A Fantastic Failure: Displaced Nationalism and the Intralingual Translation of Harry Potter

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British author J.K. Rowling’s hugely successful Harry Potter novels have been translated into a variety of different languages including, most peculiarly, American English. Rather than urging cultural accommodation, American editor Arthur A. Levine has altered diction and syntax within the American editions with the intention of ensuring “that an American kid reading the book would have the same literary experience that a British kid would have” (Levine qtd. in Radosh). Levine’s comment reveals the fundamental problematic of his project: how could an American child possibly have ‘the same literary experience’ as a British one when the Harry Potter texts are culturally- and originally, linguistically- British? To erase the specifically British linguistic elements of the texts is to overlook Rowling’s nuanced constructions of cultural ‘difference’ (Nel 2002, 269), as Philip Nel posits in ‘You Say “Jelly,” I Say “Jell-O”?: Harry Potter and the Transfiguration of Language.’ My paper takes up the relationship between form and content that Nel examines and expands upon the salient textual and cultural implications of his argument: namely, the notion that American English is replacing British English as the new Standard, that Americanization interferes with and crudely appropriates the nationalist imperative of the original texts and, finally, that the Americanization of Harry Potter reductively enforces and devalues Britain’s cultural distinctness from the United States.

The relationship between translation and genre-in the case of Harry Potter, children’s fantasy literature- serves as a useful way to contextualize exactly why the American editors of the series would have chosen to alter the original texts, and also to better understand the historical precedents and anxieties that affect the reception of foreign children’s books in United States. In a two-part article in The Horn Book Magazine, Jane Whitehead reveals that children’s literature is particularly vulnerable to alteration by American publishers. Whitehead’s article includes snippets of her conversations with several editors in both England and the United States, concluding that American editors are much ‘more interventionist than their British counterparts’ (Whitehead 1996, 688). At times, the statements that she includes from the American editors sound almost confessional; Dorothy Briley of Clarion Books admits, for example, ‘that it’s often the parents who are embarrassed by not having an immediate explanation for a foreign word or expression. “It’s not that the children can’t handle this,” she
says’ (Briley, qtd. in Whitehead 1996, 689). Whatever the reason, and Whitehead’s article suggests several, children’s books that contain ‘the merest whiff of “Britishness”’ (Whitehead 1996, 688) are likely to fall prey to American isolationism as it is manifested in the publishing world.

My intention in this paper is to theorize the linguistic and cultural implications of the Americanization of Harry Potter by treating Harry Potter as a case study that works to reveal the literary repercussions of American hegemony, the relationship between orthography and nationalism, and how protectionism is literally imposed about youth audiences. I have chosen to narrow my focus to the first novel in the Harry Potter series, since it was heavily edited in the United States. The educated reader need not even open the book’s cover to realize that the effects of the transatlantic translation are readily apparent and that even minor linguistic changes can result in radical discursive shifts. While the British edition, published by Bloomsbury in 1997, is entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, the American Scholastic edition alters the title to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. As Robert Scholes points out, ‘the original title makes the important connection between the world of Harry Potter and the word of the alchemists who were the precursors of modern scientific thinking.’ This titular change creates a rather odd situation in which, ‘that word *Philosopher* in the English edition connects the magic stone to the actual history of human thought in a way that the word *Sorcerer* in the American edition does not’ (Scholes 2001, 208). Sadly, the American edition is full of such changes, which erase or interfere with both the epistemology and discursive preoccupations of the text.

The linguistic changes that appear in the American edition of the text at first glance appear rather minor, and yet their implications are far-reaching. My paper looks at the nationalist discourses that operate in *The Philosopher’s Stone* and examines how the cultural context of the narrative and the ‘imagined community’ of the audience shifts according to the Americanization of spelling, diction and syntax. In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* from the 10th of July, 2000, Peter Gleick identifies ‘three kinds of substitutions’ in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*: changes in orthography, diction, and what he terms, ‘metamorphoses of truly English experiences or objects into something different, but distinctly American: crumpets to English muffins, for example (a particularly odious change, in my opinion)’ (Gleick 2000). Nel’s study echoes Gleick’s assessment, although he observes that Scholastic has altered idioms and phrases that fall within ‘three categories: words explained by their context, words that have a similar meaning in the States, and onomatopoetic words’ (Nel 2002, 275). Nel offers a tremendous amount of textual evidence to support his claims, systematically addressing the ‘substitutions’ that Gleick mentions and demonstrating how the text enacts certain changes. Rowling, who worked with Levine during the editorial process (Nel 2002, 263) dismisses the ‘changes’, claiming that they ‘really were minimal’. She raises the example of the American edition’s use of ‘sweater’ instead of ‘jumper’, joking that American children would have thought that male characters in the text were ‘wearing pinafore dresses’, and that she was ‘more than happy to substitute “sweater” to avoid that confusion’ (Rowling, qtd. in Nel 2002, 274)! Few of the changes are equally as convincing, however. Does Scholastic actually believe that American children cannot infer the meaning of ‘Happy Christmas’ (*Rowling PS*, 147) for example, which was changed to ‘Merry Christmas’ (*Rowling SS*, 200), or that fact that ‘motorbike’ (*PS*, 16) might
mean ‘motorcycle’ (?14)? All of these examples point toward a subtle cultural re-orientation
that is facilitated through linguistic change, and more specifically, a haphazard attempt to
regulate the text according to the standards of American English, rather than towards a telos of
comprehension.

A systematic review of the two editions reveals that the two manifest types of editorial
changes in the text relate to orthography and vocabulary. The additional categories that Gleick
and Nel include might be seen as delineations of the types of diction that are vulnerable to
alteration. Perhaps surprisingly, the syntax of the original text remains largely intact in the
Sorcerer’s Stone. Consequently, the text preserves a distinctly English inflection, particularly in
its dialogue, leaving the characters speaking American English at certain moments yet within a
sentence whose structure is notably British. In one scene, Hagrid watches over the birth of a
baby dragon, exclaiming, ‘Bless him, look, he knows his mummy’ (Rowling PS, 172). The
Sorcerer’s Stone replaces ‘mummy’ with ‘mommy’ (Rowling SS, 235), leaving Hagrid, who
speaks in heavy dialect, strangely invoking an Americanism for what is in practice for an
intensely familiar term. The preservation of common British syntax coupled with the
Americanization of words produces a hybridity that strips away the carefully constructed
realism of portions of the text. The realism that exists in the British edition works to foreground
the contrast between the normative world of the Muggles and the fantasy world that we
encounter at Hogwarts. The emphasis on the material conditions in which the text situates the
characters enables the reader to find commonality with the characters and to empathize with
them as members of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006, 5) that they can geographically
locate, even if that community is not one of which they are themselves a part.

As Nel points out, the social realism of the text postulates a critique of class relations in
English society (Nel 2002, 270). This critique persists in the American edition, but only in its
most didactic form. The mangled dialogue of The Sorcerer’s Stone prevents a nuanced reading
and interferes with the reader’s ability to make sophisticated connections between various
characters. As the diction that the character’s employ changes, those characters assume a
hybridity that destabilizes the symbolic functions that they serve in the original text. Social
critique in The Philosopher’s Stone is discursively reliant on an essentialist treatment of certain
characters, who explicitly perform and embody certain socioeconomic positions. Thus, when
Mr. Dursley, the acerbic middle-class father who ‘couldn’t bear people who dressed in funny
clothes’ (Rowling PS, 8) and constantly ‘shuddered to think what the neighbours would say’
(PS, 7) about his sister-in-law refers to ‘her lot’ (PS, 11), he is referring to something far more
insidious than the group of people with whom she socializes; he is, rather, locating her within a
social type. The OED defines ‘lot’ as both ‘that which is given to a person by fate or divine
providence’ and ‘a number of persons of things of the same kind’ (OED 2009). By flippantly
changing ‘lot’ to ‘crowd’ (Rowling SS, 7), Levine dilutes the text’s essentialism and suggests
instead that the Potters have gone awry out of deliberate choice as opposed to the fact that their
social position represents their ‘destiny, fortune, or “portion” in this life’ (OED 2009). Rather
than heightening the ethnographic implications of Dursley’s dislike for people in foreign garb,
the American edition positions Mrs. Potter more as a nonconformist than as a subject marked
by her Otherness.
The hybridity of the American text is particularly frustrating due to the seemingly arbitrary nature of the editorial changes, which prove to be incredibly inconsistent. The lack of intentionality on behalf of the editors registers with the astute reader who realizes less than fifty pages into the text that the intralingual translation, despite its disregard for the formal integrity of the original text, fails to impose a systematic shift to American English. Of course, a fundamental problematic of the project is that it would be impossible to entirely adapt the text to an American context since the use of English place names firmly locates the characters in England. The characters pass back and forth between Hogwarts and the land of the Muggles (England). We discover that the Dursleys live in Surrey (Rowling SS, 34), that Charlie Weasley ‘could have played [Quidditch] for England’ (SS, 170), and that the Muggles trade in ‘pence’ (SS, 200) and ‘pounds’ (SS, 76). Levine replaces words that he renders unintelligible to the American reader yet his tendency to intrude beyond the boundaries of intelligibility in pursuit of facileness sees him instituting words that are culturally familiar in place of words that are widely used outside of Britain but are, apparently, irritatingly foreign. ‘Mint humbugs’ (Rowling PS, 49) become ‘peppermint humbugs’ (SS, 62), as if such a minor clarification was necessary when ‘knickerbocker glory’ (SS, 26) remains included and unexplained. Inconsistencies run rampant. ‘The post’ (PS, 29) becomes ‘mail’ (SS, 33) in one scene in The Sorcerer’s Stone, only for the translation to be reversed a few pages later when Dursley explains that there is ‘no post on Sundays’ (SS, 41). In other places, Levine introduces an Americanism in one chapter but maintains the British term in another. Instead of employing ‘crowd’ instead of ‘lot’ consistently throughout the text, Levine adheres to the term from The Philosopher’s Stone in chapter three, which announces, ‘Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot’ (Rowling PS, 31). Ironically, in this case ‘lot’ does signify something quite close to ‘crowd.’ Perhaps the most bizarre of change in vocabulary revolves around the word ‘shan’t.’ In the first chapter of The Philosopher’s Stone, Mrs. Dursley brags that Dudley has ‘learnt a new word (“Shan’t!”’ PS, 10), a humorous statement that tellingly comments on both his intellectual capabilities—or lack thereof—and the fact that he is terribly spoiled. The Sorcerer’s Stone exchanges ‘shan’t’ for ‘won’t’ (Rowling SS, 6), ludicrously overstating Dudley’s limited vocabulary and the degree to which the ‘learnt’ word is coded in terms of class. Curiously, ‘shan’t’ appears again in the original text, only Levine decides to leave the phrase unaltered in his edition. ‘Shan’t say nothing if you don’t say please’ (Rowling SS, 160), teases Peeves, a ghost who roams the halls of Hogwarts pestering the students. In this instance, ‘shan’t’ strengthens Peeve’s association with Merry Old England, underscoring his cultural authenticity with the use of language that seemingly appears antiquated. This affective gesture romanticizes England by locating it in a temporal past to which we no longer have access except through the realm of fantasy, which the English boarding school experience has arguably always been in the American imagination. In a sense, it is British culture itself that becomes the fantasy in The Sorcerer’s Stone.

At its core, the textual inconsistency of the American edition speaks to Levine’s inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality in the British context. He decisively includes ‘humbug’ in his edition since he views it as ‘clearly a magical term’, a treat that ‘should be imagined’ (Levine, qtd. in Radosh 1999), a comment to which Radosh can only retort: ‘except it’s not. It’s a common triangular sucking candy’ (Radosh 1999). Levine’s distinction between
‘magical’ and vernacular terms here might be reconfigured as a distinction between the unknown and the foreign, which in the case of fantasy literature evade conflation. What Levine’s distinction overlooks is the fact that fantasy literature tends to metaphorize the familiar and to work out problems of the real in an alternate realm. Thus, characters such as Ron Weasley, who is mocked for his middle-class background and suspiciously Celtic origins, take on a didactic function. ‘My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford,’ scoffs Malfoy, the upper-crust boy who warns Harry to avoid ‘making friends with the wrong sort’ (Rowling SS, 108). Harry’s decision to stand up for Ron and to delight in the homemade Christmas presents that are to Ron a source of shame carries political implications within the broader schema of the text. In the fantasy world of Hogwarts, merit triumphs over class standing. Gryffindor, the house to which Harry and the Weasleys belong, ultimately wins out over Malfoy’s house-Syltherin- for example. Yet this reading of class in the text is contingent on the tension between the real and the fantastic, on one’s ability to literally fantasize one’s way out of oppressive conditions. To confuse the real and the fantastical is to risk collapsing the nuanced discussion of agency that the text takes up.

While a term such as ‘humbug’ obviously carries little weight in this schema, other words that Levine has translated carry more dangerous implications. Harry explains towards the beginning of the novel that Dudley would be attending his uncle’s alma mater the following year, the posh-sounding ‘Smeltings’. Harry, by contrast, is stuck at ‘the local comprehensive’ (Rowling PS, 28). In the American edition, ‘Smeltings’ is dropped, and we are simply told that Dudley ‘had been accepted Uncle Vernon’s old private school’ whereas Harry would enroll at ‘the local public school’ (SS, 32). These terms might roughly translate the English educational system into one, but the social distinctions that are invoked by the original terms disappear in the American context in which the audience is presumed unfamiliar with British class relations. What registers as particularly absurd is Levine’s use of the term ‘public school’. To the British reader, or even to an American reader familiar with the British school system, ‘public school’ would invoke a highly particular and politically loaded educational tradition in England. Hogwarts arguably takes up the model of the English public school and revises it so that suddenly the students who thrive are those who, like Harry and Ron, are economically marginalized. If we push this reading a bit farther, it grows evident that the fantasy of Harry Potter is one of class mobility as much as it is one of a classless society. According the House system at Hogwarts, in which the houses regularly compete so that one house’s downfall marks another’s ascendency, class divisions are not simply erased at the school but are instead ‘transfigur[ed]’ (PS, 100). By altering the types of schools that Dudley and Harry attend, Levine displaces the very system that Hogwarts revises.

Moreover, the rationalization behind the American translation of the text suggests that American English seeks to represent itself as a universally accessible language, one with the authority to impose itself upon other Englishes and yet which operates under a guise of neutrality. Braj Kachru’s insight into American English from nearly thirty years ago remains relevant today; those who couch their argument that American English is ‘slowly becoming today’s world language’ in the racist reasoning that it contains an inherent ‘simplicity and sophistication’ fail to account for the more sinister reality that ‘what actually happens is that language and power works together’ and thus ‘American English is accepted for its power and
superiority which America as a nation has acquired’ (Kachru 1981, 40). The permeation of American English in ‘English-using speech communit[ies]’ (Kachru 1981, 22) is a direct effect of American cultural imperialism and hegemony. Thus, it is no surprise that Whitehead’s review of transatlantic publishing practices acknowledges the ‘perception that the cultural accommodations are all one-sided’ (Whitehead 1997, 33). A comment by Susan Pearson, then with the American publisher Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, underscores the persistency with which certain American individuals and institutions literally attempt to position themselves linguistically as the norm. Pearson claims that ‘leaving in Briticisms adds an unnecessary level of confusion and detracts from a story’s universality’ (Pearson, qtd. in Whitehead 1996, 689). My response to this statement would be, ‘unnecessary’ for whom? Pearson clumsily attempts to position American diction- in this case she valorizes ‘truck’ over ‘lorry’- as ‘universal’, yet universal in this context actually signals American. By shrouding Americanization in a discourse of ‘universality’, American marketers Other British English as obscure, even anachronistic.

From a formalist perspective, the linguistic imperialism that occurs in the Americanization of The Philosopher’s Stone is intensely damaging to the integrity of the text. Whitehead describes how American publishers are extremely wary, even borderline xenophobic, about foreign children’s literature and yet, paradoxically, ‘reviewers and librarians in the U.S. hold publishers to very high standards of accuracy and specificity in the depiction of [various] ethnic groups.’ American publishers have even lambasted texts over ‘details as small as showing the wrong kind of foliage for a particular geographical or historical setting’ (1996, 692). This attention to detail concerning American texts falls flat when it comes to nuanced portrayals of foreign contexts. In my opinion, this can once again be attributed to American isolationism and hegemony, a failure to take interest in alternative nationalist discourses or attend to the nuances within them.

In the case of Harry Potter, Americanization haphazardly homogenizes carefully nuanced discourses of difference and wipes away sociopolitical cultural critiques that operate within the original version of the text. As Nel observes, Rowling’s inclusion of various dialects in the original texts maintains a political function; the Irish character is differentiated from the English ones by his use of ‘mam’ instead of ‘mum’, for example, and yet in the American edition both characters say ‘mom’ and the difference between their subject positions is violently erased (Nel 2002, 269). ‘To blur these differences through Americanization,’ Nel contends, ‘is to diminish both the aesthetic enjoyment and political critiques of the novels’ (2002, 269). Levine’s ‘translations’ become thinly veiled acts of appropriation that interrupt the nationalist discourse and subtly erode the text’s Britishness. Intralingual translation literally re-configures the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006, 5), in Benedict Anderson’s terms, of Rowling’s audience, displacing British nationalism in the text and foregrounding America’s simultaneous fascination with and ideological rejection of all things British (Baker 2009). British culture is foreign enough that it cannot, in the eyes of American editors, be easily acculturated at a child’s level, and yet it is strangely culturally and linguistically proximal enough to America that, as Nel states, rather bluntly: ‘the distortions evident in translations of British children’s books into American English prove that American definitions of multiculturalism do not include Great Britain’ (Nel 2002, 268).
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The fact that foreign children’s books are especially prone to intralingual translation in the United States suggests that the child becomes the site on which linguistic regulatory practices seek to secure domination and control. Rather than encouraging linguistic pluralism, the American edition operates on the assumption that there exist corresponding words and objects across cultures, that America is self-sufficient and nothing meaningful can exist outside of it. This entrenched solipsism manifests itself throughout The Sorcerer’s Stone, in which Scholastic exchanges vocabulary and standardizes spelling according to American English. The Sorcerer’s Stone drops the “u” from various words so that ‘rumours’ (Rowling PS, 13) become ‘rumors’ (SS, 10), for example, and ‘armor’ (SS, 129) replaces ‘armour’ (PS, 94). Sprinkling in American spelling in amongst culturally British terms such as chipolatas (SS, 203) and ‘blimey’ (SS, 79), the American editors seems to be motivated less by a desire to completely Americanize the text linguistically than by the impulse to exercise control over the foreign. By changing the text on its most fundamental level, that of language, Levine disrupts the foreign authenticity of the text and instead renders the text American through appropriation. Despite the fact that the setting remains British in the American edition, it is a Britain that is constructed by an outsider-Levine-rather than by a member of the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006, 5). A tension emerges in the relationship between representation and of the text’s linguistic constituency. Beyond the obvious formalist implications of translation, this move to shift the imagined audience simultaneously works to dictate what exactly it is that the audience imagines. Scholes suggests that ‘some American marketing genius’ must have realized that ‘sorcerers would sell a lot more books than philosophers’ (Scholes 2001, 208). Surely the switch to ‘sorcerers’ relates to the discursive function of witchcraft in the United States, a practice that has both captivated and repulsed the national audience since the days of Puritanism. The title of The Sorcerer’s Stone invokes a particularly American history that would resonate with school children far more heavily that philosophy, a tradition whose history is far less sensational in the American context.

The anxiety over American children’s inability to comprehend foreign words grows particularly nonsensical when we consider the contradiction that American audiences are expected to infer the relative meaning of neologisms in fantasy writing and yet are paradoxically presumed incapable of deciphering diction from the British vernacular. Whitehead asks, ‘what assumptions are being made about the ability and willingness of American children to deal with cultural differences’ (1996, 688)? I would like to put some pressure on this question by asking, instead, what editorial moves are being made to determine the willingness of American children to deal with cultural differences? Circling back to Levine’s comment regarding ‘humbugs’, we might glean insight from the differentiation that he makes between fantasy and the vernacular in his editorial approach, one that Whitehead observes is common in the United States where editors are generally ‘more interventionist than their British counterparts’ (Whitehead 1996, 689). The existence of various substitutions- ‘trash can’ (Rowling SS, 70) for ‘dust bin’ (PS, 55), ‘booger’ (SS, 104) for ‘bogies’ (PS, 130), or ‘chip bags’ (SS, 44) for ‘a packet of crisps’ (PS, 37)- are suggestive of Levine’s efforts to render the British world that the text depicts recognizable and accessible to the American child. Moreover, Levine’s tendency to edit English words yet to preserve Rowling’s neologisms raises the possibility that intralingual in this instance is driven by an American need to dominate within the linguistic realm of
English. Because neologisms are, in a sense, idiosyncrasies produced by the author and interpreted subjectively, to a degree, by the reader, they remain relatively non-threatening as they carry no practical repercussions. Neologisms are exempt from the power dynamics that are inherent in language, with the exception of their ability to perform those dynamics in an abstracted realm.

Levine’s decision to substitute Americanisms for what he perceives as ambiguous or evasive words falsely presupposes an inherent textual meaning that is somehow divorced from language and which might be re-configured across different cultures, when in actuality meaning is constructed through language and the subjective act of reading. Textual interpretation is idiosyncratic; to alter the diction of the text is to present a different text entirely rather than to present a text that more accurately conveys the essential meaning of the text, which is arguably non-existent. Levine masks the desire to assert American control over the English language by suggesting that his editorial changes are simply an effort to clarify the text for the reader. ‘A kid should be confused or challenged when the author wants the kid to be confused or challenged and not because of a difference of language’ (qtd. in Nel 2002, 274) Levine maintains. Yet his premise that he has access to the author’s intentions, or that any reader does, is not only problematic, it robs the reader of the pedagogical imperative of reading.

Pedagogically, Levine’s exclusion of words that he deems difficult to the American child encourages solipsism and hinders the process by which readers are forced to encounter, through the process of reading, words and concepts with which they are unfamiliar. The fact of difference in language is unavoidable, as Venuti points out (2002, 216). As we have seen, Rowling expresses sociopolitical difference through language within the text, but it is also crucial to register the fact that difference is also constituted by language. Language itself is a form of difference, one that is connected to identity and subject-formation. The characters in Harry Potter are marked by their Englishness at the same time that they embody various socioeconomic subject positions in part through their use of language. In a generic sense, the changes to spelling and diction work to conceal the complex positionalities of the characters by interfering with the social realism of the text. Even more disturbing is the ways in which by re-scripting the characters, The Sorcerer’s Stone irreparably alters them. The Harry Potter of the original texts is forced to wear a ‘jumper’ with ‘bobbles’ (Rowling PS, 23), not a ‘sweater’ with ‘puff balls’ (SS, 24); he eats ‘crumpets’ (PS, 146) not ‘English muffins’ (SS, 199) and plays ‘football’ (PS, 61) not ‘soccer’ (SS, 79). In certain instances a change in signifier does not exactly alter the sign it signifies, but at other times, as we see in the case of the crumpet, it erroneously does.

More importantly, the Americanization of the text undermines the particularly English ways in which the characters represent their experiences through language and render those experiences meaningful. It is through language that subjects ‘experience themselves as belonging to a nation’ (Jones 2001, 1064), even if that language is not indigenous to the nation. To a certain degree, all language is a deferral of meaning. Derrida argues, ‘as a disseminating operation separated from presence (of Being) according to all its modifications, writing, if there is any, perhaps communicates, but does not exist.’ Regardless of its evasiveness, language undeniably possesses a social function: ‘communicat[ion]’ (Derrida 2007, 132). In other words, we cannot divorce language from its social context. Therefore, to exchange British phrases for
American ones is not a move that grants the reader enhanced access to a supposed origin or pure form of meaning, but instead de-contextualizes, and then necessarily re-contextualizes, the phrase.

Intralingual translation should be avoided, in my opinion, for the sheer reason that translation inevitably relies on a false assumption of ‘similarity of form and meaning or of reception’ when in reality ‘any such similarity is constructed on the basis of irreducible differences’, as Venuti reminds us (2002, 216). Translation can reductively eliminate the polyphony of a text by translating various dialects into a homogenous standard. On a larger scale, the reductiveness of translation results in a dangerous move towards the standardization of English in literature. This reductiveness undermines a potential appeal of the English language: it inclusivity. As English expands in usage around the globe, it is increasingly important that we embrace linguistic pluralism both within and beyond English. ‘Educators should welcome the various forms of the English language, and promote understanding of these varieties of facilitating communication’, Marko Modiano rightly argues (1996, 209). Since literature is, in essence, communication, it is especially important that linguistic plurality be accepted, expected and celebrated amongst editors and literary critics alike. To reduce the forms of English that are marketed to the American public, and particularly children, is to deny that public the opportunity to access experiences that exist beyond the boundaries of its own nation. The heavy editing of children’s books that occurs within the American publishing industry is particularly sad and ironic since children lack a rigid sense of standards, one reason why they are more open to fantasy (Baker 2009).

While some critics might posit that Levine’s production of an American version of the text contributes to linguistic plurality by providing an American edition, it is important to consider that The Sorcerer’s Stone might newly represent The Philosopher’s Stone but it hardly constitutes a thoughtful re-interpretation of the text. In the case of adaptation, intralingual translation is perfectly permissible, and might even enrich the audience’s understanding of the original. A useful way to approach adaptation is through an ethics of translation. In his discussion of ethics, Venuti instructively draws on Freud in order to interpret the fact that ‘the verbal slips that reveal the workings of the unconscious may include omissions of key words and phrases’ and how ‘the unconscious desire revealed in the omission was at once collective, possibly nationalist, clearly political’ (2002, 234). What I am particularly interested in Venuti’s theory is his discussion of ‘difference’ (2002, 237) because I feel that difference, as Nel and others point out, is what the Americanization of Harry Potter paradoxically both institutes and displaces. Venuti posits that ‘the goal’ of translations studies should be ‘the ultimately ethical one of developing methods of translation research and practice that describe, explain, and take responsibility for the differences that translation inevitable makes’ (2002, 216). My fundamental issue with the Americanization of Harry Potter is the failure of the American edition to, in Venuti’s words, ‘take responsibility’ for the linguistic and cultural changes it enacts.

It is precisely this lack of self-reflexivity that prevents The Sorcerer’s Stone from qualifying as an adaptation of The Philosopher’s Stone. In A Theory of Adaptation, Linda Hutcheon articulates a nuanced series of proposals of what might constitute an adaptation. Her project, seemingly, is not to construct a rigid definition of adaptations, but instead to destabilize the authority of the ‘original’ (Hutcheon 2006, xii) text and to push the boundaries of how we might
think about the evolution of texts. Even though she points out that ‘not every adaptation is necessarily a remediation’ (2006, 170), a crucial premise of her text is the notion that ‘adaptation usually signals its identity overtly’ (2006, 121). Hutcheon’s observation that, in ‘transcultural adaptations’, ‘sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial’ (2006, 147) is highly relevant and compelling. However, I find it difficult to classify *The Sorcerer’s Stone* as an adaptation granted that it was released at essentially the same time as *The Philosopher’s Stone* and was meant to act as a substitution for, not as a supplement of, the original British text for American audiences. Granted that the text is therefore not an adaptation, the subject position and theoretical attitudes of the translator are necessarily situated at the foreground of any analysis of this act of intralingual translation. Since the American edition does not explicitly signify its own status as translation, it inevitably conceals its deviation from the original text. This is a reductive gesture that fails to promote linguistic plurality.

Interestingly, Scholastic has been less heavy-handed in its translation of later volumes of the *Harry Potter* series. The reasons for the decline in textual interference are unclear. Nel notes that this trend begins with the fourth novel, *The Goblet of Fire*, speculating that the text might have been less Americanized ‘because the manuscript arrived too late for Scholastic’s editors to edit it thoroughly’, but adds optimistically that they may have simply ‘come to realize the vast potential for mis-translating’ (Nel 2002, 270). Since all translation is, in a sense, a ‘mis-translati[on]’, it seems that if the editors at Scholastic were to pause and reflect upon the erroneous ‘potential’ of translation, their conclusions would ultimately force them to abandon the project entirely. Of the seven texts in the series, it is only *The Philosopher’s Stone* whose title has been changed. While Scholastic continued to Americanize the six ensuing novels, the editorial process remained erratic. A more comprehensive study of the evolution of Levine’s editorial practices over the course of the Harry Potter’s series might take up the affect of the increasing popularity of the texts on transatlantic publishing practices. Scholastic’s editorial approach to the *The Sorcerer’s Stone* appears consistent with the contemporary practices that Whitehead delineates. However, Whitehead also points towards changes within the publishing industry. ‘As reading becomes more embattled both in America and in Britain’, she posits, ‘it seems that this shrinking from the “literary or difficult” is paralleled by an equally impoverishing pressure towards insularity’ (1997, 29). Yet the notion that young readers are increasingly lazy or disinterested in reading is somewhat antithetical to the fantasy genre, which relies on the active use of the imagination.

Heightened attention to reader response also signals the susceptibility of children’s literature to the material concerns of the publishing industry. It is difficult to conceive of highbrow, canonical texts succumbing to Americanization. Gleick jests, ‘would we sit back and let publishers rewrite Charles Dickens or Shakespeare’ (Gleick 2000)? His comment highlights the role of both genre and audience in the translation of *The Philosopher’s Stone*. The fact that children’s literature is often heavily edited suggests that editors are more concerned with content than they are with form. Children’s literature seems to be defined generically by its content rather than its form, and therefore to subvert formalist concerns. Children are also less equipped to understand the effects of translation on their readings of the text, if they are even aware that the text has been edited. Intralingual translation depends on synonymy, yet as
Roman Jakobson articulates, ‘synonym, as a rule, is not complete equivalence’ (Jakobson 1971, 261). Scholastic’s decision to apply liberal changes to *The Sorcerer’s Stone* assumes that children will be unfazed by its awkward stabs at replacing a Briticism with its inexact American equivalent.

Most American children would be unable to theorize the effects of these changes due to their limited exposure to British culture, particularly if they have been sheltered from cultural and linguistic pluralism. While children may indeed be less pedantic about linguistic standards than adults- and this is merely a hypothesis- they also possess less developed vocabularies than most adults. In fact, they are very much in the process of developing their vocabularies, which is likely the reason why American editors are invested in the national flavour of the linguistic economy of any text that falls into the hands of children within their society. The Americanization of children’s literature is underscored, however, by the reality of American cultural, economic and political hegemony, and a long history of American isolationism. The vast majority of the British editors that Whitehead interviews strongly perceive transatlantic ‘cultural accommodations’ to be ‘all one-sided’ (Whitehead 1997, 33). Authors in Britain meet with increasing ‘pressure to conform to the needs of the mighty U.S. market’ while American writers enjoy a privileged position within a nation whose publishing industry, in terms of children’s literature, is largely self-sustaining (1997, 31). American children may lose out on the riveting sense of adventure that foreign texts supply by nature of their foreignness, but the publishing world prioritizes marketplace concerns over pedagogical ones and in the case of foreign children’s books, it seems to have a clear sense of which products will sell and which will fail to do so.

It ultimately proves difficult to undertake a comprehensive analysis of American editorial practices in relation to *Harry Potter* given the evasiveness of the editorial process. However, the effects of the American translation exist most keenly within the texts themselves and therefore it is the texts that ultimately deserve our attention. An examination of how *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *The Sorcerer’s Stone* function in relationship to one another reveals the discursive importance of vocabulary and orthography, and the cultural and pedagogical implications of translation. The editorial approach at Scholastic fits into a broader history of transatlantic publishing practices, one in which editors assert control over the forms of English that American children ingest. As a result, children’s literature in America is familiarized. Even when a text displays cultural differences, familiarity remains in the sense that those culture differences tend to be distinctly American. Perhaps most troubling about Levine’s appropriation of *The Philosopher’s Stone* is the ambiguity surrounding his understanding of the fact that ‘language and culture’ are ‘most intimately (and obviously) interrelated on the levels of semantics’ (House 2002, 95). On the one hand, the erratic linguistic changes seem to convey a flippant disregard for the cultural function of language, yet on the other, they might actually signal a crafty exploitation of precisely this relationship. Through language, *The Sorcerer’s Stone* manages to re-signify the social landscape of the text so that it is hybrid and fantastical at best, but nevertheless divorced from its Britishness. While the text might still feel authentically English to the foreign reader, there is a perverse irony to the fact that certain Americanisms in *The Sorcerer’s Stone* would render bits of the text illegible to British children, despite the fact that American edition maintains a British setting.
This conflict over translation ultimately boils down to a tension between ‘cultural specificity’ and ‘cultural universalism’ (House 2002, 107). The problem with the premise that *The Philosopher’s Stone* is a text that should be universally accessible is that it is text that is highly culturally specific despite the fact that it is a fantasy, or perhaps *because* of the fact that it is a fantasy. Fantasy allows the author to critically examine her own culture in a socially acceptable realm. This is not to say that American children cannot imaginatively participate in the world of the text. Rather, engagement with the text should ideally lead young readers of all nationalities to reflect upon their own subject positions and to stretch the limits of their own experiences through language. Ironically, it is through engagement with varieties of English that English-speaking American children could most poignantly realize their own American-ness. And if the discomfort of American editors with this arrangement is the way in which British texts situate American culture as the Other rather as the norm, than that is all the more reason why those British texts should remain intact. What *The Philosopher’s Stone* ultimately suggests is that self-reflection on the particularity of one’s own experience inevitably results in a greater understanding of one’s interconnectedness with a greater of humanity. The editors at Scholastic might want to consider this schema, and to leave *Harry Potter* well enough alone.
References


