



Framing Sensitive Topics: Multimodal Adaptation in the Covers of Children's Picture Books Translated from English into Persian

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Abstract

Although picture books are often associated with entertainment, through the interplay of visual and verbal modes, they construct richer meaning and give children an accessible way to engage with complex emotional and situational experiences such as loss and trauma. However, little attention has been paid to how the visual elements of translated picture books are adapted for target audiences, particularly on sensitive topics. This study therefore compares the verbal and visual modes of the covers of ten picture books on sensitive topics, using Painter et al.'s (2013) model, to examine the extent to which the target covers retain the inviting and affective qualities of the source covers. Although the cover illustrations of the Persian translations differ in composition from those of their English-language counterparts, both establish a similar atmosphere for children, supporting a comparable affective framing of the sensitive topics for young readers. The findings further highlight the Iranian publishing industry's engagement with the translation and publication of picture books addressing sensitive topics, as well as its apparent attention to the visual representation of such topics through cover illustrations.

Keywords: Picture books, children's literature, book covers, sensitive topics, multimodal translation

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1. Introduction

Picture books occupy a distinctive position in children's literature because they communicate through the interaction of verbal and visual modes. Their illustrations do more than decorate written language: together, words and images shape narrative meaning, guide readers' attention, and help young audiences interpret characters, events, and emotions (Oittinen et al., 2018; Painter et al., 2013). This multimodal character is particularly consequential when picture books address experiences that may be difficult for children to understand or discuss, including loss, trauma, body awareness, abuse, and personal boundaries. In such cases, the way a book presents its subject visually and verbally may influence not only how the topic is understood but also how approachable the book appears to children and the adults who mediate their reading.

Sensitive topics in children's literature have often prompted concerns about children's exposure to difficult or potentially unsettling material. Yet picture books can offer a context in which children encounter and reflect on challenging experiences, especially when adults help them discuss the issues raised by a story (Bowen & Schutt, 2007; Evans, 2015). The cover is a relevant part of this encounter. As a reader's first point of contact with a book, it introduces the subject and establishes an initial visual and verbal frame for approaching it. The cover's title, illustration, depiction of characters, use of color, and arrangement of elements may work together to invite engagement, signal the seriousness of the topic, or create emotional distance.

When it comes to translation of picture books, especially those for children, decisions need to be made about visual as well as verbal presentation. Picture books are multimodal artefacts in which meaning is produced through the coordination of semiotic resources, and verbal and visual elements are inseparable. Although multiple studies have examined the meaning-making potential of picture book illustrations, the visual and verbal design of translated covers, particularly covers for books addressing sensitive subjects, deserves closer examination. A comparison of source and target covers can help identify whether the target version preserves, modifies, or reconfigures the ways in which children and other figures are represented, how readers are positioned in relation to them, and how the overall cover frames the topic. These considerations are particularly significant in the Iranian context, where censorship within the publishing industry also extends to children's literature (Farnia, 2024), potentially shaping how sensitive topics are represented and communicated in children's picture books.

To elaborate on and investigate the visual and verbal translation of children's picture books in Iran, the present study compared the front covers of English-language children's picture books addressing body awareness and personal boundaries with their Persian translations. To this end, Painter et al.'s (2013) model was adopted, which examines ideational, interpersonal, and textual systems, with attention to the interaction between verbal and visual elements. The analysis considers how the covers represent participants, actions, and settings; how they position child characters in relation to one another and to the reader; and how composition and the coordination of words and images contribute to the covers' overall meaning. The study therefore focuses not simply on whether the same illustration is retained, but on the meanings and reader relationships constructed by the cover as a multimodal whole.

The main questions guiding the present research were: First, how are ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings constructed through the verbal and visual elements of the English-language covers and their Persian translations? Second, what similarities and differences emerge between the source and target covers across the three meaning systems? Finally, what are the implications, in terms of audience appeal, of these similarities and differences? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to bring visual translation and its interaction with the verbal elements into focus so as to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to the visual elements in the process of translation and the impact of visual translation on the reception of sensitive topics not only for young audiences but also for

adults. It also offers a comparative account of how English-language picture books about sensitive subjects are presented in Persian translations. The findings may be relevant to researchers in children's literature and translation studies, as well as to translators, editors, illustrators, and publishers involved in selecting and preparing books for young readers.

2. Literature Review

Once upon a time, in the realm of children's literature, picture books were deemed a playground for children, filled with artistic, colorful, and engaging images and drawings; hence, children are mostly "offered picture books as their first reading experience partly because a visual semiotic representation is so much more accessible than a linguistic one" (Painter et al., 2013, p. 53). Nonetheless, the significance of picture books is not simply limited to accessibility or increased joy of reading. The power of picture books resides in "the role [pictures] have in transmitting values, ideas and examples that can be significant in the process of narrating the story" (Martínez Lirola, 2021, p. 6). Thus, they are not just a beautiful companion to the verbal aspect and can be regarded as one of the main sources of educating children.

Picture books play a diverse and meaningful role in the lives and education of young children. Initially, "the sheer delight that children take in them, whether reading or being read to, and the fact that these activities are generally regarded as an essential preparation for the child's transition into literacy and future school success" (Painter et al., 2013, p. 1) are only two of the main roles picture books play in the life of their audiences. The third role of these books is to help children transfer the knowledge and story of the picture book to the real world and establish a clear connection between the two imaginary and real situations (Martínez Lirola, 2021; Strouse et al., 2018). Moreover, as it is often said, "picture books are the child's first visit to the art gallery" (Oittinen et al., 2018, p. 4), which creates a sense of understanding and appreciation for art and fosters creativity in children. Another intriguing factor relates to image perception because "verbal information received by the brain is delayed by fractions of a second as compared to visual information" (Nikolajeva, 2018, p. 112), allowing children with limited world and verbal knowledge to grasp concepts more easily. Lastly, narrative picture books serve as important agents of socialisation, communicating both explicit and implicit ideological perspectives concerning the social world and its underlying values (Painter et al., 2013, p. 1), to the point that one of the many definitions of picture books considers them as "a vehicle to convey ideology and values of a culture: they introduce and strengthen social ideas, norms, and messages of identity" (Oittinen et al., 2018, p. 21).

Apart from being a captivating source of entertainment, some picture books are designed to refer to and portray more controversial topics. As various pictures and images accompany the text in these books, many believe the topic should be chosen with care and consideration. This means avoiding the portrayal of sensitive and explicit materials and illustrations that can result in controversy. Nevertheless, "authors are no longer concerned with pleasing the adult reader ... [and] want to challenge the adult reader, and do so through a picturebook seemingly published for children" (Ommundsen, 2015, p. 90). In the field of children's literature, no specific term of classification exists for picture books focused on sensitive issues such as divorce, death, sexuality, cultural differences, and violence, to name a few (Evans, 2015, p. 4). Mostly adults are against introducing children to such topics in order to guard their innocence; however, parents are the ones not ready to deal with sensitive issues because "in reality, many children have to deal with troubling, personal problems on a day-to-day basis in their own lives: real-life problems needing real-life solutions that are not just found on the pages of books" (Evans, 2015, p. 5). If adults are unable to educate children on these topics, the best way is to introduce children to the world of literature, as "when children find a book that features a character whose situation they identify with, there is a release which enables them to take control and find a solution to their own problem" (Bowen & Schutt, 2007, p. 4). In one study, multiple picture books about sensitive topics were read simultaneously to children and adults;

although adults were shocked, “most children were deeply engaged by the texts and keen to discuss the moral, social, spiritual and environmental issues they raised” (Arizpe & Styles, 2016, p. 180).

The reality of everyday life is disturbing, but wrapping children in cotton wool is not the proper way of teaching them how to live, and “this lack of openness to taboo subjects means that many challenging picturebooks don’t get published at all ... [and] this covert censorship of books is more common than is often thought” (Evans, 2015, p. 10). This is why many believe “children’s literature as a whole is, almost by definition, a literature defined by what it leaves out” (Ommundsen, 2015, p. 33). Yet, if these topics are included in picture books, especially in the illustrations, the magic of literature will allow “stories [to] humanize abstract issues and encourage children to think (and talk!) about how they might feel and what they might do in a particular situation” (Bowen & Schutt, 2007, p. 4). Moreover, rather than rejecting such thought-provoking texts, they can be introduced to children through adult-led discussion, allowing adults to mediate, contextualize, and help children navigate potentially unsettling content in controversial books (Evans, 2015, p. 7). As Evans (2015, p. 7) observes:

The maturity shown by children as they read, think about and respond to challenging texts is often quite amazing; they can cope with and respond to both real-life and picturebook problems in a manner that adults frequently have found almost unbelievable. Most children who read these books find no problems with them and accept them at face value; their previous experiences and level of maturity allow them to respond in appropriate ways for their age.

All things considered, it is not only advantageous but also necessary to include complex, controversial, and sensitive topics in picture books in the hope of developing and raising thoughtful, reasonable, flexible, and also sensitive adults who can manage situations they encounter as they grow up and think critically about what they face in their course of life.

It should be noted that the verbal mode is an integral component of picture books, and its relationship with the visual mode may be either ironic or emphatic: in the former, one mode provides information that is absent from the other, whereas in the latter, both modes reinforce the same message (Painter et al., 2013, p. 5). Therefore, both visual and verbal modes need to be analyzed in conjunction with one another “to see how both modes of communication complement each other and how they interact to create meaning in the picturebook” (Martínez Lirola, 2021, p. 6). Similar to reading the verbal part, the visual mode requires reading in picture books because “the visuals help children understand the verbal meaning by extending the meanings expressed by the written text [and] both modes help children understand the story and develop their literacy” (Martínez Lirola, 2021, p. 4). However, reading the visual mode is quite different from the verbal mode, as “the reading of images is not a simple left-to-right movement. The eyes tend to focus either on the largest identifiable object or on an object that has a particular interest for the viewer” (Arizpe & Styles, 2016, p. 90), and there are many more specific characteristics that need to be taken into consideration.

The difference in reading the visual mode also impacts the translation of picture books. Translating children’s literature has always been a challenging and intricate task. Regarding the translation of picture books, complexities multiply as they are multimodal products, and isolating and treating one mode, which is the verbal part, is not the proper strategy, and words and images “need to be considered as part of a creative, synergic whole” (Oittinen et al., 2018, p. 82). Additionally, “in every picturebook there is a certain kind of relationship between the verbal (written and/or spoken words) and the visual (illustration), which the translator needs to recognize” (Oittinen, 2018, p. 464) and then make a decision about the path he/she is going to follow.

Picture and illustration analysis has become a prominent field of study since the topic of visual grammar was proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) method has three different aspects, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning, and has been applied to various research, including picture books for children. However, one of the limitations of

this method is the failure to account for how verbal and visual aspects in an illustration interact, and the method is “insufficiently developed for addressing key aspects of picture books” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 3). As a consequence, Painter et al. (2013) developed a method for visual and verbal analysis of picture books by extending Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) model. Quite a few studies have applied Painter et al.’s (2013) extended model either as the only method used or in combination with other methods. For instance, Martínez Lirola (2022), in her research titled *Compositional and Interpersonal Analysis of the Picture Book Stella Brings the Family: Deconstructing Affection*, has partially applied the method to her research to examine if the verbal aspect of picture books is complementary to the visual ones and how the selected book affects the reaction of young audiences. Another paper by Ryman (2021), named *Listening to Heartbeat: The Pulse of Ecofeminism in a Picturebook*, uses the method in order to gain more insight into environmental children’s literature with a focus on pictures. In the last example, the pictures of a book for children with a more controversial topic have been chosen. In her essay, Martínez Lirola (2021) has applied the method to the book *Me, Daddy & Dad* in order to “observe how textual meanings are created” (p. 1) through the interaction between verbiage and visual elements.

3. Methodology

Children’s picture books on sensitive subjects, such as body care and abuse, provide valuable insights for young readers into personal boundaries, respect, and consent. Combining text with images in children’s picture books makes the content more attractive and effective for the intended audience. The front covers of these books are the first thing children encounter, so they may play an important role in shaping their impression. However, translating visual elements on the front covers of children’s picture books has received only marginal attention.

A qualitative and comparative approach was adopted to investigate how verbal and visual elements on the front covers of children’s picture books on sensitive topics are translated from English into Persian through Painter et al.’s (2013) model of intermodal complementarity. This study scrutinizes meaning-making across three different meaning systems, including ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Painter et al.’s (2013) proposed model relies heavily on Kress and van Leeuwen’s model (2006) but with the twist of “arguing that picture books need to be taken seriously as a bimodal form of text in which the visual modality plays just as important a role as the verbal one in creating meaning and shaping readers” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 2). As stated, the method proposes three metafunctions or meaning systems and explains each separately alongside their different subsystems. The first one is the interpersonal metafunction, which is “not just those [relations] set up between reader and writer/image-maker on the one hand and those between the characters themselves on the other, but also (crucially) involve those in play between the reader and the narrative characters” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 15).

Ideational metafunction is the second one, which “serves to construe the content of the story [or image] in terms of the actions, the characters who participate in these and the settings in which they occur” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 133). Ideational metafunction consists of three main subsections named “participants (who or what is depicted), processes (depicted actions or relations), and circumstances (where, when, how, with what)” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 55). The last one is textual metafunction, which is involved in “integrating ideational and interpersonal meanings, packaging them within textual units, and linking them across units to create an organised and coherent whole” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 91). Furthermore, it is necessary to mention that the method “sketch out the way image analysis can be implemented alongside linguistic analysis to bring out the interplay between the two semiotic systems in examples of bimodal stories” (Painter et al., 2013, p. 133), which is a methodological strength for translation studies research, where efforts to integrate verbal and visual analysis are increasingly important for understanding meaning-making in multimodal texts.

To conduct this research, in the first step of data collection, children's picture books on body awareness and personal boundaries in Persian were searched on the websites of Iranian children's publishers. Then, the original English picture books were found using possible translations of the titles and authors' names. In the second step, the English-language covers were compared with their Persian counterparts to determine whether the latter featured entirely new designs or modifications to the original cover designs. Accordingly, only Persian translations whose covers differed visually from their English-language counterparts or had some modifications were included in the study. It is worth mentioning that books with multiple translations that had different front covers were excluded, and ten books were randomly selected from the remaining titles, along with their Persian translations.

Similar to the data collection step, the analyses of the front covers of the ten children's picture books were carried out in two stages. First, each front cover was descriptively analyzed through Painter et al.'s (2013) model of intermodal complementarity. The cornerstone of this model is to consider the interplay of both verbal and visual elements across three meaning systems.

In the ideational meaning system, action, characters, and setting were analyzed. In terms of the interpersonal meaning system, affiliation and feelings between the characters and between the reader and characters were examined. Regarding the textual meaning system, the placement of elements on the cover was addressed. As the focus of this study was on children, only the number of adult characters was calculated without analyzing them in detail. Moreover, each descriptive analysis was coded in MAXQDA Analytics Pro (26.2.1) to statistically interpret the results. In the second stage of the analysis, the statistics for the English picture books were compared with their Persian translations.

4. Results and Discussion

Both verbal and visual elements of each cover were analyzed in terms of 24 elements from Painter et al.'s (2013) model in three meaning systems as well as commitment and coupling. From the analysis, the following key findings emerged.

4.1. Ideational Meaning Systems

In terms of ideational meaning systems, regarding action, the most obvious pattern (43.8%) of the children's gaze vector on the cover of English picture books was directed at the reader, whereas the children's gaze vector on the cover of Persian translations was, in most cases (42.9%), directed at another character.

Table 1 demonstrates the analysis of the children's gaze vectors in both English picture books and their Persian translations in more detail.

Table 1. Children's Gaze Vectors

Gaze Vectors	Upward	Forward	Downward	Toward	Unclear
English	25.0%	43.8%	6.3%	12.5%	12.5%
Persian	7.1%	21.4%	28.6%	42.9%	0.0%

Based on Table 1, it is possible to conclude that English picture books focused on connecting with young readers and providing a positive atmosphere, while the Persian translations showed the opposite.

Verbal action was found in three cases in English picture books through speech bubbles or the use of first-person. However, only one cover in the Persian translations used a speech bubble and first-person, which did not belong to a child, but to an adult. Almost the majority of titles (70.0%) in both languages employed third-person. The use of the imperative was only visible on two covers in Persian

translations. None of the characters on the cover in either language had thought bubbles, which revealed that the mental processes of children on sensitive topics were ignored.

Regarding characters, nine girls, seven boys, and two adults were presented on the covers of English picture books. Eight girls, five boys, and five adults were depicted on the cover of Persian translations, in which the gender of one character was undeterminable. This indicates the focus of the English covers was on children, while the Persian covers emphasized girls as well as adults.

Regarding setting, the time in which the pictures on the covers in English and Persian took place was unclear in 70.0% and 90.0%, respectively. The remaining cases happened during the day. The place was unclear in 60.0% of cases in both languages. The most important difference was that English covers presented the children outside in the remaining cases, such as in a playground, whereas the results were the opposite for the Persian translations, using interior places like home.

4.2. Interpersonal Meaning Systems

In terms of interpersonal meaning systems, regarding affiliation, the characters in English covers had mutual gaze with the young reader in half the cases; however, in the Persian covers this number was reduced to 30.0%. According to Painter et al. (2013), a lack of mutual gaze between the reader and the characters negatively impacts their connection by keeping them outside the story world.

The drawing style in both languages followed approximately the same patterns by being generic in most cases. This is probably due to attracting young readers with cartoon-like pictures and avoiding too minimalist or realistic ones.

Analyzing the power between the characters and the reader illustrated neutral relations in 70.0% and 90.0% of cases in English and Persian, respectively. In the remaining cases, the viewing angle situates the reader in a high power position in three English covers and only one Persian translation. In none of the covers was the reader placed in a low position of power. Addressing children's power through visual elements showed that they are kept in a low-power relation in most cases. Table 2 depicts children's power relation at three levels in more detail.

Table 2. Children's Power Relation based on Visual Elements

Children's Power Relation	Low	Neutral	High	Unclear
English	36.0%	16.0%	28.0%	20.0%
Persian	45.0%	25.0%	15.0%	15.0%

The most visible trend in both languages situated children in a low position of power in most cases. However, the second prominent trend (28.0%) in the English covers was placing them in a high position of power, while only a minority of children (15.0%) in Persian translations were kept in a high position of power. Therefore, it can be inferred that children were considered weaker and more passive in Persian translations. Children's power relations were unclear based on verbal elements in all twenty cases. In English picture books, 60.0% of covers kept the reader at a very far social distance, while in Persian translations, 40.0% of covers put the reader at a relatively far social distance. Figure 1 displays the social distance between children on the covers and the reader at eight levels based on shot size.

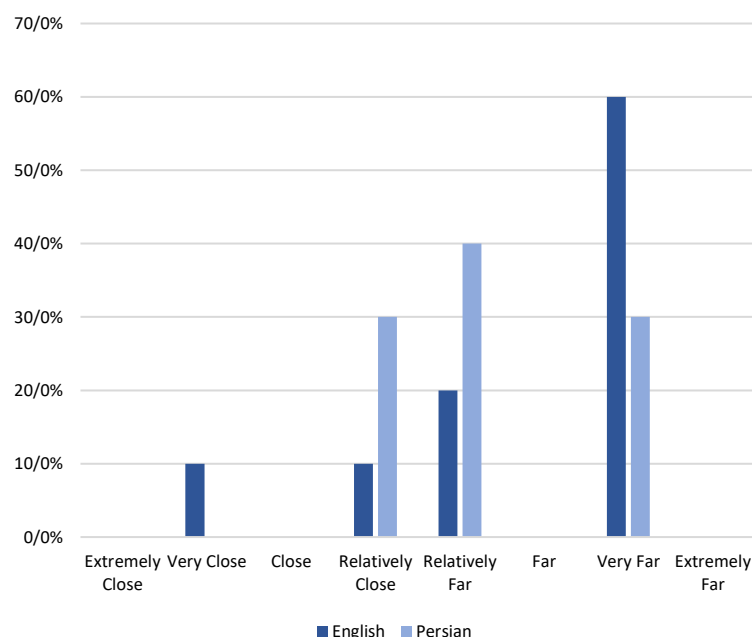


Figure 1. Social Distance Between Children and the Reader

As shown in Figure 1, the social distance in English covers had four levels, including very close, which was not seen in the Persian translations. The overall results in both languages kept the reader at an almost far social distance in most cases. This may negatively affect young readers by keeping them far from the children on the covers in both languages.

Proximity between characters on the cover was high in almost half the cases in both languages. This cannot be a positive sign, as feelings also play an important role in identifying whether high proximity is based on the right physical contact or abuse. Figure 2 outlines the proximity between characters evaluated through visual elements in both languages.

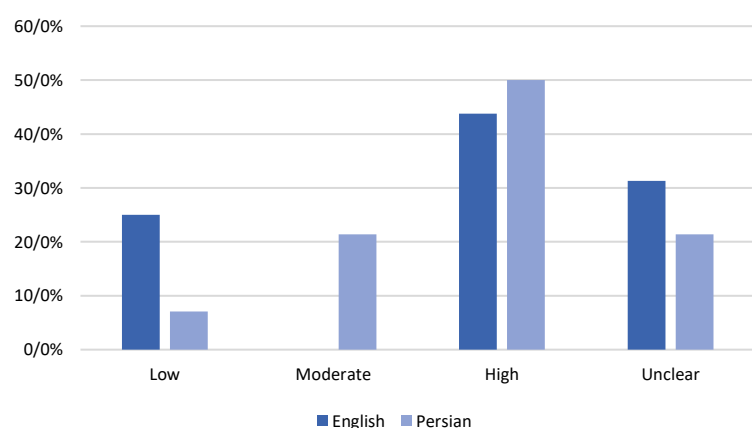


Figure 2. Visual Proximity between Characters on the Cover

Verbal proximity was not obvious on all covers in the two languages, except one of them with its Persian translation. Using the word “stranger” in the title, which refers to the man behind the fences, indicates low proximity between the little girl and him.



Figure 3. Low Verbal Proximity in the English Cover



Figure 4. Low Verbal Proximity in the Persian Cover

This Persian translation, which was one of the two cases using the same picture on the cover with a few changes, also used the word «غریبه» with the same negative connotation, conveying low proximity between the little girl and the man.

The involvement in English covers was high in 70.0% of cases and moderate in the remaining 30.0%. In Persian translations, the involvement was high in half the cases and moderate in the other half. The overall result here suggests that the focus was on attaching the young readers to the covers.

There was no mutual gaze between the children and between the children and adults in 62.5% of cases in English and half the cases in Persian. However, only 6.3% of cases in English and 29% in Persian showed orientation.

Regarding feelings, children were depicted on English covers with positive and negative feelings in 75.0% and 25.0% of cases, respectively. In Persian translations, these numbers were 43.0% and 57.0%, in turn.

The color palette was ambient in all twenty children's picture books, using both cool and warm tones. The high color differentiation in all of them also conveyed a sense of familiarity in almost 75.0% of cases.

4.3. Textual Meaning Systems

In terms of textual meaning systems, regarding salience and balance, the depiction of children created a focus of attention in 73.55% of the cases, and almost all the covers in both languages had a balanced composition.

4.4. Commitment and Coupling

On the one hand, the verbal elements used in the covers in English were positive, neutral, and negative in 27.3%, 27.3%, and 45.5%, respectively. The results were 25.0%, 33.3%, and 41.7% for Persian translations, in turn, indicating that the covers include words such as abuse in most cases. On the other hand, visual elements convey positive atmospheres in 60.0% of English covers, while they convey negative atmospheres in the Persian translations. Considering coupling, both verbal and visual elements in English covers converged in almost all cases to convey how children can set boundaries and take care of their bodies. However, in their Persian translations, the two types of elements in 60.0% of covers diverged and suggested the opposite. In eight covers in English, there was a complementary note along with the title to guide parents about the content of the picture book, whereas in Persian translations, only four covers included it.

5. Conclusion

Addressing sensitive topics in children's picture books is itself a delicate undertaking, as it requires creating a reassuring and accessible reading experience for both children and their parents or caregivers. The verbal and visual elements must be carefully designed to encourage children to engage with potentially challenging subjects while reassuring adults that these topics are presented in an appropriate and sensitive manner. Such considerations may also influence adults' willingness to select and purchase these books. These concerns become particularly salient when picture books are translated for young audiences from different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds, as both verbal and visual elements may need to be reconsidered in relation to the target context. Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to examine the verbal and visual elements of Persian translations of children's picture books addressing sensitive topics, investigating the extent to which the translated covers retain or modify the qualities of their English-language counterparts and the extent to which the translated versions were inviting or off-putting for the Persian audience compared to the English versions.

Based on the analyzed data, it can be concluded that there were few noticeable differences in the case of interpersonal, ideational, and textual meaning systems. For instance, the number of girls depicted on the covers of translated books was higher, which may suggest that, in the Persian cultural and religious context, girls are assumed to require more protection and that these books should be directed mostly at girls. Furthermore, the interplay of verbal and visual elements on the covers of English children's picture books examined in this study conveyed positive atmospheres and also addressed parents to guide the children better; however, the results for the covers of Persian translations indicated the opposite. There was also no clear pattern in choosing the pictures on the

translated covers. Overall, it is reasonable to infer that the Iranian publishing industry invested resources in redesigning and translating the verbal and visual elements of the picture books examined in this study, given the sensitive nature of their subject matter and the sociocultural context in which they are published. However, these efforts do not necessarily translate into more inviting representations for Persian-speaking children and their parents, as the findings do not clearly demonstrate that the translated covers are more conducive to engagement with the topics addressed.

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