Wordplay in children’s literature: typology of word de-formation processes and translation of ex-nihilo coinages without clear extralinguistic referents

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The overwhelming presence of wordplay in English literature for young children with limited vocabulary implies that transparency of meaning is not essential to successful communication. There is more to a word than its lexical meaning: the pleasure of its sound and rhythm; the joy of distorting and deciphering it.

This article presents a typology of word de-formation processes, for neologisms encountered in a corpus of children’s literature. The analysis of this inventory shows that, in children’s literature, wordplay creation is unrestricted, ranging from readily analysable occurrences to obscure ex-nihilo coinages without clear extralinguistic referents. The classification follows Jean Tournier’s matrix of lexicogenesis (“matrices lexicogéniques”) with three types of coinages in English:

- morphological neology
- semantic neology
- morphosemantic neology

For each standard word-formation process, there is a de-formation equivalence and the de-formation processes are often combined with one another. This classification of wordplay lists lexicological processes (e.g. affixation, conversion) as well as rhetorical devices (e.g. homonymy, paronymy, reduplication) and the alteration of customary collocations and phrases. To demonstrate the playfulness of ex-nihilo coinages despite their lack of a clear referent, the article reviewed, in a parallel corpus, how Camille Fabien translates such wordplay from Roald Dahl’s The BFG into Le Bon Gros Géant.

(1) That is the most flushbunking rubbish I is ever hearing!

Dahl’s neologism, flushbunking, illustrated in (1) has four other occurrences in the text, with various referents. Camille Fabien’s translation strategies demonstrate that ex-nihilo coinages are created to stand out rather than convey meaning. Thus, a successful translation is one that recreates the global playfulness of the original utterance.

References
towards an extralinguistic referent. Coinages in the context of children’s literature range from transparent formations to opaque creations which do not necessarily have a clear extralinguistic referent. This section reviews different types of coinages and their terminology, as well as the context of children’s literature. I henceforth refer to the process as nonce formation and to the result as occasionalism. 14 J. Munat [2007: 166], in a descriptive study of novel word formations in children’s literature, states that "these fly-by-night constructions find their raison d’être exclusively..."

Typologies of word formation processes can vary depending on their theoretical framework (see J.-F. Sablayrolles [2000] and P. Åkauer [2000]). In her study of lexical Coinage is the word formation process in which a new word is created either deliberately or accidentally without using the other word formation processes and often from seemingly nothing. For example, the following list of words provides some common coinages found in everyday English: aspirin, escalator, heroin, band-aid, factoid. Frisbee. Interjections and Exclamatory Words Interjections are words we use when we express our feelings strongly and which may be said to exist in language as conventional symbols of human emotions. In traditional grammars the interjection is regarded as a part of speech. But there is another view which regards the interjection as a sentence. However a close investigation proves that interjection is a word with strong emotive meaning, e.g. Oh, where are you going to, all you Big Steamers? The interjection oh, by itself may express various feelings such as regret, despair, disappointment, sorrow, surp. Children’s literature cannot be thought of as fiction where it doesn’t make any difference whether story is set in England or Neverland. If the author has intentionally set the story in a specific culture and context, this surly has an importance for the story, at least by putting it in a frame. The more these frames are changed in a translation. Since the time of Cicero and St Jerome there has been an argument over word-for-word translation and sense-for-sense translation strategies. This division has been expressed in many different ways through history, from Nida’s formal and dynamic equivalence, Newmark’s semantic and communicative translation, House’s overt and covert translation, and so on. In other words, new literary-bookish coinages will always leave traces in the language, inasmuch as they appear in writing. This is not the case with colloquial coinages. These, as we shall see later, are spontaneous, and due to their linguistic nature, cannot be fixed unless special care is taken by specialists to preserve them. Most of the literary-bookish coinages are built by means of affixation and word compounding. This is but natural; new words built in this manner will be immediately perceived because of their unexpectedness. Unexpectedness in the use of words is the natural device of