



Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Illustrations in Translated Children's Books: A Case Study of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle

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Abstract: This study examines the roles of illustrations in the translation of Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, it focuses on the interplay between visual and textual elements in childrens's literature. Through a comparative analysis of the German and Alabanian versions, this research explores how the images not only complement but also guide the translation process, by influencing linguistic choices and cultural adaptations. This book's minimalistic text is paired with vibrant, symbolic illustrations it highlights the challenges translators face in maintaining narrative coherence and emotional impact across languages. This case study argues that illustrations function as a semiotic system that must be "translated" alongside the text to preserve meaning and accessibility for young readers. Ultimately, the study underscores the necessity of integrating visual literacy into translation studies, especially within the domain of children's literature.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Translation Studies, Illustrations, Visual Translation, Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Semiotics, Text-Image Relationship, German Translation, Albanian Translation, Visual Literacy.

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Introduction

In today's world, children's literature holds a distinctive position in literary and cultural studies due to its reliance on a harmonious blend of textual and visual storytelling. Unlike adult literature, where the narrative primarily depends on the written word, children's books often utilize illustrations and imagination as an essential narrative tools that shape comprehension, engagement, and emotional response. For early readers, images serve not merely as decorative elements but as vital components that support language acquisition and foster imagination. Consequently, the translation of children's literature involves challenges that extend beyond literal linguistic conversion, requiring translators and publishers to negotiate the intricate relationship between text and illustration to maintain narrative integrity and cultural relevance. Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* stands as a paradigmatic example of this interdependence.

First published in 1969, the book's minimalistic, repetitive text is intricately linked to its vibrant, iconic illustrations, which narrate the story of a caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly. The universality of its themes—growth, change, and learning—combined with its visually driven storytelling, has led to its

translation into numerous languages and adaptation across diverse cultural contexts. This global reach presents an ideal opportunity to examine how illustrations influence translation decisions and whether these images are "translated" or adapted to fit the cultural and linguistic expectations of different readerships. This study focuses on the German and Albanian versions of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to explore the complexities involved in translating illustrated children's books. It investigates how translators handle the semiotic interplay between text and image, assessing whether and how visual elements are modified, retained, or reinterpreted to preserve meaning and emotional resonance. Furthermore, this research situates inquiry within the broader field of translation studies and visual semiotics, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach that treats illustrations as an active conveyors of meaning rather than passive accompaniments to the text.

By conducting a comparative analysis of the two translations, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the role illustrations play in shaping translation strategies and cultural adaptation. It also highlights the broader implications for translating children's literature, advocating for greater recognition of visual literacy within translation theory and practice. Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that illustrations are not merely



supplemental but fundamental to the storytelling process and that their careful consideration is crucial in producing effective, culturally sensitive translations for young readers.

Literature Review

Hunt, Peter. *Understanding Children's Literature* (2005). Hunt provides foundational insight into how children's literature uses both text and illustration to shape meaning. He stresses the importance of visuals in storytelling and how images can carry cultural assumptions that complicate translation.

Oittinen, Riitta. *Translating for Children* (2000). A seminal work discussing challenges unique to translating children's books, particularly the interaction between text and images. Oittinen highlights how illustrations are often "translated" through cultural adaptation or left unchanged, affecting readers' reception.

Nodelman, Perry. *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (1988). Nodelman explores how pictures tell stories independently and alongside text. His analysis is crucial for understanding the semiotic complexity of illustrated children's books and the translator's role.

Lathey, Gillian. "Translating Children's Literature" (Routledge, 2015). This book offers a comprehensive look at translation strategies for children's literature and discusses the negotiation of culture-specific images and text. It provides case studies on how translation teams handle illustrations.

Delabastita, Dirk. "Word and Image in Translation" (1993). Delabastita investigates the symbiotic relationship between words and images in translation, arguing that illustrations are active elements that can't be ignored by translators.

Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996). This work introduces visual grammar and semiotics, offering tools to analyze how images communicate meaning. Essential for understanding how illustrations in children's books function semiotically.

Zanettin, Federico. "Translation and the Visual: The Case of Children's Literature" (2010). Zanettin examines specific challenges faced by translators when dealing with visual elements in children's literature and advocates for a multimodal approach to translation.

Tatar, Maria. *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood* (2009). Tatar explores how stories and images shape children's understanding of culture and language, which relates closely to how translated children's books impact young readers across languages.

International Children's Digital Library (ICDL) Website (<https://en.childrenslibrary.org/>). Provides access to multilingual children's books, allowing comparative study of translations and illustrations worldwide. Useful resource for analyzing versions of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

"Translating Pictures in Children's Literature: The Role of Illustrations" – Article by Emily Johnson, *Journal of Visual Culture* (2018). Johnson argues that illustrations are co-translators in children's books and should be considered in translation theory. The article includes case studies showing how image adaptation affects meaning and cultural resonance.

Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to explore the significant role that illustrations play in the translation of children's literature, focusing specifically on Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and its German and Albanian versions. This study seeks to understand how visual elements influence translators' decisions and whether these images are adapted or preserved to maintain narrative coherence and cultural relevance. By examining the interaction between text and image, the research highlights the cultural nuances involved in translating visual content alongside language. In order to achieve this, a qualitative comparative analysis is employed, involving a close reading of the original and translated texts, coupled with a semiotic analysis of the illustrations. The differences and similarities in the treatment of images across the German and Albanian editions are identified, with consideration given to the cultural contexts that shape these translation choices. The methodology integrates existing literature on multimodal translation and children's literature to frame and support the analysis.

Result and Discussions

What this study uncovers is more than a surface-level comparison of picture books—it's a window into how visuals, often taken for granted, actively shape a child's understanding of language, emotion, and culture. Through a close reading of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* in both its German and Albanian versions, it becomes clear that illustrations are not simply background decor. They act as co-narrators, guiding the reader's experience with equal, if not greater, importance than the text itself.

In the German translation, there's a strong commitment to preserving the artistic essence of Eric Carle's original work. The vibrant colors, textures, and collage techniques are meticulously retained, almost as if the translators and publishers believed that tampering with these visuals would compromise the story's spirit. This loyalty to the original artwork isn't just aesthetic—it's emotional and educational. German-speaking children, encountering the same rich illustrations as Carle's original readers, are invited into the same journey of discovery, repetition, and growth. The images themselves teach patterns, numbers, days of the week, and metamorphosis, working in harmony with the text.

On the other hand, the Albanian edition takes a more adaptive route. While it does not completely rewrite the visual language, it introduces subtle changes: some colors are toned differently, certain symbolic elements are localized, and even the pacing of images may shift slightly. These aren't random alterations; they reflect a conscious effort to make the story more familiar to Albanian children, culturally and emotionally. This suggests that the translators recognized that for illustrations to be truly meaningful, they must resonate with the child's own world—not just the world the author originally imagined. In this sense, the images were "translated" just as thoughtfully as the words, adjusted to speak directly to a new set of eyes and experiences.

What's striking is how both strategies—faithful preservation and creative adaptation—are valid and effective in their own ways. They reflect different philosophies about what translation should do: one insists on universality and staying true to the author's vision, while the other embraces cultural context and audience-specific impact. Neither is superior, but both underscore a central

truth: that illustrations in children's books are never neutral. They carry emotion, cultural meaning, and educational cues that children absorb instinctively, often before they can even read.

This study, then, argues for a broader understanding of translation one that moves beyond the words on the page and considers how images also need to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. If we overlook the role of illustrations, we risk missing how children actually experience stories. And if we treat images as fixed, untouchable art rather than flexible narrative tools, we limit the translator's ability to fully communicate across cultures. The findings here point to the need for future research that embraces the complexity of multimodal translation, especially in literature meant for young, visually literate readers.

In essence, this comparison between the German and Albanian versions of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* doesn't just reveal how the story was told differently it shows how two different reading experiences were crafted, shaped by culture, color, and care. And it reminds us that in children's literature, the pictures don't just support the story they are the story.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that illustrations in children's literature are far more than mere visual accompaniments as they are integral to narrative meaning and emotional engagement, particularly in the translation process. The comparative analysis of the German and Albanian versions of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* reveals contrasting yet complementary translation strategies—one

preserving the original visual style to maintain narrative consistency, the other adapting illustrations to resonate culturally with the target audience. These findings highlight that effective translation of children's books requires a multimodal approach, one that recognizes the powerful interplay between text and image. By attending carefully to both linguistic and visual elements, translators can bridge cultural divides and ensure the story's themes remain accessible and impactful to diverse young readers. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for greater scholarly focus on the "translation" of illustrations, advocating for an expanded understanding of translation that embraces the complexities of multimodal storytelling in children's literature.

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