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


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.

Le Jaseroque (Warrin, 1931)3

1 Il brilgue: les tôves lubriqueux
2 Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
3 Ennûmès sont les gougebosqueux
4 Et le mômerade horsgrave.

Bredoulocheux (Parisot, 1971)4

1 Il était reveneure; les sliexue toves
2 Sur l'allouinde gyraient et vriblaient;
3 Tout flivoreux vugiaient les borogoves;
4 Les verchons fougeus bourniflaient.

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

borogoves → gougebosqueux:
- boro- → burrow → gouger7 → gouge-
- -goves → groves → bosquets8 → -bosqueux
raths → rade:
- pronunciation

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

3 Warrin, Frank L. « Le Jaseroque ». The New Yorker, 10 janvier 1931 pp. 52.
5 Carroll (1898), pp. 113.

Merci beaucoup to Dr. Allan MacVicar, Dr. Veronique Olivier, and Frances Gawel, all of whom have provided me with endless encouragement and support in my French studies.