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Translating “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland”

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Lewis Carroll’s story about a girl who gets lost in a fantastic land of wonders on a hot summer’s afternoon is one of the most successful children’s books of all times. There are a number of translations into German, the most popular probably by Christian Enzensberger. One of the reasons for the book’s still continued attraction for young and old is probably its highly imaginative nature. This is not only conveyed by the plot but also by the language Carroll uses in the English original. To transport Carroll’s imaginative English into another language is probably the greatest challenge to a translator. I have chosen two translations, by Christian Enzensberger, dating back to the 1960s, and one by Günther Flemming, from 2002, to point out qualitative differences and to illustrate the main problems for the translator of Alice’s story.

Generally four fields of difficulties for the translation of the book can be distinguished. The first one concerns the audience. Carroll wrote his book for children. However one can find many allusions to events and persons from Victorian England, where the book was written, knowledge of which could not even be presupposed in a child of the time. The story can therefore be understood on various levels. Concerning the translation it must be decided if all these levels have to be transported. Since today there is hardly anyone in modern Germany who can identify all the hints and allusions, it should also be considered whether these events could be replaced with more recent or at least more local events. Both Enzensberger and Flemming have decided against this approach. This can be considered a wise decision, because following this approach consequently would result in a whole new, modern Alice without much in common with its original. The book “Alles über Alice”, from which the Flemming translation is taken, works with comments that explain many of the backgrounds and allusions. These comments are also a translation from an English original (Carroll; Gardner. The Annotated Alice, 1990)

Along the same lines, the translator has to consider whether expressions typical for a specific cultural background have to be transferred into the target language. In the first chapter, in a passage that will be discussed in more detail later, Alice is falling through a rabbit-hole and wonders how far she has come yet. As a British child she uses miles to talk about distance: “*I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen by this time [...] (l)et me see: that would be four thousand miles [...]*” (Carroll. p.10). A German child might not be familiar with how much a mile is, but he or she might know that it is a very long distance. Flemming therefore uses a direct translation: “*Wie viele Meilen ich wohl schon gefallen bin? [...] das wäre dann viertausend Meilen tief [...]*“ (Flemming. p.13). Enzensberger solves the problem more creatively by first using the direct translation and then replacing it with a more understandable concept of distance: “*Wie viele Meilen ich wohl schon gefallen bin? [...] sechstausend Kilometer wären das [...]*” (Enzensberger. p.11)

Much of the attractiveness of the book derives from the fact that the reader feels immediately drawn to Alice. It is very easy to identify with her, since her personality is very well defined. This is partly due to the language used by the narrator and the language she uses herself, especially in soliloquy. These two registers are very similar. This creates the feeling that the story is told to a receiver who is very much like Alice, rather than read in a book. Language is used very playfully, with long and “*grand*” (Carroll, p.10) words and run-on sentences. Basically the way a child speaks when it is discovering the possibilities of language.

Another register-related problem concerns stylistic and imaginative elements of Carroll’s language, like word-plays, alliterations, sound-resemblances, or word-creations. These and the language particular to Alice are fundamental elements of the story. In many cases it is not possible to translate such forms without making them seem clumsy or artificial. One way to deal with this is to use similar figures in the German text, however not in the same places. Both Flemming and Enzensberger have opted for this approach. Enzensberger uses sentence-structure and word order very freely, which results in a translation that sounds very natural to spoken German and at the same time manages to transfer the childlike element in the language as conveyed by sentence-structure and choice of words. Flemming however manages to include his own word-plays without changing the content and even finds ways to preserve sound-imageries where this is important. Unfortunately, the result does not seem to be written for an audience of children. There are many figures of speech that are too complicated or too uncommon to be used in direct speech.

To discuss this in more detail a passage from the first chapter shall be analysed. (Carroll. p.10-11. Flemming. p.13-15. Enzensberger. p.11-12). Alice is falling through the air and talking to herself. In the original this passage starts with the words: “*Well*” *thought Alice to herself: “After such a fall as this[...]*”. Flemming uses this to include his first word-play: “*Wohlan*”, *dachte Alice bei sich, “oder viel mehr wohlab! Nach einem solchen Fall wie diesem [...]*”. This word-play cannot be found in the original, but it catches the general tone of the text and does not change the meaning, because “well”, “wohlan”, and “wohlab” (although non-existent in standard German) are all fillers without a particular meaning. The second part of the speech – “nach einem solchen Fall wie diesem” – does not sound like a child, as it is a rather complicated construction. In this case Enzensberger’s translation: “*Also wirklich*”, *dachte Alice bei sich, “nach einem solchen Sturz [...]*” seems much more appropriate to the original.

To express the continuity of Alice’s fall into the rabbit-hole, Carroll uses a repetition of the word “down” in two different parts of the passage: *Down, down, down*. The stress pattern of the word “down” underlines the falling movement. The direct German translation: *Hinab, hinab, hinab* used by Enzensberger results in the opposite as “hin‘ab” has a rising stress pattern due to the two syllables of the word. Flemming prefers a change of content, while sticking to the sound image: *Sie fiel, fiel, fiel*.

A few lines later Alice plays around with words she has learned in school while talking to herself. Here it becomes particularly obvious how language is used by Alice: '[...] but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?' (Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.) The German translation "Längengrad" and "Breitengrad" do not sound so educated or grand, nor is their meaning as totally shut off for German children as the Latin terms commonly used in English. These are on the other hand, only very rarely used in German. Since "Längengrad" and "Breitengrad" are technical terms Flemming translates the passage directly: "[...] aber an welchem Breitengrad oder Längengrad ich dann wohl angekommen sein mag?" Enzensberger uses the terms wrongly to point out that Alice does not know exactly what she is talking about: "[...] welchen Längengrad ich wohl inzwischen habe und welchen Breitengrad?"

During her fall Alice thinks of her cat and wonders if cats eat bats. This rhyming pair is used for a very nice word play: "Do cats eat bats? [...] Do bats eat cats?" Although the German words "Katze" and "Fledermaus" do not have this sound-resemblance, Enzensberger and Flemming both find equivalents for the word-play. Flemming's translation seems rather clumsy, but translates the exact content: "Essen Katzen Fledermäuse? Essen Katzen? Fledermäuse? Essen Katzen? Fledermäuse essen Katzen?". Flemming introduces a word invention to replace the rhyme and thereby manages to convey the feeling rather than the exact content of the original: „Daß Katzen Fledermäuse atzen? Daß Fledermäuse Katzen atzen? [...] Daß Flederkatzen Mäuse atzen?“

In general Flemming and Enzensberger have both done a good job in their translations of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland". While Enzensberger's translation is still the very imaginative children's book Carroll wrote, he sometimes translates too freely and leaves out some of the more subtle stylistic figures that are part of what makes the book attractive also to a more professional audience. Flemming's translation is very close to the original text, and he manages to introduce stylistic elements similar to the original without changing the meaning. Nevertheless, sometimes Flemming's text seems a bit dry and loses the spoken language character of the original. To explain this discrepancy between the two translations, one should take a look at the intended audience. The Flemming text is taken out of the book Alles über Alice, a translation of The Annotated Alice, which is a commented text aimed at an audience of grown-up Carroll fans that are more interested in the interpretation of the text and its author. Therefore it seems logical to concentrate on a direct translation. The majority of Enzensberger's readers are probably under fourteen years old and more interested in the fantastic story. For this audience he has done a very good job. A translation will never be equal to its original. Different languages have evolved out of different cultural contexts and even the most direct translation of a word sometimes cannot transport all the content stored in its original. Therefore the expectations and demands of the target audience should be the main objectives for a translation, and both translators have succeeded in attaining this.

Bibliography

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