

Emotional education, children's literature and translation

The case of the giraffe Gerald/Zelda

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Abstract

Studies in psychology, particularly since the 1970s, have demonstrated the complexity of the concepts of emotion and emotional intelligence. Nevertheless, the centrality of these aspects in the process of growth and education of each individual is evident. In this light, children's literature assumes an important role in fostering the socialization of emotions and improving children's emotional development, especially in the practice of shared (picture)book reading with adults. Such a crucial role cannot be disregarded in the translation process. This contribution aims to present the case of the Italian translation of the picturebook *Giraffes can't dance*. After some consideration of the overall translation choices, the analysis will focus on those parts of the text that describe the emotional evolution of the main character Gerald. The story of the giraffe, guided by a love for dance and music through a journey of self-discovery, will be analyzed in source and target languages.

Keywords

children's literature; emotional education; emotional intelligence; emotions; translation



“Excuse me!” coughed a cricket
who'd seen Gerald earlier on.
“But sometimes when you're different
you just need a different song.”
(*Giraffes can't dance*)

“Non essere triste!” Le disse
un grillo che l'aveva vista alla festa.
“A volte chi è diverso ha solo
bisogno di una canzone diversa.”
(*Le giraffe non sanno ballare*)

1. Introduction: educating to emotions

The complexity of emotional phenomena has been the subject of numerous studies in the field of psychology, particularly since the 1970s. Although these studies have led to sometimes conflicting models and theories, they agree in recognizing that emotion consists of a subjective, physiological, and cognitive component, as well as a communicative one, culturally connoted and related to the role that emotion plays in regulating individual behavior within the environment and society (Scherer 1984, 2009; Poggi, Magno Caldognetto 2004).

Building on and integrating the concepts of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence already proposed in Gardner's multiple intelligences model (1987), Goleman (1995, 53) defines emotional intelligence as an integrated set of skills:

[...] such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope.

According to Goleman, such skills often rely on an individual's innate predisposition but can also be developed over time and thus be specifically trained and taught, both in family and school settings.

The need for emotional education and the increasing interest in these aspects are also confirmed by the inclusion of the ability to recognize one's own and others' emotions among the life skills proposed by the World Health Organization (1994) and, more recently, by the inclusion of the development of social and emotional skills among the goals of the OECD «Future of Education and Skills» programme for 2030 (OECD 2019), which particularly considers the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity that characterizes contemporary school environments:

Social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness, respect for others and the ability to communicate, are becoming essential as classrooms and workplaces become more ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse (OECD 2019, 2).

Moreover, also in the fields of language acquisition studies and language education, since the end of the last century, emotional and affective aspects of learning have received particular attention, especially within the so-called humanistic language teaching¹. Similarly, the ability to emotionally understand and develop empathy and exotopy through one's emotions is an integral part of the model of intercultural communicative competence proposed by Balboni (2015).

2. Emotions and children's literature

Various studies in cognitive criticism (Kümmerling-Meibauer, Meibauer 2015; Nikolajeva 2014, 2017) have shown how picturebooks, due to their nature as iconotexts that combine words and images, can promote in young readers/listeners the development of Theory of Mind (Premack, Woodruff 1978), i.e., the ability to attribute mental states (thoughts, intentions, desires, beliefs, knowledge, emotions, etc.) to others. By engaging the reader/listener

¹ Consider, for example, Krashen's (1985) Monitor Model, in which a key role for learning purposes is assumed by the so-called Affective Filter, one of the fundamental concepts of Humanistic Language Teaching, consisting of the learner's set of feelings and states of mind that can promote or impede (e.g., in cases of tension, stress or frustration) effective comprehension and assimilation of the proposed input.

in an empathetic relationship with the characters in the story—often anthropomorphized animals or objects—picturebooks represent «an excellent first step toward emotional intelligence» (Nikolajeva 2014, 859).

It has also been shown that children's literature, and especially picturebooks, can play a key role in the socialization of emotions, especially in the family context and therefore in the practice of shared reading between children and their parents or caregivers (Garner, Parker 2018). Reading stories aloud can in fact help adults initiate conversations about emotions and promote healthy management and verbal expression of feelings.

There are numerous recent works of children's literature that focus on the theme of emotions and emotional education, both internationally and in Italy: to name a few, many picturebooks by Anna Llenas [including, in Italian translation, *I colori delle emozioni* (2019), *Il buco* (2016), *Il gioiello dentro me* (2022)] or *Sei folletti nel mio cuore*, a famous story by Rosalba Corallo from 2014. One might also consider children's films, which increasingly address the challenges of managing emotions during growth. Notable examples include recent Disney-Pixar films [*Inside Out* (2015); *Red* (2022); *Inside Out 2* (2024)].

The translation of children's literature works that are clearly intended to promote emotional education for young (and indirectly adult) readers must preserve this goal in the target language. This requires a critical and careful reflection on the so-called 'display rules' (Ekman, Friesen 1969), that is, the social norms specific to each culture and language that govern how different emotional states are expressed and determine the appropriateness of displaying (or not displaying) one's feelings in various communicative contexts. These aspects, in the author's opinion, pose a specific challenge in translation, especially in works aimed at children, given their inherently educational function. Unfortunately, despite growing interest, studies on the translation of children's literature – which is traditionally considered a 'minor' or 'second-class' literature² – remain marginal and underdeveloped (Oittinen 1993, 2000; Tabbert 2002; Lathey 2010; Garavini 2014).

² We take up here the deliberately polemical label used by Argilli (1990) to refer to children's literature and its redemption through the work of Gianni Rodari in Italy: «Con Gianni Rodari, la letteratura infantile, la serie B, si è presa una rivincita sulla Serie A» (138). For a

3. The Italian translation of *Giraffes can't dance*

Based on the considerations and theoretical framework outlined so far, this study aims to present the specific case of the translation of the children's book *Giraffes can't dance*, written by Giles Andreae and illustrated by Guy Parker-Rees. First published in 1999, the book was originally written in English, achieved international success, and has been translated into 34 languages. The choice of this book is based on two reasons: first, it is a story about the complex emotional development of the main character; second, music plays a central role as a privileged vehicle of self-expression³.

Giraffes can't dance is set in the African jungle. The protagonist is Gerald, a giraffe who longs to dance but appears awkward to himself and others due to his physical features: a very long neck, thin legs, and wobbly knees. The story tells of Gerald's redemption through the discovery of 'his' music, which becomes a symbol and tool for asserting his unique identity with pride, during the annual «Jungle Dance».

The aim of the following translation analysis is to assess whether and how the emotional content of the story and the character's development are conveyed in the Italian version. The Italian edition, *Le giraffe non sanno ballare*, was published in 2017 and translated by Marinella Barigazzi.

After a few considerations on global translation choices into Italian, the next Section (3.1) will focus on those parts of the text where the protagonist's emotional state is explicitly described. It is important to note that, although illustrations play a key role in conveying affective content in children's books (Oittinen, Ketola, Garavini 2018), this analysis will only partially consider the relationship between text and illustrations. In this book, the relationship can be defined as symmetrical: the words duplicate the content of the images and

reflection on the paradoxical 'invisibility' of children's literature and the scant interest given to this genre by literary critics in Italy, see also Beseghi, Grilli (2011).

³ The role of music in the emotional education of boys and girls will not be given specific attention in this contribution. However, we would like to mention that, on the occasion of the Workshop «Sguardi sulla letteratura per l'infanzia e per ragazzi in ambito ugrofinnico e indoeuropeo», held on November 23, 2022 in Naples, the story of the giraffe Zelda was presented to the audience through music and the *kamishibai* technique by music education expert Emanuele Giovanni Aprile.

vice versa (Nikolajeva 2014). In this contrastive perspective, it is necessary to point out that the illustrations are the same in both the original English and the Italian versions. In other words, no adaptation of the images was made.

The Italian translator chose to turn Gerald into a female giraffe named Zelda. It is plausible to suppose this choice was due to the grammatical gender of the noun 'giraffa' in Italian. Nonetheless, a deeper reflection is needed on the stereotypical association dance = girls' activity, and the risk of confining the need to express oneself through bodily artistic forms to the female world. Maintaining the male gender of the giraffe would have, in the author's opinion, strengthened the message of inclusion and self-acceptance conveyed by the story.

Nonetheless, there is an etymological affinity between the names Gerald and Zelda. Both appear to be of Germanic origin and linked to the idea of a fighter: Gerald, from the Proto-Germanic *girald, means 'one who wields a spear'; Zelda, as a diminutive of Griselda, from Old High German *grisja hilda*, literally means 'gray warrior, old heroine'⁴.

Faced with an English text in verse and rhyme, the Italian translator made another significant choice: she did not preserve the rhythmic structure in the Italian version. In such a "musical" story, clearly designed for read-aloud performance, greater fidelity to the poetic structure of the original text would have been desirable. The Italian version is instead rendered in simple and essential prose, often excessively concise, as will be seen.

3.1 Emotions in translation

After a brief initial description of Gerald/Zelda, the text proceeds by identifying the specific context – Africa and the «Jungle Dance» – and presenting the giraffe's emotional state in relation to the dancing event.

The verses relating to this introductory passage are shown in Table 1, in both English and Italian versions (emotionally connoted portions in bold).

⁴ Information on the etymology of the names of the main character in the story in the two versions is taken from the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, available at <<https://www.etymonline.com/>> (11/2024).

Now every year in Africa
they hold the Jungle Dance,
where every single animal
turns up to skip and prance.

And this year when the day arrived
poor Gerald felt so sad,
because when it came to dancing
he was really very bad.

Ogni estate in Africa
tutti gli animali partecipavano
al “Ballo della Giungla”.
Ballavano e si divertivano.

Ma Zelda detestava
quella festa perché lei
non ballava affatto bene.

Table 1 – Original text and translation compared: defining the emotion.

In the original English version, the text expresses a feeling (“felt”) using a clear emotional label (“sad”). The Italian translation, however, uses a different emotional tone: the verb *detestare* (to detest) doesn’t fall within the semantic field of sadness but rather that of anger. According to the online Nuovo De Mauro dictionary, *detestare* means ‘*odiare, aborrire*’ (to hate, to abhor)⁵. Clearly, this distorts the original sense: Gerald doesn’t hate dancing – on the contrary, he loves it – and his sadness stems from not feeling capable of expressing himself through dance. Moreover, the Italian connotation of anger contrasts with the giraffe’s image in the picturebook (Fig. 1): while the scene is filled with joyful animals dancing, Gerald/Zelda stands still in a corner, with a serious, thoughtful expression that doesn’t align with the typically intense physiological responses and excitement of anger⁶.

⁵ Resource available at <<https://dizionario.internazionale.it>> (11/2024).

⁶ In fact, anger is traditionally defined as a high activation (arousal) emotion, as are joy and surprise and unlike sadness, a low activation emotion (Russell 1980).



Figure 1 – The Jungle Dance © Guy Parker-Rees⁷.

After a humorous description of different dances (waltz, rock'n'roll, tango, etc.) and dancing animal couples, the story continues with Gerald, despite his sadness and feelings of inadequacy, trying to step onto the dancefloor (Table 2).

Gerald swallowed **bravely**
as he walked toward the floor,
but the lions saw him coming
and they soon began to roar.

"Hey, look at clumsy Gerald,"
the animals all sneered,
"Giraffes can't dance, you silly fool!
Oh Gerald, you're so weird."

Zelda si avvicinò **timidamente**
al grande palco ma appena la
videro, i leoni cominciarono
a ruggire.

"Ha ha! Guardate Zelda!
Com'è goffa!
Sei proprio sciocca, Zelda!
Le giraffe non sanno ballare!"

⁷ Images included in this article are reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Gerald simply froze up.
 He was **rooted to the spot**.
They're right, he thought, *I'm useless*.
Oh, I feel like such a clot.

So he **crept off** from the dancefloor
 and he started walking home,
He'd never felt so sad before --
so sad and so alone.

Zelda restò di sasso. "Hanno
 ragione", pensò, "**mi sento
 così inutile**".

Quindi si incamminò **triste**
 verso casa.
**Non si era mai sentita così
 triste e sola**.

Table 2 – Original text and translation compared: the attempt to react.

In the original text, the adverb 'bravely' emphasizes the giraffe's determination to face a personal limit. In contrast, the Italian version highlights Zelda's timidity and insecurity through the adverb *timidamente* (timidly). Later, Gerald's thoughts reveal that he feels utterly incapable ('useless') and like a 'clot' – an unusual, old-fashioned insult implying foolishness. In Italian, the translation simplifies the content with *inutile* (useless), which feels vague and fails to convey the idea of foolishness.

The vivid English expression 'rooted to the spot', conveying Gerald's freezing in place in contrast to the dancing animals, is also omitted in the Italian. Instead, the image (Fig. 2) shows Gerald/Zelda with a stunned look in the foreground, alone on a neutral background.



Figure 2 – Gerald/Zelda frozen © Guy Parker-Rees.

After this failed attempt, Gerald sinks into sadness and creeps away from the dancefloor. The verb 'crept off' evokes a dejected, stealthy retreat, while the Italian *si incamminò* (started walking) lacks this emotional nuance. The accompanying image (Fig. 3) shows the giraffe in the background, in the dark, head lowered, walking away, while in the lit foreground, a joyful conga line of animals continues dancing, indifferent to the protagonist's pain.

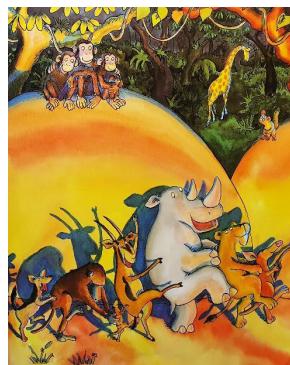


Figure 3 – Gerald/Zelda walking away © Guy Parker-Rees.

In a jungle clearing, alone under the moonlight, Gerald contemplates the beauty of the night sky. A cricket appears, who will guide him toward discovering his unique voice through music (Table 3).

“Excuse me!” coughed a cricket
who’d seen Gerald earlier on.
“But sometimes when you’re different
you just need a different song.”

“**Non essere triste**”, le disse un
grillo che l’aveva vista alla festa.
“A volte chi è diverso ha solo
bisogno di una canzone diversa.”

Tabella 3 – Testo originale e traduzione a confronto: il grillo e l’ascolto.

It is immediately evident that the Italian version opens with a denial – *Non essere triste* (Don’t be sad) – urging Zelda to suppress her sadness. In contrast, the English version does not contain such a (controversial) suggestion. Instead, the cricket leads Gerald to attentively listen to the wonderful music of the moon and nature. Along with the sound of a violin, this music allows Gerald to transform his sadness into flowing, liberating movements.

In the illustration (Fig. 4), the giraffe, in the foreground, looks serene as she gazes at the moon and listens to the cricket’s words.

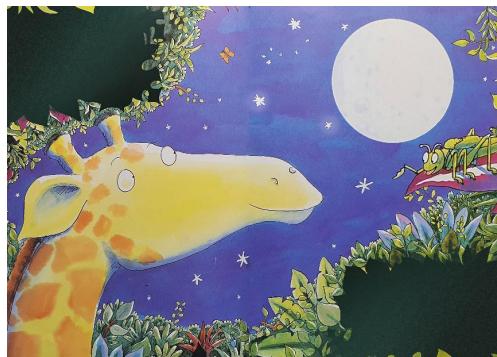


Figure 4 – Meeting the cricket © Guy Parker-Rees.

Transported by the music, Gerald/Zelda begins to dance in the air, soaring so high that all the other animals can see. Now they know: everyone can dance to the music of their heart (Table 4).

Gerald felt **so wonderful**
 his mouth was open wide.
 "I am dancing! Yes, I'm dancing!
 I AM DANCING!" Gerald **cried**.

[...]

Then he raised his head and looked up
 at the moon and stars above.
 "We all can dance," he said,
 "when we find **music that we love**."

Si sentiva **splendidamente**.
 "Sto ballando! Sto ballando!
 STO BALLANDO!"
 ripeteva continuamente.

[...]

Poi guardò in alto, verso la luna.
 "Tutti possiamo ballare" disse
 "basta trovare **la musica che
 amiamo**".

Table 4 – Original text and translation compared: the resolution.

Even in this 'resolutive' scene, the Italian translation may fall short in conveying the emotional power of the original text. The English adjective 'wonderful' is rendered with the adverb *splendidamente* (splendidly), which loses the sense that Gerald now feels like a truly magnificent dancer. The powerful verb 'cried' becomes in Italian *ripeteva*, a neutral verb that lacks emotional intensity.

In the picture (Fig. 5), Gerald/Zelda finally appears joyful and smiling, with the amazed admiration of the other animals in the background.



Figure 5 – I'm dancing! © Guy Parker-Rees.

Gerald's final words are addressed to the animals watching him in awe, wondering how he became such a good dancer. These are inclusive words (*we all/tutti*) that encourage finding one's self through beloved music – a message preserved in the Italian version without critical issues.

In the final page's illustration (Fig. 6), the moon stands out prominently, as the giraffe and all the animals look up to it, smiling together.

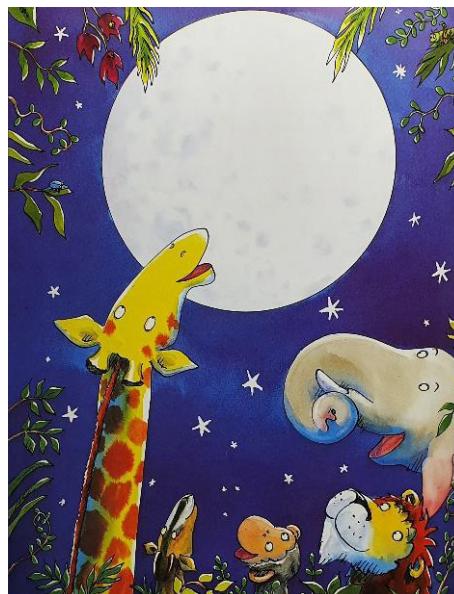


Figure 6 – We all can dance © Guy Parker-Rees.

4. Conclusive remarks

The present study aimed to observe whether and how the emotional evolution of the main character in the picturebook *Giraffes can't dance* was rendered in the Italian version *Le giraffe non sanno ballare*.

In the original text, Gerald's inner journey begins with a love for dance, continues with a courageous attempt to overcome physical limitations, descends into sadness caused by inadequacy and exclusion, and finally leads

– through (guided) listening to his own music – to self-discovery and the powerful emotion of affirming his unique and special ‘dancing identity’.

In the Italian translation, this emotional journey appears partially distorted: the giraffe’s desire to dance is replaced by a sense of disdain; courage by shyness. Sadness, in the cricket’s words, is portrayed as something to be avoided. Perhaps this is a case where the culturally connoted ‘display rules’ discussed earlier (see Section 2) would have required a careful critical reassessment. The translator might have asked: is it appropriate to convey to young readers the idea that sadness should not be shown, even when genuinely felt? Is this an emotionally ‘healthy’ cultural convention, or rather a widely accepted behavioral rule that says one must not show vulnerability in public?

In some passages, the emotional nuance of the scenes seems weaker than in the original version, due to the use of more ‘neutral’ language in terms of affective connotation. This diminishes the sense of foolishness and the extraordinary wonder experienced by the giraffe.

In other words, Gerald’s journey and his development of emotional intelligence – through which he motivates himself, copes with frustration and exclusion, and pursues his goal by transforming sadness into a valuable resource – are, in the author’s opinion, not adequately represented in the Italian version of the story of *Zelda*.

In conclusion, it is to be hoped that the role of translators of children’s and young people’s literature will grow in recognition and that high-quality translations of such works will become increasingly widespread – based on the awareness of the crucial educational role that picturebooks and other literary genres for children (and those who care for them) play, and the great responsibility this profession holds, including in the field of emotional education.

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