Adapted Readers: How are they Adapted?

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Adapted readers are described as one type of graded reader. Arguments are given for using graded readers in the teaching of English as a foreign (or second) language. The paper reports selected research results of a study of publishers' policy on text adaptation. The main principles of text adaptation, as reflected in publishers' documents, are described and compared. Previous research relevant to text adaptation is briefly described.

BACKGROUND

The background to this paper is twofold. It is first and foremost a general interest in and a personal experience of using graded readers, including adapted readers, in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Secondly it is a research interest in what people do when they are asked to adapt a given text for a specified group of readers.

These interests on my part led to various forms of communication with publishers to obtain information about how they go about the job of adapting texts. The present paper presents selected aspects of this job. The basis is a study I have called Adapted Readers and Publishers' Policy (Simensen in progress).

INTRODUCTION

Adapted readers constitute one type of graded reader currently available on the teaching materials market (cf. definitions below). There seems to be a great interest especially among British publishers today in producing graded readers for learners of English as a foreign language. This conclusion is based on the observation of a steadily growing number of such series on the market.

There are a lot of arguments for using series of graded readers in teaching. Among the most interesting are:

- By means of series of graded readers it is possible for the teacher, without too much work, to find reading material which suits the individual student both in terms of language level and types of interest.

- Using graded readers in a class may contribute to developing a self-directed and autonomous attitude among students, help them to become independent in learning, and thus eventually make them take responsibility for their own progress.

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• Such material may function as a “bridge” between ordinary foreign language course material and authentic material i.e. material not constructed for foreign language-teaching purposes.

The first argument is particularly interesting in view of current emphasis, in foreign language learning as well as in first language learning, on the value of a lot of comprehensible input i.e. an extensive exposure to language slightly above the individual learner’s productive level (cf. Krashen and Terrell 1983). The second argument fits in with a current trend in foreign language teaching methodology: the development of autonomy of students learning foreign languages (cf. some of the work done in project number 12 of the Council of Europe). The third argument is important when it comes to developing good and efficient reading habits and strategies in a foreign language. It is above all a question of counteracting a tendency among foreign language learners always to regard a text as an object for language studies and not as an object for factual information, literary experience or simply pleasure, joy and delight. Most of the publishers in the present study use arguments along this line.

For many of the graded readers on the market today there is also an extra advantage in the fact that they are available on cassette tapes.

Arguments for reading per se may, of course, also be used for using graded readers. For example, reading may:

• practice and consolidate skills learnt through intensive study;

• extend the students’ acquaintance with the language, in particular vocabulary, since by seeing words in different contexts students may get a more complete understanding of their meaning and use; and

• make it possible in an unstreamed class setting to differentiate the teaching according to the individual student’s pace of work, style of learning, level and interests.

Some syllabus plans for English as a foreign language suggest that different types of graded readers should be used. The recent Norwegian Mønsterplan for grunnskolen for instance refers to both authentic and adapted texts as teaching materials in English as a foreign language.

There are roughly three types of graded reader:

1. Authentic readers are readers with authentic texts not written for pedagogic purposes, and published in their original style.

2. Pedagogic readers are readers with texts specially written for learners of English as a foreign (or second) language.
3. Adapted readers are readers with texts which are adapted for learners of English as a foreign (or second) language on the basis of authentic texts.

It is the third type of graded reader mentioned above, adapted readers, which is the object of the present study. The term adapted is used here as a superordinate term for various kinds of alterations of a text. Other terms are: abridged, reduced, retold, rewritten, simplified and told. Whatever terminology is used, the primary aim of the alterations is in general to make the text more accessible to learners. Simplified is probably the term most often used about such texts. Maybe it is not such a good term since it begs the question: Is the "simplified" text really more simple than the original authentic text for the intended group of readers? (For a clarifying discussion see Davies 1984).

An interesting question both for teachers who use adapted readers in their teaching and for researchers is the following: In what ways are such texts adapted? Comparing adapted texts with their authentic originals could give valuable information on two questions: 1) What is considered difficult for learners at a specific level? 2) What is considered easier? A limited amount of research relevant to these questions exists and will be mentioned below.

Probably most adapted readers are adapted on the basis of intuition or assumptions about the two questions above. In addition, according to several publishers, a lot of people in this line of business have personal experience of teaching at the levels concerned.

But the most important fact for our purpose is that several publishers have produced written guidelines to be used or consulted by those who adapt texts for the teaching of English as a foreign language. The specific aim of the present study is to compare such guideline documents to bring out common features as well as differences on selected points.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

There are two main types of information on adapted readers and text adaptation which are relevant. The first applies to systematized and comprehensive surveys of different kinds of graded readers, including adapted readers, series, relevant publishers, etc. The second type applies to empirical and theoretical research on types of guidelines and principles of adaptation.

The first type helped me to get hold of the data necessary in a fairly direct and quick manner. The main sources of this type were Bamford 1984, Brumfit 1979, Hedge 1985, and Nuttall 1982.

The second type of investigation of the empirical kind includes mainly the following works: Bamford 1984, Davies and Widdowson 1974 and Hedge 1985. These studies
have distinguished two main types of principles of adaptation which may roughly be summed up by the following key words: 1) informational and situational features, organisation of information, explication of background concepts and suppositions; 2) language including vocabulary, structure, sentence length and complexity, and how sentences combine.

The second type of investigation of the theoretical kind is exemplified by Davies 1984, Tommola 1980 and Widdowson 1979. In addition to discussing most of the concepts expressed by the key words above, these writers introduce some interesting distinctions and questions. The most striking is probably Widdowson's distinction between two types of simplification of text, that is simplification as usage and as use. The former may roughly be characterised as a "traditional" simplification of language, i.e. of vocabulary and structure. The latter is described as being a simplification of content on the basis of an interpretation of the communicative value of a text. Communicative value implies that the following two aspects of a text must be considered: how the units of meaning in a text (the propositions) are developed, and the functional value of expressions in a text in terms of logical organisation, connection and textual "guidance" (illocutionary content). Matters such as the importance of redundant clues to meaning and structure, and factors in processing complexity are also discussed in investigations of this type.

In addition to these two main types of relevant investigation there is, of course, a lot of research of interest to the results of the present study which relates to 1) comprehension and memory of different types of texts or aspects of texts, 2) the relation between what is called cognitive structures, text schemata, scripts and comprehension, and finally 3) text readability, (cf. Platzack 1973, Kintsch et al 1975, Meyer 1975, Thorndyke 1977 and 1979, Haberlandt and Bingham 1982, Carrell 1983, Berman 1984, and Urquhart 1984).

There are also two experiments in text simplification of some interest to the present study: Lautamatti 1978 and Simensen 1986. The simplifications of the texts were in both cases done by native speakers. The target groups of readers, however, differed. In Lautamatti's experiment the text was simplified with foreign language learners (i.e. learners of English) in mind as readers. In Simensen's experiment, on the other hand, the intended readers were ordinary native speakers of Norwegian. The products of the simplifications were analysed in relation to (for example) information added or deleted, presuppositions and "between the lines" information, topical development, order of mention, signals to guide the reader in the text (metatextual markers) and signals to combine sentences into a text.

WHAT IS STUDIED

Previous research in terms of systematized surveys of graded readers, including
adapted readers, relevant publishers, etc., was used as a point of departure for collecting further information, as described above. Publishers referred to in the surveys were contacted in 1981/82 and/or in 1985 if readers of the adapted type were on their publication lists. The publishers qualified to be included in my study if they could provide information about their policy on text adaptation. This applied to six publishers with a total number of nine series of adapted readers. The table below gives information about publishers and series. For easy reference in the sections which follow, a letter code is sometimes given to the publishers and series.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publisher (code)</th>
<th>Series with formal guidelines available (code)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collins (C)</td>
<td>Collins English Library (CEL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grafisk Forlag A/S (G)</td>
<td>Easy Readers (ER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heinemann (H)</td>
<td>Guided Readers (GR)</td>
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<td>Longman (L)</td>
<td>The Bridge Series (BS)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Longman Simplified English Series (LSES)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Longman Structural Readers (LSR)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New Method Supplementary Readers (NMSR)</td>
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<td>Macmillan (M)</td>
<td>Rangers (R)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oxford (O)</td>
<td>Alpha Books (AB)</td>
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The publishers provided me with information in terms of personal written communication, guides, handbooks, commercial pamphlets or internal mimeographed documents. Such documents, independent of format, will be referred to as guideline documents. (They are listed and numbered in the complete list of references to this paper.) A reference in the text consisting of a letter and a number consequently refers to one specific publisher and one specific document from that publisher (e.g. C4). When exact reference to a page is necessary, this is done by adding another number to the code (e.g. C4:12).

**PRINCIPLES OF ADAPTATION**

The principles are interpreted as principles of *control* and are dealt with in three categories: control of information, control of language, and control of discourse and text structure.

These categories cannot be regarded as watertight compartments. Very often one kind of control also involves the others. The control of vocabulary items is, for example, dealt with here as a control of language, although it often also has to do with control of information. To substitute one word for another does not necessarily mean that the informational content remains the same.
“Control” is the term most commonly used in the documents studied. This does not, however, mean that it is a question of instructions to the adaptor which should be adhered to uncritically. In most cases it is rather a question of guidelines which are meant to function as suggestions to the adaptor.

CONTROL OF INFORMATION

On the basis of weighting given to different kinds of controls in the guideline documents, it is evident that the control of information ranks second in relation to the control of language. There are, however, individual differences between publishers when it comes to the importance they attach to the control of information.

Reduction of Information

Some documents have instructions about cutting out “marginal”, peripheral” or “irrelevant” information. There is advice about cutting out subplots which are not vital to the main plot. A complex plot may furthermore be simplified by reducing the number of characters, for example minor or “confusing” characters (cf. H 10, L 8 and O 1). Probably this is a kind of adaptation which most often is referred to as abridgement.

Heinemann suggests that descriptive passages, if unnecessary, should be deleted. They further say that if a descriptive passage is necessary to set a mood for a character, it is often better to bluntly state the mood of the character concerned.

In general, very little is said about what is considered necessary or relevant information. However, there seems to be general agreement among all the publishers that action is important, especially at lower levels. Oxford University Press points out that the texts in the AB series are abridged to about half the length of the original texts. But the strong central plot is “always retained in its entirety” (O 3:2).

Supply of Information

Both Heinemann and Longman are concerned with the need sometimes to supply a text with extra information. They are also concerned with the relationship between reduction of information on the one hand, and supply of information on the other — for example, a deletion of details versus a supply of details or picking out parts to be deleted versus picking out parts to be highlighted.

Heinemann is in general more concerned with the question of information control than the other publishers are. And it is in particular the question of supply of information which is dealt with at some length. Heinemann makes a distinction between the world of the story or text and the world of the student or reader. The adaptor is, for example, advised to keep constantly in mind “the cultural and
background differences between the world of the story he is re-writing and the world in which the student he has in mind lives” (H 10:6). This publisher stresses that it may be problematic for foreign language students when there is reference to things with which they are unfamiliar. If such a reference is vital to the text it should be spelt out: if not, it should be omitted.

Heinemann actually argues for adding preliminary notes to explain background differences (cf. H 6:8). Their adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, for example, is a good illustration of this. The book opens with an “Introductory Note” which deals with specific features of Nigerian culture. In addition there is an introductory list of the main characters of the book. The list includes comments on the relationship between the characters and their functions in society.

Actual texts adapted by the publishers studied here contain examples of the fact that reference across cultures has been subject to information control. But many examples also show that substitution of information may perhaps be as frequent as supply of information. A good illustration of this is the adapted short-story *The Luncheon* by W. Somerset Maugham in the ER series. The original setting of the story is moved from France to Great Britain. The main character of the story (the “I”) is transformed from a poor author in the Latin Quarter in Paris into a student at some university in Great Britain; and the French restaurant “Foyot’s” is transformed into “the Grand Palace”. A similar example from a reader in the LSR series is described by Hedge (1985:17).

**Avoiding Density of Information**

Both Heinemann and Longman warn the adaptor against making the information of the adapted text more compressed or condensed than the original. Longman warns against turning the text into “a mere synopsis of action” (L 8:3). Only these two publishers discuss this question in their documents.

Heinemann compares compression to abridgement, of which the latter is to be preferred. Furthermore, this publisher emphasises the importance of an even distribution of information in a text.

Heinemann often uses the expression *density of information* when the control of information is dealt with. The concept is not given a proper definition, but text examples are given to illustrate the meaning of the term. On the basis of this it is evident that density of information is not synonymous with *lexical density*, a term often used for the ratio of lexical or content words in a text (cf. e.g. Ure 1971). *Loads of information* seems to be used as an equivalent expression. Two types of “loads” are dealt with. One type is represented by abstract concepts: of two structurally identical sentences, the one which refers to abstract concepts is considered more difficult than the one which refers to things in the physical world,
according to Milne (cf. H 6:9). The other type of “load” is the existence of presuppositions in a text, especially presuppositions of a culture-specific kind. This makes the text difficult for the foreign language reader since it requires the reader to make inferences. The remedy is to spell out such presuppositions in adapted texts. According to Heinemann this may make adapted texts longer, not shorter than the original.

Both Heinemann and Longman are concerned with the question of suitable units of information. Longman argues for short paragraphs in the NMSR series, and Heinemann suggests that the information of a book must be presented to readers “in easily digestible amounts”.

CONTROL OF LANGUAGE: TWO APPROACHES

Two fundamentally different approaches to the control of language are represented among the publishers. These are

1. control on the basis of lists, enumerations of language principles, or actual language forms, i.e. a control on a non-intuitive basis; and

2. control on the basis of the intuition, common sense and experience of the adaptors.

The latter is represented only by Heinemann as regards the control of vocabulary. This publisher claims that definite lists of vocabulary items have an inhibiting influence on “simplifiers” and that an intuitive, commonsense approach to vocabulary control is most likely to produce the best reading material. However, figures are given for the number of words at each level in the Heinemann series. According to this publisher, the figures were arrived at by comparing a number of manuscripts already prepared in this intuitive, commonsense way.

As regards structure and other aspects of language, the intuitive approach to the control of language is in principle represented by one series only, i.e. the NMSR series by Longman. Probably this could also be said about the LSES series by the same publisher, although the guideline documents are far from explicit on this point. On the other hand, the guideline documents for these two series express a series of warnings which can only in practice be interpreted as a control of structure, etc., of a non-intuitive nature, although not in a list format. The fact that most publishers’ series are based on a non-intuitive approach to language control probably indicates that most accept this as the best solution. This does not mean that they are unaware of its dangers. According to Collins, “All grading schemes corrupt, and absolute grading schemes tend to corrupt absolutely... Grading corrupts because it interferes with the natural creativity of language” (C 2:9). Most of the publishers therefore recommend that adaptors in addition use their commonsense, judgement and experience of teaching English.
In spite of problems relating to a heterogeneous research material and to different levels of language description, I have dealt with the control of language in terms of three groups in this study: vocabulary (basis of selection and size), structure (basis of selection, verbal forms and level of introduction), and various aspects of language.

Vocabulary: Basis of Selection and Size

Most of the publishers who edit specific vocabulary lists give information about the basis of selection of items. The main types of basis are frequency counts, basic courses in English as a foreign language, and curriculum research.

The two most common frequency count lists are *A General Service List of English Words* (West 1953), and *A Teacher’s Word Book of 30,000 Words* (Thorndike and Lorge 1944). Most publishers use *both* lists as a basis for their own lists.

Four of the six publishers also refer to the second type of vocabulary selection, i.e. basic courses in English as a foreign language (C,G,L and M). The third basis of vocabulary selection, curriculum research, is referred to by three publishers (C,G and L). The only such research explicitly stated in the documents is the work done by the Council of Europe. Three titles are given: *Systems Development in Adult Language Learning* (Wilkins 1973), *The Threshold Level* (van Ek 1977), and *Waystage* (van Ek and Alexander 1980). Collins, for instance, describes how curriculum research is used to establish a list of “main communicative needs” as a checklist for all language considered for inclusion.

Most publishers also take other factors into account in the final editing of the lists, for instance to ensure an appropriate proportion of function words and content words, to ensure that the items are neither too archaic nor too written text specific, and also to include words students already know like international words.

Most publishers produce series of adapted readers on different vocabulary levels. Most series have between four and eight levels ranging from the lowest vocabulary level of between 300 and 650 items, to the highest level of between 1800 and 3200 items. Two of Longman’s series (BS and LSES) have only one level, and the Macmillan series (R) has two levels. The difference in number of items from one level to the next varies from 200 to 700.

Most publishers also make a distinction between basic vocabulary on the one hand and additional or “topic-specific” vocabulary on the other, and give advice about how to handle the two types in the adapted texts.

Structure: Basis of Selection, Verbal Forms, and Level of Introduction

Three publishers only gave information of interest about the basis of selection of structures (C, G, and L for the LSR series). Two main bases are common for these
publishers: basic courses in English as a foreign language, and curriculum research.

The latter, in this connection, means the work done by the Council of Europe. In addition to these two bases, Collins takes readability research into consideration in order to establish guidelines on sentence length and an acceptable proportion of words of more than two syllables in texts at upper levels. Heinemann, however, does not approve of the first type of basis above because such courses, especially at lower levels, aim primarily at developing the skills of listening and speaking. Thus, according to this publisher, important features of the written language may be ignored.

Verb forms are probably the type of language item dealt with most consistently in the lists of structures. By and large, all the series follow a similar pattern in the introduction of verb forms. Only a few features will be commented on here.

At the lowest vocabulary level, i.e. the 300 — 350 word level, only the following verb forms are found: present simple, present continuous, and going to future.

At a somewhat higher vocabulary level, i.e. the 500 — 1100 word level, we also find the following verb forms: past simple, past continuous, will/shall future, and present perfect.

At upper levels, i.e. in the 1100 — 2200 word range, we also find the following verb forms introduced: future continuous, past perfect continuous, future perfect, future perfect continuous, conditional, and conditional perfect.

Spanning both intermediate and upper levels we have the following verbal forms: past perfect, and present perfect continuous.

There are also a few marked differences between some of the series, but this will not be dealt with here.

**Various Aspects of Language**

These aspects will be dealt with in three groups according to how they are dealt with in the guideline documents: aspects of language to be avoided, to take care with, and to be encouraged.

1. *To be avoided*
   - idiomatic expressions (GR)
   - ambiguity (GR)
   - subclauses, one embedded within the other (NMSR)
   - elliptical constructions: deletion of relative pronouns at early levels (NMSR), difficult ellipsis (LSES), disguised conditionals (AB), deletion of
subject in simple sentences connected by *and/but* at level 1 (LSR, R), deletion of *that* after *say* or *think* (R before level 3)

- ambiguity in pronominal reference (GR)
- archaisms (LSES, AB)
- difficult stylistic sequences (LSES)
- inversions (LSES)
- awkward inversions (AB)
- inversions in participle phrases (LSES)
- lengthy noun clauses as subject (LSES)
- relative clauses as part of subject before level 4 (LSR)
- difficult appositional uses (LSES)
- unexplained allusions and figurative uses (LSES)
- ponderous or ambiguous uses of participle phrases (LSES)

2. To take care with

- contracted (short) forms (LSR, NMSR, GR)
- confusing contractions (LSR)
- inversions (GR)
- colloquialisms (GR)
- unusual expressions (GR)
- allusions (GR)
- pronominal reference (GR)
- distance between pronoun and antecedent (GR)
- attribution of speech (GR, NMSR)
- indirect speech (GR, NMSR)
- subclauses, one embedded within the other (NMSR)
- participle phrases (LSES), when non-simultaneous/not closely related actions, ellipsis, inversions, ponderous or ambiguous
3. To be encouraged

- direct speech (AB, CEL level 1, GR, NMSR)
- generosity in reference to speaker (GR, NMSR)
- repetition of proper name when doubt about reference (GR)
- control distance between pronoun and its antecedent — antecedent should be restated from time to time (GR)
- punctuation when several coordinate/subordinate clauses (LSES)
- relatives and conjunctions in long sentences (LSR, NMSR, LSES at early stages)
- “the order of events” in a sequence of sentences/arrange events in a chronological order (GR, NMSR)

In general, publishers stress the importance of a verbally explicit language, i.e. a language with ample surface clues. The aim seems to be to make the interpretation as easy and unambiguous as possible for the foreign language reader. It is probably Longman who are most concerned with this matter: they stress how important it is at low levels to avoid or to take care with difficult ellipsis, difficult and ambiguous participle phrases, confusing contractions, deletion of relative pronouns and of subjects in simple sentences connected by and/but etc. They encourage the use of relatives and conjunctions in long sentences, as in the example given below, instead of using what they call “elliptical constructions.”

If you think that he may pretend that he has not received the money, it would be better to give it to him in front of a witness. (L 5:1)

They also stress the importance of punctuation in sentences with several coordinate clauses. (Punctuation is dealt with as a surface clue, just like relatives and conjunctions.) Another example from Longman illustrates this:

He picked up his bag and stepped into the road, but a car came round the corner, and the driver... (L 5:1)

Macmillan thinks it is acceptable to delete that after say or think only at level 3 and later, as in the following sentence:

He said he was angry. (M 3:9)

Most publishers prefer direct to indirect speech. Both Heinemann, Longman, and Oxford also think it is useful to add a direct reference to the speaker when who is speaking is implicit. If there is doubt, according to Longman, “we should err on the side of generosity in the supply of such guides.” (L 8:8)
Oxford warn against "disguised conditionals" even at the 1500 word level. The following example illustrates a "disguised conditional" and an adapted version with an explicit conjunction:

\textit{Had she known} then what she knows now...  
\textit{If she'd known} then... (O 8:5)

**CONTROL OF DISCOURSE**

Only two publishers have guidelines about control of features of discourse: Heinemann and Longman. It is probably true to say that Heinemann have more concern with such matters.

One of the features which is dealt with extensively in Heinemann's documents is the use of pronouns. The aim is to make sure that the reference of pronouns is clear and unambiguous. In cases of doubt, the antecedent (a common or proper noun) should be repeated. In practice this is probably most relevant when a pronoun is far away from its antecedent, for instance when reference is across the boundary of a long sentence or several sentences. Even when the antecedent is quite clear, the publisher suggests that it should be "restated from time to time". (cf. H 10:8)

Another feature of the Heinemann re-write policy reflects their scepticism of traditional syntactic "simplification". They claim that a string of \textit{disjointed} simple sentences, one after the other, is just as difficult to read as one long, involved and complex sentence. What is implied is that the relationship between such simple sentences should be made clear.

Both Heinemann and Longman are concerned with the organisation of information in text. Longman suggests that when a text is organised in accordance with "the order of events" it is less likely to be a problem for the reader (cf. L 8:7). Heinemann gives a positive description of style in terms of "an orderly arrangement of the subject matter of the story" (H 6:5). For the intermediate level, Heinemann suggests for instance that events should be arranged "in chronological order" and that "too much time switching" should be avoided (cf. H 10:8).

**CONCLUSION**

The study has shown that by far the greatest attention in publishers' documents is control of language on the lexical and traditional grammatical levels. The control of other aspects of language — especially aspects of discourse structure and aspects of information — definitely seems to have a lower priority, and in some cases is more or less non-existent.

This situation is somewhat surprising in the 1980s. In addition to the empirical and theoretical research which relates directly to adapted readers and text adaptation,
there exists enough research evidence with a bearing on language processing and reading comprehension to conclude that control primarily on the lexical and traditional grammatical levels may not be sufficient. We may conclude that as far as the documents studied in the basic investigation show, it seems that research both of the theoretical and empirical kind on the one hand, and text adaptation as a practical activity on the other hand, represent two different worlds. Is it that existing research is not relevant to the practical field? However that may be, what should at least be relevant is research on what adaptors do irrespective of publishers’ guideline documents. In other words, what we should like to see is comprehensive and large scale analyses of readers that have been adapted on the basis of intuition, common sense and teaching experience. The outcome of such analyses should make it possible to form generalisations of high value both for relevant theoretical sciences and for the practical discipline itself: the production of adapted readers. To my knowledge such comprehensive analyses do not yet exist. They would be most welcome.

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