

Through the Looking-Glass: Translating Nonsense



In 1871, Lewis Carroll published *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, a sequel to his hugely popular *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In this sequel, Alice sees a world through her looking-glass which looks almost the same as her own world, but not quite.

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I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way. [...] the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way[...]

Alice goes through the mirror into the alternative world, which, not unlike Wonderland, is full of weird and wonderful characters. She finds a book there, which is “all in some language I don't know”. Below are the first few lines of the book – can you read it?

JABBERWOCKY.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Just the same, only things go the other way...

'Some language I don't know', 'the words go the wrong way'. Alice might almost be talking about the practice of translation, which makes a text accessible to a reader unfamiliar with the original language it was written in. And translation, too, can often feel like it is almost the same as the original, and yet somehow also different. We might say that translation is like Alice's looking-glass: it reflects the original but in distorted and imaginative ways.

Can you think of any other similes for translation?

Translation is like

because

What, in your opinion, is the purpose of translation?

Jabberwocky

Alice realises that the book she has found is a looking-glass book, and must be read in a mirror. This is the text she reads in the mirror:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.



Some questions to think about...

- What does it mean? What happens in the poem?
- How can we know what happens when so many of the words don't make sense?
- Are there clues that can help us? Can we tell what *kinds* of words the nonsense words are e.g. nouns, verbs etc.? Which tense are they in?
- Do the sounds of the words conjure up any associations? *Psst: think about onomatopoeia.*

Write down what you think these words *could* mean. Remember, there are no wrong answers so let your imagination go wild because it's all nonsense anyway!

- *brillig*
- *slithy*
- *mimsy*
- *raths*
- *outgrabe*

... You can make words mean so many different things...

With the poem itself so mysterious, is it possible to find any clues about its meaning outside the poem? Later in her travels through Looking-Glass Land, Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, who claims that the meaning of words is flexible and up to those using them.



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"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

Humpty offers his own explanation of some of the nonsense words in the poem...

brillig = four o'clock in the afternoon, the time when you begin broiling things for dinner

slithy = lithe and slimy

mimsy = flimsy and miserable

rath = a sort of green pig

outgribing = something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle

What do you think? Did Humpty's definitions match your own?

For further clues, we could look to Lewis Carroll's notes and letters but we will find that Carroll's own definitions of the nonsense words are often at odds with those Humpty Dumpty gives. For instance, Carroll describes a 'rath' as 'a species of land turtle. Head erect, mouth like a shark, the front forelegs curved out so that the animal walked on its knees, smooth green body, lived on swallows and oysters.'

So who should we believe, the author or the character – in other words, the person who created Looking-Glass Land, or the person who inhabits it? Now consider that Humpty is, himself, a product of Carroll's imagination. Does this give him greater or less authority? Does it matter that they say different things?



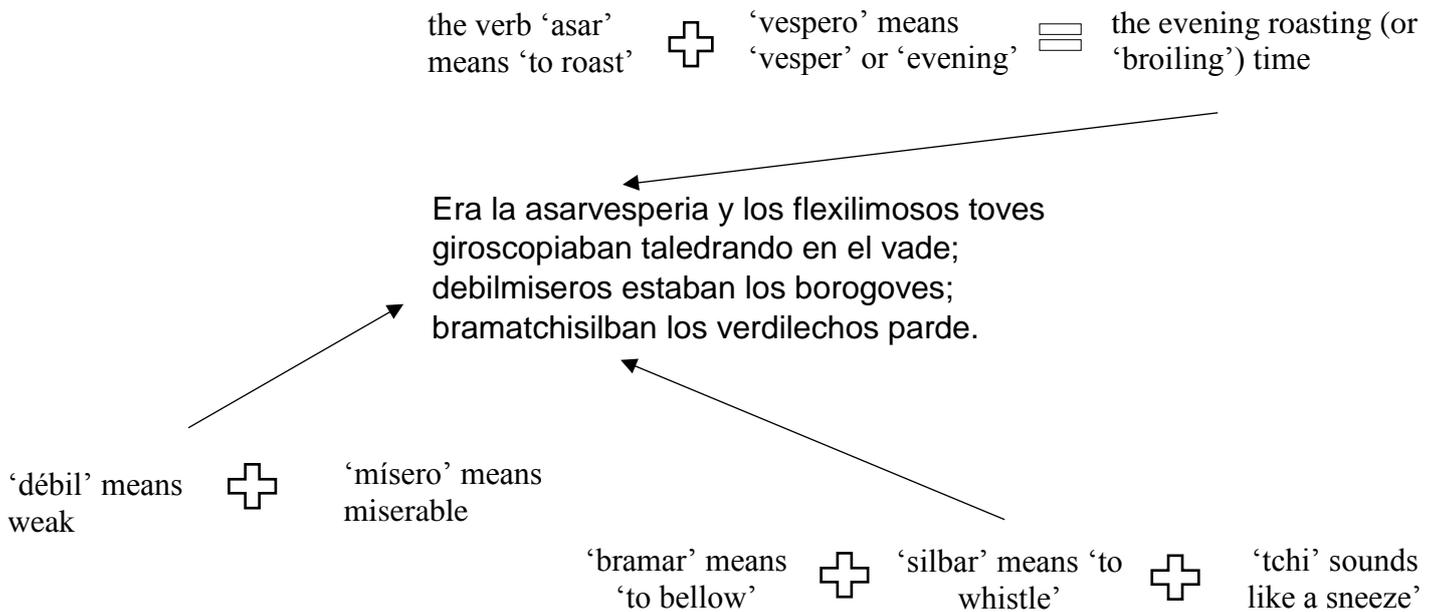
Translator's dream or translator's nightmare?

How would we go about translating a text like this? To begin to answer that, we need to go back to the question we asked earlier: what is the purpose of translation?

Is it to transfer meaning from one language to another? If so, there is an immediate problem here, since meaning in 'Jabberwocky' is hard to pin down, and seems to be determined by the individual reader's imagination. Perhaps, then, this is where the translator must think about transferring something other than meaning. But what? Atmosphere, sound patterns, word associations?

'Jabberwocky' offers the translator a rare opportunity to prioritise something other than meaning: to let go of the dictionary definitions we tend to rely on as language learners and to enjoy exploring other features such as rhyme, metre, onomatopoeia, and the linguistic associations our brains make when we search for a meaning that is denied us.

Let's take a look at how one translator did it. Take a look at Adolfo de Alba's translation of the first stanza into Spanish ('El Jabberwocky'), annotated with some observations:



'Jabberwocky' has been translated into more than 60 languages. Have a look at some other examples of the first stanza translated. Which languages do you recognise?

Era brillosto, e gli alacridi tossi
succhiellavano scabbi nel pantúle:
Méstili eran tutti i paparossi,
e strombavan musando i tartarocchi.
— (Italian, by Adriana Crespi)

Borgotaba. Los viscoleantes toves
rijando en la solea, tadraban...
Misébiles estaban los borgoves
y algo momios los verdos bratchilbaban
— (Spanish, by Ramón Buckley)

Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
Enmîmés sont les gougebosqueux
Et le mômerade horsgrave.
— (French, by Frank L. Warrin)

Mae'n brydgell ac mae'r brochgim stwd
Yn gimblo a gyrian yn y mhello:
Pob cólomrws yn féddabwd,
A'r hoch oma'n chwibruo.
— (Welsh, by Selyf Roberts)

Es brillig war. Die schlichten Toven
Wirten und wimmelten in Waben;
Und aller-mümsige Burggoven
Die mohmen Râth' ausgraben.
— (German, by Robert Scott)

Варкалось. Хливкие шорьки
Пырялись по наве,
И хрюкотали зелюки,
Как мюмзики в мове.
— (Russian, by Dina Orlovskaya)

On a phone or smart device, try searching for words, or parts of words, that you see in these translations. The dictionary will make suggestions of existing words, based on the first few letters you enter. You'll be amazed at how many of these translations draw on combinations of existing words to create new connections between apparently disparate objects, actions, or concepts. In this way, Carroll's nonsensical text has given rise to a rich and playful tradition of creative association and literary enjoyment. Do you think these translations are successful? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there any features that particularly strike you, such as changes in tense?



A final challenge

As you can see in the 'Babel: Adventures in Translation' exhibition, translation is as old as language itself. As language constantly evolves, so, too, does the task of the translator. Perhaps today's translators will be asked to translate into emojis. Can you translate the first stanza of 'Jabberwocky' into emoji form here? 😊

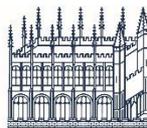
So, there you have it: an exploration of the art of translating nonsense. We began by thinking about the looking-glass as a simile for translation, but if there's anything 'Jabberwocky' shows us, it's that this mirror is not a perfect reflection. Like Alice's experience in Looking-Glass Land, translation is a distortion that captures the essence of the original but is able to retain a life and identity of its own.

Jabberwocky translations sourced from Wikipedia

Text by Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass (London, 1872)

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