

Just Like Alice: Interpreting the language of madness

A commentary on our translation of "A Mad Tea Party" in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

*Alice in Wonderland* first attracted our attention as suitable material for this translation project because of the specific challenges posed by a text which so quirkily combines childish simplicity with subversive manipulation of everyday language. Written in 1865, the novel was intended for a young readership, but due to continual changes which occur in any living language, the register remains accessible and enjoyable yet nevertheless somewhat antiquated, a consideration which needed to be taken into account in translation. One of the most famous scenes from the novel, the 'Mad Tea Party' typifies the surreal atmosphere characteristic of the whole work, and provides translators with the challenge of translating the specifically English cultural phenomenon of a tea party into a foreign language. One particular delight of close linguistic engagement with Carroll's style is to be found in his exuberant *bouleversement* of fixed or established "English" expressions, thus rendering a literal translation in many instances unviable. Translation must therefore by necessity become a rendering not just of words but of style; whereas there are specific instances of Carroll's playful use of language offering little scope for direct translation, opportunities to treat the nascent translated text in a similar manner appeared in unexpected places.

Hence in line three, where a common French equivalent for the English 'to be fast asleep' is 'dormir à poings fermés', we decided to replace 'poings' with 'pattes', a simple but comic manipulation of a figurative expression which better accommodates the body of a dormouse. If in Carroll's world, animals have the power to use (human) language as a mode of communication, it seems perfectly fitting that figurative expressions, stamped with identity of a heritage of speakers, can and should equally reflect the specific physiological identity of the non-human subject. Another instance of wordplay in the translation which requires explanation is the phrase 'donner un coup de ciseaux à ses cheveux'. Here tapping into the range of French expressions which hinge on the word 'coup', 'donner un coup de pied/magique à' to name but two, we chose to retain the set French structure but introduce a non-standard second term to colour the Hatter's words with his blunt eccentricity.

Our first response to the Hatter's famous riddle, 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?', was a slightly perplexed search for a rational answer, in order to find an assumed logic to guide the translation. This approach was quickly proved to be futile when we researched the riddle and learned that Carroll's intention was for the question to be nonsensical. Just like Alice, confronted with the impossible task of making sense of language which has no intended meaning, our attention turned to superficial phonetic patterns within language, entirely divorced from the generally accepted meaning of the words themselves. Where English offered homophony with 'raven' and 'writing-desk', our choice in French was dictated by the rhyme between the words 'corbeau' and 'bureau', explaining our choice of 'bureau' over other such possibilities as 'secrétaire' and 'pupitre'. Incidentally, Henri Bué, famous for his authoritative French translation of the work, chose to remain close to the original English homophony, with the alliteration of the French words 'pie' and 'pupitre'. It is interesting to note that Bué felt at liberty to change the species of the bird entirely, demonstrating the insignificance of specific meaning in the face of contingent linguistic patterns.

Line 17 of the English text produced particular difficulties; perhaps somewhat unexpectedly for a rather innocuous looking original sentence. To whom does the 'personal' of 'personal remarks'

refer? To the speaker, or to the object of his criticism? Alice's words smack of the scolding tone of a figure of authority: a received lesson in manners. The fact that she, a child, is reproducing verbatim the maxims of her elders puts her in a strange limbo position between the roles of educator and educated, a fact which we felt would be best carried between the two languages by careful attention to tone. Having explored a range of alternative possibilities, our choice fell on 'il ne faut pas', since the impersonal nature of this construction lends itself well to the expression of doxa. Another deceptively simple aspect of the English text is to be found in the specific vocabulary of table manners. In taking a seat at the laid table, Alice draws the logical conclusion that, since laid places ('couverts') remain unoccupied, more guests are expected. In English, Alice's use of the preposition 'for' in line 14 contains this logic of anticipation with it – the guest is the object and the purpose of the act of table-laying. Our discussions in the rendering of this phrase touched upon whether the guest, in the French equivalent phrase "mettre un couvert" is as conspicuously the beneficiary of the action – and this explains our slightly more long-winded bi-clausal translation in lines 17-18 (French text) in which we tried to emphasise the connection between a 'couvert' and its (absent) occupant.

Lines 29-34 of the original text feature a number of comic reworkings of a pattern of lexical mirroring. We recognised the importance of maintaining this structure in the English variant whereby the vocabulary used must remain identical in both halves of the "mirror". For this reason a more comic phrasing of lines 26-31 in the English version which could have run "Je m'endors en respirant" could not be justified according to the rules of their linguistic game.

The title of the chapter, 'A mad tea-party', in itself provided a number of hurdles for translation, not least in the fact that the French word 'thé' can refer both simply to the beverage itself and to the event of a tea party. "Un thé fou", therefore, would be ambiguous. Bué opted for "Un thé de fous", whereas the preposition "chez" to us seemed most explicitly to separate the tea and the insani-tea and to emphasise that, as an (uninvited) guest, Alice is on a stranger's territory and obliged to conform to a stranger's rules – and a strange logic. This nicely anticipates some of the tensions played out in their dialogue.

The insanity of Wonderland is not just to be found in its surreal characters and landscapes but more crucially in their language and in the language Carroll uses to describe it. Languages work through logic and create their own patterns which have over time come to detach themselves from the logic of reality; the task of the translator in translating a work which plays on this phenomenon is to re-use connections of linguistic logic from the first language to the second, whilst maintaining the same degree of distance from reality.

