



CASE STUDY ARTICLE

Section: *Translation Studies*

Published by Scientific-Board
LLC in the Research Journal in
Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education (RJTLLE). Volume
2, Issue 3, 2026.

ISSN: 3067-6290 (Online)
3068-8450 (Print)

Article Details

Received: 15 March 2026

Revised: 01 May 2026

Accepted: 27 May 2026

Published: 07 July 2026

Conflict of Interest: The author/s
declared no conflict of interest.



How to Cite:

Themane, L. P. (2026). The
translation of culture-specific items
in children's literature from English
into Sepedi. *Research Journal in
Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education*, 2(3), 39-48. [https://
doi.org/10.64120/z107vs54](https://doi.org/10.64120/z107vs54)

The translation of culture-specific items in children's literature from English into Sepedi

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ABSTRACT

Translation of children's literature is challenging especially when it comes to culture specific items. So far little is known about what role culture-specific items play in the translation of English into Sepedi when it comes to children's literature. Such knowledge is critical in preserving the original meaning of a text that is to be translated. This study aimed to explore the translation strategies that are applied by Sepedi translators when translating culture-specific items found in children's literature from English into Sepedi. The study followed a qualitative research approach, where a case study research design was adopted. The study selected 10 cultural items from the story book, *Charlie, and the chocolate factory*, through a purpose sampling strategy. Data was collected through two methods; semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study used the Skopos Theory to frame the analysis and interpretation of the data. The study found that the translators were faced with the difficulty of finding translation equivalents or using the correct strategy, in order to preserve the meaning of the text. Additionally, the results showed that Baker's (2018) translation by cultural substitution and translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation are used by the translators. Again, the study found that translation challenges encountered with culture-specific items inclined that there is a great need for a wider knowledge of the source language culture. The study concludes by advising translators to apply effective translation strategies when translating culture-specific items.

Keywords: children's literature, culture-specific items, translation strategies, translators, Sepedi

1. Introduction

Translators sometimes experience problems of mistranslation when they fail to account for the cultural nuances that can alter the meaning of a text, especially children's literature. Van Coillie (2020:141) views translating for children as a "messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search of new friends. The author also mentions that translated literature improves and introduces the target readers to their culture in so many ways; for example, it offers alternative views of norms and values carried by different people around the world. Oittinen (2002) mentions that children's literature provides not only valuable information but, fun as well. This makes children's literature fascinating to read. But interestingly, it appears as if little attention has been paid to their translation from one language to the other, such as from English to Sepedi. Sepedi has become of interest, as little has been done compared to other South African languages.

There seems to be little scholarly research on the importance of culture in translation and on how to translate culture-specific items in children's literature from English to Sepedi. Sehloa (2011) states that with the translation of children's books such as Harry Potter, the status of children's literature would improve as more languages would want translations. Additionally, Magakwe et.al (2025) state that translators need to draw their attention to the ways in which translation can be perceived to either help or hinder the process of introducing children to reading materials in African languages. The focus of this paper is to explore how culture-specific items found in the story *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl are translated into Sepedi. The study chose this storybook because of its typical nature in providing a rich cultural context of how cultural nuances can influence meaning-making.

Therefore, this study sought to answer these following questions: (1) What are the challenges that a translator must take into consideration when translating culture-specific items from English into Sepedi? (2) How should culture-specific items found in children literature be translated from English into Sepedi? Answers to these questions will be significant for three reasons; (1) it will assist Sepedi translators entering the field of translation to take note of and know how to translate these terms. (2) Translation researchers and (3) language policy makers.

2. Literature Review

To locate the study in its proper location I conducted a literature review around two areas. One, about children's literature, specifically children's story books. Two, culture-specific items Such an arrangement was important as it allowed me to take a glance at the scope of work done so far and what was still missing in the field.

2.1. Children's literature

Puurtinen (1998:2) mentions that children's literature is generally observed as a peripheral and uninteresting object of study despite the significant role it plays as an educational tool for social and ideological instruments. It is not only a source of entertainment or a tool for reading skills development, but it also conveys world knowledge, ideas, values, and what is considered acceptable behaviour. Oittinen (2002:4) states that "children's literature is mainly characterised by the fact that children's books are often illustrated and often meant to be read aloud". We can agree that children's literature is characterised by its appropriate adaptability to fulfil the audience's needs, in this case, the child's development.

Apart from the general translation challenges faced by language practitioners, translating children's literature presents some of its own challenges. Translations for children play a significant role in society regardless of the difficulties they give to both researchers and translators. Children's literature is characterised as having a lower status as compared with adult literature. Oittinen (2002:16) argues that the translator of children's literature needs to take into consideration the cultural knowledge of the target reader. Cultural elements such as food and proper names need to be well thought out

before producing a target text. In addition, idioms in the source text would also require that translators examine them so they can use an appropriate and justifiable strategy.

When it comes to strategy, Lathey (2015:112) sees adaptation as a negative norm due to the fact that the meaning of the texts is within the source text. This means that when the source text is manipulated to produce a target text that suits the intended audience, it is distorted. However, Lathey (2015:112) stipulates that translators may afford themselves the privilege to manipulate the text since children's literature occupies a peripheral position within the literary polysystem. Nevertheless, as studies show adaptation seems to be the preferred strategy for translating children's literature. Jettmarova et al. (1995:189) mention that "adjusting the source text to the target culture background involves foreign culture words that need to be adapted." On the other hand, Klingberg (1986:63) disagrees with this idea by stating that the translator should retain the degree of adaptation of the source text. This is due to the fact that the source text has already been adapted for the child reader; therefore, there is no need for the translator to readapt. According to this view, the translator should therefore keep the source texts cultural elements; as a result, cultural-specific items become problematic for the translator. The study is for the idea that source culture and values should be embraced in the target texts.

Klingberg (1986:10) argues that the one goal for translating children's literature is to increase the quantity of children's literature available in the language. Kruger (2013:82) points out that the translation of children's literature enhances the status of literature and supports its glorification. Also, encourages the sharing of ideas, most especially stimulating the production of literature in South African languages. One of the objectives of this study is to encourage an interest in translating children's literature into the Sepedi. Sehloa (2011:29) also mentions that this will, to some degree, expose Sepedi children to what takes place in traditional English public schools.

2.2. Culture-specific items

According to Nida (1998), the term culture addresses three significant categories of human activity: personal, collective, and expressive. Bassnett (2003) mentions that culture is an abstract term used to account for the beliefs, values, and behaviours of groups of people. On this notion, Mustonen (2010) asserts that cultural meanings are embedded into the text of a particular language. It is right to conclude that culture plays a significant role in a language. Baker (2018) adds that culture is maintained and portrayed through language. The translation process occurs between two different languages that are also in possession of their own unique cultures. On the other hand, we have cultural identity. Cultural identity is defined as characteristics that are shared by a group of people; it also defines a person's particular values, beliefs, and origins. These characteristics include language, social behaviours, even cuisines, literature, and music. We understand that culture is the element of values and beliefs shared amongst people, and these reflect both culture and cultural identity. Therefore, culture should be taken into consideration by translators.

Culture-bound terms, as defined by Guzëy (2018) are "concepts, institutions, and personnel that are specific to the source language culture." Culture-specific items (also known as cultural vocabulary or cultural lexis) are words and word combinations (phrases) that name a phenomenon closely characteristic of a certain community, have a specific national and historical colouring, and do not have equivalents in other languages (Vlakhov & Florin, 1990). Similarly, Borysenko et al. (2024) say that culture-specific vocabulary is used to picture the background of the events, describe the lives of the characters, and create a true-to-life atmosphere by writers.

Translation is a form of intercultural communication because it not only involves two languages but also the aspects of the two diverse cultures. Guzëy (2018) argues that translation unequivocally presents us with an important service in that it mediates between different languages. It overcomes the difficulties involved in translating linguistic and cultural items. Therefore, it is an indication that the translator will, one way or another, come across linguistic and cultural barriers; these cultural barriers

include culture-specific items, which the paper focuses on.

Guzëy (2018) suggests that translation requires considering the cultural implications. This makes us aware as translators that we should be aware of the cultural obstacles that we will face during the process of translation. When one comes prepared for cultural obstacles, one will be able to come up with possible translation strategies to overcome such challenges. This means that now the translator keeps in mind the cultures of the source and target languages when translating a text. It is impossible to separate the two during a translation process.

Qassem et al. (2021) introduce an analysis of translation strategies and procedures from a cultural perspective. He mentions that a translation strategy refers to the mental process of comprehension, revision, and production. Qassem et al. (2021) studies the translation strategies used by pupils when translating cultural references. Culture-specific items posed challenges to translators due to the differences in the functions of the cultures compared. Qassem and Vijayasarithi (2015) researched the problems experienced when translating cultural idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic. They discovered that the translations were inadequate as a result of the incapability to use relevant translation techniques for these culture-bound terms.

One would observe that the process of translation is a critical one, as it is sensitive and has to be strategic to include two diverse cultures. It is important for translators to not only be good with two languages but also understand the cultures involved in the languages. One can say that translation is observed as a field that a translator works in and needs to pay attention to between two diverse cultures when translating a text, the most critical will be for children's literature as the foundation of reading in mother tongue language.

Translation theorists have proposed various translation strategies. Venuti (1998) proposed the distinction between the terms domestication and foreignization. O'Sullivan (2005) refers to these two strategies as "domesticating translations," in which cultural-specific foreign elements are adapted to make them those of the target culture, and "foreignizing translations," which preserve the foreignness of the source text.

3. Theoretical Framework

I used the Skopos Theory (ST) as adopted by Hans J Vermeer (1970) to frame the study. The Skopos theory is related to the Functional Equivalence theory in that they are both functional theories. They advocate for a translation that reads like an original in the source language; hence, they are both regarded as being target reader orientated. Additionally, in terms of the Skopos theory, the function of the product determines the process of translation. In other words, the aim is to make a translation user-friendly to the target users, unlike linguistic theories that strive to have a mirror image of a source language without considering differences in languages (Jabir, 2006).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research approach

The qualitative approach was used to locate the study in an empirical world and to achieve the research objectives.

4.2. Research design

A case study design was found to be the appropriate design for this study since it supports investigations conducted in a realistic setting.

4.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling was found relevant to this study and was used to recruit participants who were relevant to answer the research questions. Participants were selected on the basis of their knowledge and

experiences as translators. The sample of the study consisted of five experienced translators. The five participants were chosen based on the researcher's judgement that they would be able to provide thorough and extensive information on the culture embedded in texts. It was their knowledge and experience as translators that provided me with in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under study. The sample consisted of a senior lecturer in Translation, a director of the Sepedi National Lexicography Unit, an official of the Department of Sports Arts and Culture (DSAC), a Literacy Development NGO director, and a PanSALB official.

The inclusion criteria for population of this study targets language practitioners in the Limpopo Province, Capricorn District. Specifically, the population of the study targeted language practitioners who are professional translators. These professional translators were to specialise in the Sepedi language. These Sepedi translators had to have five or more years of experience working in the field of translation. From this target group, I selected five participants whom I recruited to participate in the study. I reckoned that five translators would be ideal as a starting point. However, I also reckoned that if there were still more to explore, the data collection process would carry on until the saturation point was reached.

4.4. Data collection

The first method of data collection used for the study was semi-structured interviews; they provided me with an opportunity to probe more deeply into the rich descriptions of experiences shared by participants. Participants were audio-taped, and brief notes were taken. The second method of data collection was document analysis.

4.5. Data analysis

For this study, data was examined using thematic analysis. I sorted and organised pertinent coded extracts into themes. Main themes and sub-themes were developed. Themes were reviewed. I examined the coded data extracts for each theme to determine whether they form a unified pattern. I adjusted where shortcomings were detected in the initial coding and themes. Afterwards, the data was reduced into a comprehensible set of important themes.

5. Data Presentation

I identified ten words through a thorough screening of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory book*. Ten words included *Sixpenny, Dawdle, By Golly, Nincompoop, Dilly Dally, Gobstoppers, Barmy, Dotty, and Batty*. These words were deemed relevant to answer the research question because they were imbued with cultural connotations

An inclusion and exclusion criteria for the research participants was used. This brief profile in Tables 1 and 2 below provides participants' selection criteria and their level of education.

Table 1. Summary of eligibility criteria

Criteria	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Participants	1. Translation practitioners 2. Sepedi speakers 3. Academics in translation 4. More than five years of experience	1. Translation policy makers 2. Non-Sepedi speakers 3. Less than five years of experience in translation
Target book	1. Children storybook: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl	1. Any other book

Table 2. Participants' profile

Participant Code	Brief Bio	Qualification
A	An official for the Department of Arts and Culture	Master in Translation
B	Director of PanSALB	Master in Translation
C	Director at Sepedi National Lexicography Unit	Master in Translation
D	Director of an NGO for Literacy Development	Master in Education
E	Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics	PhD in African Languages (Sepedi)

The study used the Skopos Theory to frame the analysis and interpretation of the data. Specifically, in this instance, I used the three rules of the theory, the **purpose of the translation**, the **coherence rule**, and the **fidelity rule**, as the primary determinant of methods and strategies used. From this process, three themes emerged, namely (a) translation by cultural substitution, (b) translation by loan words or loan words with explanation, and c) difficulty finding a translation equivalent or using the correct strategy. The results are discussed individually.

5.1. Finding from theme 1: Translation by cultural substitution

The findings from the first theme emerged from data from the interviews, which revealed that in instances where there were no equivalents, the translators resorted to cultural substitution. This theme answered research question 2 which is, 'How should culture-specific items found in children literature be translated from English into Sepedi?'. To make meaning of this translation strategy, the researcher applied the purpose rule of translation as adopted by Skopos. Since the intention of the translators in children's literature is to make them understand the nuances of the text, they used the cultural substitution to mediate their understanding. For example, when they were confronted with a culture-specific word that could not be understood easily by the children, they used the purpose rule to make sure that the children understand the story. Here the researcher used the purpose rule to make sense of the data. The researcher found that the translators were mostly driven by the purpose of what they wanted to put across to choose what strategy and method they adopted. This can be observed in the following examples.

Of the five participants, below are the culture-specific items that were identified to fall under the translation by cultural substitution category. The culture-specific items in English are then followed by the Sepedi translation and a back translation

Participant A: Picked up the following example of a cultural substitution.

1: Source Text (ST): The great big greedy *nincompoop*!

Target Text (TT): *Lešilo le legolo la megabaru!*

Back Translation (BT): This big greedy **idiot**!

Participant B: had the following example.

2: Source Text (ST): 'He's *Barmy*!' they shouted.

Target Text (TT): *Ba goleditše ba re 'o a gafa'*

Back Translation (BT): They shouted and said '**he is mad**'

Participant D: Presented the following

3: Source Text (ST): The man's *dotty*!' muttered Grandma Josephine.

Target Text (TT): '*Monna yo o hlakane blogo!*' gwa sebaseseba makgolo Josephine.

Back Translation (BT): 'This man has **gone mad**!' murmured Grandma Josephine

5.2. Finding from theme 2: Translation by loan word or loan word plus explanation

The second theme that emerged from the data analysis is that of translation by loan word. This refers to the use of a loan word or loan word plus an explanation. This theme answered research question 2: 'How should culture-specific items found in children literature be translated from English to Sepedi?'. To understand this better, I used the strategies and methods guided by Skopos rule of coherence.

Participant C: wrote the following loan word plus explanation that she used

4: Source Text (ST): Gobstoppers

Target Text (TT): *Gobstoppers (malekere a go thatafala gomme a tšea nako go fela)*

Participant C: again wrote the following loan word plus explanation that she used

5: Source Text (ST): Oompa-Loompas

Target Text (TT): *Oompa-loompas (batho ba bakoroto ka seemo ba go šomela difeme)*

Participant E: wrote the following loan word that she used

6: Source Text (ST): And if you tried chewing one of these *Gobstoppers* here, you'd break your teeth!

Target Text (TT): *Gape ge o ka leka go sohla ye nngwe ya di-gobstopper mo, o tla kgeroga meno!*

Back Translation (BT): And if you try to chew any of these gobstoppers here, you will break your teeth

Participant A wrote the following loan word that he used

7: Source Text (ST): I found the **Oompa-Loompas** living in tree houses

Target Text (TT): *Ke ile ka hwetša di-Oompa-Loompa di dula ka dintlong tša mehlare*

Back translation (BT): I found Oompa-Loompas living in tree houses

Participant D: wrote the following (*transliterated*) loan word that he used

8: Source Text (ST): And if you tried chewing one of these *Gobstoppers* here, you'd break your teeth!

Target Text (TT): *Bjale ge o ka leka go sohla ye nngwe ya Dikoposetopa tše, o tla pšhatla meno a gago!*

Back translation (BT): Now if you try to chew one of these **Gobstoppers**, you will crush your teeth!

5.3. Finding from theme 3: Difficulty finding a translation equivalent or using the correct strategy

The third theme that emerged showed that Sepedi translators identified the difficulty of finding a translation equivalent or using the correct strategy as a problem they encounter when dealing with English culture-specific items. This theme answers the research question 1, which is: 'What are the challenges that a translator must take into consideration when translating culture-specific items from English to Sepedi?'. To make meaning of this translation strategy, the researcher applied the fidelity rule of translation as adopted by Skopos. Since the intention of the translators in children's literature is to make them understand the nuances of the text, the challenge will be to be faithful to the source text by aiming for a more similar translation equivalent.

The results that were recorded from the data collection indicate that Sepedi professional translators mostly opted for translation by cultural substitution when dealing with culture-specific items in children's literature from English into Sepedi. The summary of answers on why the participants used the translation strategies they chose is that through those strategies, they could produce accurate and sensitive translations of the source culture. These strategies ensure the development of high-quality texts and translations and ensure the meaning is preserved. Although the Skopos theory was useful in guiding the study, was nevertheless not without shortcomings. The purpose rule for example, it tended to confine translators to be fixated into one strategy. This confinement did not allow the translators to think outside the box. Thus, their creative crafts were limited. This is not surprising though, given its historical roots in structuralism. To navigate this weakness, researchers elevate the rules of fidelity and

coherence to the same level as the purpose rule.

In answering research question 2, the researcher used semiotics. For example, where there was no direct translation of words, the research looked at pictures of symbols in the story. This was a useful strategy to bridge the gap between a culturally bound English words and Sepedi. For example, an analysis of the following picture (Figure 1) would reduce the gap created by culturally imbued texts and the Sepedi language. Symbols or pictures can play a vital role as a translation strategy. Figure 1 serves to



Figure 1. Expressing an exclamation (Good heavens!) from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* storybook. This process enabled me to answer the research question (How should culture-specific items found in children's literature be translated from English into Sepedi?). I found that when translating, the translation process needs to be understood in its cultural context. That is the reason the translators opted towards the use of cultural substitution during the interviews. The result falls under theme 1 and answers this research question. Also, the use of pictures and symbols was an effective method to mediate meaning between the translator and the receiver.

6. Discussion

The challenge when translating culture-specific items begins when a translator has no equal understanding of both cultures. Most of these culture-specific items are unknown to the target readers; this brings about translation challenges in finding the most relevant equivalent. Knowing how to translate culture-specific items is important in that it allows you to apply the best translation strategy. You will be able to apply the best strategy and reach the target readers' needs for understanding the target text and fulfil the purpose of the translation. Using the best translation strategies helps to avoid mistranslation and misleading the readers.

At least three implications can be drawn from this study. One, the findings reveal that the translation of culture-specific items still needs to be explored more, especially in Sepedi. So far, there is limited data in the field to assist translators and researchers. Two, for practitioners, the findings from this study have revealed that even experienced translators such as those in this study still face challenges when they are met with the translation of culture-specific items in children's literature. The findings, therefore, provide an indication of what trajectories need to be followed to improve their practice, for example, how the loan word needs to be used with caution. Third, for language policymakers, the findings have revealed that there is a need to develop a policy framework to guide translators.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper found that the translation of culture specific items needs to be understood in its cultural context to fulfil the purpose of the translation and the application of a correct translation strategy is important. The findings were framed by Baker's (2018) translation strategies. The first method of data collection, semi-structured interviews revealed that Sepedi translators experience challenges because of culture-specific items, however manager to employ relevant translation equivalents. The second method of data collection, which is document analysis, revealed that the use of pictures and symbols (semiotics) was an effective method to mediate meaning between the translator and the receiver in children's literature. The translators regarded proper or accurate translation strategy as important for preserving the meaning of the text thus confirming the fidelity rule of translation as adopted by Skopos.

8. Recommendations

The findings reveal that the translation of culture-specific items still needs to be explored more, especially in Sepedi. So far, there is limited data in the field to assist translators, researchers and language policy makers. Recommendation one, is that knowledge of the translation of culture-specific items should be taken into consideration. Translators should be aware of these challenging concepts and be guided in applying the best translation strategies. Two, more funding should be made available to postgraduate students and researchers to study the translation of children's literature from English to Sepedi, as there is a dire need in this area. Researchers should ensure Sepedi translators are equipped with cultural knowledge of both source and target languages. Other theories that are non-structuralist in nature need to be considered if translation of culture-specific items is to be elevated.

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