in order to adapt the stories to the culture of the target country, which sometimes can lead to incoherence between word and image. In this article I will present an analysis of the Spanish translations of Babette Cole's picturebooks, while having a look at some translations published in other languages such as French or Italian. This analysis will be developed by marking the techniques and challenges translators face regarding cultural differences and wordplay.
KEYWORDS: Picturebooks, Picturebook Translation, Translating Children's Books, Translating Cultural References, Translating Wordplay

1. Introduction

Foreign children's literature has had a significant presence in Spain for some decades, especially from English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States. This predominance is even more noticeable when it comes to picturebooks, and even today, many picturebooks on the Spanish market are created by authors and artists from different countries. One example are the works of Babette Cole, which have been published in translation in Spain since the early 1990s. This is actually quite remarkable considering how transgressive – sometimes even obscene – her books are. At a time when Spain was still recovering from the censorship of the Franco era, addressing such taboo subjects in children's books would have been considered scandalous by many, and thus very challenging to translate (Aparicio et al., 2019, p. 8).

Spanish translations[1] of foreign children's books, especially those written for younger children and published between the 1960s and '80s, tend to adapt the original text to the target culture. This often implies changing names of places, characters, foods, etc (Gómez Pato, 2010, p. 59), so that, for example, "Snow White" is known in Spanish as "Blancanieves" and "Cinderella" as "Cenicienta". The phenomenon is not restricted to meaningful names, as even names with no meaning are translated. Most of the time, equivalents are found in Spanish, so in the Spanish edition of *Le Petit Nicolas* (Goscinny and Sempé, 1959a; 1959b), the main character is called "Nicolás" (with an accent on the "a"), the main character of Richmal Crompton's *William* books (1922-1970) is "Guillermo" and Lewis Carroll's famous heroine ([1865a] 2014, [1865b] 2017) is "Alicia". In all the Spanish

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[1] This article will focus on Spanish translations published in Spain. Translations published in other Spanish-speaking countries will only be mentioned - and specified - on a few occasions.

editions of the Alice books, the name of the land is also translated to “el país de las maravillas”.

Babette Cole's picturebooks have also been subject to such adaptation methods, which has sometimes led to incoherence between word and image, and other problems. In this article, I will identify some of the challenges faced by translators when rendering her picturebooks into Spanish, and report on the techniques they have used. Translations into other languages, such as French and Italian, will also be taken into consideration.

2. The consequences of domestication: verbal/visual incongruence

The first book that will be analyzed is *Mummy Never Told Me* (Cole, 2003a), the one that inspired the title of this article. This picturebook addresses several topics that children are curious about, such as how babies are born, the biological differences between boys and girls, and – our main focus here – the physical appearance of the Tooth Fairy.

As mentioned before, Cole's picturebooks are known for being very challenging to translate, not only because they address delicate subjects in a very natural and practically uncensored way (Aparicio et al, 2019, p. 8),[2] but also because of the complementary relationship that exists between the words and images. For example, in the verbal narrative of *Mummy Never Told Me* (Cole, 2003a), the protagonist wonders why he needs to go to school when his mum was expelled from hers, but it is the accompanying illustration that reveals that she was obliged to leave her religious school (we see her being sent away by a nun) because she is pregnant. Similarly, when the narrator wonders what the Tooth Fairy looks like, the reader can see a very funny illustration of a male Tooth Fairy that looks like a dentist but retains some fairy features. This is unexpected, as it does not correspond to the traditional image of the Tooth Fairy as represented in other children's books.[3]

Another translation problem is raised by the fact that, although the figure of the Tooth Fairy is traditional in United Kingdom and the United States, this is not the case for many other countries. In Spain and other hispanic cultures, when children lose a milk tooth, they receive a nighttime visit from a little mouse known as “El Ratoncito Pérez” [Pérez the Little Mouse] or “El Ratón Pérez” [Pérez de Mouse].[4] This mouse traditionally leaves some money or candy under the pillow while the children are sleeping and, in exchange, takes the tooth that the child has placed there. The Tooth Fairy and El Ratoncito Pérez thus have similar functions and star in many children's books in their respective cultures.[5]

[2] See, for example, titles such as *Mummy Laid an Egg: Or Where Do Babies Come From?* (Cole, 1993a), *Hair in Funny Places* (Cole, 1999a), or *The Un-Wedding* (Cole, 1997a)

[3] See, for example, *Arthur Tricks the Tooth Fairy* (Brown, 1997); *How to Trick the Tooth Fairy* (Russell and Hansen Rolli, 2018) or *What does the Tooth Fairy do to our Teeth* (Barry and Boerger, 2014), where, despite some physical differences, tooth fairies are portrayed as delicate female figures with stereotypically feminine features and pastel-coloured dresses.

[4] In some Latin American countries, the character is known as “El Ratón de los Dientes” [The Tooth Mouse], while in France, it is “La Petite Souris” [The Little Mouse] and in some parts of Italy, “Topolino” [Little Mouse].

[5] Regarding Pérez, some picturebooks that can be mentioned are: *La asombrosa y verdadera historia de un ratón llamado Pérez* [The amazing and real story of a mouse called Pérez] (Herreros and Lópiz, 2010); *La*

However, despite their similarities, the Tooth Fairy and Pérez obviously look very different. It is therefore interesting to observe how the figure of the Tooth Fairy has been translated in the Spanish edition of *Mummy Never Told Me* (Cole, 2003a). The illustrations remain the same, but instead of using the foreign concept of the Tooth Fairy, which in Spanish is "El Hada de los Dientes",[6] the translator replaced the figure with El Ratoncito Pérez and changed the whole text on that page to fit the illustrations.[7] Thus, instead of saying "What does the Tooth Fairy look like?" (which in Spanish could be rendered as "¿Cómo es el Hada de los Dientes?", as in the original text), the narrator wonders: "El Ratoncito Pérez... ¿se parece a mi dentista?" [Pérez the Little Mouse... does he look like my dentist?]. Though the words have in this way been related to the illustration, this translation is still problematic, because even though he looks like a dentist in the illustration, he is still a fairy with no features that might suggest a mouse, such as a tail, big teeth or mouse ears. Furthermore, while in the original edition the portrayal of the Tooth Fairy as a dentist is only noticed by the reader through the illustration, in the Spanish edition this detail is already made explicit in the text, thus removing some of the image's autonomy as an essential component of the narration.

This technique is a form of 'domestication'[8] (Lorenzo, 2014, p. 42), since the translator omits the British cultural reference and changes it for one deemed more suitable in Spanish culture. As a strategy, it can be observed in many translated children's books. For example, in a text of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, [1865a] 2014), the word "oatmeal-porridge", which is a dish that is not traditionally eaten in Spain, is replaced by "natillas de chocolate" [chocolate custard], as Isabel Pascua Febles (2005) points out. However, the difference between this domestication and the one performed in Cole's picturebook is that in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865a), the name of the dish does not really affect the narrative, whereas in *Mummy Never Told Me* (Cole, 2003a), it creates a problem because the text changes, but the illustration does not.

A similar domestication can be found in the Spanish edition of *Horrid Henry Tricks the Tooth Fairy* (Simon & Ross, 1997a), where the Tooth Fairy is also changed to Pérez (Simon & Ross, 1997b). However, in this case, the strategy does not affect the narrative. This is because, first, because the book is not a picturebook, but a chapter book, with far fewer illustrations, which do not play an essential role in the narration; and second, because even though there is one illustration in the original edition that features a note written by the Tooth Fairy, in the translated edition this illustration has also been changed and appears to

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mágica historia del Ratoncito Pérez [The magical story of Pérez he Little Mouse] (Del Castillo and Pierola Poveda, 1996), or *Chloé et la dent de lait* [Chloé and the milk tooth] (Pistinier, 1999).

[6] This is, in fact, also used in several translated children's books, such as *El Cuento del Hada de los Dientes* [The Tale of the Tooth Fairy] (Williams, 2018) or *El Hada de los Dientes* (Dann, 2012)

[7] This could be considered as a form of 'explanatory paternalism' (Lorenzo, 2014, p. 38), because the translator considers that the Spanish children would not understand the original reference and replaces it with a figure considered to be better known.

[8] Venuti (2008, p. 15) defines domestication as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home".

be signed by El Ratón Pérez. Indeed, modifying the illustration is a technique used in other books, and, as Lourdes Lorenzo (2014) mentions regarding the specific case of *Mummy never told me* (Cole, 2003a), it would have been possible here. That is to say, the dentist-looking Tooth Fairy could have been replaced by an illustration of a dentist-looking Pérez Mouse in order to resolve the incongruity.

The first edition of this translation dates from 2005, which probably explains why the reference of the Tooth Fairy was adapted. As Lorenzo (2014) points out, though the Tooth Fairy does not belong to the traditional Hispanic imaginary, today many children would know it from their exposure to American cartoons, films and tv-shows, or from other books from English-speaking countries.

Another incoherence between word and image resulting from translation can be seen in *The Smelly Book* (Cole, 1988a) published in Spanish as *El Libro Apestoso* (Cole, 1988b). This picturebook is challenging to translate because, as in many other children's books, the text is in the form of verse that rhymes. In this case, the Spanish translation is published by the group Fondo de Cultura Económica, which edits books in Spanish for publication not only in Spain but also in other hispanic countries from Latin America. Although the language is the same for those countries, there are several words that have different meanings, which can sometimes be problematic. Thus, when the narrator of *The Smelly Book* (Cole, 1988a; 1988b) says “I think I would do a bunk if I saw a smelly skunk!”, in Spanish, to maintain the rhyme, it is translated as “Salto como un cervatillo cuando me encuentro un zorrillo” [I jump like a musk deer when I see a skunk]. The problem is that the word used in Spanish to designate the skunk is “zorrillo”, which is a variant used only in Latin American countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, or El Salvador; in the Spanish spoken in Spain, “zorrillo” means “little fox”. Not only does this remove the odorous connotation, it also creates visual/verbal incongruence: when a Spanish reader looks at the text, they are expecting to see a little fox in the illustrations, but what they actually see is a skunk (a “mofeta” in their language variety).

Mummy Laid an Egg: Or Where Do Babies Come From? (Cole, 1993a) is a picturebook about the fictional stories that two parents think up in their attempts to tell their children how babies are born. These include being delivered by dinosaurs and growing from seeds, but the one they hit upon in the end is that their mummy laid an egg which exploded, allowing the children to emerge. However, there is a plot twist at the end of the story: the children find their parents' account amusing, and thus decide to explain to them what really happens when a baby is born.

In this picturebook, the translational problem derives from the fact that in Spanish, a different word is used for “egg” depending on whether it refers to a bird’s egg (*huevo*) or a human one (*óvulo*). The title, as we have seen, is translated fairly literally as *¡Mamá Puso un Huevo!* (Cole, [1993b] 1998), with the illustration, in both versions, showing a giant chicken’s egg on a sofa. But, later on, when one of the children says “Mummy does have eggs. They are inside her body”, the decision to use “huevos” (“Mamá tiene huevos. Los tiene dentro de su barriga” [Mummy has eggs. She has them inside her tummy]) is a little

incongruous, rendered even more so by the illustration, which shows the daughter pointing at the stomach on a drawing representing the body of the mother. (On the other hand, as these are just two children lecturing about where babies come from in a simple comprehensible way, the incongruity is not as serious as it might have been had the situation been different).

Something similar happens in the French translation since, like Spanish, this is a romance language that evolved from Latin. In French, the word "ovule" is used more than the word "oeuf" when referring to "ovum". There are two French editions of this book (Cole, 1993c, [1993d] 2012), but neither completely follows the original title. Instead of "Mummy laid an egg", the title is more inspired by the subtitle of the original work (*Comment on Fait les Bébés!* [How babies are made!] Cole, 1993c, [1993d] 2012), which not only loses the humor, but also breaks the relationship between the title and the cover image. It will certainly be for this reason that one of the French editions (Cole, [1993d] 2012) has opted to feature a different cover that shows one of the children starting to make their presentation about how babies are born, thereby anticipating the final plot twist.

3. The domestication of proper names and titles

The decision to domesticate proper names brings different results in different contexts. An interesting case can be found in the Spanish translation of *Lady Lupin's Book of Etiquette* (Cole, 2001a), in which the name of the protagonist (who is an aristocratic deerhound) remains the same, but an "a" is added at the end to make it sound more Spanish (*El Libro de Etiqueta de Lady Lupina*, Cole, 2001b).[9] Curiously, both this and the name Lobelia (Lady Lupin's naughty puppy daughter), which remains unchanged, may actually become more transparent in Spanish than in English, since the Spanish word for "wolf" is "lobo", and the adjective "lupino/a" is much less remote and technical than its English cognate.

In some cases, the decision to translate the names of places and characters may result in semantic loss. In *Dr. Dog* (Cole, 1994a), the family surname is "Gumboyle", an invented name created to add humor, since everyone in the family is sick and Dr. Dog needs to help them. In the Spanish edition ([1994b] 1998), this is translated as "Palomares", a word that evokes "pigeon" and has no relation to the original wordplay or to the story itself, resulting in the loss of comic detail. As for the canine protagonist, the Spanish translator opted for the onomatopoeic term commonly used for a dog's bark (the Spanish equivalent to "woof") and called the main character Doctor Guau (Cole, [1994b] 1998). In French, on the other hand, the translator created a wordplay by mixing the term "médecin de famille" ("family doctor") and "chien" ("dog") to form *Medechien de famille* (Cole, 1994c), a wordplay which could be back-translated into English as "Family dogtor". Furthermore, Dr. Dog now has his own name and surname, and is sometimes referred to as "Hippocrate Cabot" (a clear

[9] The title "Lady", which, following other translating tendencies, could have been substituted by the Spanish equivalent "señora", is not changed because in Spanish, the English title "Lady", is also used to refer to higher class British women.

tribute to the Greek doctor Hippocrates of Kos) and at other times as "Doctor Cabot" (the equivalent of Dr Dog in the original, as "cabot" is a familiar term for "dog").

Other first names in this story have been translated in a more random way in the Spanish edition. In the English version, the children are called Gerty, Kev and Fiona, which do not have obvious equivalents. However, here the translator has opted to give them common Spanish names ("Javi", "Pepe" and "Luisita" respectively), which do not raise any major problems.Another name tha can be mentioned here is from one of Babette Cole's most popular picturebooks, *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986a). In Spanish, the title is translated as *La Princesa Listilla* (Cole, [1986b] 1998), using an equivalent adjective in the target language, while in the German edition, *Prinzessin Pfiffigunde* (Cole, [1986d] 2005), the translator uses the invented adjective "Pfiffigunde", which contains the word "pfiffi", which in German means "smart", "witty" or "clever". The French edition, *Princesse Finemouche* (Cole, 1986e), uses the word "finemouche", which has a similar meaning to the word used in the German edition. The Italian edition, on the other hand, removes the connotation of the princess being smart or witty and instead uses the term "independent" (*Una principessa indipendente* [Cole, 1986c]) to describe the self-sufficient and feminist personality of the main character, who decides that she does not need a prince in her life and can do everything by herself. Even more different is the Catalan translation, *La princesa enjogassada* [the playful princess] (Cole, [1986f] 1990), which refers to how the princess tricks the princes in the story. That is to say, each of these translations has highlighted a different characteristic of the main protagonist.

The name of the main character in *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987a) also changes in the different editions. It is clearly meant to evoke the fairy tale *Cinderella*, which in Spanish is "Cenicienta", as we have already seen. Thus, the Spanish translator takes advantage of the fact that the gender can be easily changed into the masculine by simply substituting the final "a" with an "o", producing *El Príncipe Ceniciento* (Cole, [1987b] 1998). In other translations of this book, the name changes completely and is not related to Cinderella at all. For example, in the French edition, *Prince Gringalet* (Cole, 1987c), the translator mobilizes the adjective "gringalet", which means "weakling" or "wimp", to refer to the main character's physical appearance. Therefore, although the story remains the same and the reader can understand that it alludes to *Cinderella*, the wordplay in the title and protagonist's name are lost.

As regards the titles of different works in different countries, in some cases, there is an attempt to reproduce the humorous flavor by choosing similar idioms in the target language. For example, the picturebook *Drop Dead* (Cole, 1996a) is published in Spanish as *Estirar la Pata* (Cole, 1996b), and in French as *Raides Morts* (Cole, 1996c), both light-hearted death-related expressions. Another important detail is that many of the Spanish

translations carry a subtitle. Although subtitles are present in some of the original English editions,[10] others are apparent only in the Spanish translations, as with:

- *Hair in Funny Places* (Cole, 1999a), translated as *Pelos por todas partes: o la hormona alborotada* [Hair all over the places: or the messy hormone] (Cole, 1999b).
- *Drop Dead* (Cole, 1996a), translated as *Estirar la pata: o cómo envejecemos* [Kick the bucket: or how we age] (Cole, 1996b).
- *The Unwedding* (Cole, 1997a) (also called *Two of Everything*), translated as *Todo doble: o cómo divorciarse con buen humor* [Two of everything: or how to divorce in a good mood] (Cole, 1997b).
- *Dr. Dog* (Cole, 1994a), translated *El Doctor Guau y otros consejos para tu salud* [Dr. Woof and other advice for your health] (Cole, [1994b] 1998)

Upon observation, it would appear that the addition of the subtitle seems to be a device used when picturebooks have rather controversial titles: the subtitles seem to be designed to soften or clarify it. This may have been a decision of the publisher, since all the Spanish editions of the picturebooks mentioned above (Cole, 1999b, 1996b, 1997b, [1994b] 1998) are published in Spain by the same publisher, although translated by different professionals.

Some of the Spanish subtitles do not always make as much sense as those used in the original works. In the previously mentioned *Sprog owner's manual: (or how kids work)* (2004a), the subtitle in brackets has the purpose of clarifying the main title, while also playing with the implication that a “sprog” might be some kind of mechanical device (perhaps by analogy with “cog”). However, in the Spanish version, *Niños: manual de usuario (o cómo funcionan los niños)* (Cole, 2004b), the translator does not use a colloquial term in the main title (such as “retoño”) but instead repeats the generic word “niños” [children] twice. There are also now two subtitles, with “Manual de usuario” [User's manual] coming first and “(o cómo funcionan los niños)” [or how children work] coming second.

4. Visual effects: fonts

Let us finish by looking at some cases of how the visual effect of the book, particularly the choice of font, is affected by the transition to another linguaculture. Some Spanish editions simply transfer the fonts used in the original editions: this is the policy followed in works like *The smelly book* (Cole, 1988a; 1988b), *Mummy never told me* (Cole, 2003a, [2003b] 2004), or *Tarzanna* (Cole, 1991a, [1991b] 1993). However, it is not the case for several of the others. Many of the fonts used in Babette Cole's titles emulate handwriting, as in the case of *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986a), *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987a), *The Un-wedding* (Cole, 1997a), *Lady Lupin's Book of Etiquette* (2001a) or *The Trouble With...* series, with titles such as *The trouble with Mum* (Cole, 1983a) or *The Trouble with Dad* (Cole, 1985a),

[10] For example, *Mummy laid an egg: or where do babies come from* (Cole, 1993a); *The sprog owner's manual: (or how kids work)* (Cole, 2004a); or *Bad habits! or, the taming of lucrezia crum* (Cole, 1998a).

but in the Spanish editions (Cole, [1986b] 1998, [1987b] 1998, 1997b; 2001b; [1983b] 1992, [1985b] 1991), the fonts used for the titles on the covers have been replaced by a standard typed-style one, thereby removing an important part of the aesthetic that characterizes the original editions. There are other books in which the font is used in more creative ways: for example, in the title on the cover of *Dr. Dog* (Cole, 1994a), it imitates the brown and white fur of the dog, while *The Hairy Book* (Cole, 1984a), includes hairy letters. These visual elements are not found in the Spanish editions (Cole, [1994b] 1998, [1984b] 1991).

As for the French editions, these do tend to follow the original playfulness of the fonts, with the exception of *J'ai un problème avec ma mère* [The trouble with mum] (Cole, [1983c] 2010). The cover of this particular picturebook follows the same design as the Spanish edition (Cole, [1983b] 1992), since they are both edited under the same collection, published in France by Gallimard and in Spain by Altea. Although these two publishing houses have produced many picturebooks, they tend to edit them in a pocket format that makes them cheaper and, therefore, accessible to a wider audience. According to González Martín (1989), when Altea started publishing these titles (all works that had been published before by Gallimard), some people pointed out that the original editions were more visually striking. However, the publisher had to choose between making the editions affordable, and therefore, accessible to more people, or raising the price, which would restrict the audience. By choosing the first option, some of the visual features of the original would inevitably be changed.

5. Conclusion

This article has focused on the Spanish translations of picturebooks by Babette Cole, an author and illustrator that challenges the reader in multiple ways. As we have seen, her books are very different from the kind of children's literature that was being published in Spain during the 80s and the 90s, when the country was still recovering from the Franco dictatorship. Consequently, some of the translational decisions seem designed to soften or neutralize some of the more outrageous features.

One of the most common techniques used for dealing with culturally specific material is domestication, which involves adapting it to the norms of the target culture, making it more familiar. However, when the work in question is a picturebook, this strategy can produce some strange incongruencies. As it is not always possible to modify the illustrations to fit the domesticated text, the translator and publisher should perhaps consider if such domestication techniques are truly necessary, or if a foreignization strategy (i.e. translating the source-text elements more literally) might not be more appropriate. Indeed, it might be worth reflecting more broadly on whether the domestication technique is so systematically applied because the readers of the target language will not understand the original reference, or if it is merely to comply with the cultural tradition in the target culture

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