

Åse Johnsen  
Ase.johnsen@uib.no  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7284-9319>  
Universidad de Bergen, Noruega

(Recibido: 27 diciembre 2021/ Received: 27th December 2021)  
(Aceptado: 14 junio 2022 / Accepted: 14h June 2022)

# IDEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION IN CHILDREN'S ILLUSTRATED BOOKS: JOSTEIN GAARDER'S *DE GULE DVERGENE (THE YELLOW DWARVES)* AND ITS SPANISH VERSION

*IDEOLOGÍA E INTERPRETACIÓN EN LIBROS  
ILUSTRADOS PARA NIÑOS: EL CASO DE DE GULE  
DVERGENE (LOS ENANOS AMARILLOS) DE JOSTEIN  
GAARDER Y SU VERSIÓN ESPAÑOLA*

## Abstract

This article deals with the relationship between written text and images in children's illustrated books. The purpose is to examine the role that illustrations can play in children's books, and how the interplay between the written text and the images opens up new interpretations in the translation of the book when the illustrations are changed. The article compares the source text of a children's book with illustrations from several translated versions, focusing on the Spanish version. The changing of the images in the Spanish translation may give the text an ideological undertone that is present in the original, but is not intended by the author or by the illustrator of the translated text. The volume analysed here is the illustrated children's book *De gule dvergene (The Yellow Dwarves, 2006)*, written by the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder, and its translation into Spanish by Kirsti Baggethun and Asunción Lorenzo (*Los enanos amarillos, 2007*). The Norwegian original is illustrated by Jill Moursund, and the Spanish version by Mónica Gutiérrez Serna.

**Keywords:** Children's literature; Illustrations; Ideology; Jostein Gaarder; *De gule dvergene*; *Los enanos amarillos*.

## Resumen

Este artículo trata la relación entre el texto escrito y las imágenes en los libros infantiles ilustrados. Tiene como objetivo mostrar el papel que pueden tener las imágenes o dibujos en la literatura infantil y cómo la interacción entre texto e imagen puede dar paso a nuevas interpretaciones en una versión traducida en la que los dibujos se han cambiado por otros. En el artículo se hace una comparación entre el texto original de un libro infantil y las ilustraciones de varias versiones traducidas, con énfasis en la versión española. Mediante el cambio de imágenes en la traducción española se puede reforzar un tono ideológico subyacente en el texto original, aunque este no ha sido introducido de forma consciente ni por el autor ni por la ilustradora del texto traducido. El caso analizado es el libro infantil ilustrado, *De gule dvergene, 2006*, escrito por el autor noruego Jostein Gaarder, y su traducción al español por Kirsti Baggethun y Asunción Lorenzo (*Los enanos amarillos, 2007b*). La versión original está ilustrada por Jill Moursund y la versión española por Mónica Gutiérrez Serna.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura infantil; Ilustraciones; Ideología; Jostein Gaarder; *De gule dvergene*; *Los enanos amarillos*.

*No matter how simplistic it may appear, no book is innocent of ideological implications!*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Children's illustrated books can be defined as multimodal texts consisting of text and pictures or drawings, which interact to give the reader a complete story. For younger children, who cannot yet read, pictures can nurture their imagination and provide them with input to create their own stories based solely on the pictures. In most cases, however, we can talk about a dual reader, as there is an adult reading the text for the child while the child looks at the pictures. Often, the child will 'read' the book again using the pictures as input to remember the story told.

As will be argued further, no text is innocent of ideological implications, and both the text and the illustrations will normally be open to different interpretations and ideologies. The interplay between the illustrations and the text may be altered when a book is published in a translated version with new illustrations.

The main purpose of this article is to show how changes in the Spanish-translated version of Jostein Gaarder's *De gule dvergene* (*The Yellow Dwarves*), *Los enanos amarillos*, influence the possible interpretations of the story told. In the book, the expression 'Be aware of the yellow danger' appears twice with reference to some alien figures. My claim is that the new illustrations in the Spanish version of the book, in combination with the layout of the written text, open up an ideologic interpretation of the expression 'the yellow danger', making it possible to interpret the expression as a racist reference to Asian society. I will also discuss Gaarder's use of the expression 'yellow danger' in a children's book.

## 2. Illustrated Children's Books

An illustrated book may vary in its number of images, from the simple picture book – the wordless book – often for the youngest children, to the novel with illustrations on only a few pages. Shulevitz distinguishes between *storybooks* and *picture books*, claiming that, in story books, pictures have an auxiliary role, and the story can be told without them. In picture books, however, the story is told entirely through pictures (Shulevitz, 1985: 15-16). Meanwhile, Quesada Padrón makes a clear distinction between picture books and illustrated books:

The second type refers to a book that lacks the interdependency of words and pictures; instead, the text carries the most substantial weight of the narration, which causes the images to become redundant and even seem dispensable. Often, the pictures represent a situation that has been described in the narration and might even add some additional information, but usually these illustrations are not essential for the understanding of the story or to create their own story based on the pictures. (Quesada Padrón, 2020: 49)

<sup>1</sup> From the editor's introduction to the chapter 'Ideology and Children's Books' by Robyn McCallum and John Stephens in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2011).

According to Oittinen, "[I]t is very often hard to tell a picture book from a story book". She uses the term *picture book* in her article "about illustrated books which tell stories with words and images – whatever their role" (Oittinen, 2001: 110). She writes that "picture books are iconotexts, unities formed by words, images, and effects, which have a language of their own. In picture books, there is interaction between two semioticsystems, one verbal and the other visual" (Oittinen, 2001: 109-110). Serafini et al. use the term *multimodal novels* to "honour the importance of the various models of representation and communicative resources employed" (Serafini et al., 2018: 315). With reference to Shulevitz (1985), they also refuse to see illustrations as mere added support or "supplementary embellishments that could be deleted without impacting a fluent reader's comprehension". They claim that "the dismissal of illustrations, even in print-heavy texts, limits the semiotic potential of a multimodal text" (Serafini et al., 2018: 315).

Even if the pictures, together with the text, play an important role in conveying meaning, other aspects of the book, such as size, layout, typeface and the location of the pictures or the text on the page, can also contribute to the meaning of the story told. For instance, if some elements of the text are given a more salient place on the page, we can assume that these parts are more important than others. As Serafini et al. (2018) put it, "In multimodal novels, the reader must look across visual images, written language, and other design features to more fully construct meaning" (315).

As can be inferred from the discussion above, there is a difference in the role that pictures or illustrations play in books and a discussion of the terms *story book*, *picture book* and *illustrated book*. I agree with Quesada Padrón that, in the case of illustrated books, the illustrations are not essential to understand the story told. However, when a text is illustrated, the images will contribute to the meaning of the story: "Multimodal novels do not privilege written language as the primary source of meaning. The images also carry a heavy load" (Serafini et al., 2018: 314). In the following, I will use the term *multimodal text* and the more specific *children's illustrated book* to describe the object of my analysis.

### 3. Readers of Children's Books

Children's illustrated books are normally written to an intended child reader, even if the youngest readers can only 'read' the pictures and other semiotic elements. However, these books are also meant to be read by an adult, with a child looking at the pictures. Thus, the adult reader serves as an interpreter or mediator between the book and the child's world, explaining aspects of the book so it can be understood within the child's context. It is also common for the adult and the child to examine the pictures together, describing them and relating them to the text read aloud by the adult.

In some cases, however, children's literature is written for dual addressees, for both a child and an adult reader. According to Alvstad, the dual readership is explicitly present in some books, like *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Pinocchio*, but in other cases, she claims, the dual readership is not that explicit. However, she argues, "The dual readership is nevertheless always at play in children's literature, if for no other reason than that the main mediators of children's literature are adults" (2010: 24). Thus, children's books have two types of intended readers: "Firstly, we have the child readers, but, on the other hand, also the adult readers who function as mediators, facilitating the physical book for the children and reading it out loud for them" (NN & Author, 2014: 12<sup>2</sup>).

2 My translation. The Spanish original: "Por una parte, tenemos a los lectores niños, pero, por otra, también a los adultos que funcionan como mediadores, facilitándoles los libros físicamente a los niños y/o leyéndoselos en voz alta".

The book analysed in the present study does not belong to the classical children's literature that has an obvious double addressee. Instead, the adult functions more like a facilitator and a mediator of the story. It is only the adult reader who can connect the expression *the yellow danger* to a historic context. However, according to Wee, Park and Choi, "[...] illustrations in picture books also play a critical role [...] because vivid images can convey powerful messages to children from a young age" (Wee, Park, & Choi, 2014: 74). Thus, even if the child reader does not have the context to interpret an expression as racist, the child will learn this expression, and the illustrations will give the child an image of the figures representing this danger.

#### 4. Translation and interpretation of multimodal texts

When multimodal texts are translated, the decision of whether to change or maintain the illustrations will usually depend on the status of the illustrations and the illustrator. In comics and books where the figures are famous characters, the illustrations will normally remain untouched, and only the dialogue will be translated. In some cases, signs can be translated and, for example, cases of onomatopoeia that differ from language to language. The task of the translator in these cases is to give the translated text meaning considering the visual aspect of the book and, according to Oitinnen, the illustrator's interpretation of the story: "To create a translation where parts contribute to the whole, the translator must take into consideration the illustrator's interpretation of the story" (Oitinnen, 2000: 57). Likewise, when the translated version of the book gets new illustrations, the illustrator must relate to the translator's interpretation of the written text. Thus, the relationship between the text and the illustrations in a multimodal text may vary according to the importance the two parts play in telling the story.

The illustrations may also be seen as a kind of translation of the written text, that is, a translation from text to image: an intersemiotic translation, in Jakobson's terminology (Jakobson, 1959: 233). The illustrations will give forms and shapes to the descriptions embedded in the written text, and sometimes they will clarify what is unclear or ambiguous in the text. In such cases, the illustrators give their interpretation of the ambiguity in the text. According to Alvstad, this is a common feature in both translations and illustrations: "[T]ranslations and pictures have in common that they sometimes make explicit what is open or ambiguous in the source text" (Alvstad, 2010: 25). In an article, Alvstad analyses 18 illustrated versions of Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Steadfast Tin Soldier". She shows how the conditions of the composition of meaning vary with the ways the story is depicted in different versions. For instance, she claims that when the drawings contain a heart, this will reinforce one of the interpretations of the story as a romantic relationship between the tin soldier and the little dancer (Alvstad, 2008: 100). According to Alvstad, "[A] translation can change the way the verbal and the visual codes interact with each other" (2010: 25). In my opinion, this is exactly the case with the book object of this analysis. The Spanish illustrator has made more explicit the ambiguous interpretation of the expression *the yellow danger*, referring either to the small figures from outer space or to the old racist slogan.

When commissioning the translation of an illustrated book, publishers can choose to keep illustrations or replace them with new ones by artists in the target market. In some cases, the figures are an essential part of the books, and it would be impossible to replace them with other figures. This is the case of cartoons like *Peanuts* (Charlie Brown) and *Mafalda* or picture books like the *Moomin* series. In other cases, there are many illustrations of a book, even if we are talking about republishing

the book in the same language as the original. This is the case with *Alice in Wonderland*, which has fascinated scholars and artists for many decades. Even the famous painter Salvador Dalí was commissioned to illustrate a version of it, published in 1969 by Random House (Temple, 2020). The decision of whether to maintain the original illustrations or commission new ones with translations would depend on the status of the illustrations. In some cases, the illustrations are more important than the text, such as the case of the above-mentioned *Moomins*, but in cases where the book is not part of a series and the illustrator is not renowned outside the source culture, it can be easier to replace the illustrations. This can also be part of negotiations between publishers, as they may also consider the job market for illustrators in the target society.

In the case of *The Yellow Dwarves*, I have been able to trace six of the eight translated versions, the Spanish version included. Only one of the six has kept the original illustrations. We can, therefore, assume that the publisher in this case easily accepted that the illustrations may be replaced without changing the story told.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Ideology in Children's Literature

Children's literature, from fairy tales to modern literature, has often been a vehicle of moralistic values: "The moralizing finality, in a greater or smaller degree, has always been present in Children's Literature. The fascination the literary texts produce among the youngest helps in the transmission of certain values" (Etxaniz Erle, 2004: 83). In the literary criticism of children's literature, ideology became a topic during the 1970s, "as discourses interrogating social assumptions about gender, race and class began to impact upon the production and reception of children's literature" (McCallum & Stephens, 2011: 359). According to Alvstad, one of the characteristics of research on translated children's literature is that of ideological manipulation or purification:

Adaptation in the translation of children's literature also occurs for ideological reasons. Ideological manipulation, by Klingberg (1986: 12) called "purification", is that which is adapted to adhere to the adults' (parents', teachers', etc.) supposed sets of values. Ideological manipulations can also be defined as forms of censorship\*. Unhappy endings may be transformed into happy ones. When Scandinavian picture books are published in the US, illustrations showing small girls without bikini tops are altered. (Alvstad, 2010: 23)

The values transmitted in children's literature can be explicit both in images and text. Regarding images, Etxaniz Erle refers to an example from his investigation on Basque children's literature where the image in a book from 1986 (*Maripertxenta* by Ormazabal) shows a conventional gender role: a mother making dinner, the daughter setting the table and the father reading the newspaper and listening to the radio (Etxaniz Erle, 2004: 85). However, even if the values are not explicit in the story, it is not possible to have a narrative without an ideology (McCallum & Stephens, 2011: 359). Regarding children's literature, they say: "Ideologies may be more or less visible in texts produced for children, which seldom reproduce overt ideology as a thematized component of texts (...)" (McCallum & Stephens, 2011: 360). They also claim that readers and authors are not always aware of the ideology in narrations:

3 I could not obtain an answer from the publisher regarding this issue.

Ideologies can thus function most powerfully in books which reproduce beliefs and assumptions of which authors and readers are largely unaware. Such texts render ideology invisible and, hence, invest implicit ideological positions with legitimacy by naturalizing them. In other words, a book which seems to a reader to be apparently ideology-free will be a book closely aligned to that reader's own unconscious assumptions, and the identification of such ideologies will often require sophisticated reading of the text's language and narrative discourse. (McCallum & Stephens, 2011: 360)

Accordingly, all narrations have an ideology, even if it is not explicitly expressed. In translation, this ideology may be transferred or altered. When there is a change in a translated story because of ideological reasons, we can normally talk about cultural adaptation, censure or purification. As Alvstad points out, this can be done by changing the story or illustrations. In these cases, ideological manipulation can be a conscious decision made by the publishing house with or without the translator's consent<sup>4</sup>. However, in the book I analyse here, the ideological subtext in the text has not been a conscious decision by the author or the illustrator.

## 6. *De gule dvergene (The Yellow Dwarves)*

The children's book *De gule dvergene (The Yellow Dwarves)* (2006), written by Jostein Gaarder, is a small book (6 x 8.5 inches/15.5 x 21 centimetres). It is part of the series *Lesehestene (The Bookworms)*, intended to be 'children's friendly guide into the world of books' (from the colophon page<sup>5</sup>). According to the back cover of the book and the colophon page, the books in this series are intended for children aged eight to nine years and are described as books with colourful illustrations, with both lower-case and upper-case letters, short sentences and easy-to-read text. According to the website of the agents (Oslo Literary Agency) for the publishing house Aschehoug, they have sold the rights to the translation of the book for the eight following languages: Brazilian Portuguese, Catalan, Danish, Korean, Macedonian, Persian, Polish and Spanish. Most of Gaarder's books have been translated into English, but this book has not. I have been in contact with the Norwegian publisher, but they have no explanation for the lack of interest in this book for the English-speaking market.

The story covers 48 pages, of which more than 25% (13 whole pages and three partial pages) are colourful illustrations by Jill Moursund. The story has no explicit references to any specific country or place, but besides the fact that its author is Norwegian, there are several implicit factors that situate the text in Norway: the eight-digit phone number, the Norwegian names *Arild* and *Halvorsens colonial* and the fact that it is normal for Arild to be home alone after school. However, these elements could easily be changed to relocate the story into another culture.

The synopsis of the story on the Oslo Literary Agency's webpage reads as follows:

One day when Arild comes home from school, the house is empty. He goes out into the streets, but it's dead quiet everywhere. No-one to be seen; no sign of life. Except a weird, little yellow

4 In another of Gaarder's books, *Sophie's World*, the US publishing house changed the book to adapt the content to the norms of North American society, some without the consent of the translator (Author, 2000).

5 My translation. The Norwegian original: "*Lesehestene er barnas gode venn på veien inn i bøkernes verden*".

creature sitting on the kerb, throwing a dice, and mumbling to himself. Arild doesn't know it yet, but this is the beginning of the strangest day of his life. (Oslo Literary Agency)

Arild visits the local grocery store and finds that it is all empty. He is hungry and takes a banana. As he peels it, he is surprised to find something written on the inside of the banana peel: 'Be aware of the yellow danger!' (p. 14<sup>6</sup>). He thinks that it is very weird that someone could write inside a banana peel. He leaves the shop and then sees the yellow dwarf throwing dice. It turns out that the yellow dwarf is from another planet and his people want to exchange their planet with humans' planet because there are so many good bananas growing on Earth. Therefore, they have taken all the people, including Arild's family, into a spaceship. The little dwarf does not want this to happen because his grandparents are old and sick, and they cannot travel to Earth. The only way he can stop the situation is by throwing a seven on the dice. As Arild's family is held on the spaceship, he and the dwarf have a common motivation to solve the case: how to throw a seven on the dice. Finally, they solve the problem by painting another dot on the dice. Arild wakes up: It has all been a dream.

In this context, the message written inside the banana peel, 'Be aware of the yellow danger!', is likely to be interpreted as indicating the aliens, that is, the yellow dwarves. Considering the drawings in the book, they might look a little bit scary with their red eyes. Otherwise, they are rather humanlike, except that they are covered with yellow rubber. In the book, they are described as follows: "The dwarf was wearing a yellow overall which covered his whole body except for his face, but his face also had a yellowish colour. It looked as if his skin was made from rubber" (p. 16, my translation<sup>7</sup>). As for their eyes, Arild describes them as follows: "Arild looked into a pair of reddish eyes. They were not pretty. But they were not bad either" (p. 29, my translation<sup>8</sup>). The drawings in the original are very close to this description. The red eyes of the dwarves make a notable contrast to the light blue eyes of Arild. Otherwise, their faces look very similar, as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: *Arild and the Yellow Dwarf with the Dice*, page 25

6 My translation. The Norwegian original: "Pass deg for den gule fare!"

7 My translation. The Norwegian original: "Dvergen hadde en gul kjeledress som dekket hele kroppen unntatt selve ansiktet, men også ansiktet hadde en gulaktig farge. Det så ut som om huden var laget av gummi".

8 My translation. The Norwegian original: "Arild så inn i et par rødlige øyne. De var ikke pene. Men de var ikke slemme heller".

According to the online *Chemistry Encyclopedia*, a 'yellow dwarf' is a kind of small star; our sun is a yellow dwarf. Hence, the connection between the yellow dwarves and outer space is pertinent. When it comes to the 'yellow danger', it is no problem for children to connect danger with the little dwarves from outer space, as it may be considered a threat that all the people will be taken away from Earth, particularly for Arild, who will lose his family. Arild, himself, uses the expression once when he shouts to his family on the spaceship: "I will save you. Soon, I will save you from the yellow danger" (p. 48<sup>9</sup>). However, this expression is ambiguous, and for the adult reader, the expression may point to the beginning of the last century, when the rising economy and political power of East Asia were considered a threat, a phenomenon known in English as *the yellow peril*, defined in *Merriam-Webster's* online dictionary as follows:

1. a danger to Western civilization held to arise from expansion of the power and influence of eastern Asian peoples
2. a threat to Western living standards from the influx of eastern Asian laborers willing to work for very low wages

Similar definitions can be found in Norwegian and Spanish dictionaries or encyclopaedias:

The yellow danger political slogan launched around 1900 about the threat the 'yellow' race (Japanese and Chinese) could imply for the 'white race'. (*The Norwegian Enciclopedia: Store norske leksikon*<sup>10</sup>)

The yellow danger (sometimes Yellow Terror, in English: The Yellow Peril) is a racist metaphor that originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (...) (Wikipedia<sup>11</sup>)

The yellow danger or peril may have different connotations in other languages (in Danish, for instance, '*Den gule fare*' can also refer to the official football supporters' club of the Danish Superliga, AC Horsens). Nonetheless, in Norwegian, Spanish and probably other languages, it is first and foremost connected to the old political slogan. Labelling the influence of a stronger East Asian population a *yellow danger* is to use an expression that focuses on the so-called yellow skin colour of the Asian people. Accordingly, it is considered a racist expression. The origin of this racist notion belongs to the past, but for some adult readers, it might still have a clear connotation. Significantly, even today, in both Norwegian and Spanish newspapers, we can find this expression used to refer to the booming East Asian economy. The Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* (22.02.2018) declares, "The anxiety of "the yellow danger" is back in the Western world"<sup>12</sup>, and a headline from the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* (20.04.2021) reads, "The yellow danger, the hate against Asian people in the US"<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, the expression was recently reused in racist comments regarding the origin

9 My translation. The Norwegian original: "*Jeg skal redde dere! Snart skal jeg redde dere fra den gule fare!*"

10 My translation. The Norwegian original: "*Den gule fare, politisk slagord lansert omkring 1900 om den trussel den gule» rase (japanerne og kineserne) kunne innebære for den «hvite» rase.*"

11 My translation. The Spanish original: "*Peligro amarillo (a veces Terror amarillo, en inglés: The Yellow Peril) es una metáfora racista que se originó en el siglo XIX.*"

12 My translation. The Norwegian original: "*Angsten for 'den gule fare' er tilbake i vesten.*"

13 My translation. The Spanish original: "*Peligro amarillo, el odio a los asiáticos en Estados Unidos.*"

of COVID-19: "There was an outcry when local newspaper *Le Courier Picard* used the inflammatory headlines '*Alerte jaune*' ('Yellow Alert') and '*Le péril jaune*' ('Yellow Peril?'), complete with an image of a Chinese woman wearing a protective mask" (BBC, 2020). However, the expression used in this book has no connection to Asia, but rather to outer space. Even if the expression only evokes racist connotations for the adult reader, there is no reason for the child reader to learn this expression.

## 7. The reception of the book *De gule dvergene*

Jostein Gaarder writes books for children, adolescents and adults. According to his publisher Aschehough's website, one characteristic of his authorship is his curiosity and his wonder about the meaning and many mysteries of life. He explores, with great enthusiasm, entrenched thoughts and thought patterns. In a review published in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* (2006), Bjørhovde writes:

This strange short story leaves plenty of room for both wondering and thoughts. Is it possible for a dice to have seven squares? Is there a greater chance to throw a seven if you throw the cube a million times? When using your head, nothing is impossible. Arild knows what to do. The illustrations improve the text and contribute to the slightly unreal and slightly scary atmosphere of the book. The text is easy to read without being flat<sup>14</sup>. (Bjørhovde, 2006, n.p.)

In a Danish journal for teachers, *Folkeskolen.dk*, Anne Katrine Rask describes the book as follows:

An interesting philosophical book that probably needs to be read either by the teacher or in groups of several pupils who can talk about it afterwards. It is relatively easy to read (lix [readability index] 25), and the illustrations support the reader in establishing some useful images. However, the meaning out of it is not entirely straightforward<sup>15</sup>. (Katrine Rask, Folkeskolen, dk)

In an article about Jostein Gaarder, David Viveros (2010) describes him as an author who writes about the perennial questions of life draped in fantastic stories that attract children and adolescents and make them the kind of readers who are appropriate for this author. As an example, he mentions that the story told in *The Yellow Dwarves* proposes that it is possible to manipulate faith by using intelligence. In a review from the bookstores Troa librerias (n.d.), they point out that the book is easy to read and directed towards the age of the readers. They add: "However, the content is somewhat complex, with surreal nuances that may not be easy to perceive for many children who do not have

14 My translation. The Norwegian original: "*Denne rare, lille fortellingen gir rikt rom for både undring og tankespinn. Kan en terning ha syv sider? Er det større sjanse for å kaste en syver hvis man kaster en million ganger? Bruker man hodet, er inngenting umulig. Arild vet råd. Illustrasjonene løfter teksten og bidrar til den litt uvirkelige og småkumle stemningen i boken. Teksten er lett å lese uten at den er flat.*"

15 My translation. The Danish original: "*En interessant filosofisk bog, der nok har behov for enten at blive formidlet af læreren eller at blive læst af flere elever, der kan samtale om den bagefter. Den er forholdsvis let at afkode (lix 25), og illustrationerne støtter læseren i at etablere nogle brugbare forestillingsbilleder. Men teksten er ikke helt ligetil at vriste betydning ud af.*"

previous reading experience", and about the illustrations, they say that they "transmit an unpleasant impression, although they are technically well done<sup>16</sup>".

As we can see, these reviews all emphasise the philosophical aspects of the book, noting that it seems appropriate for young readers and that it is thought-provoking. Against this background, I will now turn to consider the Spanish version of the book and demonstrate how the change in the illustrations of the Spanish translation may make the racist interpretation of the 'yellow danger' more salient.

## 8. *Los enanos amarillos*

The Spanish translation, *Los enanos amarillos*, was published in 2007 by Siruela, and the translators are Baggethun and Lorenzo. The book contains colourful illustrations by the Spanish illustrator Gutiérrez Serna. According to the publisher's website, the book is published in a series called *Las Tres Edades – Biblioteca Gaarder (The Three Ages, The Gaarder Library)*<sup>17</sup>.

As for the physical aspects, the Spanish book is considerably larger than the original (11.2 x 8.5 inches/28. x 21.5 cm). The story covers 50 pages, and 16 entire pages and five half-pages are dedicated to illustrations, which constitute about 37% of the book, slightly more than in the Norwegian original (25%). The translated text is very close to the Norwegian original: The boy's name is Arild, the phone number has eight digits (in Spain, they normally have nine), and the name of the grocery shop is *Halvorsen*. The illustrations have been 'translated', meaning that they have been replaced by new ones. As the translated version of the book is larger than the original, the images are also larger and, thus, more eye-catching than those of the original.

The illustrator of the Spanish book, Gutiérrez Serna, holds a doctoral degree in the fine arts, specialising in painting. In her version, Arild has dark, curly hair and light brown skin. His eyes are only black dots, so it is not possible to see their colour, but the black dots could resemble dark black eyes. He wears trousers whose hems reach the calf, like the one often called 'chinos', and black shoes that resemble traditional Chinese shoes, also called 'kung fu shoes'. The dwarves are human-like, with yellow clothing and yellow skin (of the same shade as the clothing). They have red eyes, red cheeks, black hair and marked eyebrows. On their heads, they all wear triangular yellow hats very similar to Asian rice pickers' hats, as shown in Figure 2.

16 My translation. The Spanish original: "*Sin embargo, el contenido resulta un tanto complejo, con matices surrealistas que quizá no sean fáciles de percibir para muchos pequeños que no tengan previa experiencia lectora. Del mismo modo, las ilustraciones transmiten una impresión inquietante, poco grata, aunque técnicamente estén bien realizadas.*"

17 My translation into English.

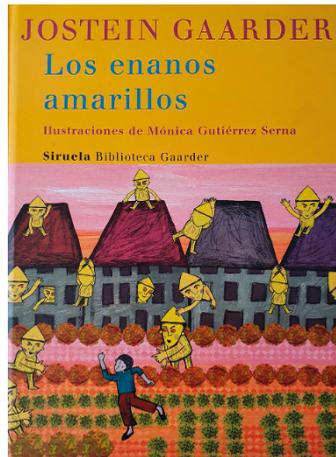


Figure 2 *The Front Page of the Spanish Translation*

The two references to the 'yellow danger' are directly translated into Spanish. The message inside the banana peel in this version is written in bold with capital letters and covers two pages of the book: ¡TEN CUIDADO CON EL PELIGRO AMARILLO! (pp. 14-15).



Figure 3 *Be aware of the yellow danger*

In the Norwegian original, this expression is also in bold, but it is written with upper- and lower-case letters: '(...) he discovered that there was something written on the inside of the banana peel. **Be aware of the yellow danger!** it said'<sup>18</sup> (p. 14). Consequently, the message 'Be aware of the yellow danger' has a more outstanding place in the Spanish version than in the Norwegian original.

18 My translation. The Norwegian original: "(...) han oppdaget at det stod skrevet noe på innsiden av bananskallet. *Pass deg for den gule fare!stod det*".

According to Oittinen, the shape and style of letters also have an effect on the reader: “[T]he visual appearance of a book always includes not only the illustrations but also the actual print, the shape and style of letters and headings, and the book’s entire layout; all these features influence the reader emotionally” (Oitinnen, 2000: 57). The layout, combined with Gutiérrez Serna’s choices for the images – chinos, traditional Chinese shoes and Asian rice picker hats – may easily draw the reader’s attention towards Asia and, thus, to the more political interpretation of the ambiguous expression *yellow danger*.

I was so intrigued by these findings that I contacted both the original writer and the illustrator of the Spanish version. The author, Jostein Gaarder, told me that he never had the political slogan in mind when writing this text. Nor did he make the connection between the yellow dwarves as the stars or the sun. Furthermore, he stated that if he had chosen a different fruit than the banana, the dwarves would have been a different colour (personal communication over telephone, 11 February 2012). The illustrator, Mónica Gutiérrez Serna, says that when she looks at the drawings ‘with my eyes’ or from my perspective, she can see the connection to Asia, but she also states that this was never a conscious strategy. She admits, however, that the sentence ‘Be aware of the yellow danger’ brought her memories from the past (personal communication over e-mail, 11 February 2012). Although they saw the connection when I made them aware of it, both claim that this was not a conscious choice in the writing of the book or in the drawing of the illustrations.

As Gaarder states, he did not have in mind the political slogan when using the expression ‘Be aware of the yellow danger’. However, this is a well-known expression; even if he did not make the connection when writing the book, it is strange that no one in the publishing house did. It would have been so easy merely to change the expression to ‘Be aware of the yellow aliens’ or simply ‘Be aware of the aliens’. This would have made the expression unambiguous. Consequently, the ideological interpretation of the interaction between the illustrations and the text in the Spanish version would have disappeared.

## 9. Other Translations

As mentioned above, the book has been translated into eight languages, and I have been able to trace six of them. Only one of the six, the Macedonian, has kept the original illustrations. The Brazilian–Portuguese version of the book, *Juca e os Añoes Amarelos*, illustrated by Jean-Claude R. Alphen, presents the dwarves as yellow figures with very thin arms and feet and bird-like fingers. As in the original, they have red eyes, as can be seen in Figure 4.

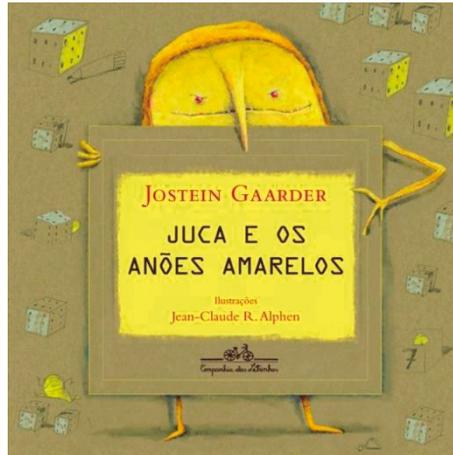


Figure 4 *The Front Page of the Brazilian Version of the Book*

The Catalan version, *Els nans grocs*, illustrated by Isabel Ferrer, presents the dwarves as funny little people, dressed in yellow, with hats with propellers (Figure 5), resembling the Swedish figure of Astrid Lindgren's Karlsson on the Roof, who had a propeller on his back.

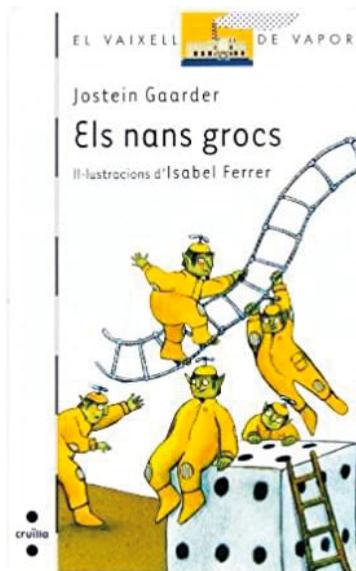


Figure 5 *The Front Page of the Catalan Version of the Book*

The Danish version, *De gule dværge*, illustrated by Signe Rød, also presents the dwarves as funny figures, with yellow skin and yellow clothes (Figure 6). Their heads bear similarities to how figures from outer space are often depicted.

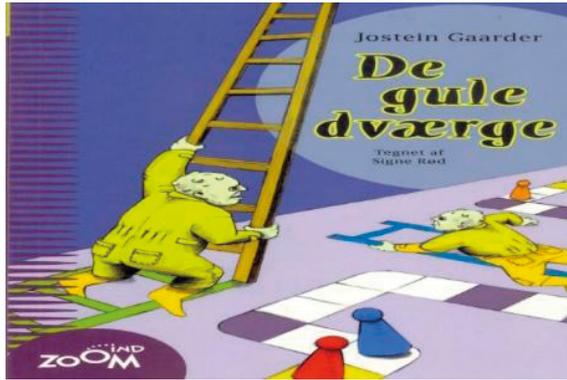


Figure 6 *The Front Page of the Danish Version of the Book*

In the German version, *Jonathan und die Zwerge aus dem All* (*Jonathan and the Dwarves from Outer Space*), illustrated by Peter Schössow, the name of Arild has been changed to Jonathan. The little dwarf has yellow skin, is dressed in yellow, wears glasses, and has a small triangle hat on his head (Figure 7). This hat, however, bears more resemblance to that of a magician or astrologer than to an Asian's rice picker hat.

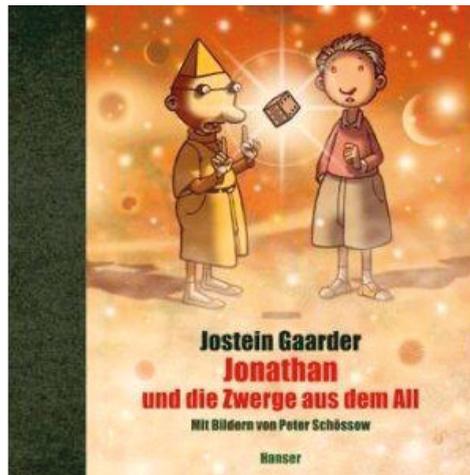


Figure 7 *The Front Page of the German Version of the Book*

The illustrations of the yellow dwarves in the different translations depict funny figures (the Brazilian and the Catalan versions), a typical astrologer or magician (the German version) or figures that resemble stereotypical space aliens (the Danish and the original Norwegian versions). None of these illustrations bears any connection to Asia or Asian people. According to Oittinen: "In one way or another, illustrators always take stories in new directions; for instance, they stress certain scenes or certain characteristics of the persons described by the author. They add and omit and make the readers of the book pay special attention to certain parts of the story" (Oitinnen, 2000, p. 103-106). As I have discussed here, the change of illustrations in the Spanish version may take the story in a new direction and give rise to the racist interpretation of the ambiguous expression 'be aware of the yellow danger'.

## 10. Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the Spanish version of *De gule dvergene* by the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder, and I have found that the illustrations in the Spanish version can be interpreted as pointing to Asia and Asian people. In that case, the ambiguity in the expression *the yellow danger* may be interpreted as the political racist slogan used in the beginning of the 1900s and reinforced in our time, both by the rising economic situation of Asian societies and by the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. The illustrations of the original book and four other translated versions depicted the small aliens as funny figures or figures from outer space. They have all respected the descriptions of the figures in the original by maintaining the yellow colour of their skin and dresses and the fact that they are small figures. There are, however, no descriptions in the text that the aliens are wearing a hat on their heads. By introducing Asian aspects to her drawings, the Spanish illustrator opens up an interpretation that was inherent in the source text but not picked up by other illustrators.

I have also argued that the expression, itself, is a problematic one and that it would have been better to use *'Be aware of the yellow aliens'* or *'Be aware of the aliens'* in the original text. For adults or teachers reading this book for children, it would also be easier just to use those expressions, as there are no reasons why children should learn a racist expression, even if they read a version other than the Spanish.

I find that the example of the illustrations of the Spanish version of the book clearly reveals how nonverbal elements, such as graphics and drawings, can be powerful in a translated text and how the illustrator, conscious or not, can change the meaning of a book simply by the way she draws a hat, trousers and shoes. Furthermore, the illustrations seem to have been triggered by textual elements in the original text because of the ambiguous interpretation of *the yellow danger*. This shows that the interplay between the illustrations and the text is something that everyone involved in children's literature should pay more attention to and that there should be further research on the comparison between varying illustrations of the same book when it comes to ambiguity and ideology.

In this case, I will claim that the pictures, the graphic design of the book and its size may distract readers' attention from the innocent children's world to an ideological one with a racist slogan. This, however, was never the original author's intention; nor was it the conscious decision of the illustrator. What I want to demonstrate in this article is that no text or picture is innocent. When the text and the Spanish pictures are interpreted together, the combination may take interpretations of the book's content in a new direction.

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