The translation of literary works necessitates a process of linguistic and cultural transfer. This paper analyses French translations of twentieth-century Australian children’s fiction and highlights the variety of translational tendencies and interpretive choices at work in moving texts from one culture to another. While ‘mistakes’ in translation represent an undesirable yet inevitable side effect of the translation process, they offer choice moments of insight into constraints of culture and language. These constraints account for the important distinction between simple error, reinterpretation, and the appropriation of cultural content to reflect a preferred set of images.
Mistranslation is a common feature in the process of transferring any text from one culture to another. While some mistranslations are simply entertaining, others can be detrimental to the quality of the translation and misrepresentative of the culture of the source text. Common sources of linguistic ‘mistakes’ leading to mistranslation include ambiguous syntax and semantics, metaphors, irony and humour, with accidental omission of simple words or the insertion of additional material often resulting in serious translational differences. Cultural ‘mistakes’ commonly result from a lack of specific knowledge of the practices and conventions of other cultures. However, the concept of ‘error’ in translation is problematic as it presumes a certain notion of equivalence, whereby the translated text is expected to be the same as the original text through recourse to a normative template that dictates what the translator should and should not do. Translation goes well beyond equivalence and involves textual re-creation through adaptation and composition for readers in another culture.

This article demonstrates the position taken by translators in the specific case of the transfer of Australian children’s books into a French-speaking environment, and highlights two major issues in the translation of children’s literature. The first issue concerns the translator’s prioritisation of the accessibility of the text for the child reader in another culture. In the process of translation, the translator selects items from the information offered in the source text and processes them anew for readers in the target culture who in turn select what is meaningful in their situation. Translation as interpretation, rewriting, and adaptation means that translators emphasise and de-emphasise different aspects of the original work consistent with the goal of making the content as explicit as possible for children in another culture. The second issue concerns the linguistic, stylistic and cultural constraints that operate in the translation of Australian children’s books into French, and the consequences of their impact on transmission of Australian cultural specificity. Translations that reveal cultural inadequacies and ‘mistakes’ may in fact reflect intentional translational choices that strongly correlate with a set of preferred French images of the Australian landscape and culture.

**CULTURE, CHILD READERS & TRANSLATION**

The expectation and indeed assumption of authors, readers and cultures that texts will somehow be ‘equivalent’ sits uncomfortably with translation theories, which claim that translation is never more than partial restatement, whereby the translation takes the reader away from the specificity of the original. Wetherill, for example, speaks of ‘the law of diminishing returns’, or reductive tendencies of translations, where one thing is rejected in order to emphasise other effects not dominant in the original. While acknowledging that translators may achieve semiotic equivalence by retaining, modifying or even omitting whole sequences within a text, Wetherill warns that such freedom can increase the risk that translations can be subject to distortion, inadequacy, mistranslation, redistribution of meaning, and cultural misappropriation. However, translation as transformation means that the translator’s reading of the original work allows such interpretation, improvement, re-creation and deviation for a new audience, resulting in each translation being, by definition, different from the original text.

When books move from one system to another, or from one culture to another, forms of adjustment are often necessary. In literature for adults, the framework of literary criticism assumes norms of sophistication and complexity that aim for high literary quality and aesthetic value, norms that become modified and simplified when writing for young readers. The practice of adjustment of the text to assumed levels of children’s comprehension and in accordance with norms of morality in the children’s social system invariably mean a shorter and less complicated target text. The aim for brevity and ease of comprehension implies deletion and simplification, supporting the view that children’s literature is by definition a literature that leaves things out. While leaving something out may in part imply a deliberate process of textual deviation on the part of the translator, it also reflects oversight and negligence that may be attributed to a lack of judgment or failure to recognise the need for cultural and linguistic adaptation. Against this background, I will present selected passages of French translations of twentieth-century Australian children’s fiction as representative examples of a variety of simple mistakes and more serious translational transformations. These passages will be analysed within the context of translators as readers, writers and interpreters of texts, and of translation as acculturation.

Relatively simple examples of carelessness in translated works that are not the fault of translators are bibliographical and typographical mistakes in the information commonly found on the verso of the title page. For example, the translation *Mon père est un peu ringard* (1998) gives
the original title of Morris Gleitzman’s work as Worry Wats [sic], both the incorrect title (the correct title is Blabber Mouth)\(^7\) and a misspelling (another of his titles is Worry Warts).\(^8\) The cover also lists the title as Papa est un peu ringard rather than Mon père... as per the title page. With the reissued translation in 2001, the chance to correct all errors is missed, as the Australian title is given as Blabber Mouth [sic], another misspelling. A further case of incorrect bibliographical information is the attribution of the wrong original title in the translation of Joan Flanagan’s The Squealies (1987),\(^9\) where the original title is unfortunately cited as The Return of the Baked Bean (actually a work by Debra Oswald, 1990), and this latter title is recorded on the verso of the title page of its correct translation as The Return of the Backed [sic] Bean.\(^10\) While clearly unintentional, such differences are proof of a lack of editorial precision and would surely be disappointing to the authors of the original works, and are a poor reflection on the professionalism of the French publishing house.

It is sometimes the case that the time allocated to the task of translating works is so limited that errors creep in due to tight deadlines. The ideal scenario of taking a long time with a translation is often totally impractical when publishers require a number of translations to be published as quickly as possible in order to capitalise on the popularity of an author. Morris Gleitzman, for example, is an author currently enjoying immense success in English-speaking countries. His French translator had the onerous task of translating seven of his works in 1998, a remarkable feat that has its drawbacks, as there are many errors in his translations concerning numbers and cultural equivalents. The following examples from Gleitzman and other authors illustrate some obvious misunderstandings leading to differences in interpretation.\(^11\)

**Morris Gleitzman, Worry Warts (1991) / Mes parents sont de mauvais poil (1998)**

A year-four kid…a year-five kid. (p. 1)

Un gamin de quatre ans...un enfant de cinq ans. (p. 5/6)

A four-year-old kid...a child of five

Yakking on for thirteen minutes. (p. 1)

Jacasser une demi-heure. (p. 6)

[To chat for half an hour]

Only seventeen months old. (p. 2)

Il n’a que sept mois. (p. 7)

[He is only seven months]

The clock on the war memorial across the street said eight minutes past eleven. (p. 5)

L’horloge au-dessus du mémorial de la Guerre indiquait huit heures onze. (p. 14)

[The clock above the war memorial showed eleven minutes past eight]

**Peter Carey, The Big Bazoohley (1995) / Le jackpot (1998)**\(^12\)

He knew they now had only forty-four dollars and twenty cents (p. 3)

Il ne leur restait plus en tout et pour tout que quarante-cinq dollars et vingt cents. (p. 9)

[Among them they now only had forty-five dollars and twenty cents]

**Allan Baillie, Riverman (1986) / Périls en Tasmanie (1994)**\(^13\)

Jean staggered back into the kitchen, leaning back from the quarter-full tub and holding the door open with her knee. (p. 24)

Jeanne revint dans la cuisine en tirant avec peine le tub aux trois quarts plein et s’aida d’un genou pour maintenir la porte ouverte. (p. 34)

[Jean came back into the kitchen pulling with difficulty the three-quarters full tub and used her knee to keep the door open]

In the first example the translator has misunderstood the age categories referring to the education system in Australia, and has read them as ‘a child of four/five’, etc. In the second example, the translator has perhaps confused thirteen with thirty, or he deliberately alludes to a reasonably long and colloquially expressed period of time. In the third and fifth examples the translator has again misunderstood simple numbers, while in the fourth example he has misunderstood time, and has reversed it. In the sixth example, there is either some confusion with the fraction pertaining to the amount of water in the tub or the translator assumes that one can hardly have a bath in a tub containing so
little water. Again, these mistranslations do not affect the overall sense of the narrative, but are indicative of misunderstandings and different interpretations of the original passages.

Stylistic differences are another category of apparent translational error. Although not always employed, the use of technical language in translation is one form of explicitation where stylistic changes account for deletions and substitutions.

Allan Baillie, Riverman (1986) / Péris en Tasmanie (1994)
That was the tree that almost killed Oskar... He drew with a stick the lumpy circle of the ugly tree, as if cut through the trunk. He drew a smaller circle inside the lumpy circle like a fat doughnut. (p. 123)
A l’aide d’un bâton, il dessina un grand cercle—environ la circonférence de l’arbre si affreux—puis un autre plus petit à l’intérieur, correspondant à l’arbre qui avait blessé Oskar. (p. 206)

Colin Thiele, River Murray Mary (1975) / Mary, la rivière et le serpent (1985)
She could see the current doing it... the water slowly ate into the hole... And there would be another rush with spades to mend the break. (p. 8)
Mary voyait le courant s’y engouffrer... L’eau s’infiltrait lentement dans le trou... Et c’était la précipitation, pelle à la main, pour boucher l’ouverture. (p. 23)

‘Circonférence’ and ‘correspondant’ are far more technical or formal than the familiar ‘lumpy’ and ‘like’, and a difference in interpretation is evident in ‘that almost killed Oskar / ‘qui avait blessé Oskar’ [which had hurt Oskar]. The change in style from the familiar of the original passage to the scholarly of the translation accounts for the deletion of references to ‘lumpy’ and ‘a fat doughnut’. With Thiele,
suggests that ‘soft serve’ is not sold in this way in France, but that gelato is. As Arnott’s ‘Butternut snaps’ is clearly a strong cultural reference for Australian readers, the translator has had to resort to a substitution, ‘biscuits aux noix’, that performs an auditory function (crunchiness). These cultural substitutions are obviously not limited to food items, as the same translation strategies apply to names and media:

Keith lay there through the rest of Play School, all of Danger Mouse, and some of Gumby. (p. 46)
Il était resté étendu le temps qu’aient fini de défilé à la télévision Mickey, Tom et Jerry et un troisième dessin animé dont il avait oublié le nom. (p. 52)
[He had stayed lying there the whole time while Mickey, Tom and Jerry and a third cartoon whose name he had forgotten had finished showing on television.]

Adaptation here takes the form of substituting a rough equivalent via American or global culture, although it is an unusual reference by the translator to the third program. This passage caused the translator some problems in conveying the same quantity of items, and it is surprising that the translator did not choose to simply omit the third item. The most important aspect of this translation is that the translator has decided to use American programs, given that French children are more familiar with popular culture in the United States than Australia.

In children’s books, there is a tendency to adapt the source text to the target reader’s level of experience and understanding, and to move the cultural setting of the source text closer to the readers of the target text. Strategies of adaptation and explicitation adopted by translators in the interest of readability shield the reader from the foreignness of the work, and constitute a method that modifies or excludes distinctive characteristics in favour of the familiar. This leads to the expectation that translations of Australian cultural material will display varying degrees of manipulation consistent with French perceptions of the land and its culture. Such strategies of adaptation may well account for what may be judged initially as translational error.

Here the translators modify the cultural content, substituting an equivalent item familiar to French child readers. Although Mr Whippy vans sell ‘soft serve’ ice-cream and gelato, in this example the referent is the creamy white ice-cream, not gelato. The choice of translation suggests that ‘soft serve’ is not sold in this way in France, but that gelato is. As Arnott’s ‘Butternut snaps’ is clearly a strong cultural reference for Australian readers, the translator has had to resort to a substitution, ‘biscuits aux noix’, that performs an auditory function (crunchiness). These cultural substitutions are obviously not limited to food items, as the same translation strategies apply to names and media:

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French perceptions and understanding of Australia underscore the issue of the portrayal of Australia and Australianmess for Australian
readers and the subsequent interpretation of these constructs by other cultures. Throughout the twentieth century, the representation of Australian culture in influential sources, such as film, television, literature and tourism, encompasses a range of images from the simplistic one-dimensional to the multidimensional. Traditional one-dimensional images of Australians that receive popular exposure are those of the blond, surly larrikin, the itinerant knockabout (otherwise known as the ‘Mad Max’, ‘Crocodile Dundee’ or ‘Steve Irwin’ figure), the Aboriginal Australian playing the didgeridoo, and the successful athlete. In terms of the landscape, Australia is portrayed as hot with nature in the form of endless deserts, beaches, tropical rainforests and the outback, and as exotic in terms of its flora and fauna. In contrast, the multidimensional images portray Australia as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan and cultured country with representations of a variety of ways of being Australian. Both sets of images abound in the national psyche, taking shape on the pages of works of fiction to be read in translation by readers in other cultures.

Just as Australian authors construct representations of national culture, so too do French publishers and translators hold a specific, although not necessarily explicit, set of stereotypes of Australianness that is likely to have been influenced by the media and tourist marketing, among other factors, of Australia in France. French critical reviews of Australian feature films screened at Festival de Cannes (Cannes Film Festival), for example, reveal strong evidence of a reading of Australia as a younger version of America, with a succession of serious feature films described as ‘des westerns kangourou’ [kangaroo westerns].

Stressing themes of domination of the landscape, mapping the void and ownership and power, part of Australia’s exoticism in the eyes of French critics is its perception as a pioneering nation in need of perpetual discovery. Tourist literature in France promotes Australia as a place of adventure in terms of its size and distance from Europe, and as a landscape teeming with exotic flora and fauna. Consistent with this image, the press release for Pons’ recent overview of the Australian nation speaks of ‘Aborigènes, kangourous, surf, grand espaces… Aux antipodes de la France, l’Australie reste synonyme de dépaysement et d’aventure’ [Aborigines, kangaroos, surf, large spaces... On the other side of the world from France, Australia remains synonymous with changes of scenery and adventure], while Pons argues for a new understanding of Australia as a country with sophisticated technology, a buoyant economy and a high standard of living.

In order to gain some idea of the range of images of Australia portrayed in French translations of Australian children’s fiction, the following examples highlight the identifiers of Australian culture that are consistently retained, appropriated or deleted.


“Far below them, in the bed of the gully, a little stream flowed inland—soon to peter out in the vastness of the Australian desert.” (p. 5)

“Loin au-dessous d’eux, dans le lit du vallon, un ruisseau s’enfonçait dans les terres avant de se perdre dans les immenses solitudes du désert australien.” (p. 9)

[Far below them, in the bed of the gully, a stream flowed into the earth before losing itself in the immense solitudes of the Australian desert]

**Morris Gleitzman, Worry Warts (1991) / Mes parents sont de mauvais poil (1998)**

“‘Being a teacher,’ he said, ‘is like walking across Australia. It’s lonely, it’s hard going and every day you stub your toe on exactly the same thing...we dream that one day, somewhere in this great land of ours, we’ll come across a precious stone.’” (p. 32)

“Etre professeur, c’est comme marcher dans le désert australien. C’est dur parce que chaque jour, on trébuche sur la même chose... Parce que nous rêvons qu’un jour, quelque part dans ce désert sans fin, on trouvera une pierre précieuse.” (p. 58/59)

[To be a teacher is like walking in the Australian desert. It’s hard because each day, you stumble over the same thing... Because we dream that one day, somewhere in this endless desert, we will find a precious stone]

Here there are images of Australia transmitted to French readers that are not present in the original: ‘le désert sans fin’ and ‘immenses solitudes’. In the example from Gleitzman, we see Australia metonymically equated simply with desert (‘le désert australien’),
emphasising desert over urban, rural and coastal settings. The use of the
desert image reinforces the elements that go with it: sun, heat, drought,
spareness of people and vegetation, and promotes a possible associative
function in the mind of the child reader of Australia as emptiness or
void. The more familiar language ‘to peter out’ in Marshall’s work,
meaning to eventually come to an end, is given a sense of giving way to
something much greater in the use of ‘se perdre’ [to disappear].

In the following example from Baillie, the ‘wild’ aspect of the
western part of Tasmania has been transferred to the entire island in
the phrase ‘de l’ouest de la sauvage Tasmanie’, and the ‘blank’ areas on
the map in the Australian text are interpreted as ‘totally unexplored and
mysterious’ by the French translator.

Allan Baillie, Riverman (1986) / Périls en Tasmanie (1994)
Great Uncle Tim had been a pioneer in the wild west of
Tasmania when there were no roads and great areas of the
map were blank. (p. 9)
Le grand-oncle Tim avait été un pionnier de l’ouest de la
sauvage Tasmanie. A l’époque, les routes n’existaient pas
et de grandes zones sur les cartes demeuraient totalement
inexplorées et mystérieuses. (p. 8)

Here the translator has chosen to use strategies that serve to
maintain an antipodean and exotic paradigm in portraying Australia as
a wild landscape and as a place to be discovered, whereas in the next
example the translator has suppressed Australianness in the form of a
major cultural referent.22

Morris Gleitzman, Sticky Beak (1993) / Le bébé de papa compte
plus que moi (1998)23
Ayers Rock hit me in the guts... Suddenly Ayers Rock wasn’t
in my guts anymore, it was in my head and had gone
volcanic... (p. 96)
Un énorme trou a creusé mon ventre... Soudain le trou n’était
plus dans mon ventre, il était remonté dans ma tête, il
était devenu un volcan bouillonnant... (p. 181)

A huge hole dug into my stomach... Suddenly the hole was no
longer in my stomach, it had gone up to my head, it had
become a bubbling volcano...]

Ayers Rock is considered to be one of the three great icons of
Australia, the other two being the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera
House. These three icons of Australia abound in tourist brochures and
are instantly recognisable by many people throughout the world. For this
very reason, it is all the more intriguing that the translator has deleted
such a marked feature of Australianness. In addition it is worth noting
that the translation ‘trou’—a hole or cavity implying emptiness—is the
negation of the very large cultural and geographical object, Ayers Rock.

In the following passage describing the kookaburra—definitely
a marked form of Australian specificity and an ‘exotic’ creature—the
translator has not reproduced the anthropomorphism so typical of
children’s fiction but has possibly seen the passage as highly ‘poetic’ and
therefore difficult to translate.

Mary Patchett, Wild Brother (1954) / Frère sauvage (1955)24
Kookaburra gives his long, ribald, chuckling laugh, which
rises through the stillness of dawn. His great beak is
wide open, his big head and round body, even his stumpy
tail, shake and quiver with gutsy laughter, for he is the
buffoon of the bush, friendly, comical, enchanting. (p. 41)
Translation:- Omitted (p. 29)

The translator has also deleted another poetic passage where
the Australian landscape is presented as a canvas of intentional and
unintentional colour. The translator has chosen not to re-create the
canvas, thus ‘whiting out’ the literary and the cultural content.

Mary Patchett, Wild Brother (1954) / Frère sauvage (1955)
Rain fell onto the desert in patches so that tiny oases, crimson
carpets of brilliant Sturt Pea, sprang up as though a giant
had shaken drops of red ink from his pen on to vast
sheets of brown blotting-paper. (p. 66)
Translation: omitted (p. 51)
The tendency in translation to delete can also apply to whole chapters, as in the work by James Vance Marshall, *The Children* (1959) / *Dans le grand désert* (1968). Chapter eleven, consisting of one and a half pages only, is the shortest chapter in the book and is deleted from the translation. The content is highly didactic in its explanation of Aboriginal mythology regarding life and death, and in its discussion of the power of autosuggestion in the Aboriginal psyche. The author quotes medical and psychoanalytical experiments on the influence of the Aboriginal mind-set over the body, and he refers to the ‘mental euthanasia’ commonly recognised in Aboriginal communities, and referred to as ‘the Spirit of Death’. It is to be noted that the original work was written for adults whereas the translation was intended for children, a situation that immediately raises the issue of the degree of adaptation of the text for a younger audience, given the rather frightening content for a child reader.25 Seen in this light, the chapter represents an adult ideological discourse, which the French publisher may well have decided is not suitable or edifying for child readers, especially with its constant references to ‘terror’, ‘death curses’, ‘self-induced apathy’, ‘impending death’, ‘no flicker of hope’ and ‘dying’.

Further examples of the concern for edifying over ‘negative’ material for children are evident in works where authors present images of regressive and aggressive children’s behaviour and use children’s literature to appeal to the sense of the anarchic in their readers. In the terms of Rousseau, these authors are testing the dichotomy of the pre-civilised versus the civilised child, and the tension between innocence and experience. The tendency in French translations to suppress and euphemise the strong foregrounding of the combination of Australianness and vulgarity highlights the issues of the social class of the readership and the function of children’s literature. If the target text is not intended to be the same as the source text—in other words, is not intended to appeal to the anarchic or regressive in the child reader—but presents a more diluted or sanitised version of opposition to authority and civilised behaviour, then it is likely that the social codification of the reader is different from that intended by the source text author.

With a penchant for portraying Australian cultural identity as the vulgar and the brash, Morris Gleitzman and Paul Jennings are authors who consistently appeal to the anarchic child and who privilege youth as a cultural group. In particular, books by Jennings provide a pertinent example of the particularity and specificity of the intended reader. The social groups in his works are composed of young male adolescents who are interested in having a bit of fun. The works of humour by these authors are riddled with slang, particularly vulgar slang, much of which is suppressed, toned down, neutralised or euphemised in the translations.


*I watch as half of my lovely lunch disappears down his cake-hole.* (p. 3)

*I watch half of my marvellous lunch disappear in his ugly mouth.*

*I'll give him black and white spots on his backside.* (p. 23)

*I'm the one who is going to give him black and white marks on his back.*

**Morris Gleitzman, Worry Warts (1991) / Mes parents sont de mauvais poil (1998)**

*Dad spent two hours in the public dunny with the trots.* (p. 8)

*Dad had a stomach ache.*

*Gary Murdoch's dad'll chuck his guts with envy.* (p. 10)

*Quand le père de Gary va voir ça, il va être vert de jalousie!* (p. 21/22)

*When Gary’s dad sees that, he’s going to be green with jealousy!*

*’Rack off you boring old chook’, said Tracy (to her mum).* (p. 21)

*’Allez, arrête! Tout le monde pleure!’, rétorqua Tracey.* (p. 40)

*Hey, stop! Everyone’s crying!*, rebuffed Tracy.

*‘Well,’ said Keith, ‘our shop’s operating in a pretty cutthroat business environment up here...and it’s really hard to*
CONCLUSION

The issue of mistranslation is just one consequence of the constraints imposed upon translators in the profession of translating. While it is reasonable to attribute errors in translation to poor general knowledge of the period when a book is set, to a lack of specific knowledge of linguistic conventions, to inadequate time for the translation to be completed, or to inadequacies in the transfer of the cultural foreignness of the original text, what is often labelled as mistranslation is, in fact, an appropriation or slanting of the text to a desired set of images of the source culture. If we think translation is merely a matter of producing equivalence, then we are missing the point. Translators as mediators between cultures, ideologies and languages aim to produce a text that is meaningful to readers in the target culture consistent with two major constraints. The first constraint concerns the translator’s judgment on what is considered ‘appropriate’ material for young French readers and covers a range of translating tendencies—from softening tendencies associated with the use of euphemistic and toned-down language to extreme cases of ideological and cultural deletion and substitution. The second constraint concerns the French perception of Australia, whereby the constructs of Australia and Australianness are manipulated in ways that reflect a consistent set of images. Where the ‘softening’ tendency elides cultural differences, the manipulative tendency reinforces them, suggesting that the degree to which Australian children’s books are ‘translatable’ in terms of their culture, language and ideology varies in accordance with the different levels of interest attributed to signifiers of Australia and their perceived typicality or exoticism. In translating for children in another culture, these levels of interest can lead to significant slanting and pre-consumption of the text. Such manipulation may at first seem to reflect errors in translation, but the examples presented in this paper highlight the difference between what is simple misunderstanding and what is, in fact, the significant negotiation of cultural and linguistic difference by outsiders looking in.

ENDNOTES

3 Peter Michael Wetherill, ‘Translation and cultural transfer’, in Geoffrey


5 Perry Nodelman, ‘We are all censors’, Canadian Children's Literature, vol. 68, 1992, 121–33.

6 These examples have been selected from the author’s completed doctoral thesis. Helen T Frank, Pre-empting the Text: French Translations of Twentieth Century Australian Children’s Fiction, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003.


11 The use of italics in the examples represents the present author’s use. For each example, a literal translation of the French translation is supplied in square brackets.


18 Geoffrey Macnab, ‘(Strewth cobber!), Bazza turns 30’, Age, 7 March 2003, 1 & 3.


25 The novel was made into a highly successful Australian film Walkabout, and gained international success with audiences in Europe, including France.
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Frank, Helen T.

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