

A Linguistic Analysis of *Kramp*: María José Ferrada's Child Narrator in Translation

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Abstract: Novels narrated by children but written for adults are a relatively unstudied recent phenomenon, and the literature lacks a ready-made paradigm for studying and understanding the role that child narrators play in adult literature. These novels also occupy a unique place in the literary polysystem: novels tend to occupy the center of that system while children's literature typically exists on the periphery. This paper considers one such novel, María José Ferrada's *Kramp*, which was published in Spanish in Chile. Several hallmarks of children's speech are identified in the child protagonist's narration, including categorization, use of standard language variants, mastery of aspect and sentence word order, and elements of authoritarian dialogics. Following a description of these elements is an explanation of how each of these hallmarks were rendered by the author of this paper in her English translation of the novel. This linguistic analysis illustrates how the role and function of the child narrator is preserved in the target text.

Keywords: child narrator; Spanish translation; polysystems; linguistics; child speech

1. Introduction

Chilean children's book author María José Ferrada released her first novel for adults, *Kramp*, in 2017. The novel follows the seven-year-old protagonist, M, who narrates in the first person from a time far after the events of the book take place. The novel is structured as a reflection, in which M describes from maturity the events that unfolded in her childhood and her perception of those events as they occurred. This narrative structure makes the novel difficult to classify. Although the intended audience is adults, the child narrator and Ferrada's history as a children's book author inflect her work with hallmarks of children's literature and child speech.

The analysis presented here will first contextualize *Kramp* within the global trend toward child narrators in adult literature and address the relative lack of scholarship on such narrators. Then, several linguistic hallmarks of M's first-person narration will be identified in the first ten chapters of *Kramp*. The discussion of these elements will include linguistic characteristics that distinguish Spanish and English language development. Finally, each section will include a translation analysis, which will compare elements of the Spanish source text with the English target text to highlight how the child speech exhibited in the novel's child narration was conveyed in translation.

2. Contextualizing *Kramp*

Kramp is part of a global trend toward the use of child narrators in adult fiction. The trend is so recent, in fact, that there is little scholarly research on the phenomenon (Steinmetz 45). Ferrada has historically written children's books; *Kramp* is her first novel for adults. Her history of writing for and about children makes it possible to analyze her work, including *Kramp*, using paradigms from the study of children's literature and children's literature in translation. The narration of *Kramp* is unique in that instead of a child narrating events in real time, as in Emma Donoghue's 2010 adult novel *Room*, M's narration is framed as a reflection from later in life. At the same time, the novel is structured so the plot unfolds through the eyes of M as a child.

Adult literature written from the point of view of a child is a literary innovation unseen until the 19th century (Steinmetz 2011). Novels such as *Huckleberry Finn* center on a child's experience and development, but are often narrated in the third person, so that the child's development is still seen through the lens of an adult narrator. The recent trend toward first-person child narration prioritizes the child's experience through his or her own eyes. This strategy allows the author to treat difficult subjects such as trauma, abuse, or terrorism without explicit comment (Steinmetz 2011). Instead, the effects of those experiences are evidenced in how they shape the life of a child who is still in development. Ferrada employs this technique: Her protagonist, M, grows up during the final years of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile. The novel doesn't explicitly deal with the country's politics, but readers familiar with Chile's history will recognize its influence in shaping M's understanding of the world.¹ To this end, the book's semantic message can only be fully understood in the context of Chile's political history. Pragmatics play an outsized role in literature narrated by children in the first person since the method is typically used to treat a subject obliquely.

Traditional children's literary analysis may not apply perfectly to *Kramp*, but the approach is one of the few scholarly lenses available through which to view the novel's distinct placement relative to children's and adult's literature. The narrative innovation exemplified by *Kramp*, which fuses child narration, traditionally confined to children's literature, with adult audiences, may occupy

1 Another novel that relies on a child narrator to explore growing up under a dictatorship in the Southern Cone is Laura Alcoba's *Manèges*, originally published in French and translated into Spanish under the title *La casa de los conejos*. The novel tells the story of a family going into hiding after arousing the suspicion of Argentina's military dictatorship. The narrator is seven years old, and although living under a terrorist regime plays a much bigger narrative role in *La casa de los conejos* than in *Kramp*, both novels explore worldview development and family relationships through the experiences of similar child narrators. Not much research has been conducted on the linguistic hallmarks of the narrator of *La casa de los conejos*, but the novel's similarity to *Kramp* and the fact that it has been translated into several languages would make it an excellent subject for comparison and for further research as the study of child narrators in adult literature develops.

a previously uninhabited corner of Even-Zohar's literary polysystem (1987). Adult literature occupies a central position in that system, but children's literature exists on the periphery. While literature in translation tends to occupy the same position in the polysystem in both the source and target languages, children's literature has historically afforded the translator more latitude, given children's literature's peripheral placement and didactic function (Shavit 1981). *Kramp* occupies a relatively unstudied middle ground, but because it doesn't serve that educational purpose, there is a strong case for closer translator fidelity and for *Kramp* to occupy the same polysystem position in both Spanish and English. The below considerations of the novel's linguistic aspects and how they are effected in English are predicated on this preference for close translation.

3. Aspects of Language Development in *Kramp*

3.1 Categorization

A central theme in *Kramp* is M's classification of her experiences. Throughout the novel, she develops an epistemology based on categories and classes. M and her father build a mutual understanding of the world rooted in hardware and construction metaphors. M claims explicitly that her worldview was shaped by the Kramp hardware catalog: "Lo que quiero decir, es que cada persona intenta explicarse el mecanismo de las cosas con lo que encuentra a mano. Yo, a los siete años, había estirado la mía y había dado con el catálogo de Kramp" (Ferrada 2017).

M's eagerness to classify reflects an early stage in child language development wherein the child recognizes patterns, understands the concept of classes, and begins to group similar phenomena. In his 1986 book, *Language, Children and Society*, David Lee explains that "children do not perceive the world as a random assortment of kaleidoscopic impressions; rather, they are sensitive to certain patterns or structures in the world around them" (1986). He goes on to say that "they already appear to understand that one of the key functions of language is to refer to the world in terms of these rather abstract structural patterns—that is, to group phenomena into classes in terms of shared features of one kind or another" (1986).

In M's case, these structures are both physical and conceptual, and hardware provides a handy metaphorical tool for building a categorized understanding of her experience. M's classifications begin early in the novel, as she describes her childhood: "Así, comencé con una temprana clasificación de las cosas" (Ferrada 2017). M describes her understanding of day and night: "El primer año de vida supe, por ejemplo, que hay algo que se llama día, algo que se llama noche y que todo lo que pasa en una vida cabe dentro de una de esas dos categorías" (Ferrada 2017).

M's categorization and her worldview construction are central themes of the novel and are made possible by her young age. The use of categorization reinforces M's status as a child narrator because it reflects a linguistic hallmark of early language development. Because this stage of language development applies to both Spanish and English speakers, close renderings of these instances of categorization are possible: "The first year of my life, I realized, for example, that there is something called day, something called night, and that everything that happened in a life would fit into one of those two categories" (Ferrada 2018).

M's system of classification not only reflects a linguistic development characteristic to children her age and structures the novel thematically, but it also provides a lens for character focalization. As discussed, first-person child narration places the onus of describing and recognizing her development as a person on the character herself. While these descriptions may be explicit, they can also be contained in features of the child's language and observation. For example, a child character's looking 'up,' 'down,' and 'around' at elements of her world illustrates her powers of observation and how she places herself within that world. Her wide-ranging sensory observation focalizes the character (Philpot 2017). A similar effect is seen in *Kramp* and M's relentless categorization. She astutely observes the ways that the world divides objects, people, and experiences by their shared features and looks for the links that connect them across that difference. Her character is focalized and her worldview conveyed through these observations.

Finally, because the concept of classification runs through the entire novel, the translator must remain sensitive to the multiple functions that classification serves in the system of the novel. It's incumbent on the translator to consider the novel comprehensively and approach the source as a total structure (Bassnett 2014).

3.2 Standard Language Variants

Throughout *Kramp*, M uses a standard language variant despite her young age. This can partly be attributed to the reported nature of the narration. *Kramp* is structured as M's reflection of her childhood from much later, but the reader views the events of the novel through the eyes of M as a seven-year-old. However, the novel's use of standard Spanish should not be seen solely as a concession to the novel's adult audience. Other novels for adults that utilize child narrators have forfeited standard usage. Donoghue's novel *Room*, for example, which is narrated by a five-year-old boy (2010).

M's use of standard speech reflects the linguistic tendencies of her sex. Women tend to use standard speech variants more than men in the same social group, a distinction that appears early in children's language development (Lee 1986). Lee notes that men's preference for non-standard variants has been

recorded across cultural and language differences. The likelihood that this tendency is exhibited equally in Spanish and English means that, to convey Ferrada's stylistic choice, the translator ought to render M's standard Spanish into standard English.

Interestingly, Lee partly attributes the possible divergence in usage to girls' exposure to and identity with primary school teachers, who tend to employ standard language variations (1986). M's career as an assistant to her salesman father is predicated on her truancy, to the extent that she and her father have to forge school attendance forms. But even with her lack of exposure to standard variants at school, M would have likely received similar exposure from the extended time she spent in the company of salesmen, another group predisposed to using standard variants (despite their sex).

One specific example of M's standard language use is her correct ordering of subjects, objects, and verbs in sentences. In both Spanish and English, children master this word order very early (Silva-Corvalán 2014). M demonstrates this mastery throughout the novel's narration, beginning with the first sentence: "D comenzó su carrera vendiendo artículos para ferretería" (Ferrada 2017). The natural strategy for the translator is to render standard Spanish word order as standard English word order, even when that means altering the source sentence from a VSO or VOS order to English's standard SVO order:

Como no había audio, de fondo tocó la banda de los bomberos (Ferrada 2017).

Since there was no audio, the fire department band played in the background (Ferrada 2018).

This alteration of syntax maintains in English translation M's characteristic understanding of standard language variants and word order.

3.3 Verb Complexity

Another aspect of M's standard Spanish usage is her mastery of verb tense and aspect. Her use of the past perfect tense in particular represents an advanced stage of verb development (Bocaz and Slobin 1988; Silva-Corvalán 2014). Bocaz and Slobin argue that Spanish speakers describe events in terms of aspect more often than English speakers because of the grammatical resources of the respective languages. In their study of children's narrative abilities, they recorded that Chilean children over the age of seven made regular use of the past perfect tense in narrating events: "[T]he past perfect begins to make its appearance at ages 4 and 5 in Chile, and by age 7 it is frequently used in both Chile and Argentina" (Bocaz and Slobin 1988). In these instances, the children always used the tense

to refer to events that had happened prior to other previous events, in the same way that standard English speakers use the tense.

M's narration in *Kramp* reflects this usage. However, in the English translation, these instances were sometimes rendered in the simple past. Occasionally, the simple past was deemed more consistent with a child narrator in English; Bocaz and Slobin found that while Chilean children used the construction regularly, none of the English-speaking children they interviewed used the past perfect tense when narrating events (1988). This is a pragmatic adjustment, taking into account the context of Spanish and English language and narrative development.

El acuerdo al que habían llegado D y mi madre consistía en que podía ejercer de ayudante solo después de las clases y en vacaciones.
(Ferrada 2017)

The agreement that D and my mother made was that I could be his assistant only after school and during vacations. (Ferrada 2018)

Without compromising semantic accuracy, the adjustment brings the English narrative in line with English-speaking children's less frequent use of aspect and the perfect tenses when telling stories.

3.4 Authoritarian Dialogics

The plot of *Kramp* revolves around M's relationship with her father as she accompanies him on sales trips to nearby towns. M's relationship with her mother is peripheral, but has a bearing on the unfolding story: Her absence and distance allow M to skip school, against her mother's wishes, and forge this relationship with her father. Throughout the novel, M rarely interacts with other children. The story focuses primarily on her development vis-à-vis her parents, or authority.

In *Translating for Children*, Riitta Oittinen discusses who the audience is for translators of children's literature. The answer is not as simple as her book title suggests. While the translator is ostensibly translating for children, that readership must be understood via its relationship to authority. Oittinen outlines how adults' relationship to children is fundamentally authoritarian (2000). Adults, and parents especially, exert control over children in the hope of instilling particular knowledge and values and curbing unwanted behavior. To this end, much literature for children is written with an educational purpose in mind. Parents also typically control to some extent the literature to which the child is exposed to, especially early in development, when the parent reads to the child aloud. This authoritarian relationship places the translator in a unique double relationship to her audience, since the goals of adults, as message imparters, and children, as message receivers, may differ. The translator always faces a bind in

choosing to translate favoring the author or favoring the reader; the authoritarian relationship between children and adults complicates this bind.

The translator must take this tension into account, but it's not often a tension that is treated explicitly in the literature she is translating. *Kramp* confounds this model in part because it is not a novel written by an adult for children, and, as mentioned earlier, the book doesn't seek to impart an educational message. The spectrum between the author and audience, and where the translator places herself between the two, is more in line with traditional adult literature. However, in focusing on M's relationship with her parents, *Kramp* treats the issue of adult authority explicitly. Her experience of the world is as a subject of adults, exactly as Oittinen describes (2000). Moreover, Ferrada deliberately sets the novel during the waning years of Pinochet's rule. So, the novel is not only about the authoritarianism between parent and child but also between state and citizen. M's experience in relation to these complex layers of authority manifests in her language. For example, the elaborate use of metaphor in the novel demonstrates how M confronts and copes with trauma by talking about her experience without necessarily describing it explicitly. M's experience, and her way of engaging with it, reflects how language and communication adapted under Pinochet: Double meanings and metaphors flourish under authoritarian rule (see Feitlowitz 1998). As Oittinen says, "Language can be defined as an issue of authority" (2000).

Another example is in how M refers to her mother. Throughout her narration, M refers to her mother as "mi madre." She also explicitly describes the distance that exists between the two of them: "Todo lo que siguió fue posible gracias a que mi madre estaba ausente" (Ferrada 2017: 19). To linguistically inculcate this same sense of distance in the English translation, the translator opted to render "mi madre" as "my mother" in all instances, as in the above segment: "Everything that happened next was possible thanks to the fact that my mother was absent" (Ferrada 2018: 7). While referring to mothers as "mi madre" is not unusual for Spanish-speaking children, in the United States, one might expect to hear a child of that age refer to her mother as 'mommy,' 'mama,' or 'mom' before 'my mother.' Depending on the context, the more common "my mom" and the less common "my mother" may each be the more appropriate rendition of "mi madre." In this case, "my mother" was chosen to reflect the emotional distance that exists between M and her mother throughout the novel. Ultimately, rendering "mi madre" as "my mother" is a lexical solution to the semantic challenge of representing the distance and authority between M and her mother.

4. Conclusion

Kramp occupies an unusual position in the literary system. The novel was written for adults by a children's book author using a child narrator who narrates from the perspective of maturity. The traditional relationships between author, audience, and translator are confounded by the novel's unique placement, and because the book eludes easy classification, there is not a ready-made paradigm for understanding the language at work in the child protagonist's narration. Authors choose to tell stories through the eyes of child narrators for several reasons, including to reflect on their own childhoods, to explore an especially formative period of development, and to approach challenging topics through a stylized lens of innocence and naïveté. To achieve these effects in a way that accurately represents child speech while also communicating mature themes to a mature audience depends largely on the successful use of language. To preserve success on both fronts in translation, the translator must carefully consider the dual challenge and make linguistic choices accordingly. This paper has been an attempt to illustrate and provide examples for how to approach such a challenge, given the scant research on this unique type of novel.

A few hallmarks of children's language development were identified and this paper examined how they operate within the context of the novel. Once discussed, the translations of these elements were analyzed in order to assess how the target text attempts to achieve the same effect as the Spanish source text. These elements included how M, the narrator, evidenced focalization through her categorization of objects and experiences. This classification also reflects an early stage of language development in both Spanish and English in which children begin to group objects by class and refer to them as such. The fact that M's categorizations run through the novel, serving a thematic purpose, also provides the translator with an opportunity to consider the novel as a total structure and translate accordingly.

Other linguistic elements included how M's references to her mother reflect the novel's consideration of authority and the relationship not only between M and her parents but also between Pinochet and Chile. Perhaps the most significant semantic alteration in translation is the English use of simple past tense in some instances when the source text prefers the past perfect tense. The change stems from a pragmatic exploration into the relative narrative abilities of Spanish- and English-speaking children and the differing aspectual understanding of events that the two languages provide. In sum, this analysis is an early foray into the role that certain language features and patterns play in the relatively new literary form that *Kramp* represents and how that same role is achieved in translation.

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