

## Notes on Translating Payshapes and the Bear by Lucina Kathmann

Many countries use the Spanish language, but there is quite a bit of regional variation in the Spanish they use. *Péxeps y el oso* is in Mexican Spanish. I made it as international as possible where I could, but in the end, Payshapes and the Bear, who do not relate to any political or national categories, are nonetheless culturally Mexican.

The English issue is the same. *Payshapes and the Bear* is in American English. I have had complaints from British readers. One British reader said that on page 113, where it says “every year [the Three Kings] have gotten in some worse scrape,” “gotten” is very bad American slang.

Let me make the question of regional variations clear with a painful and important decision about pancakes. (If you have read the book, you know how important pancakes are in it.) *Hotcakes* are sold all over the place in Mexico. They are pancakes. The word is unknown in Argentina, where the first edition of the book was published. My Argentinian editor wanted *panqueques*, the internationally standard Spanish word for pancakes, and in the first edition of *Péxeps y el oso*, *panqueques* it was.

*Panqueques* was terrible. In Mexico a *panque* is a muffin. It is not even made with a spatula. The word *panqueque* just looks like a muffin with a mistake. In this edition we are back to *hotcakes*.

There are certainly wrong translations, but there are a lot of things which are not wrong but more like unhappy. A lot of choices are made just to keep the flow. Here’s one.

In “The Polar Bear’s Mass,” the bears were having trouble *kneeling* in church. There are three ways to say kneeling, *arrodillándose*, using the participle, as in English, or *al arrodillarse*, the infinitive, or *para que se arrodillaran*, the subjunctive. The participle is not as frequent in Spanish as in English; the subjunctive was quite a mouthful in this case, so I chose the infinitive. The others would be correct too.

A common way to open a subject in Mexico is with the colloquialism: “¿Qué tal?” It is a vague question, “what about..?” or “what’s up with..?” I translated “What about going to church?” as *¿Qué tal si nos vamos a misa?* There must be a dozen other ways to open a subject. It’s really a matter of personal taste.

And I might mention those upside down question marks and exclamation points, the bane of those who have not yet found a way to get a Spanish keyboard onto their computers.

There were more serious cultural problems in at least two of the stories. They required work that was a lot of fun. One is the sayings in “Payshapes and the Oracle.” I spent a lot of time with books of adages looking for ones that were roughly equivalent in Spanish and English. Almost all of them that I used are real, but I had to invent the last one in English, making up a sort of oracular/adage-y tone.

Another was the national hymns in “Choir of Dragons.” Like so many details in *Payshapes and the Bear*, it is based on something that really happened in my life. (There are any number of details in this book that really happened. Especially the ones that seem most fanciful and impossible; those definitely occurred.) One of my daughters was going to another town to participate in a contest of schoolchildren singing the Mexican national anthem. All the elementary schools around were participating. Making dragony words out of the Mexican

national anthem was easy: *al sonoro rugir del dragón* (“to the sonorous roar of the *dragon*” instead of the “cannon,” which is the way humans sing it), but nobody would understand in English. Well, I wasn’t able to find anything in the “Star Spangled Banner,” but I found something using “My Country Tis of Thee”: *Land of the dragon’s pride*.

I still don’t know if *Land of the dragon’s pride* works. In any case it illustrates my point that the English-language culture of *Payshapes and the Bear* is the United States. It might be fun to look for a dragony corruption of “The Maple Leaf Forever” but I haven’t done it, at least not yet.