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Young adult literature in translation: The state of research

KAJA MAKOWSKA

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine the concept of young adult literature, provide its historical timeframe, identify its key components, and, finally, discuss young adult literature in translation by presenting the state of research on the topic. After analysing the concept of a *young adult*, the article moves on to provide a brief summary of adolescent fiction's history, concluding that J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* largely contributed to the recognition of the genre. The paper mentions characteristic style choices employed by the authors of young adult fiction, the most prominent being the blend of registers or 'code-switching' between teen and adult speech, as acknowledged by Penelope Eckert and Chuck Wendig. Code-switching constitutes one of the main translation problems and is discussed at large in two compelling papers on the topic of young adult literature translation, namely *Translating Young Adult Literature. The High Circulation Rate of Youth Language and Other Related Translation Problems in "The Catcher in the Rye" and "The Outsiders"* by Saskia Tempert and *Translating Young Adult Literature: Problems and Strategies. John Green's "An Abundance of Kath-erines"* by Loana Griguta. Both dissertations analyse the language of adolescent novels (in the twentieth and the twenty first century) and devise a list of strategies dedicated to adequately rendering English

source versions into Dutch and Romanian, respectively. These writings indicate a growing interest in the field of young adult literature translation. The article expresses the hope that more scholars will elaborate on the topic.

Keywords

young adult literature, history of young adult literature, features of young adult literature, young adult literature in translation

Literatura młodzieżowa w przekładzie. Stan badań

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest zdefiniowanie pojęcia literatury młodzieżowej (*young adult literature*), nakreślenie jej ram czasowych, identyfikacja głównych elementów, a następnie omówienie zjawiska tłumaczenia literatury młodzieżowej poprzez zaprezentowanie stanu badań. Po zanalizowaniu pojęcia *young adult* (młody dorosły) artykuł przedstawia krótką historię literatury młodzieżowej, którą konkluduje stwierdzeniem, iż książki *Buszujący w zbożu* J. D. Salinger'a oraz *Outsiderzy* S. E. Hinton w ogromnej mierze przyczyniły się do uznania gatunku, jakim jest *young adult*. Artykuł omawia styl powieści dla młodzieży – najczęściej stosowanym zabiegiem jest tak zwane *code-switching*, czyli mieszanie i przenikanie się kodów językowych. Zjawisko opisane przez Penelope Eckert i Chucka Wendiga stanowi jedno z największych wyzwań tłumaczeniowych, o czym możemy przeczytać w dwóch pracach dyplomowych: *Translating Young Adult Literature. The High Circulation Rate of Youth Language and Other Related Translation Problems in "The Catcher in the Rye" and "The Outsiders"* autorstwa Saskii Tempert oraz *Translating Young Adult Literature: Problems and Strategies. John Green's "An Abundance of Katherines"* autorstwa Loany Griguty. Obie rozprawy analizują język powieści młodzieżowych i opracowują listę strategii umożliwiających adekwatne przełożenie go na język holenderski (Tempert) i rumuński (Griguta). Wymienione prace sygnalizują rosnące zainteresowanie obszarem tłumaczenia literatury młodzieżowej. We wnioskach autorka wyraża nadzieję na pojawienie się większej liczby opracowań akademickich, gdyż koncept zdecydowanie wart jest głębszego zbadania.

Słowa kluczowe

literatura młodzieżowa, historia literatury młodzieżowej, cechy literatury młodzieżowej, tłumaczenie literatury młodzieżowej

1. Introduction

Young adult literature, though not named as such, has been present in the literary consciousness for at least five decades, shaping the minds of young audiences ever since J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* paved the way for the emergence of a genre that revolved entirely around adolescent struggles. Fast-forward to the present day where teen fiction is becoming increasingly popular, and although it is inherently designed for readers between 12 and 18, it is widely appreciated among other age groups, including, surprisingly, adult audiences over the age of 25. This makes it even more difficult to define the genre and unequivocally establish its real target readership. The article's aim is to discuss the notion of a young adult, to provide young adult fiction's historical timeframe, to demonstrate its main characteristics, and, finally, to analyse it in translation, tracing prevalent trends present in modern English-language YA literature and translations into different languages (focusing on European languages).

2. The recognition of a *Young Adult*

As mentioned by Michael Cart, the term *young adult* itself was not in use before World War II, as society did not recognise the need to acknowledge the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood. This view resulted from a political and economic situation in which children were forced to grow up essentially overnight (Cart 2010: 3). In such circumstances, youth culture was virtually non-existent, as teenagers, preoccupied with work and other adult responsibilities, simply did not have time to pursue education, let alone read for leisure. To put it

simply, “until 1900 we were a society with only two categories of citizens: children and adults” (Cart 2010: 4). Luckily, in 1904 psychologist G. Stanley Hall coined a new category which he described in detail in his seminal publication entitled *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. Though controversial, Hall’s work was eye-opening and extremely influential in its time. Despite not using the term *young adult*, his definition of *adolescence* agrees with our modern view on young adults, placing them between the ages of 12 and 19, and even stretching the age category to include the early twenties. Hall’s actions inspired the pursuit of education amongst teenagers, which eventually led to the emergence of youth culture in high schools, where larger groups of young people were being forced to spend time in each other’s company on a daily basis (Cart 2010: 5). Thus, a new social group was born, one with its own issues and struggles, mainly focused on such matters as love and dating – concerns that are still very much present in the lives of modern teenagers and, of course, remain visible in today’s young adult literature. Interestingly, even at the dawn of youth culture, it was already clear that it was a male-centered culture, so much so that a social worker at YMCA, H. W. Gibson, dubbed the adolescent psychology “boyology” (Kett 1977: 224). This stands in opposition to the present-day promotion of diversity which is especially apparent in the modern YA books’ choice of protagonists, which include more and more female, as well as LGBTQ characters. Influenced by G. Stanley Hall, two scholars: Robert James Havighurst and Erik Erikson, published their psychological works on the stages of human development, and both covered the stages of adolescence and young adulthood, the former identified as 13 to 18 years old, and the latter – 19 to 30 (Cart 2010: 7). Cart states that the acknowledgment of young adults was long overdue, and whether or not we agree on the nomenclature – the *young adult* versus *adolescent* debate is heated to this day – we cannot deny that the recognition of this separate stage of life opened up numerous opportunities for therapists, youth workers, educators, and, naturally, teenagers themselves.

3. The emergence of Young Adult literature

Sadly, the more positive attitude towards young people and their struggles did not result in publishing houses catering to this particular age group, largely due to the fact that teenagers were still mainly regarded as children (Cart, 2010: 8). However, as noted by Nilsen and Donelson, over the first four decades of the twentieth century public opinion started recognising the distinct needs of this new age category, and books for adolescents began to emerge (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009: 42). A new type of book, a story for teenagers about teenagers, finally landed on the shelves, and in this new genre one could find *The Hardy Boys* series (for boys) and *The Nancy Drews* series (for girls), written in 1927 and 1930, respectively. When the Little, Brown and Company publishing house published *Sue Barton: Student Nurse* by Helen Boylston in 1936, the market for teenage stories exploded, and Boylston's work became one of the most popular books in the history of YA literature (Cart 2010: 9). Though numerous publications followed, the one worth mentioning is definitely *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly (1942), which, as the author herself said, was not meant to be a juvenile novel, but a full adult novel (Berger 1994: 216). Yet, due to the author's young age at the time of publication and the publisher's decision to target the book at a younger demographic, it entered the market as part of the teen fiction genre. A love story written in first person, *Seventeenth Summer* resembles contemporary young adult novels, and though now outdated, the book certainly set a trend for future generations of writers to follow. Even Daly's contemporaries derived from her formula, writing and publishing innocent romances revolving around female protagonists. These became the staple young adult reads throughout the forties and fifties (Cart 2010: 15). And then, like a breath of fresh air, came *The Catcher in the Rye*, the absolute opposite of its prim and proper predecessors. Published in 1951, originally for adult readers, the book quickly resonated with adolescent audiences, largely due to its first-person narration, which temporarily constitutes a prevalent trait of young adult fiction (Wen-

dig 2013). Interestingly, it is Salinger's piece that established the tradition of a first-person narrative, even more so than Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (Cart 2010: 27). But there was more to *The Catcher in the Rye* than just its narrative voice. Its adolescent tone and the choice of themes, including the depiction of various rites of passage, made the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, exceptionally relatable for teen readers. Cynical, funny, and troubled, Caulfield became an icon – the symbol of rebellion – and to this day he is considered an archetypal teenager (Legan 2012). Salinger's book sparked interest in real adolescent problems, and the answer to these problems lay in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), which touched upon issues such as social class and family problems. Hinton herself commented on the fact that authors of teenage books are "fifteen years behind the times" (Hinton, 1976: 26), calling for authors to stop focusing on writing romances and depict reality instead. The critics expressed the same view, pointing out the general lack of realism in teenage novels (Cart 2010: 26). Hinton's book was innovative – it was praised especially for showing violence and inserting it into the daily lives of her characters. The author's rejection of norms changed the status quo and facilitated the birth of a new type of literature. Though a bit outdated now, *The Outsiders* paved the way for modern YA novels that deal with violence and defiance.

4. Modern adolescents and their needs

Young adult literature has come a long way, and nowadays is truly "coming into its own" (Crocker 2003: 76). As noted by the authors of the textbook entitled *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation*, well-written YA books can do much more than merely bring enjoyment to adolescent readers – they foster understanding and assist in self-development, as well as allow readers to explore different life experiences (Bucher and Hinton 2014: 1).

In order to understand the literary needs of a modern teenager, it is crucial to note that today's young adult differs sub-

stantially from the adolescent from a couple of decades ago. It has been proven that contemporary adolescents mature faster, have more cognitive knowledge, and face issues that previous generations have not been familiar with, such as eating disorders, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, peer pressure and anxiety (Bucher and Hinton 2014: 2). Although each individual is different and, naturally, deals with their own distinctive problems, these concerns serve as a guideline not only for writers, who touch upon these topics in their writings, but also teachers and educators who work with teenagers and establish their relationships with the youth through literature.

Since the contemporary young adult is more mature, contemporary young adult literature is more mature as well – it incorporates more complex themes and serious subjects (Cart 2001: 95). The most pivotal difference is the polyphony of today's YA, the multitude of perspectives, especially the emergence of previously unheard voices – those of gays and lesbians, the disabled, black communities, as well as different ethnicities and religions. The abundance of perspectives is meant to ensure that every adolescent relates to and identifies with at least a small number of YA books, allowing the teenagers who used to feel underrepresented to finally see themselves (or rather their reflections) on the pages of a book. Though often downplayed by the critics as one-dimensional and less complex, adolescent literature gained recognition and due respect circa 2000s, largely owing to Michael Cart, who devoted his career to promoting books written for youth that felt neglected and overlooked because of their sexual orientation, national origin, religious beliefs, physical appearance, *et cetera*. Cart remarks that “something wonderful has happened to young adult literature” (Cart, cited in Donelson and Nilsen 2009: 5), as it not only exploded in quantity, but also greatly improved in quality, and can no longer be dismissed as a genre, for contemporary YA authors truly offer an amazing insight into the minds of modern teenagers, simultaneously granting young readers the chance to learn tolerance, empathy, understanding, kindness and compassion.

Youth will inevitably grow up, hence we should start educating younger generations from the very beginning.

According to Bucher and Hinton, young adult literature deals with issues, problems and experiences that contemporary adolescents relate to (family relations, romantic relationships, illness and death, peer pressure, substance abuse, sexual experimentation) and it considers contemporary world perspectives, including cultural, social and gender diversity, as well as sociocultural and political aspects (Bucher and Hinton 2014: 9-10). Adolescent books usually revolve around one central plot, narrated from the teenage perspective (not necessarily in first-person narration), mostly focusing on the life of one main character. Interestingly, under the general name of 'young adult literature' there lies a multitude of genres and categories, some of which include fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, romance novels, dystopia, adventure, mystery novels, short stories, and many more.

When it comes to style, YA novels are often sophisticated and compelling (Christenbury 1997: 11). They tend to include a specific adolescent language. As noted by Ignacio Palacios Martínez, this characteristic sociolect consists of reductions and simplifications (*wanna, gonna*), negative forms (*ain't, dunno*; an abundance of negatives such as *never* and *none*), quotatives (*like*), insult words and colloquialisms, intensifiers (*totally, absolutely*), vague expressions (*loads of, thingy*), non-canonical tags (*yeah, right, okay, eh*), and more (Palacios Martínez 2011: 110-1200). While another scholar, Penelope Eckert, agrees with Palacios Martínez to some extent, she argues that such a diverse group cannot be treated as a homogenous category, as every adolescent has their own unique type of speech (Eckert 2004: 386). Chuck Wendig, on the other hand, remarks that teenagers in YA fiction "sound like adults" (Wendig 2013). He mentions the adult-like speech as one of the prevalent features of adolescent literature, which in turn may be linked with Loana Griguta's observations on code-switching – the alteration of more than one style, dialect or register (here: blending youth and adult language) – which poses difficulties for the translators, as it

requires them to achieve semantic and stylistic equivalence and convey the source function (Griguta 2013: 28). This brings us to the next concern of the article.

5. Translating young adult literature

That being said, even though young adults are such a prominent social group and nowadays the literature addressed to them occupies a high and respectable position in the publishing market, the academic interest on the topic of translating YA literature is only beginning to grow. Before the boom for modern YA books started in the 2000s, the notion of translating young adult literature was only mentioned in works concerning translating children's literature (CL). Even though there are a great number of comprehensive sources on translating CL (Gillian Lathey, Ritta Oittinen, Reinbert Tabbert and Emer O'Sullivan, to name a few), I would like to focus on texts devoted solely to translating YA. The texts written specifically on that topic consist mainly of various dissertations and articles published on the Internet.

There are, however, some extensive academic sources, one of which is Kristana Misikin's piece entitled *YA Literature in Translation: A Batch of Batchelder Honorees*. The article draws a parallel between teenagers and translated literature, discussing how they both do not fit into fixed categories – teenagers are stuck between childhood and adulthood and translated literature belongs simultaneously to multiple languages and to no language in particular (Misikin 2011: 67). Connecting adolescents to translated literature creates an opportunity to explore personal and national identity, and allows readers to learn more about the world. Given the size of the American publishing industry, the United States publishes much fewer translated works than other developed countries. Misikin remarks that a solution to this problem may lie in searching for books in the list of nominees and winners of the Mildred L. Batchelder Award – a prize awarded to publishers who print the most outstanding children's or teen book "originally published in a foreign

language in a foreign country,” then translated into English and published in the U.S. (ALA 2018). The aim of the award is to promote cross-cultural understanding, and the committee thoroughly examines the English translations in terms of theme, style, presentation, plot and character development (Miskin 2011: 67). The committee members stress that the readers should be able to tell that the book comes from another country. At this point it is crucial to highlight the role of the translator, who shapes the target version and decides which foreign elements should be retained, explained or adjusted in order to teach young readers something new without alienating and overwhelming them. Well-translated books have the power to broaden the readers’ perspective and educate them on life in different parts of the world. Here we can draw another parallel between young adult literature and translated literature, as they both offer new perspectives and help develop empathy towards those with different experiences. Miskin mentions that translated literature can become a tool for educators and may be used to teach about specific geographical areas or historical periods from a different point of view (Miskin 2011: 68). She goes on to describe the winners of the Mildred L. Batchelder Award and remarks that the list is dominated by Western-European languages (especially French and German), which may be the result of these countries’ long-standing literary traditions for children and young adults, or perhaps the publishers’ narrow-mindedness and tendency to exclude translated works from their publications. The author concludes the article by expressing the hope that publishing houses will grant the American readers access to worthy titles from all around the globe.

The case is quite the opposite for the rest of the world, where the books translated from English have maintained a steady position in the publishing markets; in Poland, for instance, they constitute 56% of all the translated texts (which in turn constitute 21% of all the published books) (Biblioteka Narodowa 2016: 31-32). Interestingly, the percentage of translations in the young adult books published in Poland amounts to as much as 62%, thus holding the second place in the number of translated

publications after comic books (80% of which are translations), which one could arguably insert into the adolescent category as well.

Having established that translated literature, or translated young adult literature, to be exact, occupies a prominent position on the literary markets around the world, we may now focus on the issues connected with translation itself. For the purpose of this part of the article we will concentrate on translation from English into different European languages.

Translating for adolescents poses many difficulties and challenges, some of which are characterised in Cristina Chifane's adequately titled *Old and New Challenges in the Translation of Young Adult Novels*, an article that deals with translations of Andy Brigg's books *HERO.COM* and *VILLAIN.NET* into Romanian. The author begins with highlighting the importance of the titles, one of which includes an acronym (Higher Energy Research Organization) that may be considered the first translation challenge. Chifane explains that the titles (and therefore the names of the fictional websites) have been preserved, while the subtitles (*Rise of the Heroes* and *Council of Evil*) were translated into Romanian. Surprisingly, Andy Brigg's message to the readers in the form of an email was entirely deleted and not included in the Romanian publication, much to Chifane's disappointment. Chifane goes on to talk about other deviations, this time at the linguistic level. She mentions five deviations: phonological, graphological, lexical, grammatical and semantic (Chifane 2014: 80-85). Phonological deviation occurs in intense situations in the books, where the English version is very expressive and the Romanian version follows normative structures. Graphological deviation is connected with the visual elements on the page, such as capital letters or parentheses and their retention or lack thereof. Lexical deviation includes malapropisms, colloquialisms and vulgarisms, as well as language novelty (creative nicknames, for example) and their rendition into Romanian (which is not always possible). Grammatical deviation involves numerous morphological and syntactic changes, which are not seen as ignorance, but as a deliberate stylistic choice. Semantic

deviation concerns the transference of meaning, especially when it comes to metaphors, similes and hyperbole in this specific case. Chifane also points out that due to the target reader's familiarity with the English terminology, English words were preserved and adapted to the Romanian linguistic structure, hence the translation includes many Anglicisms. The author concludes the article by stating that the translation process for the series resembles the confrontations in the novels and involves a linguistic confrontation, which means that it deals with instances of linguistic deviation or cases of non-equivalence. She suggests that translation strategies chosen by the translator should perhaps be revisited in order for the target version to meet the modern market requirements (Chifane 2014: 285).

Although Chifane's article points out some problematic elements when it comes to translation and provides theoretical framework that other scholars may derive from, the article does not answer the question "How should a translator treat young adult literature?," which is the exact question posed by Saskia Tempert in her master's thesis *Translating Young Adult Literature. The High Circulation Rate of Youth Language and Other Related Translation Problems in "The Catcher in the Rye" and "The Outsiders"* (Tempert 2013: 26). Tempert admits that little research has been done so far, hence it is rather difficult to pinpoint the exact translation problems of young adult literature. She notes that YA is often treated as children's literature and translators employ strategies and techniques usually attributed to translating children's fiction. Despite the similarities between these two genres, the approach towards translating them, even though sometimes imposed by the publisher, may be different (as noted by Tempert, publishers may demand that translators omit certain more mature themes while translating children's literature, which would not be the case when it comes to young adult literature) (Tempert 2013: 28). Tempert mentions the non-standard variety of youth language, also noted by Loana Griguta (2014). She writes about deviations from standard language and code-switching – alternating between different linguistic registers within the same utterance (Tempert 2013: 29). Another

interesting point brought up by Tempert is the fact that language can date a young adult book. She cites Lawrence Venuti, who wrote that the original is eternal, whereas translation will always be a copy, and remarks that this may be the reason why *The Catcher in the Rye* in English continues to be a timeless classic, while it already has three different Dutch translations. As a consolation, Tempert explains that even though the translation may become dated, it does not necessarily become completely obsolete. However it might lose its relevance, particularly to adolescent readers.

Both Tempert and Griguta mention translation strategies in their dissertations. The former makes use of Michal Mašlaň's model, which includes neutralising, substitution with a target language equivalent, substitution with a target language non-standard element, and amplification; the latter employs the methodology by Van Coille (copy, exonym [replacement with a TL counterpart], phonetic adaptation, literal translation, substitution with a synonym, omission, addition, compensation and rearrangement). One minor strategy provided by Göte Klingberg and mentioned by Tempert is particularly worth noticing: modernisation, that is a more radical form of adaptation (it involves altering the whole text to fit a more recent time or place) (Tempert 2013: 37). A key to employing this strategy is the translator's competence and great knowledge of both the source language and the target language non-standard variety, which is essential in order to make appropriate translating decisions.

Even though Tempert's and Griguta's works gather some basic information on translating young adult literature which may help enhance future research, scholars, as well as working translators, would definitely benefit from a higher number of extensive resources on how to translate YA literature, especially in the form of academic texts. As proven by the first three sections of this article, adolescent fiction is immensely valuable for young readers, and the need for identifying key translation problems and pinpointing strategies for tackling them should definitely be answered. It is certainly a topic that I wish to explore and elaborate on in the future.

6. Conclusion

There is no denying that young adult literature has been a crucial part of people's literary experience for more than fifty years now, however it truly exploded in the 2000's with the multitude of voices and perspectives that enabled every teenager to identify with characters on the pages of books. Teenage fiction touches upon such important issues as identity, sexuality, family, relationships, illness, death, and many more. It is written in a unique style that often includes a characteristic blend of registers or code-switching. The issue of translating YA literature, however, is only now being recognised by scholars. Some of the works on this issue include Kristana Miskin's piece on the state of translated works in the United States (and the same author's dissertation on the transnational exchange between the U.S. and Germany, which was not discussed in the article), Cristina Chifane's review of two Andy Brigg's books translated into Romanian, and two dissertations, the first one by Saskia Tempert on the translations of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Outsiders*, the second one by Loana Griguta on the translations of *An Abundance of Katherines*. Both papers try to pinpoint the characteristic and unique translation problems encountered by translators of YA novels, conclude they mainly lie in the distinctive language of teenage fiction, and attempt to solve these problems by means of specific translation strategies. Even though these theses raise some important matters, the notion of translating young adult literature is a rich source, and I look forward to exploring this meaningful subject in the future.

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Kaja Makowska
University of Gdańsk
Institute of English and American Studies
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
kajamelia@gmail.com