What Makes a Great Translation?

Recommendations for Storybook Versioning

REACH Project

South Africa

June 2018

Contents

Introduction

If you are planning to translate a storybook from one language to another, then these recommendations are for you. They offer helpful ideas on how to ensure the final story in the new language is high quality. A high-quality translation is one that was not necessarily translated word-for-word, but that retains the meaning and sensibility of the original story in the new language. At the same time, the new story may adjust to the specifics of a new language (e.g. the complexity of certain words), as well as the cultural context that comes with the new language. Essentially, translating is creating a new version of a story in another language.

There are no absolute rules for versioning. Each story, cultural context, and project requirements (such as adhering to specific reading levels) will lead to different ways of translating in each situation. Instead of outlining "the right way to do it", this document provides guiding questions and examples to consider. The aim of these recommendations is to guide you to creating great translations that lead to exciting, engaging stories for children in more languages.

High quality translations are important because they hold the power to create more quality stories for children to read. This is valuable especially in languages where written stories are scarce. In South Africa, the publishing industry focuses on Afrikaans and English, while African-language storybooks remain few. With quality translations, however, a publisher, NGO, writer or others can take a single written story and multiply it into more.

These recommendations were created through the Results in Education for All Children (REACH) Project and funded by the REACH trust fund at the World Bank and the Global Book Alliance. The goal of the REACH Project is to impact the children's storybook industry in South Africa to ensure all children have exciting stories to read.
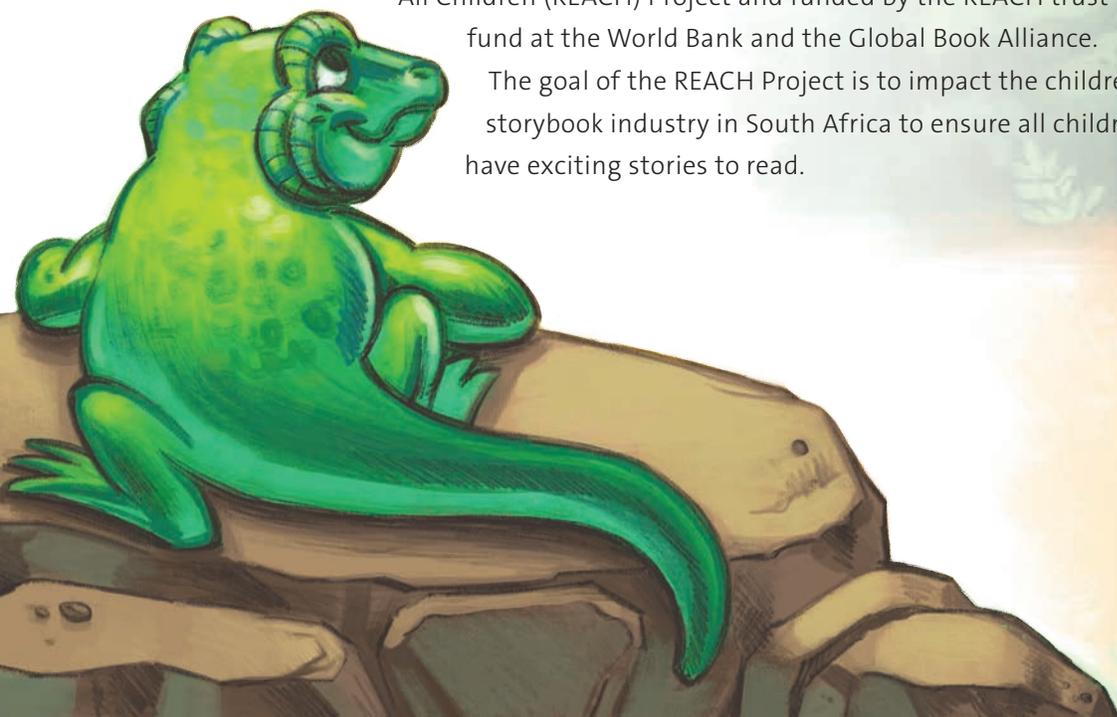
What is "translation" all about?

These recommendations are for storybooks, specifically for early grades or Grades R-3. It is important to note the differences between a children's storybook intended to be used for reading pleasure, and a reader intended to support a child's classroom learning.

Translate

verb

1. To **carry or move** from one place or condition, to another place or condition.

2. To **express** the **sense** of something (words or text) in another language.

3. To **explain** in terms that can be more easily understood.

4. To **change** into another form or medium.

5. To **transfer** from one language into another language.

6. To **change the words of one** language into the words in another language that have the same **meaning**.
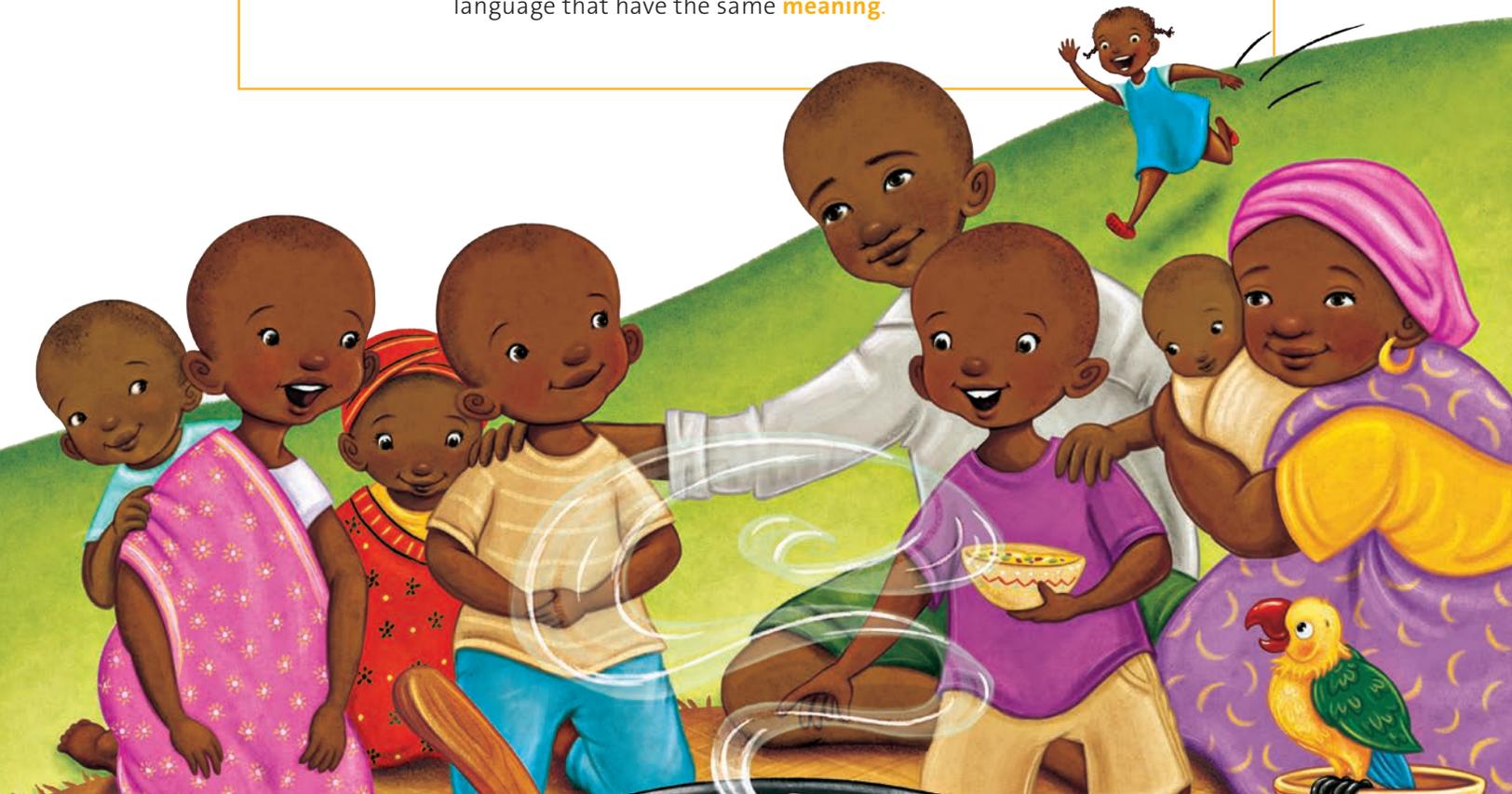
All of the explanations above are taken from or adapted from entries in a range of online English dictionaries. They are all acceptable meanings of "translate", although it might seem surprising that the word includes the idea of carrying and moving.

The word "translate" was created over a long time and it has layers of meaning to it, as well as traces of other languages in it. Like many words in English, it is a borrowed word – borrowed from another language and adapted to an English word form:

> **'To translate,' in the sense of 'passing from one language to another,' was adapted from a French word – traduire. The French word is an adaptation of the Latin word traducere, which means literally 'to lead across.'**
>
> *(Source: Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon, page 1139)*

What is the word (or words) for "translate" in another language that you know? How would you explain that word? Does the explanation contain any of the ideas suggested above, or does it add something new to how we understand the activity of translating?

The ideas contained in all the explanations on this page suggest that translating involves some or all of these activities, usually in relation to language:

- Move
- Transfer
- Change
- Express
- (Make) sense
- (Making) meaning

Are there any activities and ideas you want to add to this list?

Here is a technical description of the process of translating:

A careful analysis of exactly what goes on in the process of translating, especially in the case of source and receptor languages having quite different grammatical and semantic structures, has shown that, instead of going directly from one set of surface structures to another, the competent translator actually goes through a seemingly roundabout process of analysis, transfer, and restructuring.

That is to say, **the translator first analyses the message of the language into its simplest and structurally clearest forms, transfers it at this level, and then restructures it to the level in the ... language which is most appropriate for the audience ...**

(Source: Nida, E. A and Charles, R. Taber (1984), The Theory and Practice of Translation. 4th Impression: Brill-Leiden: The Netherlands (bold added))

This is a useful approach to translation, and there are some important terms to consider. **A grammar** of a language consists of its **formal patterns or conventions** for creating sentences and phrases (and other expressions). Semantics is the study of meaning, and **semantic structures** are the principles for **making meaning** with language in **specific contexts.** Both spoken language and visual language (which includes writing) have grammatical and semantic structures; and translators need to pay attention to both aspects.
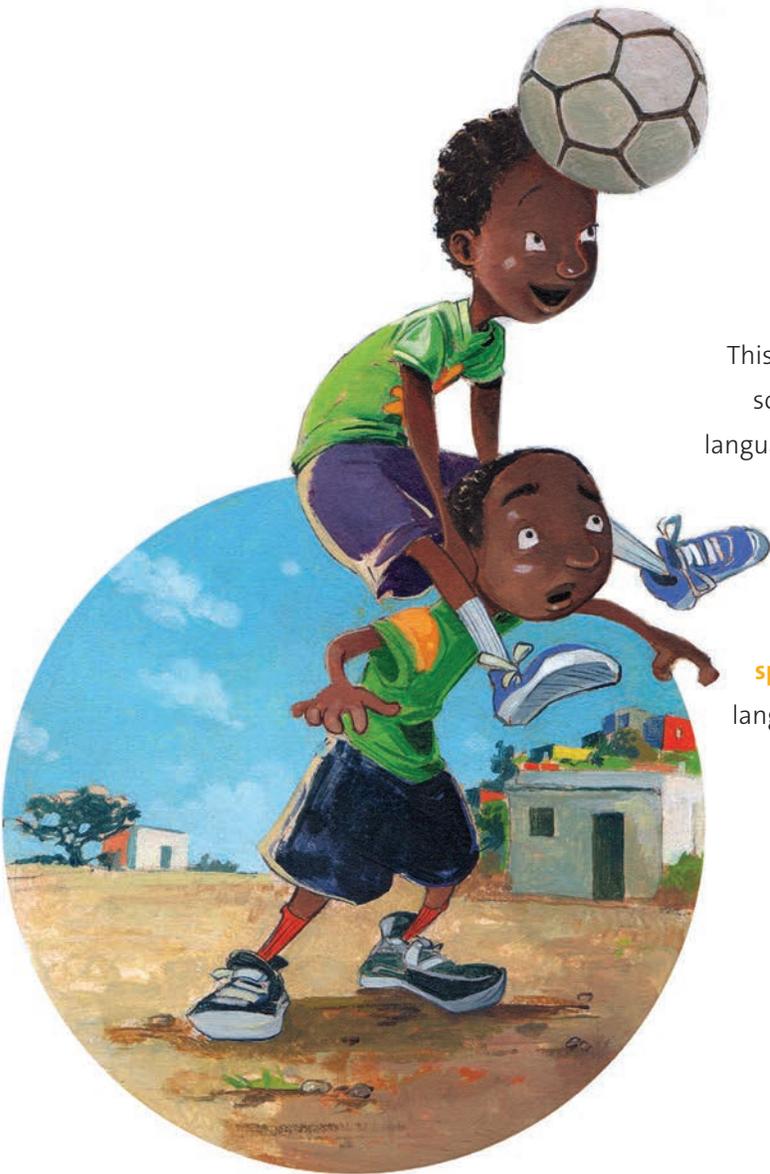
Below is an example of a translated storybook where the source and receptor languages have quite different grammatical and semantic structures because they are from very different language families. The story was written in Luganda (source language) and then translated by the author into English (receptor language, also known as the target language or goal language). The English translation of the story was the source language for the Kiswahili translation.

The English and Kiswahili translations are both potential source languages for wider translation of the storybook, especially in East African contexts (where the structures and vocabulary of Kiswahili might be more familiar to local translators than English structures and vocabulary). Luganda remains another source language for able to read the original source text by the author.

What are the limits of literal (direct) translation?

Look at these examples of literal translation from English into isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana, Kiswahili and Lubusuku. Can you see any challenges for the child reader who is learning to read African languages? Can you see any other issues to consider, for example, what if the translated text has to fit in the same space on a page or screen as the English text?

English:	Translated to isiZulu as:
I use blue. (e.g. = a blue colour pencil)	Ngipenda ngombala oluhlaza njengesibhakabhaka.
	Translated to Setswana as:
I use yellow.	Ke tshasa mmala o serolwana.
	Translated to Kiswahili as:
I use red.	Ninatumia ya rangi nyekundu.
	Translated to Lubusuku as:
I use green.	Ndumikhila ye lukondo lwe lunyasi.

(Source: Molteno, Vula Bula and African Storybook)

In the above examples, expressing the colour vocabulary required more letters and words in the target language than in the source language. It is also possible to express something in an African language using fewer letters and words than in the English translation:

Kiswahili:	Translated to English as:
Nitakuja kesho.	I will come tomorrow.
Ulilala?	Did you sleep?
Alilala?	Did she/he sleep?
Anakula?	Is she/he eating?

(Source: African Storybook)

An important difference between English and Kiswahili is how the two languages deal with gender in their structural forms (she/he). What issues might arise with regard to expressing the gender – for example, of characters in a story – when translating from Kiswahili to English? What issues do you need to consider for the languages you work with?

Sometimes it can be difficult to find in the target language an equivalent word or expression for a particular word or sentence in the source language. This can be the case for:

- **Words used in daily language**, for example, 'cellphone', 'kraal'; 'hijab', 'pap'; 'pizza'; 'uhuru'; 'safari', 'ubuntu' (and see more examples in 'Translation and pictures' on page 11 of this guide), and

- **Specific terms in content subjects** such as Maths and Science (for example, a storybook about various shapes that make up a "Polygon family": quadrilateral, rhombus, scalene, isosceles).

Translating figurative expressions – for example, metaphor, symbolism and personification – from one language to another also presents specific challenges. For each of the following examples, identify the meaning of what is expressed, and why it requires more than literal translation to carry the meaning:

English:	Meaning?	Translation?
The flames in the fireplace crackled and roared.		
I told you a thousand times! Have you got ears?		
The sun came up like a big, bald head.		
You're a star!		
The room was freezing so she lit the fire.		

An important lesson from this is that direct, literal translation is not enough. It should only be seen as a possible first step of a translation process – that is, analyzing the message of the language into its simplest and structurally clearest forms. More work has to be done by the translator so that the translated story appropriately conveys the meaning of the source language to the new audience. (And this is easier if the two languages share grammatical and semantic structures.)

What is "translation" and what is "adaptation"?

It is possible to both translate and adapt storybooks. The two activities are related but serve different purposes. The difference is briefly explained as follows:

- Storybooks are *translated* in order to have stories available in many languages – one storybook can be translated many times, into many different languages. Translation is usually from one language to another language, and the story stays the same.

- Storybooks are *adapted* so that they can be made more familiar to readers in a particular place, or easier to read for children that are at a lower reading level, or more challenging at a higher level.

Adaptation might be from one reading level to another reading level, in the same language; or the new storybook might be another level and language. Below is a translator's description of the process of adapting a story. She raises an important point about adapting a more complex story or text to a simpler one:

> It's important when adapting a story that is more complex and has more words to a story that is simpler and has fewer and simpler sentences/words, to ensure that the version you work on still makes sense as a story and not become disjointed. Often when I adapt a story down for a lower reading level, I find that it becomes somehow bare so I need to do something else to still make it interesting, flowing and meaningful. Reading through first to get a sense of the story is important before starting off with adaptation or translation.
>
> — Dorcas Wepukhulu

Changing a text to a simpler level is one type of adaption that may or may not be part of translating a story. Sometimes a storybook might stay at the same reading level, but a different type of adaptation of the story is required to make it more appropriate for the new audience, especially to make it **culturally appropriate**. When translating from one language to another language, a different type of adaptation or "versioning" is often required:

> If I translate a story from a different cultural background, I may find it necessary to version in simple ways affecting only names and activities in the story to enhance its meaning in the new language.

In Resource 1 in the Resources section at the end of this document, translators explore how to address character names in their story. What decision did the translators make? What decisions have you made about using or changing the original names of characters when you translate into another language?

What decisions have you made about the original names for places, games, songs, and special days?

"Don't worry, we will study soon. Please play!" Bedilu begged Tarik. In the end, the boys played kisara.

(Kisara is a game in which players take turns throwing flat stones or coins into a small hole, standing about a meter and half from the hole.)

What decisions did the translator of this storybook (Shepherd and his best friend) make about the character names when he translated into English? Do you know another name for the same type of game?

What if a language has more than one version?

In the box below are four quotations from English literature written in England, Scotland and Ireland. All of the sentences are versions of English – geographical, historical and literary versions. There are many dialects and versions of English in England and across the world.

Versions of English

Ah seemed tae leave ma body fir a while, watching a game show on the box. Ah could hear ma auld auld man talking tae ma auld girl, but ah couldnae take may eyes fae the ugly-looking game-show hose and turn ma heid tae face ma parents.

(Trainspotting Irvine Welsh)

As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion bequeathed me by will but poor a thousand crowns, and as thou sayest, charged my brother on his blessing to breed me well. And there begins my sadness.

(Act 1, Scene 1, As you like it, William Shakespeare)

He took his vorpal sword in hand;
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree
And stood awhile in thought.

(Jabberwocky, Lewis Carol)

All me life I have been lived among them but now they are becoming lothed to me. And I am lothing their little warm tricks. And lothing their mean cosy turns. And all the greedy gushes out through their small souls.

(Finnegans Wake, James Joyce)

Every language has many versions. But not all versions of a language are equal in terms of how users value them (or don't value them). Some languages and language versions have been given more resources by powerful groups in society, resources such as promotion in schools and universities, dictionaries, newspapers and other media. This is a social and a political issue, but what does it mean for translation?

The other challenge that constantly comes up is issue of dialects and regional preferences. There are language groups that have several dialects, some more prominent than others. Some have established orthographies while others don't have. For example, the Kiswahili spoken in Tanzania is different from that spoken in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, DRC and Burundi. Although Tanzania and Kenya are closest in terms of accepted grammar, there are still differences in spellings and vocabulary. There is the spoken and the written. Children growing up are exposed more to the spoken than the written so in translating, the question is which one should be used? Does one go by what experts lay down or by what contemporary children are familiar with? Language is alive, it evolves as user needs arise.

(Source: "What are the issues in translating and versioning stories for early reading in local African languages?" (2016) by Dorcas Wepukhulu)
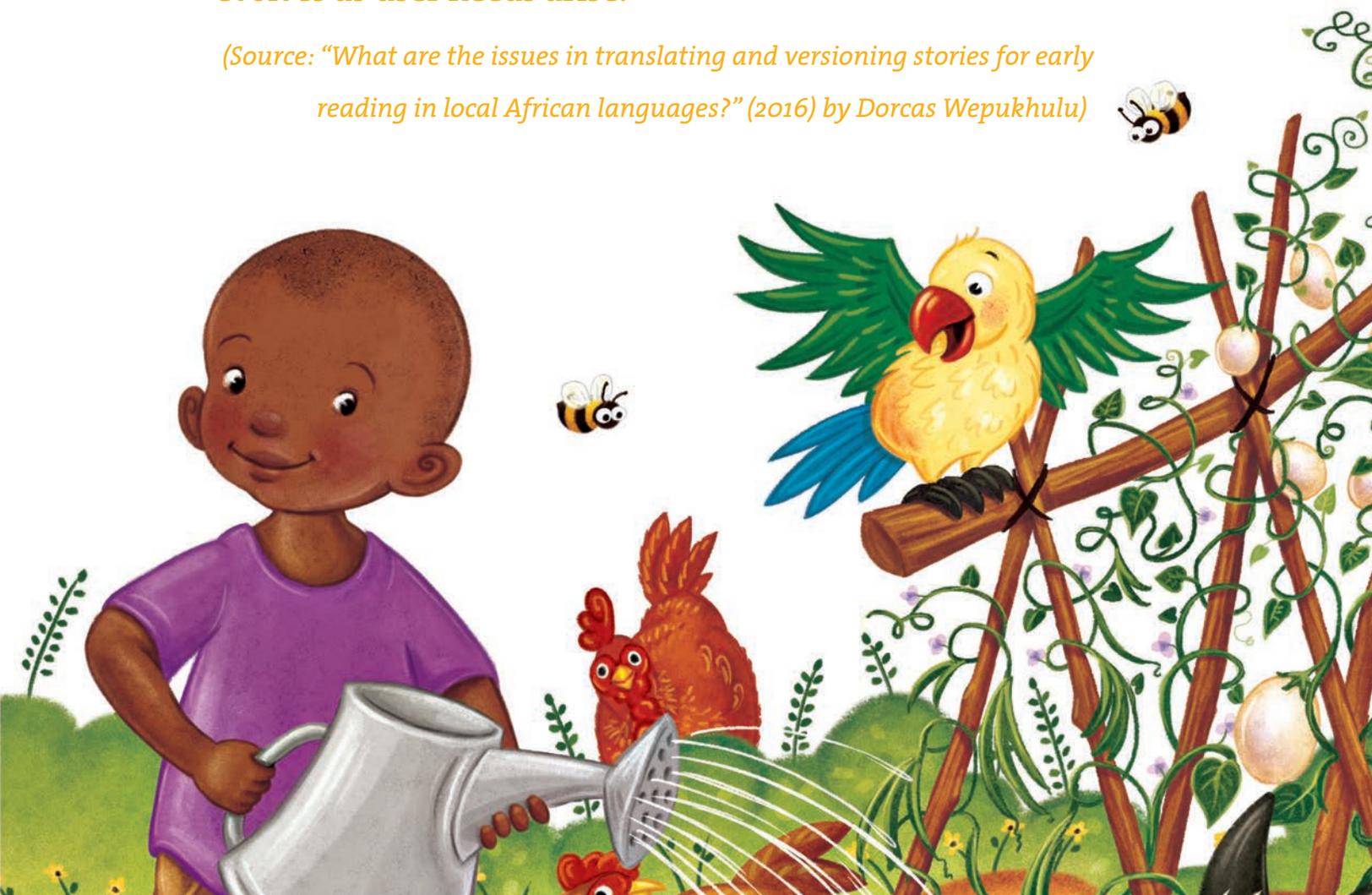
What particular issues around language versions have you encountered in your work? How have you addressed these issues?

You can also see Resource 4 in the Resources section for a perspective on "pure languages" as this may be relevant to discussions that could arise when discussing language and translations.

To an extent, the versions of the languages that translators work with depend on what they are translating and for whom they are translating. It can be very useful to work as a translation team to compare approaches, share decisions and best practices – as you can see in the case study in Resource 1 in the Resources section below.

It is also important for translators to compare interpretations and to have a checking process to quality assure their work. But sometimes it can be difficult for translators – and other language professionals – to agree on the best version to use in translated material. Resource 3 shares the experience of a group of translators re-translating a particular storybook into isiZulu (from English).
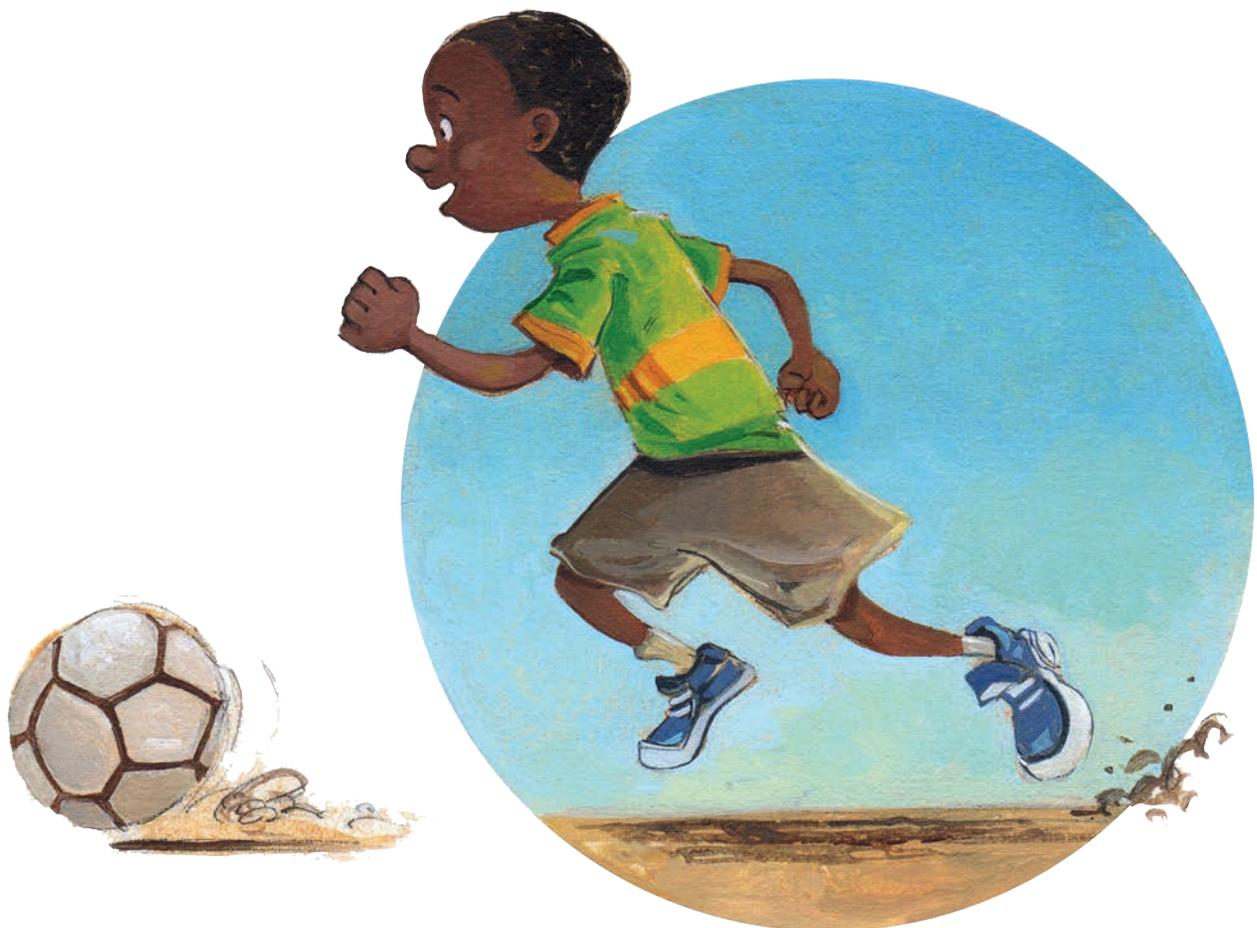
Translation and Pictures

In an illustrated storybook, each page has information in writing and a picture. The written text and the associated picture should work together to create the meaning of the story. What do you think about the pictures for Chicken and Millipede below? Do the pictures support the meaning of the sentences? Do the sentences support the meaning of the pictures?
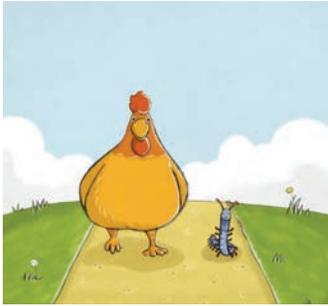
Chicken and Millipede were friends.

Page 1

They were to play football.

Page 2

Chicken was the goal keeper.

Page 3

Millipede scored three goals!

Page 4

Chicken was annoyed.

Page 5

Chicken swallowed Millipede.

Page 6

Then, Chicken met with Millipede's Mother.

Page 7

"Help Mother! Chicken swallowed me!" Cried Millipede from inside Chicken.

Page 8

Millipede tasted bad.

Chicken felt sick.

Page 9

To read the ending, search for this storybook at **www.africanstorybook.org**

Here are an additional three single pages from different storybooks.

Child as Peacemaker	Nonkungu and the Imbulu	Akai's Special Mat

An erotot from another community came by. He saw the baby. He was surprised. He asked himself, "Where is the mother?"

Nonkungu took off her clothes and gave them to the girl. When the girl took off her rags. Nonkungu saw that she had a tail! Nonkungu was afraid. She realized that girl was really an imbulu. They walked a little further, and then Nonkungu asked, "Please give me back my clothes and beads."

Akai also knew where her grandmother's manyatta was located. She often went to drink camel milk with her grandmother.

What do you think an "erotot" is? What is an "imbulu"? What is a"manyatta"? The translators decided to use words from the source language in the English translations. This is possible because the pictures help the reader to understand what the borrowed word means.

Left is one picture from a set of 12 pictures for a storybook called Advice from an Old Man. The picture shows a family of mother, father and two sons. From looking at the picture, would you say this is a happy family, and why or why not? (Consider their body language and facial expressions.)

What other information can you observe in the picture? For example, does it take place in a city? Does it take place in the present time or the past? Where does it take place?

What translation decision would you make if the text with this picture read:

Father left home one night during a bad storm.

Resources

Resource 1:
Case Study about translation planning

Resource 1 is from a case study about a translation project to create reading material for early literacy (Early Readers) – this is an extract of the notes from the four translators' planning meeting. As you read Resource 1 notice the specific aspects of language that the translators focus on, and the decisions they make about shared approaches to the work.

CAPOLSA (Centre for Promotion of Literacy in sub-Saharan Africa) is a literacy organization that publishes material in some of the local Zambian languages.

CAPOLSA's first Early Grade Readers were published in iciBemba, siLozi, ciNyanja and chiTonga in 2013, and in kiKaonde, Lunda and Luvale in 2015. These languages have closely similar grammar and phonology (system of sounds) as well as some word forms in common. Some of the stories were written in and translated between these languages. The conceptual transitions involved in translations among similar languages are easier than when translation is between languages with completely different structures and vocabulary. Translators decided to translate from the English source text into four of the African languages, and then translate the remaining material from those African languages.

The planning meeting brought together four expert translators. In addition to discussing the ideal approach to translation, the agenda also included the following:

Orthography:

Zambian languages are mutually intelligible so it is possible to have text spelled in a similar way across the languages. Together with language academics and other experts, CAPOLSA has developed a simplified orthography. The text is written in a manner that the language is spoken. This is to help young readers to connect the letters and sounds more easily. Each translator was given a guide with the rules for spelling in the specific languages.

Content, Style, and Vocabulary:

The meeting strongly emphasized the need to have content that is appropriate for young minds, the style of writing and vocabulary suitable for the developing minds. The work should be free of grammatical errors. They also agreed that certain core words or word forms – which carried particular meaning – should be retained from one language to another.

Names of Characters:

One major issue was about whether or not to maintain the names that were in the original language in the translated stories. It was agreed that it would be ideal to keep the original names because this retains the sense of originality of the story. It would also make easier the recognition of the stories by children if they came across the stories in the other languages. It was felt that young readers might have problems with some names due to unfamiliar spelling, such as 'Bontle.' For those names, similar names in local languages were to be used.

It was also noted that the stories in the English version might appear shorter than the translated ones. This was because translating the stories exactly as they were in the source language would have made the stories in the target languages appear disjointed. Translators needed to read, understand the story and write it in a way that was fitting and meaningful to the Zambian audience.
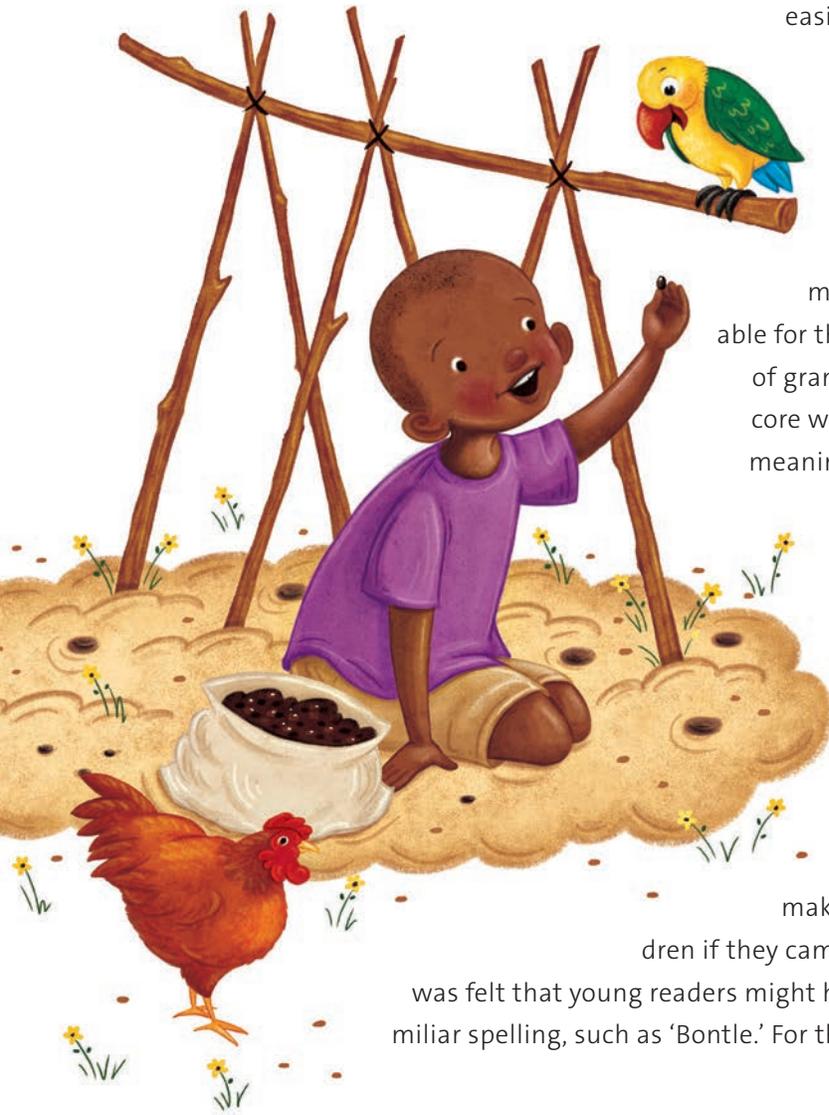
Mode of translation:

There were several stages for completing the translations. The first stage involved each translator translating 5 to 8 stories from the English version to their language of expertise (to be completed in one week by each individual). Meaning is more likely to be retained as only a small number of stories was translated from the source language to the receptor language, and then to 2 other receptor languages (at a later stage).

(Source: "Quality Assurance Report: CAPOLSA Story Translation Activity for Saide" (2017) by Ephraim Mhlanga)

Resource 2:
African Storybook translators' experiences

Resource 2 reflects some of the experiences of African Storybook translators in their own words. The comment highlighted in bold describes translation as an activity that requires a translator to negotiate between languages. What do you think of this description?

African Storybook is a literacy organization that aims to address the shortage of contextually appropriate books for early reading in the languages of Africa.

What do the underlined words in Resource 2 mean in the context of your work?

I translated stories from Sesotho into Setswana. I found the process to be more interesting, less time consuming and easier than when English is the source language. Sesotho, Sepedi and Setswana are grouped as Sotho languages and some words are related and mean the same things, whereas some words mean opposite things and/or have totally different meanings, for example, in South Sotho 'Ke lapile' means 'I'm hungry' and in Sepedi and Setswana it means 'I'm tired'. In isiXhosa and isiZulu, 'Lambile' means hungry, just as it means in South Sotho. There is some inter-connectedness to African languages even if they do not fall under the same language group. When translating from one African language to the other, the translation is based more on the **cultural aspect** of the language and its people, unlike in English where some translators concentrate on finding meaning of words in English to translate to an African language.

Xolisa Guzula, a UCT Doctoral student in language and literacy and bilingual education, translated 21 African Storybook stories from isiZulu to isiXhosa. Xolisa said that this form of translation is re-telling the story for the target group and it did not feel like she was translating. Xolisa explains that isiXhosa translation is riddled with complexities. "There are issues of literal translation and of imposing English onto isiXhosa in ways that just do not make sense in the language. **Translation is a constant negotiation between the source language and the target language,**" she says.

(Source: "What are the issues in translating and versioning stories for early reading in local African languages?" (2017) by Lorato Trok)

One of the first things we noticed at the start of the project was that when a story is translated into some languages, the text is much longer than in the original language. This meant that text couldn't fit into the textbook on the page, and the font size of the text had to be reduced in order to facilitate this. When a story is translated from English into African languages, often the story becomes more difficult because it becomes longer (with more words/sentences). Does this become an **adaptation** because the translation changes the level of the language?

(Source: "Translating and adapting stories" (2014) by Lorato Trok and Tessa Welch)

In translation, how does someone translate a story that is context-specific? Does translating perhaps go very much hand in hand with **versioning**? If I translate a story from a different cultural background, I may find it necessary to version in simple ways affecting only names and activities in the story to enhance its meaning in the new language. But **cultural translation** is also more complex than choosing names for characters and activities which are more suited to the target language.

(Source: "What are the issues in translating and versioning stories for early reading in local African languages?" (2016) by Dorcas Wepukhulu)

Resource 3:
Case study about Chicken and Millipede (uNuku noShongololo)

In a translation workshop in KwaZulu-Natal, the team involved in finalizing the isiZulu translations had conflicting opinions. As a result, the team did a collective translation exercise using a story called Chicken and Millipede. Chicken and Millipede is an early level story with one sentence per page.

As the illustration and English sentence was projected page by page, each of the 21 participants translated the text sentence by sentence. When they were done, they passed their translation to the person sitting on their left to review. Each translation was different. And there was considerable debate about what was correct. Here is a summary of the issues raised:

1.   There is a difference between the written and spoken forms of the language: whereas one would write, 'Baya ukuyodlala ibhola', one would probably say 'Baya ko dlala ibhola' (page 2).

2.   There are more expressive and less expressive ways of saying things. For example, for the sentence, 'Chicken was annoyed' on page 3 – some words or phrases for 'annoyed' or 'irritated' in isiZulu are simply more expressive and interesting to read (and hear) than other words. Translators also looked at the picture to make sure the translated words could express the chicken's facial expression.

3.   Translations will vary according to dialectal differences. For example, for the sentence 'Millipede tastes bad', one person translated it, 'UShongololo unam bitheka kabi', and another 'UShongololo akanambitheki kamnandi'.

4.   The translator has to be very aware of the context in order to choose the correct word. For example, 'Chicken feels sick'. The sense that needs to be conveyed is that he is nauseous ('ukucanusela') – not simply that he generally feels unwell ('ukugula').

5.   Punctuation, punctuation, punctuation! Many of the translators didn't get round to inserting the quotation marks into the sentences.

There was no single translation that could be taken in its entirety and used as the official translation, so the efforts of various participants were combined. You can view the translation at **http://www.africanstorybook.org/index.php?id=15102.**

(Source: "In even the simplest stories, there are translation issues" (2016) by Tessa Welch)

What are the advantages and disadvantages of a group approach to a translation?

How can translators make the most of shared expertise and resources, and sometimes agree to disagree?

Resource 4:
Extracts from article

These extracts are from an article that was originally published on:

https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-rethink-whats-meant-by-mother-tongue-education-96475

It's time to rethink what's meant by "mother tongue" education

— Lara-Stephanie Krause

Extract 1

The issue of mother tongue education has been fiercely but sporadically debated in South Africa since 1994. In the past two and a half years, student protests at universities across the country have breathed new life into the discussions.

Proponents of mother tongue education tend to argue that children should be taught in the language they first learned and spoke at home. Those who oppose this approach argue that English is a 'global language' and should be the main language of instruction throughout the school system and into higher education spaces.

But in a country steeped in colonialism and apartheid, it's not far-fetched to suspect that the common understanding of the idea of "mother tongues" is coloured by outside influences.

A mother tongue is taken to be a language that has a name: Xhosa, Tswana or Sotho, for instance. It refers to the standard version of that language, transcribed in most cases by 19th century European missionaries based on how they understood and conceptualized the way people spoke in the immediate vicinity of the rural mission station.

But what they were transcribing were actually regional dialects, not pure versions of pristine languages tied to an authentic and timeless cultural identity. Decades of schooling practices institution-alized and continuously reinforced the missionaries' notions.

Here's the problem: those supposedly "pure" languages often bear only a loose family resemblance to the way that modern people in both rural and urban areas actually speak.

[End Extract 1]
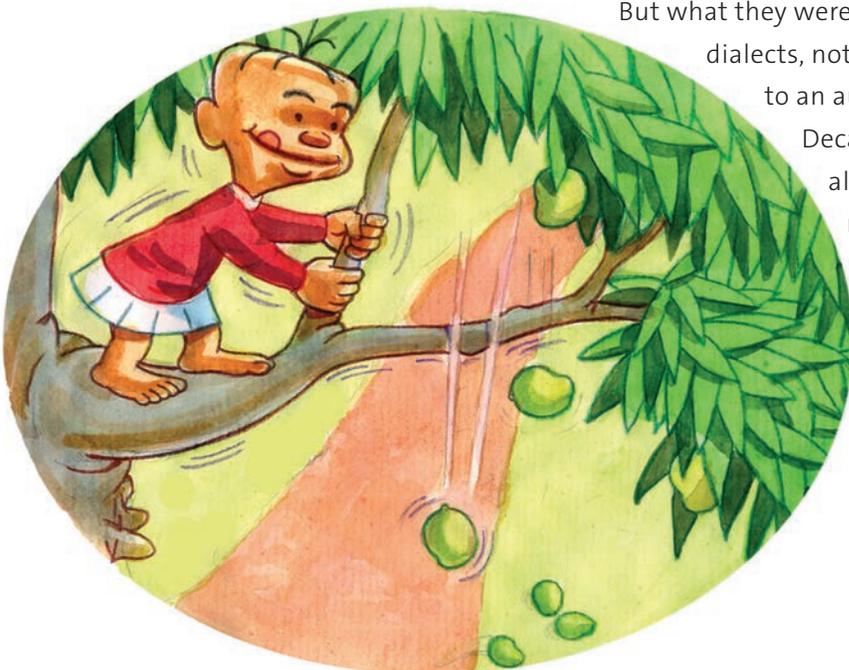
Extract 2

The frame of reference for European missionaries and colonizers when transcribing African language practices was an idea of languages existing as autonomous structures each spoken by a distinct group of people.

Versatile and flexible African listeners and speakers communicating efficiently without necessarily agreeing on one distinct, correct way of speaking did not fit this 19th century European frame of reference.

But to translate Bibles and develop grammars for their "educational" and Christian agenda, missionaries had to make African ways of speaking fit European ideas of language and grammaticality. Their Western concept of language forced them to be selective, to choose some ways of speaking for standardization and writing purposes and to ignore others.

The result is that most of today's "African languages" and so-called mother tongues are not defined by the way African mothers speak but by how white Europeans wrote them into being decades ago.

The good news is that some shifts are happening in how African languages are discussed and understood.

[End Extract 2]

Resource 5:
Translation Template

Story Template

Title of story (source language)	
Language	
Title of story (target language)	
Name of story writer/s	
Name of translator (or adaptor)	
Name of illustrator	

Summary of story (source language)	
Summary of story (target language)	

Page	Story in source language	Story in target language
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		

Resource 6:

Translator's Checklist

☐ Always read though the whole text first to understand the meaning.

Words:

☐ Is word choice appropriate for the audience? (for example, simple vocabulary for early literacy)

☐ Is vocabulary varied? (for example, interesting and different adjectives)

☐ Keep your own spelling style sheet for consistency (make a note of your decisions about spelling and other word conventions)

☐ Are there words that will be difficult to translate into the target language? How will you address this?

☐ Is there a word count to check? Number of words per page? (This can be especially important for early reading and leveled readers.)

If the translation is for illustrated material:

☐ Does each page of written text make sense with the picture on the page?

☐ Does each page of written text make sense with the sequence of pictures in the whole book?

Letters and Special Characters:

☐ Are the letters and symboles correct and consistent?

Punctuation:

☐ Are there full stops at the end of every sentence?

☐ Are there capital letters at start of every sentence?

☐ Are there capital letters for proper nouns (for example, names of people and places)?

☐ Is everything in correct formatting of direct speech?

☐ Is the spacing correct before/after punctuation (close up / open up spaces)?

☐ Are there any semi-colons and ellipsis (for early literacy)? (Try to avoid them.)

☐ Are there any sentences too long for the reading level (for early literacy)?