

## TRANSLATING HUMOROUS ELEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS – ASTRID LINDGREN'S BILL BERGSON BOOKS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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### **Abstract**

Research in the translation of humorous elements in children's books is a complex subject, which cannot be reduced to studies of wordplay and of other highly humorous items. The translation of slightly humorous items can also influence the whole literary work if such elements are used frequently. This article analyses the ways in which such funny instances were dealt with in the English and German translations of the Bill Bergson books (original name: Kalle Blomkvist) by the Swedish author of children's books Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002). More specifically, it discusses the translation of several funny words and expressions, repetitions and exaggerations. It is shown that the humorous effects in the English translation are sometimes less obvious than in the German translation, even if both translated texts rendered the majority of humorous instances in a very funny way.

**Keywords:** *translation of humour; children's literature; Astrid Lindgren; Bill Bergson; skaz*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Studies in the translation of children's literature have often focused on the issue of cultural adaptation, i.e. on analysing how and to what extent translations make use of domesticating strategies (Venuti 1995). Such strategies take into consideration the intended target group's assumed knowledge and expectations, including, for example, explanations of (cultural) references that are presumed to be unknown to the child reader, as well as other (pedagogical) norms that need to be conveyed, or culture-specific taboo items and other forms of censorship (cf. Alvstad 2010, House 2008, Nikolajeva 2011, Tabbert 2002). Central issues

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that have been scrutinized in the field of the translation of children's literature include names, cultural markers and references (such as food, money, clothes etc.), dialogue, dialect, and so forth (cf. Lathey 2015).

However, other translational aspects have also been dealt with, and humour is one of these. In this particular field, it is above all wordplay and other stylistic figures through which comic effects are achieved that have been studied (e.g., O'Sullivan 2005). Still, there are also other forms of humour that are typical of children's prose fiction – contrasts, irony, exaggerations, etc – the impact of which may be less strong, but which, nevertheless, may be highly important in the reader's appreciation of the work.

In this study, emphasis is laid on the translation of such minor elements of humour. A book series very much characterized by such humoristic features is the one about the “master detective” Bill Bergson (Kalle Blomkvist in the original text) by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (1907–2002). In this series of three books, the excitement of the children solving mysteries is interspersed with a plethora of minor humorous elements, which make the reading of the books a very entertaining one – at least for the reader that pays attention to these stylistic qualities.

Our analyses involve comparisons between the English and German translations of the last two books of the series, which seem to comprise the highest number of instances of verbal humour (cf. Törnqvist 2015). One reason for this comparative approach is that Lindgren had considerably greater success with practically all her books in the German-speaking world than in English-speaking areas. Whereas Lindgren is seen as a major classic of twentieth century children's literature in Germany, where she also had very high sales, she has never been highly appreciated either in the US or in the UK. There may, of course, be many explanations for this. In this article, we are trying to find out whether different ways of translating the humorous elements in the books have played a role in this state of affairs.

Section 2 will, therefore, discuss research on the translation of humour in children's literature, whereas in Section 3, the books about Bill Bergson are presented. In Section 4, some general comments on the English and German translations of these books are made, and in Section 5 the treatment of some humorous passages in the translations is analysed. A conclusive discussion follows in Section 6.

## **2. TRANSLATION OF HUMOROUS ELEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Humorous elements of children's books can, of course, be problematic to translate for many reasons. Differences between the source language and text

and the target language and text, between what it is regarded as acceptable humour in children's literature in either source or target culture may pose important problems for translators; to these, one may add the different opinions on issues such as the age at which children understand parody, irony and so forth. In addition, purely linguistic differences between source and target languages concerning, for example, ambiguity or polysemy can make humorous elements like word-play difficult or impossible to translate, as long as more or less similar effects are expected to be achieved in the translated text.

Forms of humour that are discussed in handbooks on the translation of children's literature (e.g. Lathey 2015, O'Sullivan 2006) typically include distinct elements of humour, like wordplay or other instances in which the linguistic form is focused on, as well as, among other things, the use of linguistic varieties (e.g. dialects) for humorous effects. However, there is, of course, a scale of comic effects, with some elements leading to greater comic effects than others. Less conspicuous elements, such as instances of humorous contrasts, repetitions, exaggerations, and different forms of additions, have seldom been analysed, even if they can permeate a whole literary work when they occur frequently. Needless to say that sometimes such elements are difficult to identify by the translator himself/herself, as a person to whom the source language is usually a foreign language.

The use of these elements is normally due to the existence of a very visible narrator, who can use them as part of his/her "verbal theatre", in which linguistically based jokes usually play a prominent role. A story that imitates an oral performance, and where the verbal acting of the narrator is focused on, has been called a *skaz* after Eichenbaum's well-known study (1919) on the short-story *The Overcoat* by Gogol. Eichenbaum showed how Gogol foregrounded the narrator's verbal acting, instead of highlighting the plot.

Astrid Lindgren made considerable use of linguistically based humorous elements, effected by a very visible narrator, in several book series, such as the books about Pippi Longstocking, Karlsson-on-the-roof, Emil, and also in the Bill Bergson series. Probably, the use of *skaz* elements is most conspicuous in the books about Emil, where the narrator even "leaves the plot" in order to comment on the course of events. The Emil books, set in the rural Sweden of the late nineteenth century, have been extremely popular in this country, not least among adults due to their nostalgic overtones. They were written later in Lindgren's literary career, and it can be hypothesized that this gave the author more freedom of expression.

Boethius (1998) analyses the first book about Emil. He claims that the whole book is constructed as a *skaz*, where the narrator is placed in the foreground and recurrently makes herself comical through a number of means of expression. The Emil books are intended to be read aloud to small children; Emil himself is five years old in the first book. Boethius shows how Lindgren, using a

direct address to a listening “you”, applies many techniques which are meant to create funny instances. For example, she often uses surprising, contrasting additions, which divert the reader’s attention, a thing which leads to a humorous effect. Further, Boethius shows that the narrator makes statements (e.g. claiming that children nowadays do not eat candy) with pretended seriousness, statements that both she and the reader know are lies. Boethius claims that this is one of Lindgren’s favourite “calembour” (83), *calembour* being Eichenbaum’s term for the linguistic caper made by the narrator so as to achieve humorous effects. Boethius also claims that the technique of using comic repetitions, which sometimes expand into leitmotifs is another favourite *calembour*, which is frequently present in the first of Emil’s books. For instance, the repeatedly mentioned information that Emil will become chairman of the county council as a grown-up (ibid.), or the use of dialect (91). Finally, Boethius points to the fact that precision, a favourite comic feature of a skaz, is recurrently used in the book about Emil, for instance through his mother’s careful dating of all his mischiefs. Boethius states that precision, also prevalent when it comes to everything related to money, “tends to undermine or dissolve the referential meaning of the words, in order to emphasize and foreground instead the very way of expression” (93; translations mine here and elsewhere). This leads to a true “verbal theatre” with many different forms of *calembour*. To conclude, it can be stated that *calembours* of this type, performed by the narrator, are probably at their strongest in the Emil books, but such puns are also present in the Bill Bergson books, as will be seen in the following section.

### 3. THE THREE BOOKS ABOUT THE MASTER DETECTIVE BILL BERGSON (SWEDISH: KALLE BLOMKVIST)

Astrid Lindgren is one of the world’s most popular author of children’s books of all times, having been translated into around 100 languages, and sold in around 150 million copies –the vast majority of which are, of course, translations of the original Swedish texts ([www.astridlindgren.se](http://www.astridlindgren.se)). Lindgren made her debut in 1944, as an author of the girls’ book *Britt-Marie lättar sitt hjärtain* (“Britt Marie eases her heart”), and the first book about her best-known character, Pippi Longstocking appeared in 1945.

Lindgren’s series of three books about the young, so-called “master detective” Bill Bergson and his friends appeared in 1946, 1951 and 1953, respectively. The books are called *Mästerdetektiven Blomkvist* (MB; English: “Bill Bergson, master detective”), *Mästerdetektiven Blomkvist lever farligt* (MBLF; English: “Bill Bergson lives dangerously”) and *Kalle Blomkvist och Rasmus* (KBOR, English: “Bill Bergson and the white rose rescue”), with the abbreviations of the Swedish names and the English translation titles in brackets.

The books can be classified as realistic adventure stories, more precisely as detective stories for children. Bill and his friends Anders and Eva-Lotta are members of The White Rose gang, and during their summer holidays they constantly play a "war game" over a trophy stone, against The Red Rose gang, which consists of three boys of the same age – around thirteen. Playing in a small Swedish town, in every book the children's game gradually becomes serious, and they get involved in dangerous situations. These arise when they help local police with solving various crimes: in the first book a jewellery theft, in the second a murder, and in the third a kidnapping.

These children share obviously in common with the books on Pippi Longstocking. Here also the characters are very independent and occupy adult positions when they solve the crime mysteries. While the realistic setting is constantly preserved, the adventures contain a number of episodes with slightly fantastic elements, such as walking over roofs in order to eavesdrop from other houses and walking on the walls of castle ruins, like in other books by Lindgren, e.g. *Karlsson-on-the-Roof*. The second parts of the books in particular are full of excitement, due to the complex mysteries that the children have to solve.

The Bill Bergson books are also similar among themselves in many ways. They contain the same protagonists and have the same environment, as well as a similar plot, but there are important differences, too. Törnqvist claims that the last two volumes are "more elaborate and the descriptions of the protagonists and environments are more precise and better nuanced" (117); moreover, they "mirror Astrid Lindgren's development during these years and above all how her view on detective stories for young readers changed" (115). Törnqvist also points out that Bill himself goes through a personal development in the books (128); his daydreaming (of being a great detective) in the first book is toned down in the two latter ones; instead his heroic deeds become even bolder (128).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Bill Bergson books were bestsellers when they appeared in Sweden, and were filmed shortly thereafter. Fredriksson and Fredriksson (2011) claim that they started the "golden age" of the Swedish detective stories for children and young adults. Later on, the books also influenced many authors of detective stories, for children, and for adults. For example, in the Millennium series (2005-2007) of the Swedish author Stieg Larsson, which was commercially successful in many countries, the protagonists, Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander, bear names that much resemble those of Kalle Blomkvist and his female friend Eva-Lotta Lisander. The latter is depicted as an adventurous "boy-girl", even called a "krigare" (Engl. warrior) in the third book (1986:9). She thus shares in common with Lisbeth Salander. In the Millennium trilogy by Larsson, there is explicit reference to the Bill Bergson books several times (Törnqvist 112). The Bill Bergson books can therefore be seen as predecessors to the "Nordic Noir" wave in crime literature, that spread Scandinavian crime literature throughout Europe and other parts of the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

Especially at the beginning of the books, there is an abundance of humorous passages, which depend both on the protagonists' actions and on verbal elements, usually with several instances of the latter type on every page. Even if it is not strictly accurate to call the books in the Bill Bergson series ('real') *skazes*, since it is not the verbal acting of the narrator that is the most central element, they still contain a conspicuous narrator, who constantly adds humorous elements to the storytelling.

In terms of vocabulary, many highly precise words and phrases are used, a thing that leads to an expressive language and, frequently enough, to slight comic effects. This concerns especially a number of adjectives, but also verbs. In general, many words that were certainly unknown to thirteen-year-olds are used. However, since they are never put in the mouths of the young protagonists, they do not leave the impression of being "artificial". Many lexical items belong to an elaborate register; however, it is difficult today to assess how old-fashioned many of the words were when the books first appeared.

When the children play at being knights in the War of the Roses, they try to imitate an overly-formal language. However, their awkward handling of this kind of language creates humorous effects, as will be seen in section 5. The children also use many repetitions, which sometimes expand into leitmotifs. For example Bill, the precocious master detective, repeatedly comments on his deeds with the laconic statement *rena rutin arbetet* (Engl. "just routine work"). This becomes comic since it is unclear if it is intended to be an ironic statement, and even more comic in the Swedish original due to the alliteration. Another recurrent phrase is the exclamation of dismay that five-year-old Rasmus in the third book often uses: *Fy bubblan* (English literal translation: "Ugh the bubble", or, more freely, "Drats and bats").

To conclude, it can be stated that the narrator's "acrobatic" language use, which leads to many humorous effects, permeates the whole narration in the Bill Bergson books and makes them truly unique.

#### **4. THE TRANSLATIONS OF THE BILL BERGSON BOOKS INTO ENGLISH AND GERMAN**

The first two Bill Bergson books were translated into (American) English by Herbert Antoine in 1952 and 1954, and the third one by Florence Lamborn in 1965. They were all published by the New York publishing house, The Viking Press. Lamborn had previously translated the Pippi Longstocking and Noisy Village books by Lindgren. The British English translations of the Bill Bergson books appeared with some delay, the third book twelve years after the original. They have never been published again. They have a closer resemblance to books of this kind written in the Anglo-Saxon culture than other stories by Lindgren.

They can also be seen as parodies of British detective stories; even the names of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Lord Peter Wimsey are mentioned, and important references are made to the history of England, e.g. to the War of the Red and White Roses. However, this does not seem to have helped with their popularity.

The acclaim was, from the very beginning, much bigger in the German-speaking world. Friedrich Oetinger published the first book about Pippi Longstocking in German in 1949. After this immediate success, he continued with other works by Lindgren, including the Bill Bergson books. Cäcilie Heinig translated the first one into German in 1950. Shortly after, she passed away (Surmatz 2005), and Karl Kurt Peters translated the remaining two. Peters also translated other books by Lindgren, notably those about Noisy Village and Mio, my son. The last two Bill Bergson books were translated immediately after the Swedish originals and were very well received in West Germany. They have appeared in many new editions, and are now regarded, like many of Lindgren's books, as children's classics in Germany.

The English translations of the Bill Bergson books were undertaken in a manner that is typical of children's literature, with a number of liberties being taken, which, however, do not involve any kind of censorship. Conversely, in Lindgren's American translation "Mischievous Meg" (Swed. *Madicken*, 1960, Am. Engl. 1962), some form of (self)-censorship clearly functioned, as a number of things often classified as taboo items in children's literature – alcohol, social inequality, swearing (by girls) and the mentioning of war – were removed from the translation (Nikolowski-Bogomoloff 2011).

In the English translations of the Bergson books the main protagonist's name is changed (Kalle Blomkvist > Bill Bergson), and the title of the third book is also different. In the third book, there is yet another name change ("Rasmus" is called "Eric" in the English translation), and the title *Kalle Blomkvist och Rasmus* becomes "Bill Bergson and the White Rose Rescue". Some other protagonists have also slightly distorted names: konstapel Björk > constable Burke, Jonte > Johnny. Despite the anglicized names, the mentioning, in the original texts, that the stories take place in Sweden leaves no doubt about the cultural setting of the stories; the English translations also take place explicitly in Sweden (even if the names of the Swedish towns are changed into better known ones, for instance Hässleholm is turned into Stockholm).

The German translation renders both the punctuation and the syntax in a more literal manner than the English one. The German translation preserves the original names, except for two of them -Eva-Lotta > Eva-Lotte and Sixten > Sixtus – that are slightly changed. There is hardly any censorship in the German translation, even the recurrent "war" between the gangs is kept, even if the books had appeared just after World War II and this word was almost prohibited in

those years! However, the word *invasionsförsök* (Engl. invasion attempt) is changed to “Entdeckungsreise” (Engl. discovery trip).

It should be stated here that all the translations discussed in this article were written by professional translators. There is no mistranslation in any of them. This cannot be always taken for granted, since the translations appeared at a time when the resources available to translators were usually restricted to some mono- and bilingual dictionaries. In the English translation some punctuation marks are changed, and a number of words and expressions simplified, but such changes are small if compared to the translation norms of the time, which sometimes required more spectacular distortions of the original. Moreover, the German translation is even closer to the source text; perhaps the already established literary reputation of Astrid Lindgren also played a role in the translator’s choice of source-oriented strategies, or, in a perhaps more speculative vein, there was very little self-esteem in Germany after the war, and translators did not dare to change too many things when it came to foreign elements in the source texts.

Still, as far as the translation techniques used in rendering humorous elements are concerned, the target texts are somewhat different. We will look at this aspect in the following section.

## 5. HUMOROUS INSTANCES AND THEIR TRANSLATION

In this section, three kinds of humorous elements will be discussed, all highlighting the narrator’s use of the language. Firstly, instances of precise references leading to comic effects are analysed. This applies, above all, to adjectives and verbs. Secondly, instances of exaggeration are discussed. Thirdly, instances of repetitions of phrases are examined that constitute rhetorical figures, and may often expand into leitmotifs.

The narrator frequently emphasizes that the protagonists’ utterances are spoken very precisely, for example by using *sa* (Engl. said) + an adverb belonging to a formal register. Some examples of English and German translations from KBOR: *sa Eva-Lotta förnärnad* (4) – said Eva-Lotta indignantly (10) – Eva-Lotte war erstaunt (7)”; *sa bevekande*(12) – said appealingly (19) – fragte beschwörend (13); *sa Eva-Lotta harmset* (93) – Eva-Lotta said indignantly (129) – Eva-Lotte tat harmlos (96).

From KBLF: *sa Anders förtörnad* (69) – Anders cried in exasperation (95) – rief Anders ganz verstört (71); *nickade eftersinnande* (70) – nodded thoughtfully (96) – nickte nachdenklich (70). All these Swedish lexemes have a touch of precise expression, and the translations sometimes, but not always, preserve this feature.

For the German translator, there are more formally related lexemes available in Swedish that carry the same connotations than for the English one. This may be due to the close relationship between Swedish and German, or, and even more importantly, to the many loan words and morphemes in Swedish that originate from the Middle Low German of the Middle Ages, and which are very similar to German words. Some examples from KBOR: *bedyrade han* (5) – he declared (10) – *beteuerte er* (7); *sa Rasmusberedvilligt* (62) – said Eric solemnly (86) – *sagte Rasmus bereitwillig* (65).

In addition, many verbs are used that very precisely refer to the activity described. They relate, for example, to lexemes denoting activities from the semantic area of walking-running. Here again, preciseness triggers slight comic effects. Some examples from MBLF: *kom travande* (11) – came trotting (17) – *die ... entgegentrabten* (12); *kommer du sättande hit* (116) – did you come running here (160) – *kommst du hier angetigert* (121).

Exaggerations are frequently used in all the Bill Bergson books, being part of the protagonist's irony, or of other forms of word play. They are sometimes played down in the translations. An example could be the very expressive term *trälade för* (MBLF 8) (Engl. *slaved for*), which is usually connected, in Swedish, with slavery during the Viking age. This term is used in the formulation *om man föreställde sig att det man trälade för var nödvändiga vapen* (Engl. literal translation: *if you imagined that what you slaved for were necessary weapons*) and is rendered by “if one could imagine that the effort was expended in order to prepare weapons” (12) and “wenn man sich vorstellte, dass das, womit man sich abrackerte, notwendige Waffen ... waren” (8).

As stated in section 3, the protagonists sometimes try to use the solemn language of knights. Instances in which they happen to intersperse this with very colloquial – practically slang – language, usually creates comic effects. Both translators keep up with this very special language nearly all the time; however, there are also instances when their translations are not so effective as the original. An example from MBLF: *vår ädle, högt frejdade ledare* (7) (Engl. *our noble, highly revered leader*), is rendered by “our noble, highly renowned leader” (10) and “unsern edlen, hochberühmten Chef” (7), for which the archaic connotations of *frejdade* are not rendered. An overly-formal, recurring formulation is the one below, echoing Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, part 1 (a reference to the, War of the Roses), which is used in relation to a particularly adventurous episode:

Nu är det strid mellan den Röda och den Vita Rosen, och tusen sinom tusen själar skola gå in i döden och in i dödens natt! (Lindgren, KBOR 19)

Now there will be a battle between the Red and the White Roses, and thousands and thousands of souls will go down fighting and enter the vale of death! (Lindgren, *Bill Bergson and the white rose rescue* 28)

Nun herrscht Kampf zwischen der Roten und der Weißen Rose, und tausend und aber tausend Seelen werden in den Tod gehen–hinein in die Nacht des Todes. (Lindgren, *Kalle Blomquist, Eva-Lotte und Rasmus* 21)

The overly-formal and dramatic Swedish formulation is taken from the classical Shakespeare translation of Carl August Hagberg from the 1840s (Shakespeare's formulation is: "Shall send between the red rose and the white / A thousand souls to death and deadly night"). In the English translation above, the language is tuned down (it does not use Shakespeare's formulation). The German translation is a very close rendering of the Swedish original, the English literal translation of which would be: "Now there is a battle between the Red and the White Roses, and thousands and thousands of souls shall go into death and into the night of death."

The outcry of *Framåt till strid och seger!* (MBLF 9 *passim*) is also repetitively used when a new "battle" between the Roses is to begin. Here, the renderings are the same, solemn but without the alliteration of the Swedish original: "Forward to battle and victory" (13) and "Vorwärts zu Kampf und Sieg!" (9), respectively (both in MBLF).

## 6. FINAL DISCUSSION

There are two comments to be made concerning the evaluation of a study of this type. Firstly, the texts examined here appeared some 55-70 years ago, and the stylistic connotations of words and expressions may have changed (in one or several of the languages involved), which, in turn, can be difficult to assess from today's perspective. Secondly, the books are so rich in (slightly) humorous elements, that it is difficult to make a fair assessment concerning the degree to which these elements are retained in translation. Of course, many of them have been kept, but there are also those that have not, and some others that have been added. Then, as seen in section 5, many humorous elements concerning the language used by the narrator were rendered in the translation in a way that does not diminish the comic effects. However, there were also humorous instances that were played down in translation. This was mainly the case with the English translations. However, the differences were frequently irrelevant.

Since both translations have been very competently – and even creatively – carried out in terms of humour translation as well, it is not possible to argue that the translation strategies used by the professional translators could be the reason why the translations into English were less successful than those

into German. The reasons for this should, in my opinion, be sought elsewhere. The perspective on childhood these books provide, as well as the ongoing competition with other national and translated authors are more probable causes for the different reception of the translated books. Besides, it has been claimed that Lindgren's great success in Germany was facilitated by the fact that her groundbreaking book about Pippi Longstocking coincided with the end of World War II, when Germany was at *Stunde Null*, and the atmosphere was open to new views on child education, and a new children's literature, after the pedagogical direction preaching the child's total submission to the adults during the Nazi period, and also in earlier times (Surmatz 2005).

It has sometimes been maintained that children's literature in translation is frequently subject to heavy manipulation and imposition (House 2004), with the significant exception of highly canonized literature. If we consider the fact that, when the first Bill Bergson book appeared, Astrid Lindgren was still a relatively unknown (female) author from a minor language area writing in a sub-genre of very low prestige – detective stories for children – it is surprising to notice that the translators made such considerable efforts to render the humorous instances in her books down to the smallest detail.

Future research will need to examine if the results of this study coincide with translation analyses of other works by Lindgren in which recurrent humorous elements are foregrounded, e.g. the Pippi Longstocking books, the Emil books and the Karlsson-on-the-Roof books. Of course, it would also be interesting to compare these translations with translations into other languages, to see where the English and German translations would stand if some kind of hierarchy were established. Such issues are worthwhile pursuing, because humorous elements in children's literature may be a very relevant topic for translation studies, highly important in the evaluation of the translation as a whole.

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