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Implications of the Transition from the Present to the Past Tense in the Translation into English of Children's Texts

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Time, Narrative Intimacy and the Child: Implications of the Transition from the Present to the Past Tense in the Translation into English of Children's Texts

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RÉSUMÉ

La version britannique de l'*Histoire de Babar* de Jean de Brunhoff fournit un exemple frappant d'un procédé fréquemment employé dans la traduction en anglais de textes pour enfants, et qui consiste à traduire le présent de narration par le passé simple. À partir des théories sur le temps narratif on cherche à évaluer dans quelle mesure ce glissement dans les temps verbaux est susceptible d'influencer, d'une part, la qualité littéraire du texte traduit par rapport à l'original, d'autre part, les possibilités d'une lecture performative partagée par un adulte et un enfant et finalement le développement cognitif de l'enfant dans son appréciation du rôle joué par les temps verbaux dans les récits.

ABSTRACT

The British version of Jean de Brunhoff's *Histoire de Babar* is a striking example of the transition from the present to the past tense in the translation of children's texts into English. With reference to theories of narrative time, this paper invites speculation on the impact of such a tense shift on the present-tense qualities of the original, on the performance of a shared reading by child and adult and, finally, on the relevance of the young child's developing understanding of the role of tense in narrative.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

children's text, narrative, picturebook, tense transition, shared reading

"Each tense," said Neville, "means differently."
Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Anthea Bell is one of Britain's most highly respected translators and a past recipient of the Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation. When reflecting on her extensive experience of translating children's books in 'Translator's Notebook' (Bell, 1986), she drew attention to the 'delicate matter' of translating the historic present – that is the present tense as basic narrative mode – of French and German children's stories into English. In Bell's opinion the historic present in English is an exciting, but unusual, narrative strategy:

> I am most reluctant to use the historic present in English in a middle-of-the-road kind of children's novel, even if it is the main tense of a French or German original. In English, the historic present seems more a tense for a stylist than is necessarily the case in other languages. I like it myself; I like its immediacy. But I feel it needs to be approached with caution in translating children's fiction. (Bell, 1986: 17)

Bell's cautious response to the translation of the present tense is challenging. It suggests that tense in narratives is linked to dominant literary conventions within languages, and that tense shifting in translation is one means by which a text is assimilated into the target culture. It also provokes speculation on the imaginative and aesthetic effects of the narrative present in children's texts, and the consequences of a change of tense in the process of translation. One striking example of a transposition of tense is to be found in the British edition of Jean de Brunhoff's picture book *Histoire de Babar*, where the unacknowledged translator[1] has changed the present tense of the original French to the past in English. By analysing the causes and effects of this shift on the British *Babar*, and exploring the relationship between language, narrative and the perception of time, I hope to establish some of the qualities of the present tense that are potentially lost in translation and, finally, to relate this discussion to the young child's developing understanding of the role of tense in narrative.

Since, as Paul Ricoeur has asserted, our experience of time is 'constitutive of human reality' (Onegin and Landa, 1996: 129), its apprehension is reflected in language at both lexical and grammatical levels. European languages superimpose a system of verb tenses and aspectual contrast ('I live in London' as opposed to 'I am living in London') on the fluidity of real time. In narrative, that 'primary act of mind,' tense naturally plays a pivotal role, as human beings tell each other about their past, present or potential future experiences, and exchange information in narrative form. As Ricoeur has argued: 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence' (1984: 52). When time is articulated in narrative, tense has less to do with an attempt to express the physical laws of time than with the registration of subjectivity. What matters in narratives is not the accurate recording of real time, but the significance of events within the story for its protagonists. Hence the distinction first made by Müller (1968) between narrative time – the time it takes for the narrator to tell his or her story – and narrated time, that is the time narrated events would take to unfold in real time. Real time may be condensed, 'folded,' slowed down or accelerated in narratives encompassing a few minutes, hours, years, decades or even centuries.

All narrators, from the gossip to the bard, manipulate real time in this way; they must deftly orchestrate tense and the apprehension of time by an audience in order to ensure maximum impact of the story to be told. When a writer or storyteller decides to adopt the present tense to relate events that happened in the past, there is a merging of narrative and narrated time either for the whole of the narrative or for substantial passages, as events are related by an 'on the scene' narrator. A synchronicity of narration and events is, of course, impossible; there is a time lag even for the sports reporter with microphone in hand or the surrealist scribbling down fragmentary thoughts in 'automatic' writing. Nevertheless, in present tense narratives such as *Histoire de Babar* narrator and reader collude in ignoring this paradox: they are united in an illusion of presentness. Present tense narratives are a literary convention quite separate from the marking of real time. It has even been argued that the present tense, as a tense without explicit reference to time, is temporally neutral, and that it may therefore on occasion 'substitute' for the past in narratives (Fleischman, 1990: 286).

To regard the historic present as a mere substitute or stylistic flourish, however, is to ignore the qualities that make it special. Suzanne Fleischman, in her comprehen-

sive study of tense and narrativity, examines these qualities in narratives from medieval performance to modern fiction. In the modernist novel of the first half of the twentieth century, for example, the present tense allows the reader access to thought processes *as they occur*. Anthea Bell's decision to break her own rule and retain the present tense in her translation from German of a stream-of-consciousness narrative reflecting a boy's responses to his grandfather's last illness, Elfie Donnelly's children's novel *So Long Grandpa*, owes much to this tradition of interiority. Taking examples from medieval French epic poetry, Fleischman also addresses the visual qualities of the present tense which 'in ordinary language is primarily a descriptive tense' (1990: 285) as well as the immediacy of the narrator as spectator. Surprisingly, she makes no reference to the frequent use of the present tense in children's literature; yet it is precisely these visual attributes, together with the nature of the interaction between adult reader and child listener, that are particularly relevant to the picture book.

Jean de Brunhoff's classic picture book, *Histoire de Babar* (1931), is a present tense narrative that was first published in English in two separate editions. Merle Haas, translator of the American version of 1933, retained the present tense of the original. The translator of the British *Babar*, on the other hand, opted for the past tense in an edition that appeared a year later, thanks to the offices of *Winnie-the-Pooh* author, A.A. Milne. Two translators, translating into the English language at about the same time, made quite different choices. Merle Haas decided to align her translation with the French cultural practice of using the present tense in children's stories, whereas the British translator of *Histoire de Babar* appears to have shared the unease Anthea Bell expresses at using the present tense as a basic narrative mode, and chose instead to follow the dominant convention in contemporary British children's stories. One reason for this divergence may be the more innovative and open climate in some of the leading American publishing houses at the time; the American translation of Erich Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives*, too, is far closer to the original German in its rendering of street slang than the conservative British version with its entirely inappropriate middle class register.

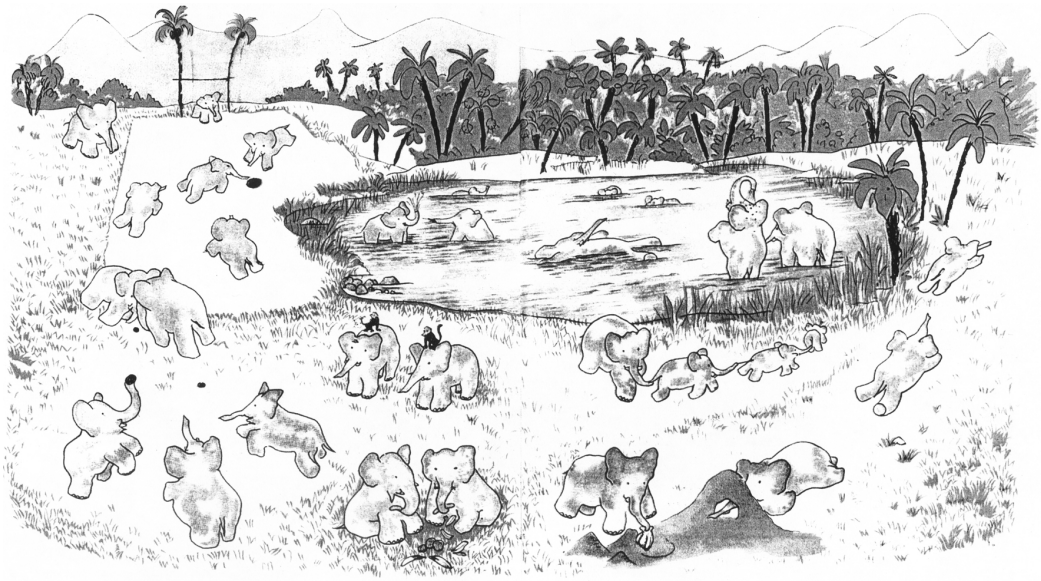
A closer look at the original French text of *Babar* soon reveals a second, text-based reason for the British translator's tense shift. There is a retrospective narrative viewpoint underlying Babar's story; an organising narrative entity is at work who is in command of the story material and knows the outcome. This becomes apparent when the narrator jumps forward two years from one page to the next during Babar's Parisian séjour; despite the present tense, narrated time and narrative time are not synchronous throughout the story. Another folding of time occurs during Babar's return journey to the jungle, which takes place as the reader's attention is diverted to a double spread account of the elephant king's death. By switching focus, the narrator allows the journey time to elapse unnoticed. An occasional use of the past perfect – by the second page of the book Babar 'a grandi' (has grown) – also interrupts the present tense reportage and indicates omniscience. Such intimations of the inherent pastness of events recounted in a present tense narrative may well have determined the British translator's choice of the past tense.

Histoire de Babar in fact exemplifies a function of the historic present addressed by Dorrit Cohn in her discussion of the representation of consciousness in fiction. Cohn describes the eyewitness account of events by Darl in William Faulkner's *As I lay Dying* as: 'a retrospective narration in the evocative present tense' (Cohn, 1978:

206). In *Babar*, too, the present tense is instrumental in the 'calling forth' of past events into the present. Yet the narrator of *Histoire de Babar* operates on two levels, both as orchestrator and controller of time and action within the story, and as eye-witness reporter on pictured events to which the child has immediate visual access. Narrative voice and child listener share the same time frame as they activate de Brunhoff's illustrations in the present, and it is at this level that there is the greatest change in narrative perspective in the British version.

Babar's story, first told to her children by de Brunhoff's wife Cécile, is clearly intended to be read aloud to a young child. The book becomes a catalyst for a kind of playacting that includes gesture, physical contact and dialogue, all inspired by the joint interpretation of pictures as well as by the reading aloud of the written text. Philip Pullman, in an essay on the reading of images, has asserted that: 'Pictures have a present-tense quality which anyone who has shared a picture book with a child will recognise' (1989: 167). Pullman alludes not to a presentness encoded in the picture, or even to the tense of the accompanying text, but to the shared animation of that picture in the present. Even where a picture book text is written in the past tense, adult and child activate the pictures using the present tense. The present tense of the French *Babar* is therefore entirely in keeping with this act of narrative elicitation. Anthea Bell, too, cites visual narratives as an exception to her general wariness of the historic present in English. As co-translator with Derek Hockridge of the *Astérix* series into English, she regards the strip cartoon as a present tense genre because it resembles: 'a dramatic performance unfolding before the reader's eyes' (Bell, 1986: 17). The present tense as a narrative mode does, after all, have its historical roots in orally performed epics or the enactment of human experience in drama.

As *Babar* is read aloud, the adult reader becomes the narrator and acts as guide, taking the young listener by the hand as together they activate the static images of the text. The British translator, swayed by de Brunhoff's 'evocative' use of the present into using the past as the basic narrative tense, is nevertheless aware of this second, animating function of the present tense. On the second page of *Histoire de Babar*, the French narrator indicates which elephant is Babar by pointing to the action in which he is engaged: 'C'est lui qui creuse le sable avec un coquillage' (1979: 9). In a scene immanent with movement, the British translator is compelled to abandon the narrative past by using the deictic 'look' and the present participle: 'look at him digging in the sand with a shell' (1989: 5). The present tense in French, and the elision of the continuous present form in English, set in motion a repeated action in the imagination. Later in the story, when all the elephants run to greet Babar on his return to the jungle, the British translator again resorts to the present participle. The French narrator addresses his audience directly, asking the child reader what he or she sees: 'Qu'est qu'ils voient! Babar qui arrive dans son auto et tous les éléphants qui courent en criant.' In English the event has already taken place, but the present participles compensate to some extent for the loss of immediacy: 'What a wonderful sight they saw! It was Babar arriving in his car, with all the elephants running and shouting' (1995: 40). For the caption to Babar's photograph the translator even uses the present tense, translating: 'Et voila sa photographie' (1979: 21) as 'And here is his photograph' (1989: 17). The photograph, after all, is visible *now* within the text; this would not be the case in a prose narrative where a photograph could be described using the past tense.



Babar grew fast. Soon he was playing with the other baby elephants.
He was one of the nicest of them. Look at him digging in the sand with a shell.

In these instances the requirements of the image force the translator's hand, but he or she resolutely maintains the past tense throughout the text. In addition to the inevitable distancing of events, the interaction of pictures and text is affected in less obvious ways. Picture book authors and artists make careful choices to ensure a counterpoint between written text, narrative perspective, layout and image; here a change in tense can make a subtle but significant difference. The death of Babar's mother on the fourth page of *Histoire de Babar* is one of the most memorable and shocking moments in children's literature: in an oral reading of the French original the listener effectively watches *as the huntsman shoots*. De Brunhoff introduces a cinematic cut between the scene where the hunter is shooting ('tire,' present tense) at Babar and his mother, and the picture on the next page of Babar weeping on his mother's corpse. On this second page there is a rare instance in the French text of the use of the past perfect to telescope time: 'Le chasseur a tué la maman' (1979: 11). De Brunhoff deliberately bridges the messy process of injury and death both visually and linguistically by creating a hiatus in the narrative flow.[2] In the British version the entire event is consigned to the past, from: 'a cruel hunter, hiding behind a bush, shot at them,' to 'He killed Babar's mother' (1989: 6-7). The jarring effect of the tense switch in the original is erased. Nor does the British translator seize the opportunity to reverse this shift by adopting the so-called dramatic present to fully re-engage the reader's attention in the here-and-now.

Changing the basic narrative tense of *Histoire de Babar* and the corresponding interplay of tenses is, then, likely to have an effect on the narrative triangle in a read aloud event. The intimacy of the relationship between the narrative voice of the adult reading aloud, the child who listens and imagines, and the images quickened by

both adult and child, is enhanced in the case of the French original by the present tense. In turning my attention finally to the child listener's own usage of tense in narratives, I wish to suggest two points for consideration in relation to the broader issues raised by Anthea Bell's discussion of the historic present. Firstly, it has become a commonplace to assert that adults and young children experience time differently. Whilst it is certainly true that children younger than five or six do not share adult concepts such as day, year, 'sooner' or 'later' – to tell a sobbing child on its first day at school that its mother will be back that afternoon or in a few hours is no comfort at all – adult and child nevertheless share the subjective apprehension of time. The sensation of time 'dragging' or 'flying' – what Martin Heidegger has called 'within-timeness'– is common to all human beings whatever their age; it is the linguistic reckoning with time in the form of vocabulary and grammatical structures such as tenses that children only gradually assimilate. A child may therefore not locate narrative events temporally in quite the same way as an adult. My second point, which concerns children's use of tense in dramatic play, throws some light on this developmental question.

Young children begin to use the past tense as a narrative mode quite early, adopting the language of anecdotes or stories read and told to them by adults[3]; yet at the same time they engage in dramatic play where stories are created or re-enacted in the present. Child players move seamlessly in and out of participant and spectator roles, with tense sometimes acting as an indicator of the degree of engagement. A child takes on a role, whether as Cinderella, a character from a favourite soap opera or a superhero; he or she becomes that figure and speaks in the present tense. Yet at any moment the child may move outside the story to act as spectator, and the shift into narrative mode is often reflected in a change of tense to the past. In transcripts

of children's play, such as those collected by American kindergarten teacher Vivian Gussin Paley (1981: 192-193), it is possible to see this movement into and out of the text created in play. One particularly revealing example occurs in Gordon Wells' longitudinal study of pre-school language development, where three five-year-old boys are taking an imaginative journey on a boat. One of them, David, introduces a note of distress:

> *David*: All our luggage is–is–One of, er–one of our boyfriends is crying in a corner [*pretends to cry.*] Pretend one of the–the–their children was crying in a corner (Wells, 1987: 199)

Not only does David switch tense from 'is crying' to 'was crying,' but he also articulates the reason for doing so. His instruction to the other players to 'pretend' that one of the children 'was crying' indicates a move from inside to outside the story, and from participant to spectator and initiator of the dramatic scenario. Such an approach to time and narrative, while echoing adult conventions, also demonstrates the child's ability to immerse himself instantaneously in an imaginary world as though it existed in the present. This suggests that the more frequent use of the historic present in French and German narratives noted by Anthea Bell is in fact in tune with the younger child's orchestration of tense in play. Misgivings about maintaining the historic present in translation into English may therefore be unfounded, at least as far as a young child audience is concerned.

The next step in investigating the translation of tense in children's fiction is a large-scale comparative study; translation of the historic present into English in longer prose fiction, for example, raises a different set of questions from those posed by the translation of a picture book. The focus in this paper has been on the younger child, and it is pertinent to my conclusions that Riitta Oittinen, in her discussion of translation issues specific to children's literature, privileges read aloud qualities (2000: 32). Surely the narrative intimacy of the present tense, which potentially affords the closest possible relationship between narrator and addressee, is one of these qualities that a translator should preserve, particularly when pictures contribute a third dimension to the read aloud performance. A case study of the reception by bilingual children of the French and British versions of *Babar* could also further illuminate children's responses to past and present tense narratives. In the great forest a little elephant *is* born; or: 'In the Great Forest a little elephant *was* born'(1989: 3) – the present tense lends a tone and an aura to a narrative that *do* matter.

NOTES

1. Despite extensive research I have been unable to trace the translator of the British edition.
2. In an early draft de Brunhoff included both scenes on one page and used the present tense 'tue'; it can only be assumed therefore that the separation of images and change in tense was designed to enhance impact. See Fox Weber (1989: 25)
3. Arthur Applebee in *The Child's Concept of Story* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978) cites an earlier, extensive study by Pitcher and Prelinger (*Children tell stories: An analysis of fantasy,* New York: International Universities Press, 1963) whose analysis demonstrated an increase in the consistent use of the past tense in storytelling by children between the ages of two and five.

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