

Translating Jabberwocky: Quotability with a Vengeance

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion on Lewis Carroll's famous nonsense poem *Jabberwocky* and the special problems it presents to its translator. A translation not specifically aimed at child readers only, and adhering to the current norms of literary translation, needs to take account of Carroll's numerous clever word coinages and how they are explained, as well as the metrical form and the effect of Sir John Tenniel's classic illustrations of the poem, bringing in the question of multimodality. It also needs to resemble the original enough to be recognizably quotable, as *Jabberwocky* is a text frequently quoted and alluded to. The writer's Finnish translation discussed here, *Monkerias*, appeared in her new complete Finnish translation of *Through the Looking-Glass*, titled *Alice Peilintakamaassa* (Carroll 2010).

Keywords: literary translation norms, invented words, quotability, multimodality

1 Introduction

Lewis Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky* (in *Through the Looking-Glass*, originally published 1871) presents a translation task with more restricting factors than usual. A ballad about an obscure dragon-killing quest, it contains invented words that are later carefully explained; the whole poem is commented on in the narrative; it belongs to the tradition of nonsense literature, yet has elements of beauty; it has regular metre and rhyme; and is one of the most often quoted texts ever, some of its new words (e.g. *chortle*, *galumphing*) now in general use. Two illustrations by John Tenniel show details of the poem that must not be contradicted by the translation (cf. Oittinen 1993: 108). For a Finnish translator, it is also a formidable challenge to retranslate something with a famous earlier rendering by Kirsi Kunnas (Carroll 1974: 147–148).

In my translation of *Through the Looking-Glass*, *Alice Peilintakamaassa* (Carroll 2010), I have attempted to take account of all these factors, particularly the formation of new words and exactly how they are discussed by Alice and Humpty Dumpty. The level of self-commentary makes the task unusually tricky. This paper looks in detail at the poem and the strategies used to keep to the norms of literary translation, especially that of quotability. The resulting poem was published in *Alice Peilintakamaassa* (Carroll 2010: 26–28). Both the original and its translation are to be found in the Appendix.

While this paper is written from the point of view of a practicing translator, norms in translation theory are an extensive subject. Chesterman (1997: 51–85) gives a clear overview of the field, not forgetting the ordinary translator: "In brief, norms save both time and effort." (ibid. 56.) What I call norms in this paper arise from translation and editing experience of over twenty years.

I shall go on to cover aspects of translating *Jabberwocky* by discussing quotability, metrical structure, invented words and how they are explained, and the effect of illustration on translation.

2 Quotability

Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, probably the world's best-known nonsense poem, was published in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* in 1871. Both of Carroll's *Alice* books are among the most frequently quoted works in all literature; Carroll's biographer Martin Cohen puts them "next to the Bible and Shakespeare" in this respect (Cohen 1995: 134). This paper, a discussion of the translation issues arising when translating the poem *Jabberwocky* into Finnish, focuses particularly on the question of quotability. Whether translated texts are successful, or disappointing, or totally unusable when they need to be quoted from, is a practical point often encountered in translation and editing work, and I regard it important enough to have conceived the *norm of quotability* to help discussing it (Martin 2001: 3, 5; 2008: 23–25). While related to traditional matters of faithfulness, loyalty, and accuracy, quotability is a special question coming up in connection with just such texts as *Jabberwocky* that are very often referred to.

The norm of quotability means that any Source Text (ST) passage should be represented in the Target Text (TT) by a passage resembling it in as many ways as possible. Thus it should be possible to use the resulting TT passage in the same function as the ST passage in question, and the TT quotation should be recognizable to a reader also knowing the ST. (Martin 2001: 3, 5.) Quotability is important from the point of view of other translators, who may need to quote from a given work; of course this applies in particular to much-quoted classics, such as Carroll's *Alice* books. Quotability is a function of the usefulness of the translation in the target culture, and it is my hope that *Alice Peilintakamaassa* may prove of use to many Finnish translator colleagues encountering Carroll quotations in their work. The following looks into some of the features of *Jabberwocky* that need to be considered from this point of view.

3 Metrical structure

Jabberwocky is a poem written in ballad form, with regular four-line stanzas. The rhyme scheme is abab, and the fourth line is a foot, or two syllables, shorter than the others. Three of the stanzas (3, 5, and 6) have internal rhyme, and in these stanzas the end-rhyme pattern is abcb. The metrical pattern is as follows; syllables in stressed position are marked +, those in unstressed position o, following the marking system of Pentti Leino (1982: 58).

o+o+o+o+
o+o+o+o+
o+o+o+o+
o+o+o+

Though the metre is regular, it is not mechanically so. Consider for instance the line

- (1) And the **mome raths** out**grabe**. (Carroll 1992: 116)

According to the metrical pattern, the syllables with stress are *the*, *raths*, and *grabe*, but natural prosody requires stressing the syllables marked above. Carroll subtly varies his lines, even smuggling in a couple of light extra syllables in stanzas 2 and 3. The resulting poem sounds lively and natural despite its metrically regular pattern.

The Finnish version, *Monkerias*, does not achieve the same degree of regularity, though hopes to capture the liveliness. It does, however, have the same stanzaic structure with the same number of stanzas, as well as abab rhyme (with one exception in stanza 5). Line length varies from 10 to 14 syllables, but six of the seven stanzas begin with a 13-syllable line, giving the whole a fairly unified look. Only stanza 5 has internal rhyme, and there is one instance of half-rhyme in stanza 6 (*teit – lurei*). On the other hand, the Finnish uses plenty of alliteration, a traditional feature of Finnish poetry.

Metrical form is sometimes given up when translating poetry in favour of free verse, but in children's literature this seems to be less usual. Be this as it may, quotability demands keeping the form of a poem recognizable, so *Jabberwocky* required a metrical and rhyming translation. Finding words of the right number of syllables for each line, words that also fitted the rhyme scheme and worked in the semantic context, was a difficult task; the requirements left the translator surrounded with demands that preyed on each other. I decided that perfect metre was not a necessity, as long as the overall impression was metrical and the rhymes were orthodox from the point of view of stress. I also had to give way to Finnish word length and allow my lines to be longer than Carroll's, in order to fit in all the necessary words.

4 Invented words explained within *Through the Looking-Glass*

The trickiest part of *Jabberwocky* is the first stanza, which is also the best-known and most quoted. All the nouns, adjectives and verbs apart from *be* and *do* are Carroll's inventions. Consider the stanza and its translation:

- (2) 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 1992: 116)
- (3) Jo koitti kuumon aika, ja viukkaat puhvenet
päinillä harpitellen kieruloivat,
haipeloina seisoksivat varakuhenet,
ja öksyt muvut kaikki hinkuroivat. (Carroll 2010: 26)

Not only is this difficult to translate as such, but it is discussed in great detail by Alice and Humpty Dumpty in Chapter 6. As Humpty Dumpty explains many of the words, the translator must actually translate the poem itself word for word to be able to translate

the discussion, too. Being thus far bound by the ST is unusual in literary translation. Not every word is mentioned on this meta-level, however, so some of the invented expressions can be translated more freely.

I shall go on to discuss the different ways invented words are explained in the book.

4.1 Random meaning

Humpty Dumpty uses several different types of explanation. Some words he simply explains without there being any overt relation between the form and meaning.

- (4) "Well '*toves*' are something like badgers – they're something like lizards – and they're something like corkscrews. — also they make their nests under sun-dials —" (Carroll 1992: 164)

This is easy enough to translate, once you decide how to render *tove*, which must also rhyme with *borogove*. Quoting Humpty Dumpty again:

- (5) "And a '*borogove*' is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round – something like a live mop." (ibid: 165)

Before finally deciding on *puhvenet* and *varakuhvenet*, I toyed with dozens of pairs of rhyming words and suffered from a feeling of lack of restricting factors: it seemed there was nothing to guide one to a satisfactory outcome, since the words, particularly *tove*, had no semantic content of their own. In such a case it is difficult to reach the stage of feeling that the translation is now right. It turned out that restricting factors were around in abundance, however, as we shall see.

4.2 Portmanteau words

Carroll's concept of "portmanteau" words is famous. The term is now in general use (OED 1994 s.v. portmanteau), but it was Carroll who coined it in *Through the Looking-Glass* (Carroll 1992: 164), and examples show it to mean a merging of two words with partially overlapping sound to form a single one, with elements of both in the resulting combination, often with amusing effect. This is Humpty Dumpty's explanation of *slithy*:

- (6) "Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as active. You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word." (Carroll 1992: 164)

Consider the Finnish:

- (7) "No, viukas tarkoittaa liukasta ja vikkellä. Jota ei pitele mikään. Sellainen sana on kuin salkku joka aukeaa kahtia, siinä on kaksi merkitystä pakattuna samaan sanaan, jos ymmärrät." (Carroll 2010: 97)

Finnish words meaning 'slimy' (*limainen, niljakas*) were discarded, as the resulting portmanteau words seemed rather more disgusting than the ST, whereas *viukas* sounds humorous rather than unpleasant. Note that whereas Carroll finds it necessary to explain the word *lithe*, presumably because it might be unknown to a child reader, Finnish words are too transparent for explanation not to seem silly. I have therefore added "jota ei pitele mikään", 'too active and unmanageable to be controlled', as a kind of characterization of *viukas*, so as not to have to leave the explanation completely out of the translation.

The other word labelled a portmanteau, *mimsy*, from *miserable and flimsy*, was after many abortive attempts translated as *haipelo*, from *haikea* 'sad, melancholy' and *ruipelo*, 'too thin, a thin lanky person'. The result also brings to mind other words like *hatara*, *hapero* and maybe *heiveröinen*; such associations of near-collapse and frailty seem not unfitting.

4.3 Imaginary derivation

Another type of explanation, relating invented words to existing ones through resemblance in sound, might be called *imaginary derivation*. The relations are not necessarily obvious. Humpty Dumpty defines *brillig* as follows:

- (8) "—'*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon – the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner." (Carroll 1992: 164)

But the following are quite plausible:

- (9) "To '*gyre*' is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To '*gimble*' is to make holes like a gimblet." (Carroll 1992: 165)

As for *brillig*, the explanation for *kuumo* (connected with *kuuma*, 'hot') seems close enough to Humpty Dumpty's etymology:

- (10) "*Kuumo* on kello neljä iltapäivällä – se aika jolloin aletaan laittaa kuumia ruokia päivällistä varten." (Carroll 2010: 96)

Gyre and *gimble* required polysyllabic Finnish equivalents, often inherently amusing:

- (11) "Kun *kieruloidaan*, kieputaan hyrränä ympäri ympäri. *Harpitellen* tarkoittaa että samalla tehdään pieniä reikiä keskelle." (Carroll 2010: 98)

Finnish being a language rich in descriptive verbs, there is plenty of potential for new verbs that carry obvious association with existing vocabulary – in the case of the above, consider *kieriä* 'to roll', *kierukka* 'coil', *kiemurrella* 'to wriggle', *rinkuloida* 'to draw a circle round sth'; *harppi* 'compasses', *pyöritellä* 'to roll sth around'.

4.4 "Tack-on words"

A rather fanciful form of explanation by Humpty Dumpty is that of seeing new words as formed by "tacking on" part of a previous or following word and then giving the whole a new meaning, as in *wabe*, from *way* + *b* from prepositions following it:

- (12) "And '*the wabe*' is the grass-plot round the sun-dial, I suppose?" said Alice —
"Of course it is. It's called '*wabe*', you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it —"
"And a long way beyond it on each side," Alice added. (Carroll 1992: 165)

Mome in the following example presumably refers to the pronunciation "from 'ome":

- (13) " — but *mome* I'm not certain about. I think it's short for 'from home' — meaning that they'd lost their way, you know." (Carroll 1992: 166)

The Finnish translation for *the wabe* is as follows:

- (14) — "Sen nimi on päini, koska se jatkuu aurinkokellosta pitkän matkaa eteenpäin ja pitkän matkaa taaksepäin —" (Carroll 2010: 98)

In Finnish, the commonest noun type is a bisyllable ending in a vowel, so adding an *i* to a postposition seemed a way of giving it a semblance of nominality. Because of its atypical derivation from a postposition, *päini* also seems an odd and irregular formation in the same way as *wabe* does. As for *mome*, consider the following:

- (15) "— öksystä en ole niin varma. Luulisin, että se tulee *öksymisestä* – siitä kun ei kerta kaikkiaan löydä kotiin." (Carroll 2010: 98)

Öksy, chosen partly for its interesting sound and contrast with the following word *muvut* ('raths'), I derived from the verb *öksyä*, a dialectal form of *eksyä*, 'to get lost' (Rapola 1966: 342); the adjective *öksy* has been formed by cutting the verbal ending. The word may remind readers of *äksy*, 'bad-tempered', a common adjective in Finnish.

5 Invented words explained elsewhere

While the explanations discussed above must be translated within the book itself, there are others that exist outside the book, but may nevertheless be useful or relevant to the translator. Carroll himself wrote about some of the words, e.g. *uffish*:

In a letter to a child-friend, Maud Standen, Carroll said that the word suggested to him "a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner roughish, and the temper huffish." (Gardner 2006: 41)

So, when translating the relevant line of *Jabberwocky*,

(16) And, as in uffish thought he stood, (Carroll 1992: 118)

the translator might benefit from this authorial statement, tentative though it is. The Finnish line runs

(17) Seisoi poika siinä jumot mietteet mielessään, (Carroll 2010: 28)

Jumo, though not conceived as a portmanteau word, might be seen to combine the Finnish adjective *juro* 'gruff, taciturn' and *jumi(ssa)*, 'stuck, unable to move'.

Carroll was not beyond making up new explanations afterwards; see Cohen for the *Jabberwocky* correspondence of 1888 (1995: 443); I have not taken this into account.

Some *Jabberwocky* words are not in fact new, though Carroll either re-invented or popularized them. *Beamish* is one to be found in OED and defined as 'shining brightly, radiant', with its single pre-Carrollian example from the year 1530 (OED 1994: s.v. *beamish*). Whether Carroll knew of this word before using it is immaterial; it is formed according to normal word-formation rules with the productive *-ish* ending and is therefore part of the potential of the English language open to anybody.

6 The effect of illustration on translation

When a translation has illustrations, the translator's job leads from mere texts and words into the world of multimodality. In Finland, Riitta Oittinen has discussed Carroll and the interplay of textual and visual elements in several writings, e.g. her book *Kääntäjän karnevaali* (1995: 118–130). Illustration being the part of a book that cannot be changed – a "given" –, it is the text being translated that has to accommodate. This need is reflected in what can be called the norm of harmony between text and illustration (Martin 2008: 25).

There are two illustrations by Sir John Tenniel connected with *Jabberwocky*. As Carroll is known to have been most particular about illustrations of his works (Woolf 2010: 170; Cohen 1995: 129), one may presume that these pictures give a pretty good idea of how he envisaged the details shown. The first (Illustration 1) shows the protagonist, the long-haired *boy* or *son*, brandishing his sword at the monster *Jabberwock*. The *vorpall sword* or *vorpall blade* looks rather like an ordinary sword, the *tulgey wood* rather like any forest, but one may take a good look at the *Jabberwock* itself. It is a dragon with batlike wings, front legs with birdlike talons and feet with lizardlike claws, a long neck, an ever longer tail, scaled skin, a hideous face, and – to alleviate the horror, maybe – a buttoned waistcoat. Consider the Finnish name of the *Jabberwock*, *Monkerias* (for further discussion, see Martin 2008: 58). It is reminiscent of the Finnish for 'eel', *ankerias*, which seems to fit the snakish features of the illustration quite well. Note that Carroll doesn't describe the *Jabberwock* in so many words beyond mentioning its claws, jaws and eyes, and a head that gets cut off, so the illustration can be said to have influenced our visual idea of this monster a great deal. Indeed, it is Tenniel who makes

the (obvious enough) connection with St George and the dragon; Carroll himself never classifies the beast.



Illustration 1

The second illustration to consider is in Chapter 6: a very detailed picture of the first stanza, with *toves*, *borogoves*, *sun-dial* and *mome raths* (Illustration 2). It merely shows Tenniel's vision of exactly what the text says, but for the translator it means an obligation to stick to the ST in all details shown. If, say, there were a temptation to translate *badgers* as *otters*, the badger-stripes shown would probably hinder this. In literary translation there is usually a degree of freedom which is here shackled, making the translator's job more of a challenge than it would otherwise be.

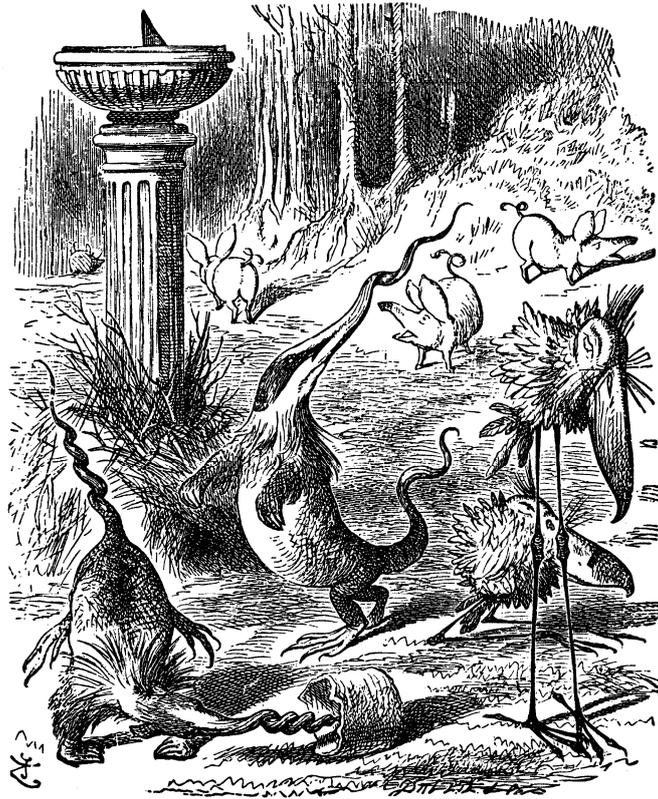


Illustration 2

7 Conclusion

Jabberwocky is a translation job that will always require a fine balance between compromises. From the reader's point of view, the main thing is that the translation solutions are not contradictory either with the discussion of them within the book itself or with the illustrations; i.e. that the whole remains logical (in its Carrollian way). The poem should also sound dramatic, funny, baffling and evocative. What Alice herself says after reading it seems a fair enough starting point (Carroll 1992: 118):

"It seems very pretty, — but it's rather hard to understand! — Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas — only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate — !"

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Appendix

Jabberwocky by Lewis Carroll 1871

'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 whiffing 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.

Monkerias, Finnish translation © Alice Martin 2010

Jo koitti kuumon aika, ja viukkaat puhvenet
päinillä harpitellen kieruloivat,
haipeloina seisoksivat varakuhenet,
ja öksyt movut kaikki hinkuroivat.

"Varo, poikaseni, varo Monkeriasta,
sen napsuvia leukoja ja kättä kynterää.
Jukjukilintua väistä, ja kauas kavahda
kun Panttareisku kohti hörmäjää."

Poika otti aseensa käteen, miekan jänkkyisän,
ja etsi metsän huumuloista vihollistansa.
Pompoppuu soi varjoa ja levon hetkevän,
hän viipyi siinä aatoksissansa.

Seisoi poika siinä jumot mietteet mielessään,
kun yllättikin Monkerias tulisilmäinen!
Sen vuuhausa soi kimeänä metsään melkeään,
se porlottaen ryntää kohti tanner tömisten!

Yks kaks! Yks kaks! Yhä puolikkaammaks
leikkoi jänkkyisä rauta, niks eli naks!
On päätön, kuolias koko Monkerias,
käy poika kotiin kunkkuillen, kainalossa pää.

"Monkerias surman suussa! Poikani, sen teit!
Paisteikas poika, sua syleilen!
Oi kirluntaipäivä! Luroo ja lurei!"
näin mykerteli isä iloiten.

Jo koitti kuumon aika, ja viukkaat puhvenet
päinillä harpitellen kieruloivat,
haipeloina seisoksivat varakuhenet,
ja öksyt movut kaikki hinkuroivat.