

# Translating War and Migration in Children's Literature. The Case of *Mexique, el nombre del barco* on Spanish Civil War

**Araceli María Alanís Corral**

University of Salamanca, Spain  
maria.alaniscorral@usal.es

## Abstract

*Mexique, el nombre del barco* (2017) is a picture book for children written by María José Ferrada and illustrated by Ana Penyas. It narrates the migration of 456 Spanish Republican children fleeing the Spanish Civil War aboard the ship *Mexique*. This article explores the book's multimodal nature as an act of translation, addressing both the migrant experience and its historical context. Through poetry and illustrations inspired by historical photographs, the first part of the book translates the children's emotions and memories into a narrative in which objects such as the ship, the moon, and the suitcases serve as symbolic bridges connecting their past and present. The second part provides a verbal translation of the historical context, complementing the emotional and symbolic elements of the first. Drawing on the notion of *translatio* as a transportation of meaning, the framework of intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959) and refraction (Lefevere 1992), and Vidal Claramonte's perspective on storytelling as a form of translation, we explore how visual and verbal elements adapt historical narratives for a contemporary audience. By engaging with multimodal, emotional and historical translation, *Mexique, el nombre del barco* conveys the complex experiences of migrant children, fostering empathy and solidarity with past and present migrations.

*Keywords:* translation, Spanish Civil War, migration, history, children's literature.

## Streszczenie

Tłumaczenie wojny i migracji w literaturze dziecięcej. Studium przypadku książki obrazkowej *Mexique, el nombre del barco* o hiszpańskiej wojnie domowej

*Mexique, el nombre del barco* (2017) to książka obrazkowa dla młodych odbiorców napisana przez Marię José Ferradę i zilustrowana przez Anę Penyas. Opowiada o migracji 456 hiszpańskich dzieci republikańskich uciekających przed hiszpańską wojną domową na pokładzie statku *Mexique*. Niniejszy artykuł bada multimodalny charakter książki jako aktu tłumaczenia, odnosząc się zarówno do doświadczenia migrantów, jak i kontekstu historycznego. Pierwsza część książki poprzez poezję i ilustracje inspirowane historycznymi fotografiami przekłada emocje i wspomnienia dzieci na narrację, w której przedmioty takie jak statek, księżyc i walizki

pełnią rolę symbolicznych pomosty między przeszłością a teraźniejszością dzieci-migrantów. Druga część stanowi werbalne tłumaczenie kontekstu historycznego, uzupełniając emocjonalne i symboliczne elementy pierwszej części. Opierając się na pojęciu *translatio* jako transferu znaczenia oraz koncepcjach tłumaczenia intersemiotycznego (Jakobson 1959), refrakcji (Lefevere 1992) i podejściu Vidal Claramonte do opowiadania historii jako formy tłumaczenia, przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób elementy wizualne i werbalne dostosowują narracje historyczne do współczesnych odbiorców. Poprzez zaangażowanie w intersemiotyczne, emocjonalne i historyczne tłumaczenie *Mexique, el nombre del barco* przekazuje złożone doświadczenia dzieci-migrantów, jednocześnie wzmacniając empatię i solidarność wobec migracji zarówno przeszłych, jak i współczesnych.

Słowa kluczowe: tłumaczenie, wojna domowa w Hiszpanii, migracja, historia, literatura dziecięca.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, children's literature has increasingly addressed the topic of migration, offering young readers a meaningful lens through which to engage with this pressing global issue. Among such works, *Mexique, el nombre del barco* (2017), written by Chilean author María José Ferrada and illustrated by Spanish artist Ana Penyas, stands out for its dual focus on migration and historical narrative. The book recounts the story of hundreds of Spanish Republican children fleeing their war-torn country during the Spanish Civil War. The original title<sup>1</sup> draws attention to the *Mexique*, the ship which transported these children to Mexico, a country that offered them temporary asylum in the hope of an eventual Republican victory.

The Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936 during a European economic crisis, pitted a coalition of republicans, socialists, and communists against the right-wing upper classes and the Catholic hierarchy (Alted Vigil 1995: 11). This led to a conflict that deeply affected vulnerable populations, especially children. Among the countries offering aid, Mexico, under President Lázaro Cárdenas, welcomed 456 children who traveled without their parents aboard the *Mexique*. They were housed and educated in the city of Morelia, at the boarding school "España-México". After the Republican defeat in 1939, only 61 children returned to Spain, as Mexico refused to recognize the new government ruled by Francisco Franco (Alted Vigil 1995: 23; Pla Brugat 1985).

Migration and exile presented profound challenges for these children, aged 3 to 15, particularly during their sea journey. *Mexique, el nombre del barco* transforms this historical

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the English translation is titled *Mexique: a Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War*, a literal translation from the original title would be *Mexique, the Name of the Ship*.

event into an accessible and emotionally resonant story for young readers through poetry, descriptive language and evocative illustrations. Although the book has been translated to other languages, such as Italian or English, this article focuses on a broader notion of translation — one that extends beyond linguistic exchange to encompass various modes of meaning-making. Such an approach is based on the new perspectives different scholars have proposed after Roman Jakobson's (1959: 233) notion of intersemiotic translation or transmutation, which is the "interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems". In this sense, we believe the book translates history, portraying migration as a universal experience through the lens of childhood. Children's literature serves as a powerful tool for introducing important themes like migration, opening doors to new worlds and experiences while stimulating imagination and creativity. A number of scholars (Bonin *et al.* 2021; Filograsso 2021; Orgad *et al.* 2021; Hernández Gómez 2023) have studied the way children's literature on migration topics can foster empathy, awareness and compassion among the readers. In the present work, we will study how *Mexique, el nombre del barco* does this through translation.

While it is not a book depicting contemporary displacement, it draws powerful parallels between past and present migration flows, connecting young readers to Spanish history by means of a format that is attractive to children and that combines different semiotic systems with the aim to communicate the message. The picture book format enhances the narrative through a collaboration of text and illustration, simplifying reading while deepening complexity (Colomer 1999). As Arizpe (2021) notes, authors of migration-themed works often employ techniques like metaphor, imagery, and the interplay of words and illustrations to evoke empathy and deepen understanding. This research will focus on the last of these techniques: the blending of text and image in the picture book format. Through this multimodal approach, the book strengthens the emotional bond between readers and characters, making it a powerful tool for teaching history, relating to migrant experiences, and fostering empathy.

This article will analyze *Mexique, el nombre del barco* by focusing on the role of translation for depicting migration experience as well as a specific moment in history. For this purpose, it is important to note that the book is divided into two distinct yet complementary parts. The first part, multimodal in nature, narrates the children's journey through poetic verses and evocative illustrations, adopting an emotional perspective that emphasizes the experience of displacement. The second part consists of text without illustrations and provides a historical account, with dates, facts, and a detailed explanation of the causes and consequences of the events depicted earlier. These two sections exemplify the dual nature of the book as both a multimodal translation of migrant experiences and a textual translation of historical events. By examining

these aspects, the article will explore how the picture book blends text and visuals, translating history and migration into a format that fosters empathy, teaches history, and reflects on the universality of displacement. This will be framed within an extended view of translation, focusing on a broad understanding of what a text is, as well as on the notions of *translatio*, multimodal translation and translation of history, in order to clarify the unique ways this work engages young readers with the intertwined themes of migration and historical memory.

## 2. Picture books and multimodal translation

Translation has traditionally been perceived as an interlinguistic task. Nevertheless, new perspectives have broadened this understanding, recognizing that communication extends beyond linguistic systems and can encompass other semiotic realms. Authors such as Robinson (2017), Blumczynski (2023) and Vidal Claramonte (2025) trace the term “translation” back to its Latin roots in the word *translatio*, which refers to the act of transporting something from one place to another. From this perspective of mobility, translation is the transportation of meaning across places, cultures, languages, semiotic systems, or even temporal contexts. Therefore, *translatio* emphasizes that meaning resides not only in linguistic structures but also in visual and material forms, making it particularly relevant to the study of picture books.

While Kaźmierczak’s (2018) development of Jakobson’s intersemiotic translation maintains that illustrations are not inherently translational because they do not replace text, do not require equivalence, and often complement rather than reinterpret the verbal narrative, her perspective contrasts with the broader notion adopted in this study. In multimodal works like picture books, illustrations often replace or reinterpret the verbal narrative, particularly for young readers who may not yet be able to read text. As research has shown, each hemisphere of the brain processes “verbal and visual emotionally charged information” (Nikolajeva 2018: 110) differently, with the right hemisphere playing a key role in interpreting new experiences and favoring text-image tension and ambiguity, especially in young readers (Nikolajeva 2018: 113).

For children, illustrations function as a translation of textual elements, especially when emotions are involved: “images can furthermore represent emotions of which young readers have limited or no experience, emotions for which the left hemisphere finds no recall in its schema database” (Nikolajeva 2018: 115). Kaźmierczak’s (2018: 13) statement that intersemiotic translation requires clear transposition between semiotic systems highlights a narrower, more technical application of Jakobson’s (1959) concept. In contrast, broader interpretations—as the above-mentioned authors’—have extended the definition to include

interpretations of non-verbal signs by verbal ones, recognizing the complexity of multimodal works like picture books.

Picture books are a cultural product where verbal and visual systems converge to form a multimodal narrative. In this hybrid medium, text and images complement one another to communicate meaning as an integrated whole. Boria and Tomalin (2020) challenge the traditional idea of a “text”, proposing that it includes any medium that produces signification and forms a cohesive structure, reflecting the etymology of “text”, often shaped by interrelated semiotic processes. Consequently, a picture book is inherently a multimodal text that undergoes translation processes to align their verbal and visual elements. As Barton (2016: 6) points out, the interaction between words and images within a narrative “can increase the range of interpretative possibilities and assist in generating meaning for the reader”.

When we consider children’s literature, this interaction becomes even more relevant. As mentioned earlier, some of the target audience’s reading skills are not yet fully developed. In consequence, the integration of visual aspects that align with the textual meaning ease the understanding of the message (Moya Guijarro and Pinar Sanz 2008: 1613). Therefore, the text as a whole can only be understood as a network of words and pictures, where meaning is translated from both systems in order to be complete, as it involves what Op de Beeck (2018: 21) calls an “excess of signification, dealing in page-to-page, verbally/visually interdependent information”. In the case of *Mexique, el nombre del barco*, this dynamic is evident in the first part of the book, which presents a multimodal translation of the migrant experience in a text that intertwines words and illustrations.

The collaboration between Ferrada and Penyas exemplifies how the balance of visual and verbal storytelling makes “the plot easily accessible for the young child” as it keeps “their attention and interest on the story being narrated” (Moya Guijarro and Pinar Sanz 2008: 1601). In *Mexique, el nombre del barco*, the narrative captures the essence of migration during a specific historical period, focusing on the Spanish Civil War’s impact on children. To that purpose, Penyas’ work draws heavily from archival photographs, serving as a visual translation of historical objects and events. As Vidal Claramonte (2025: 44) mentions, photographs “translate images and memories of the past into contexts of the present”. Penyas extends this process by reinterpreting historical images through her illustrations, translating them into a visual system that aligns with the written narrative and resonates with contemporary readers. While the interplay between archival photographs and illustrations offers an interesting theme for further research, this article focuses on the book’s broader multimodal and translational dimensions.

Color is a crucial element in the multimodal translation of the book's theme. As noted by Moya Guijarro and Pinar Sanz (2008: 1616), "specific colours come to evoke certain attitudes and, in this way, manage to convey mood more precisely than any other features". Beyond establishing the mood and atmosphere of the narrative, colors can emphasize or diminish the presence of objects and characters, while also building connections among them (Oittinen 2018: 464). In Penyas' illustrations, shades of gray, white and black dominate, communicating a lugubrious and somber atmosphere which reflects war and loss. Additionally, "the consistent use of dark colours seems to suggest an affinity between past and future" (Filograsso 2021: 103), which reinforces the historical background of the narrative. The only bright color we find throughout the book is red, used exclusively for human figures and the smoke from vehicles. This deliberate choice emphasizes a connection between the human characters and the vehicles, distinguishing them from their surroundings. The role of the vehicles, particularly the ship, is highlighted through color, positioning it as a central protagonist in the journey.

Colomer (1999: 29-30) argues that picture books serve not only to simplify the reading process for an audience that may not yet fully grasp it, but also to deepen the narrative complexities of the story. This interplay is evident from the opening pages of the story, as it begins with two wordless pages featuring different evocative images: a pair of walking feet, a bridge under a moonlit and starry sky, the zoomed-in profile of a ship, and a large illustration of women and children holding suitcases and bundles that could be either babies or luggage. These images establish an ominous and nostalgic tone, introducing both the central figures and the objects that will carry significant emotional weight throughout the narrative.

Some of the objects depicted in these initial illustrations are constantly addressed through both a visual and a verbal focus. These objects, imbued with emotional and symbolic value, function as "texts" integral to the migrant experience, conveying meanings tied to home and the life left behind. As embodiments of *translatio*, they transport meaning-making elements across physical and emotional realms. In the following section, we will analyze how these objects offer the children a material translation of memory and identity.

## **2.1. The translation of objects as a means for children to navigate their migrant condition**

Migration is often accompanied by both emotional and physical luggage, two intertwined dimensions that complement each other. Vidal Claramonte (2025: 38) rightly remarks that "objects tell stories about the journey and about the personal history of the migrant". In *Mexique*,

*el nombre del barco*, the children's relationship with the objects they carry becomes a key narrative, translating their memories of home and helping them face the uncertainty of their journey. These objects—clothes, shoes, caps, suitcases—visually and verbally embody a profound translation of what used to be home.

During migration processes, certain objects carried with affective nuance can provide migrants with “stability in an unstable life” (Socolovsky 2018, 155). In this regard, this section examines three specific objects from the book—the ship, the moon, and the suitcases—as powerful translations of memory, identity and emotion. Although shoes are significant to the visual story too, as emphasized by the opening and closing illustrations of feet walking, this motif has been extensively analyzed in previous studies (Arizpe 2021; Vidal Claramonte 2025). Therefore, the focus here shifts to other objects that demonstrate the multimodal interaction of visual and verbal systems, and their role as vehicles of *translatio*. These objects, introduced in the wordless opening pages of the book, recur throughout the narrative as central elements that mediate the children's experience.

### 2.1.1. *The ship as a liminal space*

Ships—and also, unfortunately, shipwrecks—hold symbolic weight in modern and past migration narratives. The *Mexique*, as shown by its centrality in the title, is not merely a vessel but a central narrative and symbolic element. We have already mentioned that the use of red in the illustrations visually equates and links it with the human characters of the story. The narrative reveals various facets of the ship—its stairs, deck, and sleeping quarters—gradually familiarizing the readers with the children's new reality. This multimodal interplay reinforces the ship's dual role as both a character and a scene, central to the unfolding migrant experience.

Of all the phases traversed by migrants, the book focuses on the moment of displacement itself, as a space for uncertainty and change. While children's literature is typically set in the familiar and social spaces that cities provide (Hernández Gómez 2023), this story stands out by being confined almost entirely to the ship and the surrounding sea. The ship's movement mirrors the children's emotional state: they are no longer in their country, yet not quite at their temporary home in Mexico. The *Mexique* thus aligns with what Vidal and Perteghella (2018: 600) describe as “a movement or tension between past and present, between the place of origin and the place of residence”, a space where “new stories, new ideas are born and shared”. In this ambiguous space where identities are formed and negotiated, the *Mexique* echoes Bhabha's (1994: 5)

concept of the stairwell as an interstitial and temporal passage, which “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”.

Within this liminal space, the children’s sense of identity may begin to shift. As Inghilleri (2017: 180) notes, circumstances of displacement, especially those involving conflict or threat, often lead to the redefinition of identities. This transformation is evident in the children’s collective experience aboard the ship. The *Mexique* is the place where they begin to define their identity as a community. This is reflected in the narrative’s emphasis on the first-person plural, used 17 times, in contrast to only 7 instances of the first-person singular. This highlights that the story’s focus is, both visually and verbally, on the children as a collective identity. They translate their individual fears into a collective resilience by bonding through shared activities.

We sometimes sing.

Someone starts, and the rest of us follow.

Songs bloom like flowers.

Songs were always inside the pockets,

In the few clothes we carry.

(13)<sup>2</sup>

The *Mexique* fosters a sense of community that comes along with a new identity involving, for some children, an “unasked-for initiation into adulthood as minors are forced to take on experiences, responsibilities and emotions which they are too young for” (Arizpe 2021: 1357). Picture books aimed at children usually engage with various representations of childhood, as Christensen (2018: 369) notes: “child and adult readers are exposed to representations of childhood from very different historical periods, and rather different cultural contexts. Thereby they meet a multiplicity of depictions and verbalizations of what it means to be a child”. The following fragment illustrates the sudden and unanticipated transition to adulthood —a non-conventional kind of childhood shaped by their circumstances and centered on care— that these migrant children are forced to undergo:

I stay behind, but a hand suddenly holds me.

A hand that ends in the body of a girl.

Because there are the big ones, and then us, the small.

Us, the small, hold on to sisters

---

<sup>2</sup> Since the picture book does not have page numbers, we will count the first page of the story as page one, in order to facilitate reference. The English versions provided here are our own translations of the original Spanish text.

We did not have before.  
 Mine is eleven or twelve years old.  
 Her name is Clara.

(12)

The ship, as an object visually and verbally highlighted in the book, serves as a text that translates the stage of intermediacy children are facing. It is a space where they can play, sing and form a community, like they used to do at home, but it is also a space that intensifies the absence of their families, and the loss of everything they once knew. In this regard, the *Mexique* is a new home where children can pine for their idea of “home”, an idea that is in motion—in translation—in the same way as they are. Vidal and Perteghella (2018: 601) notice that “a definition (or translation) of ‘home’ [...] must take into consideration real and imagined places, the possibility of multiple, translated identities, historical, political and social constructs, third and hybrid spaces”. The ship hence embodies *translatio*, transporting the children from a war-torn past into an uncertain future, serving at the same time as a stage for action and an active participant in their journey.

### 2.1.2. *The moon and the suitcase bridging past and present*

In contrast to the ship’s transformative symbolism, the moon and the suitcase establish a direct and stable link with the children’s memories of home. The moon appears both in the illustrations and in the verses as a stable and familiar element. It is a junction between the known and the unknown, between Spain and the ship. It represents a familiar and easily recognizable element, which enables the children to interpret their new reality through the lens of the familiar, and therefore it plays the role of a vehicle for translating “over there” into “here”:

There are big wars and small.  
 (456 boys and girls on board).  
 Because there are the big ones, and then us, the small.  
 And the suitcases of the big ones grow.  
 The small ones’ wane,  
 like the moon we watch from the ship’s night.  
 Is it the same moon that used to shine over there?  
 The same one seen from my windows at home?

(16)



Figure 1. The war of the adults: “big wars”. Illustration: Ana Penyas<sup>3</sup>. Ferrada and Penyas ([2018] 2020: 15).

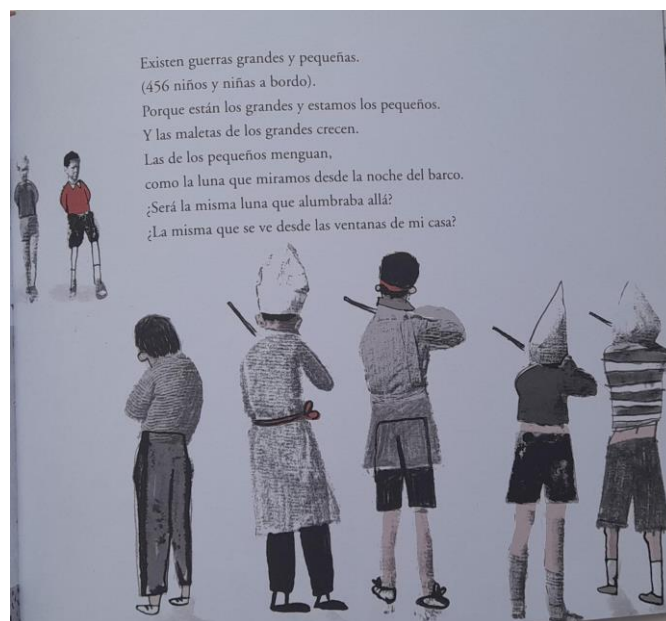


Figure 2. The war of the children: “small wars”. Illustration: Ana Penyas<sup>4</sup>. Ferrada and Penyas ([2018] 2020: 16).

On the other hand, the suitcase embodies a more complex and ambivalent form of translation. It contains everyday objects that hold great emotional significance for the migrants, which is linked to Vidal Claramonte’s (2025: 53-54) observation that objects “have different

<sup>3</sup> All rights reserved by Ana Penyas.

<sup>4</sup> All rights reserved by Ana Penyas.

meanings in different spaces, and therefore communicate the meanings they had in the place of origin and transform their meaning in new contexts”. Nevertheless, the children’s objects carry, at the same time, both nostalgia and the traumatic meanings of their homeland:

Through the crowd I hold on to my suitcase,  
 (a suitcase is also a piece of land, a house).  
 Through the crowd, I lose Clara’s hand.  
 We move forward, we believe the war to be behind us.  
 But it is not true: we carry the war inside the suitcase.

(24)

This depiction illustrates how the suitcases in this book do not translate exactly into a positive memory of home. In this ambivalent scenario, translation reflects a process inherent to migration, as an act of memory and reconstruction of a worldview. As Karpinski (2012: 225) points out: “A vexing question is not what is lost and found in translation but rather how to deal with finding loss and keeping what is lost”. The journey raises unresolved questions for the children, but at the same time, shows them how to cope with these losses by forging a new identity and translating the familiar into the uncertain. The suitcase is an object that keeps both practical belongings and emotional burdens, encapsulating a dual process of translation and symbolizing both the children’s physical journey and their emotional struggle to reconcile the past with the present. Beyond symbolizing the traumatic weight of war, the suitcase is an object that invites to reflect on the resilience of the children, as they carry fragments of their war-torn past into an uncertain future. The suitcase hence embodies a dual role bridging the recent loss with the possibility of rebuilding a sense of home.

The analysis of these objects —the ship, the moon, and the suitcase— highlights the intricate ways in which multimodal systems translate the migrant experience. Each object, through its visual and verbal representation, serves as a text that bridges the children’s past and present, translating their memories and emotions into a narrative that brings the readers closer to their experience. The process of *translatio* takes part in the displacement and reinforces the children’s understanding of their journey. Just as objects are vehicles for personal and emotional translation, the narrative itself engages in an extensive act of translating historical events into a multimodal form. However, the second part of the book shifts focus from the children’s personal experiences to the historical context of their migration, leaving multimodality aside in order to approach the issue only by verbal means, which will be analyzed in the next section.

### 3. Translating history for children

The conjunction of words and images in picture books not only creates an emotional effect in readers but also carries an ideological impact, expressing through the twofold semiotic system the ideology of a specific society (Stephens 2018: 138). As mentioned earlier, the visual element in picture books is deeply tied to portraying emotions, enabling even very young readers to engage with feelings they may not yet fully understand (Nikolajeva 2018). When emotional and ideological effects converge, empathy is produced, which “is tied up with two categories of reader affect: the inferences readers make about characters’ emotions, and readers’ emotional responses to texts” (Stephens 2018: 144). *Mexique, el nombre del barco* portrays the hardships endured by Republican children during their journey as a metaphor for present-day migrations. It establishes a clear ideological stance that highlights the rights and humanity of migrants, fostering empathy through a historical discourse that resonates with contemporary contexts.

According to Vidal Claramonte (2018), both history and storytelling are inherently acts of translation, since history is not a singular narrative but a myriad of texts that intralinguistically rewrite and translate reality (or realities). This recount is shaped by the perspectives of those who construct the narrative and their use of language. While Vidal Claramonte (2018) frames history and storytelling as forms of translation, Lefevre’s (1982: 4) concept of refraction — “the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work”—provides a complementary lens for understanding how historical narratives are adapted for specific audiences. Refraction, as Lefevre (1992) explains, involves the compromise between cultural and ideological systems when transferring a text to a new audience, whether through translation, historiography, or criticism. This aligns with *Mexique, el nombre del barco*, where the collaboration between Ferrada’s verbal narrative and Penyas’ illustrations refracts the historical experience of Republican children, adapting it into a multimodal format that fosters empathy and understanding among young readers. The illustrations, in particular, serve as both a reinterpretation and an emotional amplification of the historical events, illustrating Lefevre’s idea of how refractions make texts accessible while reflecting the constraints of the receiving system. Jakobson’s (1959) concept of intersemiotic translation further illuminates this process, as it emphasizes the transfer of meaning between verbal and non-verbal systems.

In this regard, the way a story is told depends on various factors: who tells it, who it centers on, its intended audience, its purpose, and the medium through which it is expressed. In

consequence, there is no such thing as a purely objective account of history, but only a selective appropriation of every historical narrative:

No coherent narrative can be elaborated by attempting to incorporate every detail experienced by or available to the narrator. Inevitably, some elements of experience are excluded and others privileged. This process of selective appropriation is inherent in all storytelling and is guided by evaluative criteria that reflect the narrative location of the individual, group or institution elaborating the narrative.

(Baker 2014: 167)

Rarely do war narratives focus on vulnerable populations who bear the consequences of armed conflicts without participating directly in it. Even less common are narratives centered on children and addressed to contemporary child audiences. *Mexique, el nombre del barco* is therefore not only significant within the realm of children's literature but also an important contribution to historiography. It offers young readers a way to learn about history through the lens of other children's experiences. As Orgad *et al.* (2021: 557) point out, "in children's picture books, significant attention is paid to historical aspects of migration, and history is used as a prism through which to teach children about migration in the present".

By framing a historical narrative as a form of translation, we expand the historian's role beyond a mere presentation of facts. As Vidal Claramonte (2018: 78) argues, the historical text is a "discourse that translates reality", and the historian is a "translator" who selects documents and facts using "maneuvers" that inevitably carry ideological implications. A historian, therefore, becomes a translator who mediates between the past and the present, adapting and reshaping narratives for specific audiences, which links back to Lefevere's "refraction". In *Mexique, el nombre del barco*, author María José Ferrada and illustrator Ana Penyas act as translators of the Spanish Civil War, presenting verbally and visually a first-person narrative that gives voice to a population often marginalized in historical accounts.

As previously discussed, the first part of the book follows a multimodal structure, where the narrative is constructed through the use of first-person. This allows the readers to experience events from the children's perspectives, in line with Filograsso's (2021: 103) observation that "the narrating first person of the child protagonist shows full awareness of the experience". In contrast, the book's second part shifts from the character's recount to the authors' voices. Ferrada and Penyas explain the historical events, reflecting on war and migration both in the past and the present. This section reinforces the metaphorical and translational work introduced in the first part, while connecting historical events with contemporary migration issues.

In the multimodal part, war is visually and poetically portrayed as an object that can be carried inside a suitcase. It is also defined in this way:

War is a really loud noise  
War is a huge hand shaking you  
And hurling you inside a ship.

(9)

The second part, in turn, builds on this imagery by contextualizing the war and framing the story as a metaphor for ongoing migration crises, a translation of a specific historical ship that represents the countless migrant ships that sail the world today:

Where do they come from? Perhaps even they cannot answer  
this question. Because this is the answer that exile steals  
From “the children of Morelia” and from all the boys and girls who, urged  
By violence, abandon their countries seeking refuge [...]  
We tell the story of one ship, aware that there is no record  
of all those sailing the ocean day by day, with the right  
for a life without fear.

(30)

The book’s structure reinforces this dual approach to history and translation. It begins with a wordless visual narrative, focusing on emotional resonance, and concludes with an imageless text that provides historical context and analysis. This cyclical narrative structure is also emphasized by the repetition of the walking feet that appear in the first and last illustration of the children’s story, underscoring an endless cycle of displacement in a way contemporary children are invited to reflect upon.

The translation of history in this book achieves a recounting of events that raises awareness of migration as a historical and ongoing reality. The choice of a picture book as the medium is key to this purpose, as “the authentically political role played by these stories never lies in the mere choice of topic, but in the form and aesthetic choices of the authors and illustrators” (Filograsso 2021: 99). For example, the visual and poetic depiction of the moon connects the children’s present and past, creating a universal symbol of stability that resonates across cultures. Similarly, the collective singing aboard the ship reflects how shared acts of expression can build solidarity among displaced individuals, even in the face of uncertainty. This multimodal system that emphasizes objects with an emotional and translatable value, as well as

the adaptation of historical narratives to the language and understanding of children, create an accessible and attractive format, where both empathy and representation can take place.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Mexique, el nombre del barco* involves translation in multiple ways. Firstly, it translates history by taking a specific event —the Spanish Civil War— and focusing on its impact on migrant children, transforming it into a story accessible to a modern and young audience. The original photographs documenting the journey of the *Mexique* are reinterpreted through illustrations that complement the literary text, making it more comprehensible for an audience with limited reading skills while adding visual depth to the narrative of migration. Within the story itself, we also observe another form of translation: the children —like many migrants (see Karpinski 2012, Inghilleri 2017, Vidal Claramonte 2025)— create a new identity through everyday elements and objects that mediate between their past and present worlds while preserving deep emotional significance.

The book vividly portrays the grief of leaving loved ones behind, alongside the resilience and companionship that emerge among the children, who become a new family themselves. The multimodal nature of the book exemplifies what Lefevere describes as “refraction”, where the integration of illustrations and text creates a compromise that adapts history for young readers. These elements work together to translate the emotional and historical dimensions of the narrative, balancing accessibility with depth. This analysis of the multimodal format and the translation of history demonstrates how the extended concept of *translatio* —a transportation of meaning across contexts and mediums— underpins the book’s structure. The dual character of the ship and the translatability of the represented objects work together to translate history and emotion into a format that intertwines verbal and visual semiotic systems, while bridging the experience of migration with a collective historical understanding. In this context, both its multimodal and historical narratives involve a translation process and illustrate the book’s potential as a medium “on which to build new ways of thinking about and designing reality” (Filograsso 2021: 95). This also exemplifies what Vidal Claramonte (2018) describes as the historian’s role as a translator, selectively reconstructing and interpreting reality to convey it to a specific audience.

Children’s literature centered on migration stories holds the capacity to bridge emotional and intellectual gaps among experiences of exile, displacement and loss, especially through a multimodal format that reinforces the same message using different semiotic systems that

engage children with the story despite their reading skills. This type of literature can also promote a sense of solidarity and empathy among readers that have not experienced migration themselves (Bonin *et al.* 2021: 67-68). The picture book format reinforces this function by inviting readers not only to understand but to feel the children's experiences through poetry and illustrations. The interplay of these two modes of communication fosters an emotional connection that makes the struggles of migration more relatable and immediate, even to non-migrant audiences.

Although *Mexique, el nombre del barco* does not refer to a present-day experience of forced displacement, it draws parallels to current migration flows, which may seem closer and more relatable to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. The book's final sentence powerfully advocates for a dignified life, free from fear, for migrant children who, like those aboard the *Mexique*, continue to seek safety across oceans today. This closing reflection highlights one of the book's most profound contributions: its ability to give voice to migrant children from the past, while inviting today's readers to learn from history, connect with migration experiences, and cultivate empathy and solidarity toward the millions of migrants who continue to exercise their right to seek a dignified life.

## References

- Alted Vigil, Alicia (1995) "La Guerra Civil Española y los niños." [In:] Teresa Fernández García (coord.), *El exilio español de la Guerra Civil: los niños de la guerra*. Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura; 11–25.
- Arizpe, Evelyn (2021) "Migrant Shoes and Forced Walking in Children's Literature About Refugees: Material Testimony and Embodied Simulation." *Migration Studies*, 9 (3); 1343-1360.
- Baker, Mona (2014) "Translation as Re-narration." [In:] Juliane House (ed.) *Translation: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; 158-177.
- Barton, Simon (2016) *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction. Gaps, Gestures, Images*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Blumczynski, Piotr (2023) *Experiencing Translationality: Material and Metaphorical Journeys*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Bonin, Iara Tatiana, Darlize Teixeira de Mello, Liége Freitas Barbosa, Rosa Maria Hessel Silveira (2021) "Direitos humanos, refugiados e migrantes: literatura infantil e

- acolhimento”. *Revista Interdisciplinar de Direitos Humanos*, 9 (1); 47–70. <https://doi.org/10.5016/ridh.v9i1.37>.
- Boria, Monica, Marcus Tomalin (2020) “Introduction.” [In:] Boria *et al.* (eds.), *Translation and Multimodality. Beyond Words*. Oxon, New York: Routledge; 1-23.
- Christensen, Nina (2018) “Picturebooks and Representations of Childhood.” [In:] Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. Oxon & NY: Routledge; 360-370.
- Colomer, Teresa (1999) “El álbum y el texto.” [In:] María Fernanda Paz Castillo (ed.), *El libro-álbum: invención y evolución de un género para niños*. Venezuela: Banco del libro; 29-34.
- Ferrada, María José, Ana Penyas ([2018] 2020) *Mexique, el nombre del barco*. Mexico City: Alboroto Ediciones y Ediciones Tecolote.
- Filograsso, Iliaria (2021) “Becoming Human. From Cultural Memory to New Senses of Belonging: Stories of Migration in Contemporary Picture Books.” *MeTis. Mondì Educativi. Temi, indagini, suggestioni*, 11 (1) ; 95-112.
- Hernández Gómez, María de los Ángeles (2023) “L’enfance en migration dans la littérature de jeunesse contemporaine: ce que les villes font aux enfants.” *Strenæ. Recherches sur les livres et objets culturels de l’enfance*, 23 (2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/strenae.10491>
- Inghilleri, Moira (2017) *Translation and Migration*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Jakobson, Roman (1959) “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation.” [In:] Reuben A. Brower (ed.), *On Translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 232–239.
- Karpinski, Eva C. (ed). (2012) *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration, and Translation*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Kaźmierczak, Marta (2018) “From Intersemiotic Translation to Intersemiotic Aspects of Translation.” *Przekładaniec*, special issue (Word and Image in Translation); 7-35.
- Lefevère, André (1982) “Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature.” *Modern Language Studies*, 12 (4); 3-20.
- Moya Guijarro, Jesús, María Jesús Pinar Sanz (2008) “Compositional, Interpersonal and Representational Meanings in a Children’s Narrative: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis.” *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40 (9), 1601-1619. DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2008.04.019
- Nikolajeva, Maria (2018) “Emotions in Picturebooks.” [In:] Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. Oxon & NY: Routledge; 110-118.
- Oittinen, Riitta (2018) “Picturebooks and Translation.” [In:] Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. Oxon & NY: Routledge; 463-470.

- Op de Beeck, Nathalie (2018) "Picture-Text Relationships in Picturebooks." [In:] Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. Oxon & NY: Routledge; 19-27.
- Orgad, Shani, Dafna Lemish, Miriam Rahali, Diana Floegel (2021) "Representations of Migration in U.K. and U.S. Children's Picture Books in The Trump and Brexit Era." *Journal of Children and Media*, 15 (4); 549-567. DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2021.1882517
- Pla Brugat, Dolores (1985) *Los niños de Morelia. Un estudio sobre los primeros refugiados españoles en México*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Robinson, Douglas (2017) *Translationality: Essays in the Translational-Medical Humanities*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Socolovsky, Maya (2018) "Material Literacies: Migration and Border Crossings in Chicana/o Children's Picture Books." *MELUS*, 43 (4); 148-174.
- Stephens, John (2018) "Picturebooks and Ideology." [In:] Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*. Oxon & NY: Routledge; 137-145.
- Vidal, Ricarda, Perteghella, Manuela (2018) "Translation as Movement: Migration and Notions of 'Home'." *Open Cultural Studies*, 2 (1); 598-610. DOI: [10.1515/culture-2018-0055](https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0055)
- Vidal Claramonte, Ma. Carmen África (2018) *La traducción y la(s) historia(s). Nuevas vías para la investigación*. Granada: Editorial Comares.
- Vidal Claramonte, Ma. Carmen África (2025) *Translation and Objects*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.