

Translations of Jabberwocky

Douglas R. Hofstadter

Imagine native speakers of English, French, and German, all of whom have excellent command of their respective native languages, and all of whom enjoy wordplay in their own language. Would their symbol networks be similar on a local level, or on a global level? Or is it meaningful to ask such a question? The question becomes concrete when you look at the preceding translations of Lewis Carroll's famous "Jabberwocky".

[The "preceding translations" were "[Jabberwocky](#)" (English, original), by Lewis Carroll, "[Le Jaseroque](#)", (French), by Frank L. Warrin, and "[Der Jammerwock](#)" (German), by Robert Scott. -kl]

I chose this example because it demonstrates, perhaps better than an example in ordinary prose, the problem of trying to find "the same node" in two different networks which are, on some level of analysis, extremely nonisomorphic. In ordinary language, the task of translation is more straightforward, since to each word or phrase in the original language, there can usually be found a corresponding word or phrase in the new language. By contrast, in a poem of this type, many "words" do not carry ordinary meaning, but act purely as exciters of nearby symbols. However, what is nearby in one language may be remote in another.

Thus, in the brain of a native speaker of English, "slithy" probably activates such symbols as "slimy", "slither", "slippery", "lithe", and "sly", to varying extents. Does "lubricilleux" do the corresponding thing in the brain of a Frenchman? What indeed would be "the corresponding thing"? Would it be to activate symbols which are the ordinary translations of those words? What if there is no word, real or fabricated, which will accomplish that? Or what if a word does exist, but it is very intellectual-sounding and Latinate ("lubricilleux"), rather than earthy and Anglo-Saxon ("slithy")? Perhaps "huilasse" would be better than "lubricilleux"? Or does the Latin origin of the word "lubricilleux" not make itself felt to a speaker of French in the way that it would if it were an English word ("lubricilious", perhaps)?

An interesting feature of the translation into French is the transposition into the present tense. To keep it in the past would make some unnatural turns of phrase necessary, and the present tense has a much fresher flavour in French than in the past. The translator sensed that this would be "more appropriate"--in some ill-defined yet compelling sense--and made the switch. Who can say whether remaining faithful to the English tense would have been better?

In the German version, the droll phrase "er an-zu-denken-fing" occurs; it does not correspond to any English original. It is a playful reversal of words, whose flavour vaguely resembles that of the English phrase "he out-to-ponder set", if I may hazard a reverse translation. Most likely this funny turnabout of words was inspired by the similar playful reversal in the English of one line earlier: "So rested he by the Tumtum tree". It corresponds, yet doesn't correspond.

Incidentally, why did the Tumtum tree get changed into an "arbre Té-té" in French? Figure it out for yourself.

The word "manxome" in the original, whose "x" imbues it with many rich overtones, is weakly rendered in German by "manchsam", which back-translates into English as "maniful". The French "manscant" also lacks the manifold overtones of "manxome". There is no end to the interest of this kind of translation task.

When confronted with such an example, one realizes that it is utterly impossible to make an exact translation. Yet even in this pathologically difficult case of translation, there seems to be some rough equivalence obtainable. Why is this so, if there really is no isomorphism between the brains of people who will read the different versions? The answer is that there is a kind of rough isomorphism, partly global, partly local, between the brains of all the readers of these three poems.

Source:

Hofstadter, Douglas R. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York: Basic Books, 1980; Vintage Books Edition, Sep 1980. ISBN 0-394-74502-7.

Note:

In the book, this excerpt is from Part II: EGB, Chapter XII: Minds and Thoughts. The 3 versions of the poem are in "English French German Suite" at the end of the previous chapter.

Jabberwocky

Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson)

(from: *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 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 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.

Der Zipferlake

Christian Enzensberger (1963)

Verdaustig war's, und glaÙe Wieben
rotteten gorkicht im Gemank.
Gar elump war der Pluckerwank,
und die gabben Schweisel frieben.

»Hab acht vorm Zipferlak, mein Kind!
Sein Maul ist beiÙ, sein Griff ist bohr.
Vorm Fliegelflagel sieh dich vor,
dem mampfen Schnatterrind.«

Er zückt' sein scharfgebifftes Schwert,
den Feind zu futzen ohne Saum,
und lehnt' sich an den Dudelbaum
und stand da lang in sich gekehrt.

In sich gekeimt, so stand er hier,
da kam verschnoff der Zipferlak
mit Flammenlefze angewackt
und gurgt' in seiner Gier.

Mit Eins! und Zwei! und bis auf's Bein!
Die biffe Klinge ritscheropf!
Trennt' er vom Hals den toten Kopf,
und wichernd sprengt' er heim.

»Vom Zipferlak hast uns befreit?
Komm an mein Herz, aromer Sohn!
Oh, blumer Tag! Oh, schlusse Fron!«
So kröpfte er vor Freud'.

Verdaustig war's, und glaÙe Wieben
rotteten gorkicht im Gemank.
Gar elump war der Pluckerwank,
und die gabben Schweisel frieben.

Source unknown.

Le Jaseroque

Frank L. Warrin

Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
Enmîmés sont les gougebosqueux
Et le mômerade horsgrave.

«Garde-toi du Jaseroque, mon fils!
La gueule qui mord; la griffe qui prend!
Garde-toi de l'oiseau Jube, évite
Le frumieux Band-à-prend!»

Son glaive vorpal en main il va-
T-à la recherche du fauve manscant;
Puis arrivé à l'arbre Té-Té,
Il y reste, réfléchissant.

Pendant qu'il pense, tout uffusé,
Le Jaseroque, à l'oeil flambant,
Vient siblant par le bois tullegeais,
Et burbule en venant.

Un deux, un deux, par le milieu,
Le glaive vorpal fait pat-à-pan!
La bête défaite, avec sa tête,
Il rentre gallomphant.

«As-tu tué le Jaseroque?
Viens à mon coeur, fils rayonmais!
Ô Jour frabbejeais! Calleau! Callai!»
Il cortule dans sa joie.

Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
Enmîmés sont les gougebosqueux
Et le mômerade horsgrave.

Original source:

Warren, Frank L. *The New Yorker*, Jan 10, 1931

Il Ciarlestrone

Adriana Crespi

Era brillosto, e gli alacridi tossi
succhiellavano scabbi nel pantúle:
Méstili eran tutti i paparossi,
e strombavan musando i tartarocchi.

«Attento al Ciarlestrone, figlio mio!
Fauci che azzannano, fauci che ti artigiano,
attento all'uccel Giuggio e attento ancora
Al fumibondo chiappabana!»

Afferò quello la sua vorpi da lama
a lungo il manson nemico cercò...
Cosí sostò presso l'albero Touton
e riflettendo alquanto dimorò.

E mentre il bellico pensier si trattenea,
il Ciarlestrone con occhiali brage
venne sifflando nella fulgida selva,
sbollentando nella sua avanzata.

Un, due! Un, due! E dentro e dentro
scattò saettante la vorpida lama!
Ei lo lasciò cadavere, e col capo
Se ne venne al ritorno galumpando.

«E hai tu ucciso il Ciarlestrone?
Fra le mie braccia, o raggioso fanciullo!
O giorno fragoroso, Callò, Callài!»
stripetò quello dala gioia.

Era brillosto, e gli alacridi tossi
succhiellavano scabbi nel pantúle:
Méstili eran tutti i paparossi,
e strombavan musando i tartarocchi.

Written in 1974.