



'Le Grand Place', the main (best known) square in Brussels, Belgium

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IDENTITY IN PRACTICAL TRANSLATION: CONDUCTING CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES

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Résumé. - *"Folktale" constitue un projet interdisciplinaire ambitieux, qui étudie, dans différentes cultures, les réactions des lecteurs par rapport à trois contes populaires authentiques (originaires du Danemark, du Groënland et de Turquie). Les personnes interrogées lisent les trois contes sur la base du "même texte" dans les langues qu'ils comprennent: l'anglais ou le danois. Le présent article est exclusivement consacré au travail accompli par l'équipe de recherche dans l'élaboration d'une étude répondant aux exigences rigoureuses de la psychologie expérimentale. A cet effet, l'article présente l'organisation complexe du travail de traduction et les problèmes liés à la mise au point des "mêmes textes" en danois et en anglais. Il traite également des procédures utilisées pour obtenir des lecteurs, dans des pays tels que le Nigéria, le Groënland, l'Inde ou le Royaume-Uni, des réactions authentiques qui pouvaient à leur tour être mises à profit pour la formulation de questions compréhensibles par les lecteurs de cultures différentes. L'article décrit ensuite les tests préliminaires et définitifs sur les questionnaires qui montrent les réactions des lecteurs aux différents récits; il présente également une sélection de problèmes relatifs à l'attitude des lecteurs (par exemple leur introversion ou leur agressivité). L'énorme travail de collecte des données est maintenant pratiquement terminé et n'attend que les subventions pour être analysé. D'autre part, les procédures, les méthodes et les réflexions sur l'élaboration de cette étude consacrée à deux langues distinctes offrent un intérêt intrinsèque en raison de leurs*

implications pour d'autres études pluriculturelles et pluridisciplinaires qui ne se limitent pas à une seule langue.

Introduction

This article focuses exclusively on “translation” strategies and procedures used to construct the experimental set-up for a cross-cultural study of a complex everyday phenomenon, viz. reading of literature, in two different languages, namely Danish and English.¹ ...// 12 ... The project has involved readers from Denmark, England, Greenland, India, Ireland, Nigeria, and USA, all of which nations use English or Danish at some level. The project is interdisciplinary and covers psychology, statistics, literary theory and touches upon folklore and sociology.²

The background of the project

The study, “Folktale: an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural study of the experience of literature”, was started in 1983. Its goal is to establish similarities and differences in the response to literature cross-culturally. It is hoped that the results will be relevant to teaching, criticism, and cross-cultural research as well as translation work.

In the present context we are concerned with translation problems, so this is not the place for a prolonged discussion of the project’s aims and methods. Nevertheless a brief presentation is needed in order to set in relief the translation problems involved.

When human beings respond to works of art they feel a strong conviction that their own response is intersubjectively “true” and “objective”. This is not in keeping with reality, for the response to specific works of art is very personal. In literature, there are also individual, “idiosyncratic” features in each reader’s response to “the same work”. In terms of the project under discussion, it is thus highly unlikely that all components, or, as we prefer to term them, aspects, of the response of any one reader will be meaningful to all others: therefore, our study is likely to show that, in their entirety, the aspects comprised in an individual response are meaningful only to that individual reader himself. On the other hand, there are aspects of this holistic individual response which are also meaningful to other readers, and, in some cases, to groups of readers with, for instance, the same educational background, nationality, and religion. And, finally, there may be aspects that readers can agree about crossculturally.

Even this is possibly too simplistic, for there may be different levels of multicultural agreement which, in turn, differs even with groups of speciously homogeneous readers within one culture. In practice, we cannot aprioristically assume that such complexity exists, for although there are studies that indicate so, there is no overwhelming proof.

As a tentative working model we therefore hypothesize that the literary response comprises three major and overlapping layers, namely,

- an individual layer, i.e. a series of aspects which are consistent with the individual reader but in which the reader’s response does not tally with that of others,

- a group-bound layer where readers with the same education, the same religion, the same nationality, the same culture and so on, agree to some extent about some aspects, and ...// 13 ...

-a universal or at least multicultural layer where there is considerable crosscultural agreement.

In order to uncover these layers in the literary response of a large number of readers from different cultures, it is necessary (a) to have a stringently thought-out procedure which (b) is practicable. This is what we have striven to have in our study.

We therefore decided:

- a. that the extensive final data collection must be conducted in two hours or less,
- b. that this extensive final data collection must be based on the response to three stories,
- c. that these stories must be presented to readers in a rotated order,
- d. that each story was followed by a series of questions pertinent to that story only,
- e. and that there must be questions comparing the response to the three stories,
- f. which was to be followed by a questionnaire on the reader's background (gender, age, education, hobbies, reading habits, and the like), and
- g. that we must pose a series of questions to probe specific features or attitudes with the reader (e.g. whether the reader was introvert vs. extrovert; enjoyed or detested cruelty, etc.).
- h.

These requirements were met with by means of a booklet of 48 pages which readers filled in the final data collection. It was developed over a six-year period.

The booklet

Since the order of the stories was rotated (a-b-c, a-c-b, b-c-a, b-a-c, c-b-a, and c-a-b), there were actually six different versions of the booklet, although they all looked the same. All six versions were handed out (in rotated order) at each session, and in the oral instruction, the readers were informed that the booklets were not entirely identical. This was done partly in order to discourage attempts at cribbing, partly to avoid confusion in case readers accidentally found out that their booklets were different.

The outline and the structure of the booklets was, however, the same:

The front page of the booklet instructed participants in how to complete the questions.

Then came the first story, followed by the pertinent questions. After them was the second story and the corresponding questions. Then readers were confronted with the third story and its questionnaire. This part was rounded off with questions comparing the-stories.

The readers now proceeded to fill in information on their backgrounds, and, subsequently to answer 60-odd questions about their attitudes. All told there were 420 questions. ...// 14 ...

The set-up functioned surprisingly well. At the very first session in the final data collection, we realised that not all readers could complete the questionnaire within the two hours allotted. This led to the instantaneous introduction of a “Jumpcommand” used ever since: fifteen minutes before time was up, all readers who had not finished all stories were told to move to page 34 and answer the questions listed from thereon for the remainder of the session. The reason for the command was that these questions concern the crucial information about background (age, gender), which most reader response research studies show are important determinants in the literary response.³

In terms of our hypotheses, we assume, roughly speaking,

- that we chart factors determining the individualistic components in the response in the questionnaires on the readers’ backgrounds and attitudes,
- that we shall find group-bound factors by means of the questions on the readers’ backgrounds. And
- that we shall find responses at all levels, including the multicultural, in the reader responses to the stories.



American students

The languages

We chose to work with the “same” set-ups in Danish and in English, because both languages are used in different cultures, albeit sometimes only as the language of administration or education (English is used in India and Nigeria; and Danish is used in Greenland).

However, we are aware that “identical set-ups” in Danish and in English are not possible: in fact we only have reasonably close approximations which will, in turn, permit to make (cautious) generalisations about the multicultural nature of the literary response.

In the following discussion we shall focus first on the stories, then on the questions on the response to the stories, and eventually on the questions of backgrounds and attitudes. This is rounded off with generalised considerations.

The stories

We chose to use authentic folktales for the study.

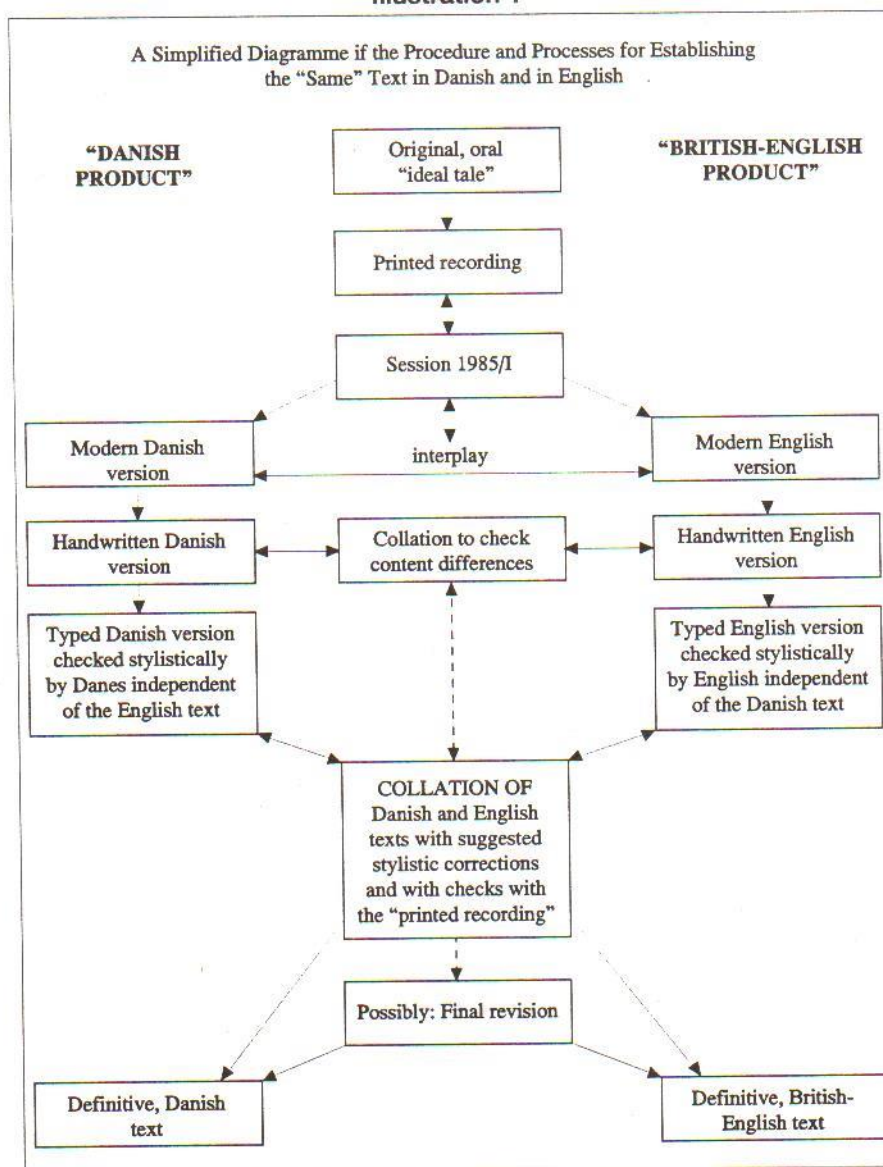
There were several reasons. The first reason was practical and pragmatic: folktales are not copyrighted. But the other grounds were scholarly: ...// 15 ... (a) the oral narrative is an ancient and established form which was predominant all over the world until the last century and is still alive and well in many parts of the world; (b) oral narratives are always accepted as "literature", at least when they are committed to paper; (c) stories that are popular must embrace the norms of the cultures in which they are told, both in terms of contents and narrative style. Accordingly, we chose tales which were told by "active bearers", that is, by established and popular narrators in three different cultures, namely Islamic Turkey, largely Christian Denmark, and shamanistic Greenland.

Finally there was a reason dictated by the need to establish the same text in two different languages, namely that such stories are "linguistically malleable": However unsound this may be ontologically,⁵ we can change the sourcelanguage text if this sleight-of-hand will ensure greater stylistic and semantic identity with the target-language version. The explanation is that in so doing we argue that as editors, we are to be likened to "a narrator" in the oral tradition who modifies a traditional story to fit the specific situation in which it is retold.

The procedure for establishing "the same story" in English and Danish.

Illustration 1 is a simplified diagram showing the establishment of "the same tale" in Danish and English:

Illustration 1



There were various stages in the process.

In stage one, a tale was told and taken down in a specific place in time in one specific culture. To ensure the stories' authenticity, we chose only tales recorded or edited by established folklorists.

In a session involving two professional translators, one native speaker of Danish and one of English, the original texts were mulled over, analysed, discussed and turned into both modern Danish and modern English.⁵ At these sittings there was an intense, dynamic interplay between the texts and the translators so that the work on sentences and larger units of the texts (for one hesitates terming this translation properly speaking) was not finished until there was agreement about the near-identity of the versions of the tale in the two languages. In each case, there was a preliminary preparation, a cursory translation, then a thorough translation, and finally a follow-up to check for identity and for internal consistency at all levels from word-to-word to, the complete story.

The two resulting versions were then read separately by expert native speakers of Danish and English, respectively, who did not know the version in the other language. These native speakers were asked to note all linguistic features which jarred or just sounded odd.

All points noted were then discussed at, a new collation by the translators of the texts, and, after this, the tales were considered final.

In practice, this ideal tended to be even more complex than appears from this description and from the diagram.

What is more: it was not always feasible (and desirable) to have all features correspond on a one to one basis; we kept carefully track of all semantic and stylistic deviations between the two language versions. Illustration 2 shows the deviations on page 2 in the Danish folktale *Per Smed's whip*: content differences are underlined.

Illustration 2

Per Dk v. 3 s. 2 Folktale 6:8 Danish story p. 2	Per Eng v. 3, p. 2 Folktale 6:9 Danish story p. 2
<p>1. Hvis han ikke fik gjort det, skulle han af med livet, og det ville han jo nødig miste. Så sagde hun: "Nej, det er der ingen fare for. Hvis du giver mig tr mark, kan du bare gå hen til herregården imorgen tidlig, så skal gården nok være brolagt."</p> <p>5. Det var ikke underligt, han ville det. Så Per vendte om og gik hjem. Om morgenen, da Per Smed kom til herregården, var gårdspladsen så blank, som var den brolagt med lutter sølvmonter. Per for hen og bankede på – han ville have sine trehundrede <u>daler</u>. Så tænkte forvalteren: "Hvordan pokker kunne han gøre det." Og han begyndte at blive bange for, at Per Smed kunne hekse. "Men jeg skal nok sætte ham til noget, han ikke kan gøre," tænkte forvalteren. Der var et frygteligt sumpet morads rundt omkring gården, så forvalteren sagde til Pers kone, at hun skulle fortælle Per, at han havde fået ordre til at beplante moradset, sådan at der var en hl skov i stedet – inden der var gået fireogtyve timer, ellers skulle han af med livet; men kunne han gøre det, skulle han få sekshundrede <u>daler</u>. Da Per Smed kom hjem til konen, sagde hun det til ham. "Nej," sagde Per, "det jeg har aldrig prøvet det." "Ja, så skal du joo af med livet," sagde hun. Per besluttede, at så ville han løbe sin vej. Så han rendte ud til skoven igen.</p> <p>20. I skoven traf han igen den gamle kone, og hun sprogte ham, hvor han nu vill hen? Han sagde, han ville rende væk, for nu</p>	<p>1. if he failed, he was to forfeit his life, and he didn't want to die. She said: "Don't let that worry you. If you give me three marks, you can just go to the manor tomorrow morning, and you'll find the courtyard paved."</p> <p>5. Well, of course Per agreed – and no wonder! He turned in his tracks and went home. In the morning when Per Smed went to the manor, the court-yard was gleaming as though it had been paved all over with silver coins. Per rushed over and knocked at the door – he wanted his three hundred <u>pieces of silver</u>!</p> <p>10. Then the steward thought: "How the devil did he manage it?" And he began to be afraid that Per Smed could do things by magic. "But I'll give him a task he will never be able to do," thought the steward.</p> <p>15. Now all around the manor-house there lay a great boggy marsh, so the steward told Per's wife to tell him that he had been ordered to plant the marsh with trees so that before twenty four hours had passed, there would be a wood where the marsh had been – otherwise he was to forfeit his life; but if he could do it, he would be given six hundred <u>pieces of silver</u>.</p> <p>20. When Per Smed came home to his wife, she gave him the message. "No" Per said, "I can't do that. I've never in my life learnt how to plant trees, and I've never tried it." "Well, you'll forfeit your life, then," she said. Per decided that in that case he would run away. So he fled into the forest once more.</p> <p>25. In the forest he met the old woman again, and she asked him where he was off to this time? He said he was running away</p>

...// 18-19 ...

The questions on the responses

The study must compare readings from several cultures. In order to avoid any inbuilt bias we therefore first collected large number of responses from readers from different cultures for our work on the questionnaires.

Accordingly 21 readers from Denmark, Greenland, the US, and Canada reported on, their responses to the stories in the course of their readings. Furthermore, over 100 readers from Denmark, Greenland, Great Britain, India, and Nigeria wrote essays on their responses to each tale.

These reader responses were carefully listed, analysed, and eventually used for phrasing questions on each story. One page from the questionnaire concerning the Turkish story illustrates how this was done (Illustration 3):

<p>22. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the story?</p>	<p>22. Er du enig eller uenig i følgende påstande om fortællingen?</p>
<p>AGREE DIS- MAYBE DON'T AGREE AGREE KNOW</p>	<p>ENIG UENIG MASKE VED IKKE</p>
<p>a. Children must show respect of their parents</p> <p>b. It is about self-confidence</p> <p>c. Children may give parents advice ...</p> <p>d. Girls/women are more competent than boys/men</p> <p>e. It is about intelligence</p> <p>f. It is about family feeling</p>	<p>a. Børn skal vise deres forældre respekt</p> <p>b. Den handler om selvtillid</p> <p>c. Børn kan give forældre gode råd</p> <p>d. Piger/kvinder er dygtigere end drenge/mænd</p> <p>e. Den handler om intelligens</p> <p>f. Den handler om familiefølelse</p> <p>.....</p>

Illustration 3

Question a derived from "It is a story about a girl showing her father respect" (India), "A girl bringing pride to her-father" (Nigeria), "The girl's loyalty towards her father" (Nigeria), and "One must be obedient" (Nigeria).⁶

Question b was based on "It tells the reader to ... have self-confidence" (India, Nigeria), "a clever ... person can do almost everything" (India).

Question c was phrased from "Children can give parents advice" (Nigeria), "The girl's ability to advise her father" (Nigeria).

Question d originated in numerous statements such as, "an intelligent, wise girl" (Denmark, America, India), "All the men are weak" (Denmark), "Don't count females out" (America), "The girl used her intelligence", "The male hero was outwitted by the girl (Nigeria), "Girls are equal if not superior to men" (Denmark, Greenland, United Kingdom, India, Nigeria).

Question e was inspired by e.g. "He is dumb to be insulted" (Canada, America), "The boy is stupid" (Denmark, America), "By being clever and active one achieves one's goals" (Denmark, Greenland, America), "The story's emphasis is on intelligence" (Nigeria).

And question f sprang from e.g. "It is a family feud" (Denmark), "Do your duty to your family" (America), "The girl takes up the challenge in her father's behalf" (Nigeria), "Never let people insult you or your family" (England).

Small as it is, the excerpt also shows that our questions were detailed and that we did our best to have the same layout in the two languages.

The two versions were checked several times by translators to make sure that they were as "identical" as possible. In this case it was an advantage that all team members knew the original responses and could sometimes identify similar ones deriving from different cultures in both languages. ...// 20 ...

Finally, the similarity of the questionnaires was tested out by having two different classes of Danish students in their 12th year (with 7 years of English) complete the Danish and the English questionnaires. Their answers were checked for deviations which might be ascribed to linguistic differences in the phrasing of the questions.



Indian students

The questionnaires on reader backgrounds and attitudes

were also checked for "identity" by at least two translators (at various stages), but in this case we did most of the work ourselves: The questionnaires were tested crossculturally numerous times, namely in Denmark, the US, the UK, India (two places) and Nigeria (two places) and this forced us to discuss and change questions ourselves to make sure that we would get reasonably comparable information cross-culturally.

There were, of course, major problems in phrasing questions for obtaining this information. On the first page we thus chose to focus on the degree to which readers considered themselves religious rather than external observance of religious rites. This is only one of the many cases where feedback from the tests rounds provided us with useful information: Hindus do not go to temple as Christians go to church. Another area of this type of change affected the original questions about reading habits, access to books and the like, as Indian participants pointed out that mundane and practical problems involving national infrastructure, transport, and access to shops thwarted attempts at "comparison".

The questions concerning reader attitudes had been tested together with the "background questionnaire". Originally it was a series of nearly one hundred questions probing, not reader personalities, but only reader attitudes to special phenomena which would indicate select dimensions in their personalities such as impulsiveness, risk-taking, inhibition, aggressiveness, assertiveness, dogmatism, and others.

These questions were fairly tricky, since we did not have access to testing of these dimensions in all countries involved. On the other hand, we had to assume that there would be tolerable international standardization in the field.

"Identity" in translation

We mentioned at the beginning that this article was concerned with the translation problems only: at present the data-collection outside Denmark is over, but it is up to the powers that be to decide if we can ultimately carry through the last bit of the study and embark on our analyses of the intercultural nature of the response to literature. ...// 21

...

This dampening outlook on the project as a whole, however, does not affect its relevance to translation studies, and this is therefore what we shall focus on now.

Debates about "equivalence" in translation tend to hide the fact that there cannot be identity between a translated message and the original.

In this study we operate with two closely related Germanic languages, which means that by and large, there are many similarities in words, word order and syntax. In addition the study is empirical through and through, which implies that it has been our overriding concern to set up a study which is "identical" in English and in Danish. We have, indeed, sometimes operated with something which might make for a better approximation to identity, namely originals - for instance the responses - from the two languages that would also (in traditional parlance) "be the target languages". We have set up an overall structure which participants read their way through in the same order in English and in Danish. We have worked hard to make it "identical" at all levels.

We have disregarded interculturally equivalent signs such as markers of politeness, beyond the most obvious one, "Please". We have used "mark" instead of "tick" in the English questionnaire. This is not an oversight, but a deliberate decision. We have insisted on this "linguistic and physical sameness", not because we essentially believed that we could create the "ideal identity", but because we did not think we had any choice: For we do not believe it is possible to conduct a study of the complexity of "Folktale" if we start gearing style and questions towards the language use in specific groups and nationalities. Such a procedure would soon mire the study in a hopeless tangle of sociolects, dialects, and idiolects where nothing was stable.

On the other hand, this attitude of ours raises problems that go to the core of the study: Surely, it is naive to assume that the same word or linguistic expression, even in the same language (e.g. English) is taken to refer to comparable, or similar, let alone "identical" non-linguistic referents in the recreation of readers from different cultures. On the syntactic level, there are also differences in "the same language" so that speakers and readers of English inevitably vary in their usage of "the same English" depending on the country and the culture in which they have grown up. The key-problem is "World Englishes", and all "World Englishes" cannot - at least not in a broad sense - be covered adequately by the more or less felicitous interlanguage concocted by a group of more or less international translators and researchers in Denmark. Also, is it, really, possible to argue that the response to literature is at all comparable cross-culturally? And do readers from different languages "understand the tales the same way at the most basic level" ?

It is readily appreciated that we cannot grapple with these issues in one single study, however grand its concept and however careful its design. Since we are not unaware of these problems, we have, however, tried to probe these concerns in practicable and

modest ways within the project itself by focussing on "comprehension" and on important details at the most obvious surface level.

In order to make sure that we are indeed talking about the same stories, we have three questions about indisputable facts after each story. The series from the Greenlandic tale, is shown in Illustration 4.

Illustration 4

17. Finally we would like you to answer some factual questions about the story:

a. What does the bear catch?

a seal	<input type="checkbox"/>
a salmon	<input type="checkbox"/>
a hare	<input type="checkbox"/>
a dog	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't remember	<input type="checkbox"/>

b. Where did the woman hide when the men went for the bears?

in a tree in the wood	<input type="checkbox"/>
in the mountain cave	<input type="checkbox"/>
under a platform	<input type="checkbox"/>
At the neighbour's	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't remember	<input type="checkbox"/>

c. What did the bear do with the woman's body?

Left it alone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Threw it in the water	<input type="checkbox"/>
Threw it on the rubbish heap	<input type="checkbox"/>
Buried it	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't remember	<input type="checkbox"/>

Readers who do not answer two of these questions correctly, are automatically excluded from the sample. At the most superficial level, this is, of course, a safeguard against including responses from participants who have not bothered about reading the stories at all.

We also check whether the style of each story is rendered in Danish and English in a way which individual readers accept by means of the questions given in Illustration 5.

Illustration 5

5. Did you find the language...

good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	poor	1
fluent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	clumsy	2
oldfashioned	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	modern	3

...// 23 ...

These four simple questions will, we assume, primarily inform us on the felicity of the translations, but, in a larger context, also about the relationship between individual readers' use of language and its relationship to "the core language".

And at the end (Illustration 6), we ask readers if they know a few (tolerably rare) words selected from the stories and questionnaires.⁷

Illustration 6

33. Do you know the following words?	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
to fiense	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
yeast	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a swamp	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
tongue-in-cheeck	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
mother tongue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a platform	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

We assume that if readers have problems with (some of) these words, they may have had problems in decoding the stories in general. In this particular case, the "identity" of the questions in English and Danish is deceptive, for there is no doubt that the words chosen are not "identical" in terms of familiarity and frequency in different cultures.

In so far there are variations at these questions - and it would be odd if there were none - they will perhaps pinpoint weaknesses in the set-up or in our thinking. Or it may be that such variety indicates cultural differences in the very concept of reading. As yet, while the data are still locked up in the questionnaires, we do not know.

The work we have done has been thoroughly documented and is open for inspection in the ERIC system.⁸ We have done our best, but this does not mean that we are above criticism. And we are, in no way, above the project: we are part of it, for as analysts and researchers from Denmark we decided how to phrase responses originating from, say, Nigerian readers, in a form that we thought could be answered in other cultures. We may have given the study an ethnocentric bias.

Yet, we operated with several cultures and two different languages, and we have chosen to squarely face the problems we encountered in that endeavour.

True, the results we ultimately get must be viewed with caution. Provided such caution is shown, we are confident that we can indeed say something meaningful and useful about cross-cultural differences and similarities in the response to literature.

... // 24 ...

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was read at the AILA-Congress in Thessaloniki, Greece, April 1990.
2. The study has been carried out with support from the UNESCO and from Professor Ludvig Wimmer and Hustrus Legat.
3. The most pertinent studies in terms of the "Folktale-project" are discussed in Paper 13:14.
4. We have discussed this question in e.g. Dollerup 1988 (no. and Dollerup & Reventlow & Rosenberg Hansen 1985 and 1990 (see this homepage nos 94 and 112).
5. The Danish story was taken down in 1874 in the dialect of Jutland. It therefore had to be modernised ("translated") to go down with modern Danish readers.
6. These statements are all edited ones from the four reports referring to the primary material.
7. A (few) questions containing misprints will be left out in our analyses. The original of the questionnaire had been carefully worked out on a word-processor but was lost by accident so that we had to paste together the "original" under time pressure.

8. The ERIC system comprises all our internal reports which were published in c. 60 copies for distribution to interested scholars and libraries.

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