

Zuzanna Bodziony  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8910-7394>
Jagiellonian University
e-mail: zuzanna.bodziony@uj.edu.pl

Between form and meaning: Translating nursery rhymes

Pomiędzy formą i znaczeniem: metody tłumaczenia piosenek dla dzieci

Abstract

This article addresses translation strategies which are applied in children's songs. Based on a detailed line-by-line analysis of eight popular English nursery rhymes and their Polish and Hungarian versions, the study identifies and compares dominant tendencies: meaning-oriented versus form-oriented approaches. The results indicate that Polish translations exhibit a slight predominance of form-oriented strategies (53%), whereas Hungarian ones show a slight preference for meaning-oriented approaches (53%). A key conclusion, however, is the significant variation observed across individual songs, proving that the choice of strategy is influenced not only by the general characteristics of the target language but mainly by the specific requirements and nature of each particular song.

Keywords: nursery rhymes, translation, English, Polish, Hungarian, poetic stylistic means, meaning-orientated translation, form-oriented translation, translation accuracy

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje tematykę strategii translatorskich w przekładzie piosenek dziecięcych. Na podstawie szczegółowej, linearnej analizy ośmiu popularnych angielskich piosenek i ich polskich oraz węgierskich wersji badanie identyfikuje i porównuje dominujące tendencje: orientację na znaczenie lub na formę. Wyniki wskazują, że tłumaczenia polskie cechują się lekką przewagą strategii zorientowanej na formę (53%), podczas gdy węgierskie – na znaczenie (53%). Kluczowym wnioskiem jest jednak znaczące zróżnicowanie pomiędzy poszczególnymi utworami, co podkreśla, że o wyborze strategii decydują nie tylko ogólne cechy języka docelowego, lecz także specyfika i wymagania konkretnego utworu.

Słowa kluczowe: piosenki dla dzieci, translatoryka, język angielski, język polski, język węgierski, poetyckie środki stylistyczne, tłumaczenie skoncentrowane na znaczeniu, tłumaczenie skoncentrowane na formie, adekwatność tłumaczenia

Introduction

Literary translation poses significant challenges for the translator, who must render content in another language using different linguistic means (Catford, 1965: 20, Newmark, 1988: 7). It is hard to deny that translating poetry is even more problematic than translating prose – as it requires focus on both content and form. Extending this logic, musical translation presents a further difficulty: in addition to meaning and form, various musical factors must also be taken into consideration (Franzon, 2014: 376).

Nursery rhymes can hardly be considered a form of art in the same way as poetry, which is often rich in meaning. Although their form relies on the very same stylistic figures, children's songs may be categorized as functional texts: their primary aim is to entertain and teach the simplest things, presenting the closest environment to the child (Pramata, 2017: 2) – and not to express inexpressible. In light of this, an intriguing question arises: are nursery rhymes translated similarly to poetry, or rather to functional texts? The former approach would prioritize form, while the latter would emphasize meaning.

This paper seeks to answer this question through an analysis of eight popular English nursery rhymes and their Polish and Hungarian versions, which have spread globally via platforms like YouTube and Spotify. These languages were chosen not only due to the author's competence – but mainly because these specific translations drew the author's attention to the topic through repeated exposure via listening habits of her toddler.

Framework

Numerous studies highlight the complexities that make song one of the most challenging forms of translation. Antosz-Rekucki (2022) provides a detailed, chronological overview of English and Polish texts on song translation from the early twentieth century onward. This listing effectively illustrates the field's inherent complexity.

While the scope of this paper does not permit an exhaustive review, it is essential to acknowledge key theoretical criteria identified in the literature as vital for song translation. An examination of both theoretical papers (Low, 2005; Frazon, 2008 and 2024) and applied studies (Pratama, 2017; Tekin, 2017; Reus, 2024) reveals the following predominant features of original lyrics which should be preserved in the translated version:

- sense (meaning),
- singability (suitability for singing),
- naturalness (the lexical and stylistic choices natural for native speakers),
- rhythm (mainly the number of syllables),
- rhyme,
- style,

- sound,
- appropriateness (for the given type of listeners).

The above list leads to the conclusion that the translation of nursery rhymes may involve a tension between meaning-oriented and form-oriented approaches. The former represents the most literal method, wherein the translator attempts to express the content word-for-word. However, lexically equivalent words often differ formally across languages. They may vary not only in sound but also in length, and in some cases may require articles while in others articles are either optional or non-existent. All of these factors alter the song's rhythm and rhyme structure – for example, a greater number of syllables must be sung faster to fit within the same music interval as the original words. The latter approach prioritizes stylistic figures: meaning is adjusted to the words which rhyme or otherwise fit within the original structure. Modifications to lyrical content may constitute minor adjustments, though it is also possible that the translator changes so many elements that, without the music, the translated version becomes barely recognizable as a rendition of the original song.

This article seeks to answer the main question: which translational approach (meaning-oriented or form-oriented) predominates in the Polish and Hungarian versions of popular English nursery rhymes? The titles examined are listed below in alphabetical order:

1. “Finger Family”,
2. “Humpty Dumpty”,
3. “If You’re Happy and You Know It”,
4. “Itsy Bitsy Spider”,
5. “Old McDonald Had a Farm”,
6. “Rain, Rain, Go Away”,
7. “Skinamarink”,
8. “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”.

The song selection was guided by three criteria: availability in all three languages, genuine popularity on platforms like YouTube and Spotify, and poetic features like rhyme and rhythm. The study does not consider the origin of the songs, so the analysed corpus includes both traditional nursery rhymes with considerable historical depth (such as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”, which according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* dates to the early nineteenth century) and more recent compositions.

Polish and Hungarian versions were identified using a consistent search methodology: the English title of each song was combined with the phrases *po polsku* (‘in Polish’) or *magyarul* (‘in Hungarian’) in the Google search engine. The use of target-language phrases was intended to optimize the relevance of search results. From the first five results, the version with most views was selected, unless it substantially diverged from the original (for example, through significant alterations to the music or lyrics) – then it was replaced by the next most popular version. Such cases are mentioned in the analysis. Additionally, reference is occasionally made to less popular translations that present features of particular theoretical interest.

The analysis of the lyrics was conducted according to the following procedure. First, each version was compared line-by-line with the original. Each line was evaluated

on the basis of the question: did the translator prioritize meaning or form? In other words: is the line translated literally, so the same content can be found in the final and original lines, or rather was it adapted to reproduce acoustic features, so the final line contains the same rhythm, the same number of the syllables, the analogical rhymes and so on. Some other language aspects were also taken into account. For example, whether the word order of the translated sentence reflects the natural usage in the target language, or whether it was manipulated to match the form was analysed. Each line was assigned a score: it could receive 1 point for a meaning-orientated translation, 1 point for a form-orientated translation or 0,5 points for each (if a clear classification was not feasible). In rare cases where the translator disregarded both meaning and form, a score of 0 was assigned. Points were then summed up for each version, with separate totals for meaning and form. These totals were converted into percentages to determine the proportion of the translation dominated by semantic fidelity versus formal preservation.

The results of the analysis are presented below, along with a detailed discussion of individual cases and notable observations.

Results of the study

The presentation of the results follows a structured approach. First, the Polish and Hungarian translation of each song are presented and described individually to examine the specific strategies applied by the translators in each language. The translations are presented in the alphabetic order. Then the results from both languages are compared. This comparative phase aims to determine whether observed tendencies in the translation are connected to the content and structure of the original nursery rhymes or are influenced by features inherent to the respective target languages.

The table below illustrates the scoring applied to the Polish translation of the song “Finger Family”, indicating the number of syllables per verse (NS) and the rhyme scheme (R) which is marked with capital letters, in the corresponding columns:

Table 1. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Finger Family” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Rodzina Palców (Bajlandia TV)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Daddy finger, daddy finger</i>	8	A	<i>Tato palec, tato palec</i>	8	A	0	1
<i>where are you?</i>	3	B	<i>gdzie jesteś?</i>	3	B	0,5	0,5
<i>Here I am.</i>	3	C	<i>Jestem tu.</i>	3	C	0,5	0,5
<i>Here I am.</i>	3	C	<i>Jestem tu.</i>	3	C	0,5	0,5
<i>How do you do?</i>	4	B	<i>Jak się masz?</i>	3	D	0,5	0,5
<i>Score in percentage</i>						60%	40%

Source: own elaboration on kanał dla dzieci – bajlandia.tv, 14.05.2020.

The song contains four more stanzas, each differing from the presented example by only one word: subsequent stanzas substitute *daddy* with *mommy*, *brother*, *sister*, and *baby*. The translation maintains this structural pattern – additionally, the variable words have the same number of syllables as their English counterparts (*mamo*, *bracie*, *siostró*, *dziecko*), so there is no need to take those stanzas into consideration.

The final scoring indicates that over half of the translation prioritizes meaning. However, as the detailed analysis reveals, the last verse is the crucial one: it is translated with a Polish phrase commonly used to inquire about someone’s well-being. This phrase does not agree with the formal requirements of the nursery rhyme: it contains fewer syllables than the original and fails to rhyme with the second verse. The result is aesthetically discordant, resembling an arbitrary statement rather than a coherent lyrical line. Consequently, the translation loses the characteristic features expected of children’s song.

While one might argue that there is no better solution which could be used in Polish to express the same content – an alternative version suggests otherwise. There is another Polish version of “Finger Family” ([HeyKids – Piosenki Dla Dzieci, 24.04.2021](#)) in which the last verse is translated as: *Jak się masz?, Cześć!* ‘How do you do?, Hi!’. This solution does not change drastically the original meaning but it maintains rhythmic structure through an additional lexical item. The resulting rhyme (*jesteś – cześć*), though imperfect, successfully recreates the musical quality essential to the genre.

It is interesting that the percentage distribution between meaning-oriented and form-oriented translation approaches in the Hungarian version of the song presents exactly the inverse pattern.

Table 2. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Finger Family” song

Original lyrics			Ujj család (LetsgoMartin)			Meaning	Form
	NS	R		NS	R		
<i>Daddy finger, daddy finger</i>	8	A	<i>Apa ujjá apa ujjá</i>	8	A	0	1
<i>where are you?</i>	3	B	<i>merre vagy?</i>	3	B	0,5	0,5
<i>Here I am.</i>	3	C	<i>Itt vagyok.</i>	3	C	0,5	0,5
<i>Here I am.</i>	3	C	<i>Itt vagyok.</i>	3	C	0,5	0,5
<i>How do you do?</i>	4	B	<i>Te hogy vagy?</i>	3	B	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						40%	60%

Source: own elaboration on LetsgoMartin Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 31.03.2024.

It is also the result of a single line – but this time it is the song’s opening verse. The translator uses the form *ujja* which contains the possessive suffix *-a*: thereby the given word means ‘his/her finger’. This choice is likely motivated by the fact that the nominative form (*ujj*) would not fit the song’s rhythmic structure. The remaining lines are translated literally while maintaining the original syllable count and preserving the rhyme scheme in corresponding positions. The exception is the last verse which contains only three syllables but it rhymes with the second line and it makes a pleasant melody. It is worth noting that this translation should not be regarded as randomly successful. There is another

preposition which can be used to ask ‘Where are you?’ in Hungarian: *hol?* – however, its monosyllabic structure likely precluded its use, as it would not have fulfilled the metrical requirements.

As demonstrated in table 3, a balance between the two translation approaches is achievable:

Table 3. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Humpty Dumpty” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Humpty Dumpty (Bobasy TV)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.</i>	8	A	<i>Humpty Dumpty na murze siadł.</i>	8	A	0	1
<i>Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.</i>	8	A	<i>Humpty Dumpty z tego muru spadł.</i>	9	A	0,5	0,5
<i>All the king’s horses and all the king’s men</i>	10	B	<i>Choć wielu rycerzy pró- bować chciało</i>	11	B	0,5	0,5
<i>couldn’t put Humpty together again.</i>	10	B	<i>poskladać Humpty’ego rady nie dało</i>	11	B	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						50%	50%

Source: own elaboration on Bobasy TV – Piosenki Dla Dzieci, 27.09.2019.

The first line matches the original one in both meaning and form. The second and final lines preserve the original meaning but diverge in syllable count. Nevertheless, the translator makes a concerted effort to maintain the rhyme scheme by manipulating Polish word order (which is relatively flexible) and mentioning the wall for the second time: *Humpty Dumpty z tego muru spadł* ‘Humpty Dumpty fell from that wall’). Consequently, these lines could not be assigned a score of zero. The zeros gained the meaning and the form of the third line, though. The word-for-word translation of this verse is ‘although many knights wanted to try’, so it expresses more information than the analogical line in English. It also contains more syllables than the original one. It could be argued that the additional syllable has been added in order to maintain the rhythm of the translation (the last verse of the translation contains one supplementary syllable, too). However, the research focuses on the analysis between the original lyrics and their translation, so such internal adjustments within the target language version fall beyond its scope.

A noteworthy finding is that this balance between the semantics and the form in the translation is unique among the analysed translations, yet it also characterizes the Hungarian version of the same nursery rhyme:

Table 4. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Humpty Dumpty” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Humpty Dumpty (LetsgoMartin)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.</i>	8	A	<i>Dundi dömpi a falra felment.</i>	9	A	1	0

Original lyrics	NS	R	Humpty Dumpty (LetsgoMartin)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.</i>	8	A	<i>Dundi dömpi nagyot esett.</i>	8	A	0,5	0,5
<i>All the king's horses and all the king's men</i>	10	B	<i>A király összes lovas embere.</i>	10	B	0,5	0,5
<i>couldn't put Humpty together again.</i>	10	B	<i>Kevés volt hogy dömpit össze szedje.</i>	10	B	0	1
Score in percentage						50%	50%

Source: own elaboration on LetsgoMartin Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 14.06.2022.

It is important to note that the final score is identical in both languages but the details differ from each other. In the Hungarian version the second and third lines achieve a near-perfect balance between meaning and form: semantic content is preserved, syllable counts correspond exactly, and rhyme is maintained (albeit imperfectly). The first line demonstrates a meaning-oriented approach, as it contains more syllables than the original. Conversely, the final line prioritizes formal structure by maintaining the original syllable count, though it introduces new semantic content: a literal translation of this line is: 'there were too few of them to put Humpty together again'). It can be assumed that this change was made in order to establish a rhyme between the third and fourth lines, further reinforcing the form-oriented character of this translation.

Additionally, it should be noted that another Hungarian version of this nursery rhyme exists which is more accurate, almost perfect – but it has fewer views, and thus, under the established selection criteria, could not be considered the primary version for this study. As illustrated in the table below, a balance between meaning and form in this nursery rhyme can be achieved not only in the aggregate score but consistently across each individual line.

Table 5. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Humpty Dumpty” song (II)

Original lyrics	NS	R	Humpty Dumpty leült a falra (Kids Tv)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.</i>	8	A	<i>Dingi dungi a falra ül.</i>	8	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.</i>	8	A	<i>Dingi dungi lependerül.</i>	8	A	0,5	0,5
<i>All the king's horses and all the king's men</i>	10	B	<i>Jöhet a királytól lókatona.</i>	10	B	0,5	0,5
<i>couldn't put Humpty together again.</i>	10	B	<i>Nem rakják dingit össze soha.</i>	9	B	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						50%	50%

Source: own elaboration on Kids Tv Hungary – Gyerek Dalok Magyarul, 10.08.2023.

The only discrepancy regarding the form is one missing syllable in the last line (what does not spoil overall rhythm). Semantically, only minor modifications are present: the translator uses the present tense (*ül* ‘is sitting’, *lependeül* ‘is rolling down’) and introduces a verb in the third line that translates literally as: ‘All the knights can come from the king’ – which does not impact the meaning.

Regarding the song which is to be analysed as the next one, it is important to highlight two issues. The song – originally titled “If You’re Happy and You Know It” – has many (at least four) stanzas, yet this study examines only the first. This limitation is justified by the stanzas’ structural uniformity: although the imperative commands vary across stanzas, their formal construction remains consistent, making the analysis of additional stanzas redundant for the present purposes. However, it should be admitted here that it was impossible to find such Polish and Hungarian versions of that song which would contain identical commands in matching sequence. Such discrepancies could influence the evaluation of the translation or at least impede it with no profit of the final result, what validates the decision to restrict analysis to the first stanza.

The Polish translation of the stanza is presented in table 6.

Table 6. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “If You’re Happy and You Know It” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Jeśli jesteś dziś szczęśliwy (Little Baby Bum)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.</i>	11	A	<i>Jeśli jesteś dziś szczęśliwy, w dłonie klaszcz.</i>	11	A	0,5	0,5
<i>If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.</i>	11	A	<i>Jeśli jesteś dziś szczęśliwy, w dłonie klaszcz.</i>	11	A	0,5	0,5
<i>If you’re happy and you know it.</i>	8	B	<i>Jeśli jesteś dziś szczęśliwy,</i>	8	B	0,5	0,5
<i>Then your face will surely show it.</i>	8	B	<i>w sercu pokój masz prawdziwy.</i>	8	B	0	1
<i>If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.</i>	11	A	<i>Jeśli jesteś dziś szczęśliwy, w dłonie klaszcz.</i>	11	A	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						40%	60%

Source: own elaboration on Little Baby Bum po polsku, 10.08.2020.

This translation presented notable challenges for evaluation. It should be emphasized that the only part demonstrating full correspondence with the original in both meaning and form is the imperative *w ręce klaszcz* ‘clap your hands’. While semantically equivalent (the only difference is the lack of the possessive pronoun in Polish) this phrase, being a loan translation, may not represent the most natural expression for native Polish speakers. The construction is pleonastic in the target language (the act of clapping inherently involves hands, making the explicit specification redundant). The 50:50 score is fully justified only in this case.

The first part of the line is translated with the additional information (*Jeśli jesteście dziś szczęśliwy* ‘If you’re happy **today**’) but without the phrase analogous to *and you know it* which helps to main the rhythm of the song. Although this omission might suggest a form-oriented approach, such classification would be inaccurate for this specific nursery rhyme. The reason for that is the forth verse which is translated to Polish as ‘in your heart, you have true peace’ – so with totally different meaning and with the extraordinary word order. These modifications serve primarily to preserve rhythm and rhyme, indicating a decidedly form-oriented strategy. Admittedly, these adjustments contribute to the song’s overall melodic quality. By comparison, the previous mentioned alterations (such as lexical additions) appear relatively inconsequential from this perspective.

It is interesting that the Hungarian translation of this nursery rhyme demonstrates a predominantly meaning-oriented approach.

Table 7. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “If You’re Happy and You Know It” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Ha Jó A Kedved Tapsolj Egy Nagyot (HeyKids)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands</i>	11	A	<i>Ha jó a kedved tapsolj egy nagyot.</i>	10	A	1	0
<i>If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands</i>	11	A	<i>Ha jó a kedved tapsolj egy nagyot.</i>	10	A	1	0
<i>If you’re happy and you know it</i>	8	B	<i>Ha velünk vagy és jó a kedved.</i>	8–9	B	0	1
<i>Then your face will surely show it</i>	8	B	<i>Másoknak is mutasd ezt meg.</i>	8	B	0,5	0,5
<i>If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands</i>	11	A	<i>Ha jó a kedved tapsolj egy nagyot.</i>	10	A	1	0
Score in percentage						70%	30%

Source: own elaboration on HeyKids – Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 20.10.2016.

The repeated verses contain almost the same meaning as the original ones: *Ha jó a kedved tapsolj egy nagyot* means literally ‘If you’re happy give a big clap’, in Hungarian there is a self-sufficient verb *tapsol* ‘to clap sb’s hands’, making the explicit addition of ‘hand’ semantically redundant and stylistically unnatural. While the equivalent of *and you know it* is absent, the verses diverge from the original in both rhythm and the number of the syllables, so it seems they are translated rather with regard to meaning.

Such evaluation seems right in comparison to the translation of the fourth line where a minor semantic alteration successfully preserves both the rhythmic structure and syllabic pattern of the original: *másoknak is mutasd ezt meg* ‘show it to the others’. The third line presents the most complex case. There is the entirely new semantic content added which does not appear either in the analogical phrase in the first and second verse, or in the original (*velünk vagy* ‘If you are with us’) – that precludes its classification as meaning-oriented. One might note the syllabic discrepancy in this verse, yet it is relevant

to observe that the Hungarian copulative conjunction *és* ‘and’ is frequently realized in its contracted form *s* – thanks to that the number of the syllables is equal in both, original and translated, lyrics.

Even a preliminary examination of table 8 reveals that the Polish translation of the subsequent song exhibits a strongly meaning-oriented approach.

Table 8. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Itsy, Bitsy Spider” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Itsy Bitsy Spider (Maluch TV)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout.</i>	13	A	<i>Maluteńki pająk po rynnie wspinał się.</i>	12	A	1	0
<i>Down came the rain and washed the spider out.</i>	10	A	<i>Nagle spadł deszcz i pająka splukał z niej.</i>	11	A	1	0
<i>Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.</i>	10	B	<i>Potem wyszło słońce i wyparował deszcz.</i>	12	A	1	0
<i>Then the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again.</i>	14	B	<i>Więc maluteńki pająk znowu wspinał się.</i>	12	A	1	0
Score in percentage						100%	0%

Source: own elaboration on Maluch TV, 17.11.2015.

Not only the number of syllables differs in each verse but also the rhyme scheme is different from the original. This divergence results in a markedly different rhythm of the nursery rhyme which (without the music) would be identifiable as the translation of the original song primarily through its literal lexical correspondence. The biggest alteration is to be observed in the third line, where agency shifts: rather than being dried by the sun, the rain dries itself.

In light of that, it is particularly noteworthy that an alternative Polish version of this song exists in which the two translation approaches achieve a near-perfect equilibrium.

Table 9. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Itsy, Bitsy Spider” song (II)

Original lyrics	NS	R	Tyciutki pajęczek (Bobasy tv)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout.</i>	13	A	<i>Tyciutki pajęczek na górze rynny był.</i>	12	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Down came the rain and washed the spider out.</i>	10	A	<i>Nagle przyszedł deszcz i w dół pajęczka zmył.</i>	11	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.</i>	10	B	<i>Wyszło słoneczko, deszcz wysuszyło wnet.</i>	11	B	0,5	0,5
<i>Then the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again.</i>	14	B	<i>Tyciutki pajęczek po rynnie znowu wszedł.</i>	12	B	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						50%	50%

Source: own elaboration on Bobasy TV – Piosenki Dla Dzieci, 24.03.2017.

This translation maintains the original rhyme scheme and the differences in the number of syllables is not as significant as in the previously analysed version. Furthermore, the lyrics remain semantically faithful to the source text. These features collectively makes the song much more pleasant to the ear. Probably that is the explanation why this alternative version has garnered substantially more views than the first translation examined (66 millions compared to 114 thousands). Nevertheless, it could have not been chosen as the primary version for analysis because the creators have adapted it to a different narrative framework: as the accompanying video illustrates, the song tells a story about a spider family (three kids and their father), so the modifier of the *spider* noun changes in each stanza addressing different referents. The first and final stanzas use a *tyciutki pajaczek* ‘itsy bitsy spider’, the second: *maluški pajaczek* ‘little spider’, whereas the fourth introduces *byczo duży pajak* ‘jumbo spider’.

As presented in table 10, the Hungarian translation of this nursery rhyme also focuses on the meaning.

Table 10. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Itsy, Bitsy Spider” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Ici Pici Pók (LetsgoMartin)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout.</i>	13	A	<i>Egy ici pók felmászott az ereszen.</i>	13	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Down came the rain and washed the spider out.</i>	10	A	<i>Jött egy nagy zápor lemosta hirtelen.</i>	11	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.</i>	10	B	<i>De ki sütött a nap és az eső felszaradt.</i>	13	B	1	0
<i>Then the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again.</i>	14	B	<i>Így az ici-pici pók hát újra felszaladt.</i>	13	B	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						63%	37%

Source: own elaboration on LetsgoMartin Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 9.11.2018.

Nevertheless, the formal discrepancies between the original song and this translation are less significant than in the initially analysed Polish version. The present translation maintains the original rhyme scheme and largely the number of syllables (the main exception is the third line). The whole song sounds much better compared to the former translation.

Regarding the analysis of the next song, it is worth noting that the vocables (E-I-E-I-O) appearing on the ending of the first, second and final verse, are excluded from evaluation: they are not taken into consideration either as the rhymes, or as the additional syllables, so they are not marked in the transcribed lyrics either. As they have an identical equivalent in both translations, there is no point to examine those.

Table 11. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Dziadek fajną farmę miał (BZYK tv)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Old MacDonald had a farm.</i>	7	A	<i>Dziadek fajną farmę miał.</i>	7	A	0	1
<i>And on that farm he had a pig.</i>	8	B	<i>Kurki na niej hodował.</i>	7	A	1	0
<i>With an oink oink here.</i>	5	C	<i>Kurki koko tu.</i>	5	B	0,5	0,5
<i>And an oink oink there.</i>	5	D	<i>I koko tam.</i>	4	C	0,5	0,5
<i>Here an oink.</i>	3	E	<i>Koko tu.</i>	3	B	0,5	0,5
<i>There an oink.</i>	3	E	<i>Koko tam.</i>	3	C	0,5	0,5
<i>Everywhere an oink oink.</i>	6	E	<i>Ciągle tylko koko.</i>	6	D	0	1
<i>Old MacDonald had a farm.</i>	7	A	<i>Dziadek fajną farmę miał.</i>	7	A	0	1
Score in percentage						38%	62%

Source: own elaboration on PIOSENKI DLA DZIECI BZYK tv, 20.02.2014.

It must be acknowledged here that the original form of the song has a complex formal structure. In fact there is no rhyme (just the first line repeated twice and the sound of the animals appearing at the end of three verses) and no structured rhythm. Despite this, the Polish translation demonstrates a form-oriented approach. Nearly all verses have the same number of the syllables. Thanks to that the translated text remains readily adaptable to the original melody.

However, there are some significant modifications of its semantic content. The most important to mention is the replacement of the main figure (Old MacDonald) with *dziadek* ‘grandpa’ – who is someone similar but closer to the Polish audience’s environment.

It is interesting that a similar methodological approach is observable in the Hungarian translation of this nursery rhyme.

Table 12. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Régi Macdonald-nak volt gazdasága (Kids Tv)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Old MacDonald had a farm.</i>	7	A	<i>Józsi bácsi a tanyán.</i>	7	A	0	1
<i>And on that farm he had a pig.</i>	8	B	<i>Volt pár csirke a tanyán.</i>	7	A	0,5	0,5
<i>With an oink oink here.</i>	5	C	<i>Egy csip-csip itt.</i>	4	B	1	0
<i>And an oink oink there.</i>	5	D	<i>És egy csip-csip ott.</i>	5	C	0,5	0,5
<i>Here an oink.</i>	3	E	<i>Itt egy csip.</i>	3	D	0,5	0,5
<i>There an oink.</i>	3	E	<i>Ott egy csip.</i>	3	D	0,5	0,5
<i>Everywhere an oink oink.</i>	6	E	<i>Mindenhol egy csip-csip.</i>	6	D	0,5	0,5

Original lyrics	NS	R	Régi Macdonald-nak volt gazdasága (Kids Tv)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Old MacDonald had a farm.</i>	7	A	<i>Józsi bácsi a tanyán.</i>	7	A	0	1
Score in percentage						44%	56%

Source: own elaboration on Kids Tv Hungary, 11.02.2019.

The translator connects with the rhymes the first and the second verse by repeating the phrase *a tanyán* ‘on the farm’. They also replace Old MacDonald with *Józsi bácsi* ‘uncle Joe’ – this intervention has similar motivation as the analogical one in the Polish version.

The subsequent nursery rhyme appears to feature lyrics that are ostensibly straightforward to translate; however, as illustrated in the table below, the translator engages in substantial manipulation of both meaning and form.

Table 13. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Rain, Rain, Go Away” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	“Deszczowa piosenka” (CoComelon)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Rain, rain, go away.</i>	5	A	<i>Idź stąd deszczu gdzieś.</i>	5	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Come again another day.</i>	7	A	<i>Tata chce dziś bawić się.</i>	7	A	0	1
<i>Daddy wants to play.</i>	5	A	<i>Padaj sobie w inny dzień.</i>	7	A	0	0
<i>Rain, rain, go away.</i>	5	A	<i>Idź stąd deszczu gdzieś.</i>	5	A	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						33%	67%

Source: CoComelon po polsku – Piosenki dla dzieci, 27.11.2021.

The first verse – which is also the last one – matches the original line perfectly. However, some significant divergences characterize the other part of the song. The translator not only adds some new information to each verse but also switches the content of the second and third line: *Tata chce dziś bawić się / Padaj sobie w inny dzień* ‘Daddy wants to play today / Just rain another day’ what makes impossible to classify the translation of these verses as the meaning-orientated. The reason of this alternation is ambiguous: it appears unrelated to rhyme or syllabic requirements. It is hard to explain why the translator uses this rather radical method.

It is interesting that the semantic modifications in the Hungarian translation are even more extensive:

Tab. 14. The analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Rain, Rain, Go Away” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Rain Rain Go Away (LetsgoMartin)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Rain, rain, go away.</i>	5	A	<i>Hess hess eső hess.</i>	5	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Come again another day.</i>	7	A	<i>Megkérek hogy máshol ess.</i>	7	A	0	1
<i>Daddy wants to play.</i>	5	A	<i>A baba játszana.</i>	6	B	0	0
<i>Rain, rain, go away.</i>	5	A	<i>Süssön csak a napocka.</i>	7	B	0	0
Score in percentage						17%	83%

Source: LetsgoMartin Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 27.09.2022.

The table above proves that only the initial verse is translated accordingly to both meaning and form of the original lyrics. The translation of the second verse must be classified as form-orientated as its literal meaning (‘I’m asking you to rain somewhere else’) differs significantly from the source text. The remaining two lines differ not only in the number of syllables and another pair of rhymes but also in the content: ‘A baby would play / Just let the sun shine’. The noun *baby* is not a main problem here. The song contains more (together 6–7) stanzas that systematically reference different family members and finally all the family together. The case is similar to the “Finger Family” structure: the variable words have the same number of syllables and finally all the same members appear in the song, so such changes should not be taken into consideration. More significant modifications are present in that part of the song: the declarative *wants to play* is replaced with the conditional mood and the first line does not appear as the final one – it is replaced by an entirely new sentence.

The next song is a particular case as it contains some made-up words.

Table 15. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Skidamarink” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Kocham cię! (HeyKids)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Skidamarink a dink a dink.</i>	8	A	<i>Skidamarink a dink a dink.</i>	8	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Skidamarink a doo.</i>	6	B	<i>Skidamarink a de.</i>	6	B	0	1
<i>I love you!</i>	3	B	<i>Kocham cię.</i>	3	B	0,5	0,5
<i>I love you in the morning,</i>	7	C	<i>Kocham cię co rano.</i>	6	C	0	0
<i>And in the afternoon,</i>	6	D	<i>I po południu też.</i>	6	D	0,5	0,5
<i>I love you in the evening,</i>	7	C	<i>Kocham cię wieczorem.</i>	6	E	1	0
<i>And underneath the moon.</i>	6	D	<i>I nocą kocham też.</i>	6	D	0	1
Score in percentage						42%	58%

Source: own elaboration on HeyKids – Piosenki Dla Dzieci, 24.09.2023.

It is particularly noteworthy that these made-up words are modified in the Polish translation to preserve the rhyme scheme between the second and third lines. It seems to be

a clever step to prioritize formal structure over meaningless literal fidelity as the changed words lack semantic content. The proof of how meaningless these words are is further evidenced by their historical orthographic variations: the song currently titled “Skidamarink” or “Skinnamarink” originally appeared in forms such as *Skid-dy-mer-rink-adink-aboomp* or *Skiddy-Mer-Rink-A-Doo*.

The rest of the translation does not focus on the form in such extend. The number of syllables and the rhymes maintain the same only in the fifth and seventh verse, while the fourth and the sixth line match the original ones only in regard to the semantic content (however, there is a slight modification in the fourth line which literally means ‘I love you every morning’, likely added introduced to maintain rhythmic consistency by aligning its syllable count with the sixth line. Despite this adjustment, the absence of a coherent rhyme scheme significantly diminishes the translation’s melodic quality.

The Hungarian translation, though comes from the same YouTube channel, applies a distinctly different approach.

Table 16. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Skidamarink” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Szeretlek dal (HeyKids)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Skidamarink a dink a dink.</i>	8	A	<i>Skidamarink a dink a dink.</i>	8	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Skidamarink a doo.</i>	6	B	<i>Skidamarink a doo.</i>	6	B	1	0
<i>I love you!</i>	3	B	<i>Szeretlek!</i>	3	C	0,5	0,5
<i>I love you in the morning,</i>	7	C	<i>Szeretlek reggel.</i>	5	D	1	0
<i>And in the afternoon,</i>	6	D	<i>És délután.</i>	4	E	1	0
<i>I love you in the evening,</i>	7	C	<i>Szeretlek este.</i>	5	F	1	0
<i>And underneath the moon.</i>	6	D	<i>És a hold alatt.</i>	5	G	1	0
Score in percentage						86%	14%

Source: own elaboration on HeyKids – Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 23.07.2023.

What is the most disturbing, the translator retains the original endings of the invented word, so it does not rhyme with the Hungarian equivalent of *I love you* which naturally exists only in one version. The translator demonstrates a strictly meaning-oriented approach: they translate the lyrics word-for-word while disregarding rhyme and rhythmic structure. The third verse’s alignment with the original syllabic count appears coincidental rather than intentional. Consequently, the translated text lacks melodic coherence and resembles a series of disjointed statements.

The last song included in the analysis features a highly structured original form, characterized by isosyllabic verses and monorhyme, making it particularly relevant to examine whether translators have preserved these features. As table 17 illustrates, the Polish translation indeed prioritizes formal elements.

Table 17. Analysis of the Polish translation of the “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Mrugaj, mrugaj gwiazd-ko ma (HeyKids)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Twinkle, twinkle, little star.</i>	7	A	<i>Mrugaj, mrugaj gwiazdko ma.</i>	7	A	0,5	0,5
<i>How I wonder what you are.</i>	7	A	<i>Cudna jest uroda twa.</i>	7	A	0	1
<i>Up above the world so high</i>	7	A	<i>Leć wysoko, w niebo leć.</i>	7	B	0	1
<i>Like a diamond in the sky.</i>	7	A	<i>Jak diamencik jasno świeć.</i>	7	B	0	1
Score in percentage						13%	87%

Source: own elaboration on HeyKids – Piosenki Dla Dzieci, 29.10.2021.

Although the translator does not keep the monorhyme, they establish an alternative rhyme scheme and maintain consistent syllable counts across lines. The priority of the form necessitates semantic modifications as in the second verse of the translation which means literally ‘your beauty is wonderful’. While alterations in the third and fourth verses are less substantial, they cannot be ignored. The translator adds here the imperative verbs: ‘fly high into the sky / shine bright like a diamond’ which do not match the original lyrics.

The Hungarian translation similarly departs from monorhyme but, in contrast, achieves a more balanced integration of semantic fidelity and formal accommodation.

Table 18. Analysis of the Hungarian translation of the “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” song

Original lyrics	NS	R	Ragyogj, Ragyogj, Kis Csillag (LetsgoMartin)	NS	R	Meaning	Form
<i>Twinkle, twinkle, little star.</i>	7	A	<i>Ragyogj ragyogj kis csillag.</i>	7	A	0,5	0,5
<i>How I wonder what you are.</i>	7	A	<i>Bárcsak tudnám hogy mi vagy.</i>	7	A	0,5	0,5
<i>Up above the world so high.</i>	7	A	<i>Az égben a föld fölött.</i>	7	B	0,5	0,5
<i>Like a diamond in the sky.</i>	7	A	<i>Te gyémántként tündökölsz.</i>	7	B	0,5	0,5
Score in percentage						50%	50%

Source: own elaboration on LetsgoMartin Gyerekdalok és Mondókák, 22.03.2019.

The semantic content remains largely consistent with the original: the first and the second verses constitute literal translations. The fourth one introduces the verb (‘you **shine** like a diamond’) and the third one contains the information which appears in the final line of the original lyrics (‘in the sky above the world’). Unlike the Polish version, which

employs imperative constructions, this translation refrains from altering core meaning; instead, it modifies information sequencing and makes implicit verb grammatically explicit.

The preceding analysis has examined numerous different elements. It is impossible to compare all of those beyond the overviewed pairs of the same titles – but for the sake of this study it is sufficient to identify prevailing tendencies within the Polish and Hungarian translations. The following table gathers the percentage results of the meaning- and form-orientated efforts of the translators:

Table 19. Percentage of the meaning- and form-orientated translations in the Polish and Hungarian versions of the selected nursery rhymes

The original title of the song	The Polish version of the song		The Hungarian version of the song	
	The meaning-orientated translation (%)	The form-orientated translation (%)	The meaning-orientated translation (%)	The form-orientated translation (%)
“Finger Family”	60	40	40	60
“Humpty Dumpty”	50	50	50	50
“If You’re Happy and You Know It”	40	60	70	30
“Itsy Bitsy Spider”	100	0	63	37
“Old McDonald Had a Farm”	38	62	44	56
“Rain, Raing, Go Away”	33	67	17	83
“Skidamarink”	42	58	86	14
“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”	13	87	50	50
Average	47	53	53	47

Source: own elaboration.

It is surprising that the average results are mirror images: Polish translations exhibit a slight preference for form-oriented approaches, whereas Hungarian versions lean marginally toward meaning-oriented strategies. However, both averages remain close to an equal distribution. The 3% difference does not mean much, especially taking into consideration how great discrepancy can be observed in individual translations.

Nevertheless, this overview reveals several noteworthy particularities. For instance, only one case demonstrates complete alignment with a single translation method: the Polish version of “Itsy Bitsy Spider” received a 100% meaning-oriented evaluation.. There is no other similar case either among the Polish, or among the Hungarian translations. No other translation in either language achieved a similarly unequivocal classification. The second most pronounced discrepancy also occurs among the Polish samples, with the translation of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” rated 87% meaning-oriented. The Hungarian translations

show their greatest methodological divergence in “Skidamarink” titled song which ranks as the third most polarized case at 86% meaning-oriented.

Additionally, several translations achieved balanced approaches between the two methods. Interestingly, two such cases appear in the Hungarian corpus (“Humpty Dumpty” and “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”) while there is only one such translation on the Polish side (it also concerns “Humpty Dumpty”). When excluding the balanced translations from consideration, a notable disparity emerges: a form-oriented approach predominates in five of the Polish versions, whereas a meaning-oriented approach characterizes only three. In contrast, the distribution of these approaches across the Hungarian versions is even.

Conclusion

The research presented in this paper, while limited by editorial constraints to a select number of examples, has opened the door for further discussion regarding the methods applied in Polish and Hungarian translations of English nursery rhymes.

The central question concerning the primacy of meaning or form arrives at a surprising resolution. The averaged result suggests a near balance between semantic content and stylistic structure in both languages, albeit with a slight preference for form in the Polish versions and a corresponding emphasis on meaning in the Hungarian ones.

This average, however, obscures considerable variation evident in the analysis of individual songs. The collected data demonstrates that extreme cases exist, particularly among the Polish translations, including instances of nursery rhymes translated with almost exclusive regard for meaning, thereby disregarding the original rhythm, syllabic structure, and rhyme scheme.

Consequently, the definitive classification of nursery rhyme translation remains elusive. It exhibits complete alignment neither with the translation of poetry nor with that of purely functional texts. Instead, it persists – like the genre itself – as a phenomenon situated between meaning and form.

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