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You Say "Jelly," I Say "Jell-O"?

Harry Potter and the Transfiguration of Language

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Many have criticized the decision by Arthur A. Levine of Scholastic to translate the Harry Potter books from British English into American English. The same month that *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* made its American debut, eleven-year-old Whitaker E. Cohen's letter to the *New Yorker* asserted that children "have large imaginations, and can usually figure out . . . what words mean from their context." When the fourth novel, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, was published, Peter H. Gleick's op-ed piece in the *New York Times* lamented the "devolution from English to 'American' English" and suggested that Scholastic's "Americanized" texts contribute to the "dumb[ing] down" of U.S. society. Later that year, Sukanta Chaudhuri's "Harry Potter and the Transfiguration of Language," published in the Malaysian newspaper *New Straits Times*, blamed "the global arrogance of the American" for this act of "cultural reappropriation" that, were it done to a "non-privileged" culture (such as Hindi), would be roundly criticized. For his part, Levine has said, "I wasn't trying to, quote, 'Americanize' them. What I was trying to do was translate, which is something different. I wanted to make sure that an American kid reading the book would have the same literary experience that a British kid would have."¹

This essay centers around acts of translation both literal and figurative, and the responses to them—not just the "toe-may-toe, toe-mah-toe" pronunciations suggested by the Ira Gershwin lyric, but the differences in cultural heritage and meaning obscured by editorial revisions. Were it possible to create "the same literary experience" for children from different countries, why would it be desirable? That this question does not occur to Levine reinforces Chaudhuri's point. As Martha Bedford, a self-described

1. Whitaker E. Cohen, "Hands Off Harry!" 16; Peter H. Gleick, "Harry Potter, Minus a Certain Flavour," A25; Sukanta Chaudhuri, "Harry Potter and the Transfiguration of Language," 5; Arthur A. Levine, quoted in Daniel Radosh, "Why American Kids Don't Consider Harry Potter an Insufferable Prig," 56.

"13-year-old English girl," wrote in response to Gleick's piece, "In England, we have American TV shows, American pop groups and American movies, yet the language is not changed to suit us. The spell-checks on our computers come in American English."² In addition to highlighting America's disproportionate influence on global culture and effacing some of the books' Britishness, Scholastic's "translations" result in changes in meaning. Not only is "English muffin" different from "crumpet," but *Sorcerer's Stone* also lacks the reference to alchemy implied by *Philosopher's Stone* in the title of the British edition published by Bloomsbury in 1997. As well as changing the title of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Levine, in collaboration with author J. K. Rowling, translated "sherbet lemon" to "lemon drop," "motorbike" to "motorcycle," "chips" to "fries," "jelly" to "Jell-O," "jacket potato" to "baked potato," "jumper" to "sweater," and "mum" to "mom" (though, at Rowling's insistence, "mum" was retained in later books). While the fourth Harry Potter novel has largely escaped the zeal of American translators, this subtle blurring of cultural distinctions continues in the Scholastic editions of books two and three.

As Bedford's letter indicates, these acts of translation have repercussions beyond the books themselves, highlighting Americans' blithe ignorance of important differences within British society, as well as Britons' anxieties about U.S. representations of themselves. Though no one has remarked on it, the *New York Times* Bestseller List (which has since banished the Potter books to a new "Children's Bestsellers" list) did something curious in its summaries of the first Potter book. When *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* first appeared on the list in December 1998, its description read, "A Scottish boy, neglected by his relatives, finds his fortune attending a school of witchcraft." A month and a half later, "Scottish" had quietly become "British." Though Scotland is indeed a part of Great Britain, one suspects that a Scotsman would notice the switch from "Scottish" to "British."³ Indicative of U.K. concerns, one reason that Steven Spielberg is not directing the planned Harry Potter films hinges upon translation: he planned some Americanization of the books. Rowling disapproved of his plans for the film, and he did not get the job. Both her disapproval and the widely misreported notion that "Spellotape" was translated as "Scotch tape" ("Spellotape" was retained by Scholastic, though "Sellotape" was not) illustrate the uneasiness over the power American companies have to shape the perception of British culture. That is, while all acts of translation can be read as acts of appropriation, the global marketing of Rowling's Potter series makes appropriation

particularly significant. As the series continues to grow in its market value and in its marketing (the second film is due out in November 2002), these issues will grow increasingly important. There are big bucks and cultural identities at stake, and the latter are more likely to get lost in the translation.

Translating British books for American audiences does not begin with Rowling's Potter series, and Scholastic's revisions must be evaluated in this context. As Chaudhuri reminds us, the original American editions of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* removed "unflattering references to Americans" so that the novel's U.S. "sales might not suffer nor the box office" when Dickens undertook a reading tour of the States. However, the often extreme degree of American editors' revisions to children's literature in particular—as well as the assumptions behind these revisions—make analysis of Scholastic's revisions to Rowling especially significant. As Jane Whitehead points out in the first part of her thorough, two-part study of this subject, "This is NOT what I wrote!": The Americanization of British Children's Books" (1996), "The range of alterations made under the umbrella of Americanization is vast." These changes include: "Titles, setting, character names, . . . culturally specific allusions, . . . in addition to spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and idiom."⁴ Furthermore, the practice of making such alterations is so widespread that it usually passes without comment. For example, there has been little discussion of the fact that Knopf saw fit to publish *Northern Lights*, the first book of British author Philip Pullman's acclaimed *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000), under the title *The Golden Compass*. So, to some extent, the attention paid to Scholastic's translations of Rowling's series tells us more about the popularity of the Potter novels than about Levine's particular acts of translation. The books are, in this sense, a highly public example of a common editorial practice.

That said, though Scholastic's versions of the first three Potter novels are guilty of some degree of cultural imperialism, Levine has done a much more sensitive job than many of his peers. Whitehead, for example, cites Catherine and Laurence Anholt's *Tiddlers*, published in the United States by Candlewick Press as *Toddlers*. The line "I am sad, I am happy, I want Mum to change my nappy" becomes "I am sad, I am sweet, I can stand on my two feet," effecting so complete a change in meaning that the original British version virtually disappears under its heavy-handed American editor. While some American "translations" of British books go so far as to change radically the author's style and meaning, others take a "signposts" approach. "Children everywhere are keenly interested in, and ready to learn about, other children; and the odder, the better. The editor needs only to

2. Martha Bedford, Letter to the Editor, A30.

3. Bestsellers: Hardcover Fiction," December 27, 1998, and February 14, 1999.

4. Chaudhuri, "Transfiguration," 5; Jane Whitehead, "This Is NOT What I Wrote!": The Americanization of British Children's Books," part 1.

help with a few signposts,” observes Grace Hogarth in a 1965 issue of the *Horn Book*.⁵ In general, Levine’s goal seems to have been more of the “signposts” method, striving to locate key words and phrases that might confuse an American child, and then inventing a U.S. “equivalent.” To his credit, Levine actually worked with Rowling on the translation—a practice that not all editors follow. While their collaboration did not create a text irrevocably damaged by Americanization, the significance of Scholastic’s changes extends beyond signposts.

Before examining more fully the deleterious implications of the Scholastic translations, let us look at some of the benefits. In several senses, the Scholastic editions may represent Rowling’s final version of the manuscript and, as such, include changes that ought to be incorporated into future Bloomsbury editions as well. That is, considering that Rowling worked with Levine on the Scholastic editions, the discrepancies between the following scenes amount to something other than “Americanization.” In Bloomsbury’s *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, just after Ron and Harry find themselves blocked from entering platform nine and three quarters, Ron suggests flying the car, an act which, he insists, would not violate any wizarding laws. As he explains, “Even under-age wizards are allowed to use magic if it’s a real emergency, section nineteen or something of the Restriction of Thingy . . .” The next sentence registers Harry’s interest in the idea: “Harry’s feeling of panic turned suddenly to excitement.”⁶ In contrast, Scholastic’s edition inserts a brief debate in between Ron’s passionately vague justification and Harry’s excitement:

“But your Mum and Dad . . .” said Harry, pushing against the barrier again in the vain hope that it would give way. “How will they get home?”

“They don’t need the car!” said Ron impatiently. “They know how to Apparate! You know, just vanish and reappear at home! They only bother with Floo powder and the car because we’re all underage and we’re not allowed to Apparate yet. . . .”

Harry’s feeling of panic turned suddenly to excitement. (*Chamber of Secrets*, S 69)

Harry’s objection reinforces the notion that Harry is more mature and less likely to act on impulse than Ron is, but it also introduces the magical skill of Apparating. In chapter 9 of *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione lectures her fellow students on the impossibility of Apparating into Hogwarts, and *Goblet of Fire* offers a much fuller exploration of the ability to “just vanish and

5. Grace Hogarth, “Transatlantic Editing,” 520.

6. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Bloomsbury edition, 56. Subsequent references to the Harry Potter books will appear in the text with the designation “B” indicating the Bloomsbury or British edition and the designation “S” indicating the Scholastic or U.S. edition.

reappear,” as Ron puts it. If the Scholastic version does represent Rowling’s final version of this scene, then it cleverly anticipates a reader’s objection (how will Ron’s parents get home?) and subtly introduces another dimension of the wizarding world, preparing the reader for its return in future novels.

In the first Potter novel, revising a conversation between Ron and Dean Thomas also enhances the realism in Rowling’s fantasy world, doing so not through foreshadowing but by making more explicit the episteme in which the characters’ experiences are grounded. Earlier in the novel, Ron and his Muggle-raised schoolmate Dean argue over which sport is more exciting, Quidditch or football (“soccer” in the Scholastic edition)—Ron could not see the excitement of “a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 107; *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 144). A version of this debate emerges after the Slytherin team captain, Marcus Flint, fouls Harry during a Quidditch match (or “game” in Scholastic’s version):

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, “Send him off, ref! Red card!”

“This isn’t football, Dean,” Ron reminded him. “You can’t send people off in Quidditch—and what’s a red card?” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 138)

If the Bloomsbury edition alludes to the differences between Ron’s and Dean’s respective worlds, the Scholastic edition emphasizes these differences more clearly:

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, “Send him off, ref! Red card!”

“What are you talking about, Dean?” said Ron.

“Red card!” said Dean furiously. “In soccer you get shown the red card and you’re out of the game!”

“But this isn’t soccer, Dean,” Ron reminded him. (*Sorcerer’s Stone*, 188)

A subtle change, perhaps, but it does make very clear the different life experiences that have shaped Ron and Dean. In Bloomsbury’s version, Ron’s immediate reply—“This isn’t football. You can’t send people off in Quidditch”—leaves open the possibility that Ron already knows that sending a player off the field is a sanction used in a football match. His question “what’s a red card?” could indicate merely a lack of awareness that the red card is the formal means for this sanction. However, in Scholastic’s version, *all* of Dean’s remark catches Ron by surprise. Instead of replying with a reminder that the two sports are governed by different rules, Ron asks, “What are you talking about, Dean?” Only after Dean explains how a red card works does Ron remind Dean of the discrepancy between Quidditch rules and soccer rules. Ironically, the American edition blurs somewhat the cultural specificity of Rowling’s original by changing “football” to “soccer,”

while at the same time making much clearer the specific cultural contrasts between the “Muggle” world and the wizarding one.

Generally and with the exception of once substituting Lupin’s name for Black’s in *Prisoner of Azkaban*,⁷ the Scholastic editions tend to correct errors published in the Bloomsbury editions, a change for which Levine and his fellow editors at Scholastic deserve credit. In the third chapter of Bloomsbury’s *Chamber of Secrets*, “Geoge groaned” (B 32); Scholastic’s *Chamber* fixes the typo, rendering the line as “George groaned” (S 35). Likewise, when Harry and Ron board the Hogwarts Express in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Bloomsbury’s version tells us that “Harry and Mr. Weasley led the way to the end of the train” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, B 58), which cannot be correct because in the very next sentence they “went back outside to say goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.” Scholastic’s editors catch the error, replacing “Mr. Weasley” with “Ron,” so that “Harry and Ron” lead the way into the train, and the paragraph makes sense (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, S 72). In the first of the Potter novels, we learn that *A History of Magic* was written by Bathilda Bagshot (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 52; *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 66); however, the Bloomsbury edition of *Azkaban* attributes authorship to Adalbert Waffling (B 7), while Scholastic remains consistent, identifying Bagshot as the author (S 1). These may seem like relatively minor details, but Scholastic deserves praise for its more careful editing and for the handsome design of the American editions. In any case, even if such details appear to be minor, readers are paying attention. In an online chat with Arthur Levine at *USA Today*’s web site, one reader actually asked, “In volume 3 page 1, why was the name of the author of History of Magic changed from Adalbert Waffling to Bathilda Bagshot?” Levine replied that Scholastic did, indeed, catch “a typographical error that (apparently) the British editors missed.”⁸

Readers can ask such detailed questions because the Potter books have drawn such a wide following: people are collecting different editions, reading the books many times over, and even publishing books on Rowling herself. There are more than a dozen books about Harry Potter, even though no one had heard of J. K. Rowling before June 1997.⁹ The series’ incredible

7. The passage “‘Then it’s time we offered you some proof,’ said Black. ‘You, boy—give me Peter. Now.’” (266) becomes “‘Then it’s time we offered you some proof,’ said Lupin. ‘You, boy—give me Peter, please. Now.’” in the Scholastic edition (362). The change from “Black” to “Lupin” appears to be an error because Lupin, who is familiar with Ron, addresses him as “Ron,” not “boy.” Black, who does not know Harry’s friend, is much more likely to address Ron impersonally as “boy.” Though Scholastic’s revision softens the command by including “please” before “now,” the line still sounds as if it should be spoken by Black and not Lupin.

8. “‘Harry Potter’: Arthur Levine.”

9. These books include: Sharon Moore’s *We Love Harry Potter!* (1999) and *Harry Potter, You’re the Best: A Tribute from Fans the World Over* (2001), Marc Shapiro’s *J. K.*

popularity renders its version of Britain *the* most widely known representation of that country at this point in history. Just as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936; film, 1939) has provided people all over the world with an enduring (if inaccurate) image of the American South during and after the Civil War, the Harry Potter novels broadcast a version of late-twentieth-century Britain that has been absorbed by millions. To echo the claims of Karin Westman’s essay (elsewhere in this volume), though these novels are fantasy, the worlds of the Potter books—both magical and Muggle—directly respond to the England of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The cultural weight borne by Rowling’s novels amplifies the importance of their details, especially those details that have been “translated” into American English. Some have suggested that Scholastic’s editions merely provide “a vernacular that represent[s] the British nature of the novels” to make “Harry and Hogwarts seem . . . more realistic to readers in the United States who lack . . . awareness of boarding school and British culture.”¹⁰ However, replacing British vernacular with what Americans think of as British vernacular diminishes the novels’ realism. At times, when reading the Scholastic editions, the phrase “British simulacra”—and not “British vernacular”—more accurately describes the translations. For example, in *Philosopher’s Stone*, during the Christmas holidays, Harry and Ron sit by their common room fire, toasting “bread, crumpets, marshmallows” (146). In *Sorcerer’s Stone*, they sit by the fire, toasting “bread, English muffins, marshmallows” (199).¹¹ While “crumpets” and “English muffins” are related, they are not the same. A similarly inexact substitution occurs when Ron says that he will not “take any rubbish from Malfoy this year” in the British edition of *Azkaban* (B 64), but tells us he will not “take any crap from Malfoy this year” in the American version (S 80). You say “rubbish,” I say “crap”? Hardly. The greater degree of vulgarity in the word “crap” hits the reader with more force than “rubbish” does. Apart from being unnecessary (surely an American child would deduce that “crumpets” are food?) the

Rowling: *The Wizard behind Harry Potter* (2000), Lindsey Fraser’s *Telling Tales: An Interview with J. K. Rowling* (2000, published in America as *Conversations with J. K. Rowling*, 2001), Elizabeth D. Schafer’s *Exploring Harry Potter* (2000), Ben Buchanan’s *My Year with Harry Potter: How I Discovered My Own Magical World* (2001), Richard Abanes’s *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace behind the Magick* (2001), Bill Adler’s *Kids’ Letters to Harry Potter: An Unauthorized Collection* (2001), David Colbert’s *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter* (2001), Allan Zola Kronzek and Elizabeth Kronzek’s *The Sorcerer’s Companion: A Guide to the Magical World of Harry Potter* (2001), Sean Smith’s *J. K. Rowling: A Biography* (2001), and my own *J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Novels: A Reader’s Guide* (2001).

10. Schafer, *Exploring Harry Potter*, 214.

11. *Ibid.* Schafer’s claim that “Harry consumes crumpets in both British and American editions” may apply to the second, third, and fourth Potter novels, but it clearly does not apply to the first one.