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Translating Nonsense: An Analysis of the Poem “Jabberwocky” and Two French Translations

Kylie R. Deer

Is it possible to translate nonsense? If yes, then how?

Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” is a nonsense poem in which many of the words are invented out of the author’s imagination. As a result, readers depend on Carroll to explain the meanings of such words. The first stanza of “Jabberwocky,” chosen since it contains the largest number of nonsense words in the poem, was analyzed and compared to the first stanza of two French translations (“Le Jaseroque” by Frank L. Warrin and “Bredoulocheux” by Henri Parisot). A word-by-word, and to an extent, syllable-by-syllable close reading of the three texts was performed to determine the origins of the words used in “Jabberwocky” and how the translators interpreted them in order to create their French translations. It was concluded that it is possible to translate nonsense; however, a decision must be made between maintaining the poetic style or the meanings of the invented words. The two translations illustrate two distinct methods of translation. “Le Jaseroque” models translation by phonetics while “Bredoulocheux” models translation by definition.

Introduction

- Nonsense as a genre is typically characterized by its use of invented words with no obvious meaning.¹
- “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll (1898)
 - Published in Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking-Glass*.
- “Le Jaseroque” by Frank L. Warrin (1931)
 - American.
 - Published in *The New Yorker*.
 - Maintains rhyme scheme and syllables.
- “Bredoulocheux” by Henri Parisot (1971)
 - French.
 - Published in Parisot’s full French translation of *Through the Looking-Glass*.
 - Maintains rhyme scheme, but not syllables.

Methods

- A word-by-word and syllable-by-syllable close reading of the first stanza of each of the three poems was completed.

Jabberwocky (Carroll, 1898)²

- 1 ’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
- 2 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
- 3 All mimsy were the **borogoves**,
- 4 And the mome **raths** outgrabe.

borogove:

- “a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all around—something like a live mop”⁵

rath:

- “a sort of green pig”⁶

Le Jaseroque (Warrin, 1931)³

- 1 Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
- 2 Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
- 3 Enmîmés sont les **gougebosqueux**
- 4 Et le mômerade horsgrave.

borogoves → gougebosqueux:

- boro- → burrow → gouger⁷ → gouge-
- -goves → groves → bosquets⁸ → -bosqueux

raths → rade:

- pronunciation

Bredoulocheux (Parisot, 1971)⁴

- 1 Il était reveneure; les slictueux toves
- 2 Sur l'allouinde gyraient et vriblaient;
- 3 Tout flivoreux vaguaient les **borogoves**;
- 4 Les **verchons** fourgus bourniflaient.

borogoves → borogoves:

- no change

raths → verchons:

- green → vert → ver-
- pig → cochon → -chons

Results

- “Le Jaseroque” models translation by phonetics.
 - Meanings of words change.
- “Bredoulocheux” models translation by definition.
 - Words retain original meanings.

Conclusion

- It is possible to translate nonsense.
- Limitations in poetry: Must decide between maintaining poetic style or the meanings of invented words.

References

- ¹ « nonsense ». *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2020. Web. 22 septembre 2020.
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- ³ Warrin, Frank L. « Le Jaseroque ». *The New Yorker*, 10 janvier 1931 pp. 52.
- ⁴ Campillo, D. et Lanctôt, M. (1992). *Quelques observations sur des traductions de Jabberwocky, de Lewis Carroll*. *Meta*, XXXVII (2), pp. 215-216.
- ^{5,6} Carroll (1898), pp. 113.
- ⁷ « gouger ». *Larousse.fr*. Larousse Dictionnaire de Français. 27 octobre 2020.
- ⁸ « groves ». *WordReference.com*. WordReference Dictionnaire Anglais-Français, 2020. Web. 27 octobre 2020.



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