

The Theme of Migration in the Paddington Bear Book Series and its Intersemiotic Translation

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Abstract

No literary work is ever finished, and its interpretation largely depends on the time and place of its reception. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how the theme of migration was transformed from the original Paddington book series to its intersemiotic translation in the form of a film. This phenomenon is connected to the importance of interpretation parallels in the process of literary adaptation and actualisation as well as in translation

Keywords: intersemiotic translation, interpretation parallel, migration, Paddington Bear, adaptation

1. Introduction

Writing about translation, Koška states that each generation has its own *generation interpretāns*, because translators do not live in an isolated vacuum – they are influenced by recent history, the contemporary social situation, and texts written after the text they are translating. That is the reason why translators' interpretation always differs and changes throughout time. Each literary work has its own potential future content, which is difficult to anticipate. The content of any literary work can be understood as “emptiness providing possibilities” (106). Every era creates its own interpretation parallels, by which translators compare the situation in the original text with similar situations in the contemporary world, and form their own interpretation and translation (or adaptation) strategies.

In relation to the adaptation of literary works, it is also more adequate to speak about

the interpretation potential of a work. Whenever a cinematic adaptation of a literary work written in the past¹ is being filmed, its current author has to compare it with a similar contemporary situation; otherwise, the readers will find it difficult to interpret – especially when speaking about a child reader/viewer.

The goal of this paper is to briefly examine and analyse the themes of migration in the original book series *A Bear Called Paddington* by Michael Bond, and then to compare how the film adaptation by Paul King (2014) dealt with this topic. Further, the paper analyses the intersemiotic translation with regard to the characters, and describes how and why certain characters had to be changed in order to be better understood by the contemporary audience. Migration is a widely-discussed topic nowadays, and therefore it is expected that the theme of migration and the depiction of a migrant in the books will be different from in the film adaptation.

2. The Theme of Migration in the Paddington Book Series

Michael Bond, the author of the Paddington Bear series, fought in WWII. The inspiration for the story of a bear coming to London from Darkest Peru is quite poetic. Bond wanted to buy his wife a Christmas present and visited the Selfridges store. On one of the shelves he saw a lonely bear puppet which he decided to buy. One year later, in 1958, this puppet became a children's literary hero. From the beginning, the idea of a refugee in need coming to London was part and parcel of the story. As Bond comments, "Refugees are the saddest sight – I still think that" (Byrne). However, it is quite interesting that Paddington is never referred to as a migrant, but rather as a "stowaway", although in one instance, he comments "I'm glad I emigrated" (Bond 14).

A small talking Peruvian bear was found with just a suitcase at Paddington station, and later was named after the station. This image of a single bear waiting at a railway station was not coincidental. Bond came up with the idea while watching children and adults waiting at the stations in London prior to WWII. These predominantly Jewish child refugees were part of the famous Kindertransports; children were sent from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Poland to Britain and placed in foster homes where Londoners would look after them (Ellis-Petersen). Bond recalled that "A lot of the children had luggage labels round their necks with their names and addresses on them" (Preston); this had an impact on the first appearance of Paddington, who also wore a note that read: "Please look after this bear, thank you". Similarly to the refugees, Paddington only had a small brown suitcase with the inscription "Wanted on voyage" (Bond, 8). Such suitcases were quite common in the pre-WWII period and they embodied refugees' poverty caused by the situation in their countries of origin.

Children's books usually have an educational function, and Bond's Paddington series is no exception. The first book in the series was published 13 years after WWII, in 1958. Soon it became hugely popular, and new editions were published. The books were republished several times. In the 1960s, readers began to associate Paddington Bear with Commonwealth immigration (Smith 38) rather than with the pre-WWII situation. Commonwealth immigration began with the Immigration Act of 1962. This Act gave citizens of Commonwealth nations the right of migration into the United Kingdom. Like the immigrants in the

1960s, Paddington Bear immigrated into “civilized” London from a “barbaric” country; originally, Paddington’s roots were supposed to be in “Darkest Africa”. The term “Darkest Africa” is defined in the Longman dictionary as “the parts of Africa etc. about which we know very little; this use is now frequently considered offensive”, though originally it was supposed to depict Paddington’s mysterious origins. However, Bond’s editor told him that there are no indigenous bears in Africa, and so Bond chose instead to situate Paddington’s childhood in “Darkest Peru”. The attribute remained the same, providing an image of a mysterious country.

In the book, Paddington comes to London because his aunt Lucy has been moved into the Home for Retired Bears. London is depicted as a safe haven for everyone who needs help. According to Hunt & Sands, Bond’s depiction of London partly corresponds to the image of pre-war imperial Britain as a nation of unshakeable and undisputed values (40). These values are difficult to define, although they are probably best embodied in Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden”. It is a belief that the white man has a moral obligation to help the uncivilized man; the uncivilized man “is first amicable, only later to become duplicitous and require the correcting hand of the ‘cultivated’ man” (“Post-Colonial Literature” 808). With regard to Britain, there was an undisputable belief that the British way of life, Britain’s way of managing society and politics was the one everyone else should aspire to.

Hunt & Sands also state that a typical trait of post-imperial children’s books is the depiction of a foreigner (Paddington) as someone who is subject to the benevolent supremacy of the dominant culture; the character tries to conform to the norms of the supremacist country, and this is how the positive stereotypical image of imperial Britain was emphasized (41). However, in the case of Paddington, Smith to some extent disagrees, because Paddington’s otherness is sometimes used to question the dominant culture. His otherness is explicitly emphasized throughout the story. However, it is not used to ridicule the main character or for solely comical purposes. In fact, the very opposite is the case; Paddington is never depicted as a fool or an uncivilized barbarian (48). But as a foreigner, he is forced to give up his former identity and culture and to integrate himself into the dominant culture. The dominant culture is generally presented uncritically. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to state that Paddington is willing to give up all of his identity. For example, one chapter sees Paddington reject a new hat, justifying it by his connection to his original hat, which he has worn since childhood. In this simple act, his connection with his culture of origin is retained. There are several similar elements in the story, but as mentioned above, the dominant culture expects Paddington to have a rather positive attitude towards its norms.

In general, Paddington is presented as a “role-model” migrant. He speaks fluent English, he is extremely polite, and this politeness could be perceived even as stereotypically British.² He always addresses people as “Mr”, “Mrs” and “Miss”, and only very rarely by their first names. He is also kind-hearted, but not to the point of being a simpleton – he is not afraid to express his disapproval to those who are dishonest. His more comical characteristic consists of innocently getting into trouble, but he does everything he can to put things right. He is prepared to give up everything to become a British citizen (Hunt & Sands 48). Even his name, Paddington, originated from Paddington station, where he was found by his new foster parents, the Browns. Castles & Miller find a resemblance between

Paddington's journey and the story of immigrants sailing to Britain or the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries, who were also given English names by migration officers, neglecting their former identity (85).

In the first book – although Paddington's otherness is emphasized – he is not asked by his new family and friends about his roots. As noted by Fanon, the dominant culture of the colonizers is always trying to transform the past of the oppressed people to conform with their own image (154). Here, Paddington does not enrich the target culture with his own culture, and he almost completely disregards his former identity. This is demonstrated e.g. when Paddington mentions that in his home there is no such concept as “birthday”. He is then immediately given a birth date by the Browns. Such a ritual could be considered as a manifestation of a completely new identity.

As mentioned before, the dominant culture in the Paddington books is generally presented uncritically. London is a welcoming city, and the Browns immediately want to take care of Paddington (they even have the first line in the book).³ However, the books also contain very subtle anti-racist themes, which – compared to other children's books dealing with these topics – are presented rather implicitly (Smith 48). After the aforementioned Immigration Act, there were many racist riots,⁴ and Michael Bond explicitly situated the majority of the story in Notting Hill, where many of these riots took place. Pinsent thinks that Bond uses the theme of “a foreigner in a foreign country” in order to present anti-racist arguments (106). In general, children's books that explicitly promote positive anti-racist attitudes are often counter-productive. On the other hand, if the themes are too implicit, children tend to only confirm their previous opinions – whether they are racist or not (Hollindale 36). Bond managed to balance these tendencies, and therefore is successful in his goals. This is achieved by being neither too covert nor too overt in the depiction of anti-racist themes – they are hidden in the depiction of everyday situations encountered by a newcomer in an alien culture. Although this newcomer is slightly alienated, he is presented as a positive character who is morally sound and acts ethically, as someone with whom the readers can sympathize. In a way, the theme is implicit and presented as an entertaining children's story without being too moralizing.

Bond's goal was to educate children in anti-racist themes and to teach them to be polite; however, Paddington's positive image is juxtaposed with an implicit narrative of Paddington being dominated by the dominant culture and the dominant culture claiming the right to control him (Smith 38). Britain is presented as a safe haven which helps those in need, but it is also presented as a supremacist country possessing the only genuinely civilized values. Although criticism of dominant values is more present in the later books in the series, there are very few criticisms towards the original culture. Such criticism is more strongly present in its intersemiotic translation.

3. Intersemiotic Translation and Contemporary Interpretation Parallels

Jakobson distinguishes three types of translation. One of them is intersemiotic translation, i.e. translation between different sign systems (233). A film adaptation of a book series falls within this category.⁵ The film *Paddington* is directed by Paul King, famous for his work in the British dada comedy series *Mighty Boosh*. The specifics of his artistic

vision can be seen mainly in the use of vibrant colours and props which react to the mood of the main characters as well as in the use of playful humour and irony. Paul King situated the film in contemporary London, which meant that several changes had to be made (discussed further below). It was screened in the pre-Brexit era, in 2014. The film has a star cast – Paddington is voiced by Ben Whishaw, the Browns are portrayed by Hugh Bonneville and Sally Hawkins, Nicole Kidman plays the main villain, and the character of Mr Curry is played by Peter Capaldi. It was received very well, both critically and by the audience. *The Guardian* (Bradshaw), *The Telegraph* (Collin) or the web portal *Rotten Tomatoes* gave positive reviews praising *Paddington* as an ideal family film.

Taking into account the rather long time span between the original and the intersemiotic translation, the target audience (predominantly consisting of children and their parents) needed new interpretation parallels which would enable them to form an attachment with the characters. One of the aims of children's literature is to educate its readers, and this is certainly true of children's films as well. A film such as this can give children new information, it can improve their critical thinking or educate them in terms of ethics. Ethics are constantly changing, so literal adaptations are problematic as norms have often changed. Contemporary European children and young people are unable to imagine the pre-WWII period, and their interpretation parallel concerning Paddington's arrival in London is not associated with the pre-WWII period or the Commonwealth migration. They are more likely to connect Paddington's migration with the omnipresent video footage of refugees from the current migration crisis; this was one of the changes that Paul King had to make. Therefore, the arrival of Paddington was no longer associated with WWII or the Commonwealth migration. This time, Paddington was forced to come to London after a natural disaster. He was placed on a small boat by his aunt; this creates an immediate link with the present-day migration crisis and migrants from the Middle East fleeing their homes in rubber boats – images which children can see on their screens on a daily basis. In the film, Paddington's aunt and uncle were invited to London by a British geographer visiting Darkest Peru, who promised them that they would be welcomed by the Londoners.

Unlike the book series, the film begins in Darkest Peru, introducing the character of Paddington and his idyllic life which he is soon forced to abandon. Paddington, together with his aunt and uncle, dream of London; they want to visit the city as tourists. Paddington is then forced to flee Darkest Peru and find a new home in London, because his uncle dies during an earthquake and – similarly to the book – his aunt is sent to the Home for Retired Bears. However, as soon as Paddington arrives at Paddington station, his illusions about a welcoming city and polite Londoners are destroyed. This is one of the themes that Paul King explicitly emphasized: the shattering of the positive myths resulting from the stereotypical images of Britain, consequently emphasizing the importance of sympathy for those in need. While in the book everyone is very welcoming, the film strikes a different image. The colours of London are very grim and grey; passers-by are depicted as indifferent, hidden under identical black umbrellas, and nobody even notices Paddington.⁶

This strikingly different image compared to the book is highlighted even more by the first utterances of Mr Brown concerning Paddington. Mr Brown warns the rest of the family by saying “stranger danger” and “Keep your eyes down. There's some sort of bear over there. Probably selling something” – once again linking Paddington to immigrants illegal-

ly selling various products on the streets, in another example of an interpretation parallel. Compared to the original book, in which the Browns immediately take care of Paddington, there is initially a much more cynical (and, one would say, realistic) approach. In the film, Mr Brown represents the Britain of reason, while Mrs Brown reminds the viewers of the more generous and hospitable Britain, the lost (though idealised) values of pre-WWII Britain – the Britain who helped those in need, e.g. during the Kindertransports.

The Britain of the pre-war period and its unshakeable values are ridiculed in the film on several occasions. For example, there is a flashback set in the Geographers' Guild, in which the explorer who met Paddington's aunt and uncle tries to persuade his colleagues that Peruvian Bears are an intelligent kind of bear. His colleagues are angry that he did not bring any specimen – specifically, a stuffed specimen – and decide to ban him from the Guild. He is trying to persuade them the Peruvian Bears are intelligent and that is why he did not bring any specimen, and they answer as follows: “They didn't even speak English. Did they play cricket? Drink tea? Do the crossword? Pretty rum idea of civilisation you've got, Clyde”. This example of irony reveals a rather critical view of the values of colonial Britain.

The traits of the Paddington character in the film are quite similar to those described in the book. He is still extremely polite, addressing everyone as Mr and Mrs – which is not as common as in the past – and expecting the best from other people. In the film, Paddington is also depicted as an “ideal” migrant, but as opposed to the book, he is more proud of his origins, and other characters are actually interested in his roots. Migration is no longer defined as an unconditional surrender to the dominant culture, but as a combination of one's own identity with new elements of the target culture which are critically accepted.⁷

In the end, Paddington is basically used as a plot device as he helps the Browns to overcome their personal crises and to improve their lives. All of the Browns feel some sort of frustration as a result of the social superego and its constraints. Mr Brown is very reserved (“But what's the point of them being happy if they're not safe?”). He works as a City of London risk analyst – this fact is comically juxtaposed with his role as a father and a husband – and he is a hapless, good-hearted character. He initially perceives Paddington as a danger to his family, but later warms to him. In the film, Mrs Brown depicts the generous Britain; she is very caring and works as a children's book illustrator, which explains her friendlier attitude. She cares a lot about Paddington, and in the first encounter with him she exhibits the values of kindness and sympathy towards him – after all, she is the one who persuades Mr Brown to help the bear. However, she lacks inspiration, which she later overcomes thanks to Paddington. The daughter Judy is described by Paddington as “suffering from a serious condition called ‘embarrassment’”. She embodies a typical teenager who finds her family embarrassing. The son, Jonathan, suffers from his father's primness. He wants to be an astronaut, and he has a talent for inventing new devices; however, he is forbidden to do so as Mr Brown – after some unfortunate accidents – decides it poses a health risk. It can be stated that both elements – the dominant culture as well as the alien component – mutually enrich each other and depict an ideal positive impact of assimilation. However, the fundamental condition is that Paddington wants to assimilate and to adapt.

In the film, Paddington believes he will find a place described as welcoming and warm.

Aunt Lucy promises Paddington that London is welcoming, because the Londoners had to survive a war and many foreigners helped them and therefore they would know how to behave towards foreigners. However, Paddington encounters a cold and harsh city, in which everyone is dressed in drab clothes. He soon finds out that these values were just the idealised view of a kind geographer who lived in a fool's paradise. With this distorted idealised vision, paradoxically, Paddington tries to revive these values which are no longer present among Londoners. Although such a comparison may seem far-fetched, this belief in the welcoming "West" can be compared to current migrants' view of Western Europe, which tends to be similarly distorted. Paul King appeals to the audience to be polite to foreigners and to remember that Britain also needed help in the past, and he emphasizes the role of immigrants in the process of forming Britain. This message is present in how Paul King depicts London. For example, there are a variety of different accents in the film, which is an important feature of King's vision. The accents emphasize the image of multi-cultural London, open to anyone who needs help. Furthermore, the music for the film was composed by the *D Lime band*, representatives of Calypso music – a genre which originated in Trinidad, a country which experienced rather high emigration to the UK during the Commonwealth migration. At the end of the film, London is finally shown as a magical city which can, if its citizens want to, help those in need. Compared to the original book series, the film more comprehensively analyses the identity of migrants and shows the importance of how other unique identities can enrich the target culture. The film's depiction of migrants corresponds to the idea of micro-cosmopolitanism. The concept of micro-cosmopolitanism was defined by Cronin (14–16), one of the leading figures of American Translation Studies, and its goal is to emphasize rather than suppress "otherness".⁸

4. Adaptation of Characters

There are several characters that should be discussed in order to more precisely analyse the adaptation of the book's theme of migration into the film as well as the use of actualization. Three characters form the focus of the discussion that follows.

The first is the character of another migrant in London, Mr Gruber. In the original series, Mr Gruber was an owner of an antique shop. According to Bond, his character was based on his literary agent, Harvey Unna, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, although the character of Mr Gruber was of Hungarian descent (Byrne). In the book, he is a very kind man and a good friend of Paddington's. As they are both migrants, they tend to stick together and usually enjoy shared "elevenses" and drink cocoa rather than the more typically British tea. This can also be perceived as a typical trait of migrants who tend to build their own communities. In the book, there is no mention of why Mr Gruber came to Britain. However, in the film, his story is elaborated on. As the movie is set in contemporary London, Mr Gruber's migration is explicitly associated with the Kindertransport. There is an immediate association with Bond's image of child refugees of the pre-WWII period. There is a flashback of Mr Gruber coming to London as a child. At a train station he is greeted by his foster mother, who is depicted as a very strict and harsh woman. In one of the dialogues, Mr Gruber explains to Paddington that home is "more than a roof over your head", and sums up his experience with his new family as "my body had travelled very fast

but my heart... she took a little longer to arrive". This can be viewed as implicit criticism of people's stance towards migrants. Migrants need more time to accommodate in their new homes, and it is unjustified to strip them of their identity and expect of them to adapt immediately.

Nevertheless, Mr Gruber's character was the subject of the main complaint made by Bond towards the film. He stated that he wanted someone foreign to play the character, and argued that "because he was based on my first agent, a lovely man, a German Jew, who was in line to be the youngest judge in Germany when he was warned his name was on a list, so he got out and came to England with just a suitcase and £25 to his name" (Byrne). King decided to preserve the original reason why Bond made his main character a refugee, but gave this "legacy" to one of the secondary characters. In the film, Mr Gruber was played by the well-known British actor Jim Broadbent, who depicted the character with a rather solid (if intentionally comical) Hungarian accent.

Mr Curry is one of the few negative characters in the book. He is described as having a reputation "for meanness and for poking his nose into other people's business. He was also very bad-tempered, and was always complaining about the least little thing which met with his disapproval" (Bond 119). Although in the books he is just a mean-spirited neighbour, in the film he is an anti-hero and is abused by the main villain, Millicent Clyde (Nicole Kidman). After he falls in love with her, she uses him to get to Paddington, as she wants him stuffed in the Natural History Museum. In one scene they discuss Paddington's arrival and Mr Curry says he is afraid he will have to withstand "loud jungle music", but he also says he is happy that there is only one bear. Millicent raises his fears saying that it always begins with one, and "soon the whole street will be crawling with them", and there will be "Drains clogged with fur. Buns thrown at old ladies. Raucous all-night picnics". This scaremongering can remind us of similar arguments used on various internet forums to stimulate fear of immigrants in Europe. King pokes fun at it in a very clever and implicit way. However, in contrast to the books, Mr Curry eventually turns good, and helps the Browns to save Paddington from the hands of Millicent.

The last character that will be briefly discussed is Mrs Bird. In the books, Mrs Bird is the Browns' housekeeper. Housekeepers were quite common back in the day, and therefore there used to be no problems concerning the interpretation of her character. Nowadays, however, such a character would be difficult to explain to children, and therefore in King's vision, Mrs Bird (played by another well-known English actress, Julie Walters) is introduced as an "old relative" whose husband was in the navy, and who therefore likes to keep everything "shipshape". This introduction results from the film-makers' effort to keep the character in the film, but not to present her as a housekeeper. Nevertheless, the introduction is rather disorganized, and it is quite difficult to understand the relationship and the placing of the character within the story. There is no further elaboration of how she is related to the Browns, and therefore she seems quite out of place. The need to keep her in the story probably resulted from the fact that she is a very interesting and amusing character; however, her adaptation should have been made more unambiguous. Except for this minor issue, the adaptation by Paul King successfully implements and adapts the themes and characters of Michael Bond's story for contemporary viewers.

5. Conclusion

This paper has briefly analysed the theme of migration in the Paddington book series and its consequent re-interpretation and adaptation in the form of intersemiotic translation. It can be stated that interpretation parallels result from the evolving sociocultural context, and that any literary work can be seen as an “emptiness” providing new possibilities for interpretations. This has to be taken into account by translators translating literature from older periods, as they have to try and connect the themes of the translated work with current interpretation parallels. Migration in the film is no longer seen as an unconditional surrender to a dominant culture, but instead as a combination of one’s own identity with new values – which are accepted, albeit critically. The film successfully adapted the themes and topics of the book series and managed to give contemporary interpretation parallels for the current audience. The film differs from the books as follows:

- 1) Migration is not defined as a total surrender to the dominant culture.
- 2) Paddington’s identity and other characters’ interest in his roots are more strongly emphasized.
- 3) London is presented as a multicultural and multi-ethnic city shaped by migrants.
- 4) The film is much more critical towards the predominant (although mainly imperial) British values, and Paddington is used to question these values.

All the changes the director made were necessary to improve the interpretation for the contemporary audience; at the same time, he managed to preserve Michael Bond’s original elements in terms of the pre-WWII Kindertransport and the Commonwealth migration. Similarly to Michael Bond, Paul King combines the topics of anti-racism and politeness and presents them to the audience neither too explicitly nor too implicitly.

Notes

¹ It is not possible to state an exact span of years, as this varies.

² Later, Michael Bond revealed that the politeness of Paddington was based on his father’s politeness (Preston).

³ “A bear? On Paddington station?” Mrs Brown looked at her husband in amazement. “Don’t be silly, Henry. There can’t be!” (Bond 2)

⁴ Specifically, the infamous 1958 Notting Hill race riots. White working-class “Teddy Boys” were hostile towards the growing numbers of black families in the area (Olden).

⁵ It should be mentioned that this is not the first intersemiotic translation of Paddington. There was an animated TV show which began in 1976 and lasted to 1980 called *Paddington Bear*, and also a successful TV show called *The Adventures of Paddington Bear* (1997–2013).

⁶ The image of London also changes according to the characters’ emotional state. Happiness is depicted by radiant bright colours and sadness by drab, grey colours.

⁷ Here, Paddington also mentions his name in the Bear language.

⁸ American Translation Studies have emphasized the notion of otherness since the rise of post-colonial Translation Studies.

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