

Czech

Žvahlav

Bylo smažno, lepě svihlí tlové
se batoumali v dálnici,
chrudošní byli borolové
na mamné krsy žárnící.

„Ó synu, střež se Žvahlava,
má zuby, drápy přestroje;
střež se i Ptáka Neklava,
zuřmící Bodostre!“

Svůj chopil vorpálový meč,
jímž lita soka vezme v plen,
pak used v tumtumovou seč
a čekal divišlen.

A jak tu vzdeskné mysle kles,
sám Žvahlav, v očích plameny,
slét hvíždně v tulížový les
a drblal rameny.

Raz dva! Raz dva! A zas a zas
vorpálný meč spěl v šmiků let,
Žvahlava hlavu za opas
A už galumpal zpět.

„Ty’s zhubil strastna Žvahlava?
Spěš na mou hruď, ty’s líten rek!“
„Ó rastný den! Avej, ava!“
Ves chortal světný skřek.

Bylo smažno, lepě svihlí tlové
se batoumali v dálnici,
chrudošní byli borolové
na mamné krsy žárnící.

Jaroslav Císař

Jabberwocky in Czech

Jiří Rambousek

While the history of translating Carroll's *Alice* into Czech started in 1902, the first two translators only rendered *Alice in Wonderland*. It was only in 1931 that Czech readers could enjoy the first Czech version of "Jabberwocky." Since then, five Czech versions of "Jabberwocky" were published in print, four of them produced as part of complete translations of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Their translators were Jaroslav Císař (poem title "Žvahlav", 1931), Aloys Skoumal and Hana Skoumalová ("Tlachapoud", 1961), Helena Čížková ("Plkodlakiáda", 2015), and Jiří Žák ("Pidlivousi", 2017). The fifth version was appended to the translation of *The Hunting of the Snark* by Václav Z. J. Pinkava ("Hromoplkie", 2008). As to the titles, the first two are in line with Carroll's "Jabberwock": they each combine a Czech word with the meaning 'to jabber' or 'prattle' (žvanit and *tlachat*, respectively) with the second part of a bird name (*krutihlav* 'wryneck', *strakapoud* 'woodpecker'), which gave žva+hlav and *tlacha+poud*. Čížková combines *plkat* 'to prattle' with *-dlak* which, while similar to the bird name *dlask* 'hawfinch', is in fact rather the second part of *vlkodlak* 'werewolf', and adds the ending *-iáda* usually used to characterize an organized event in sports or similar activities. Žák combines *pidli*, an onomatopoeic interjection, and *vousy* 'beard'; Pinkava's "hromoplkie" combines *hrom* 'thunder' and *plkat* 'to prattle'.

Of these five translations, the first two can be considered classical, competing for the role of the canonic Czech wording of the poem. They have been published repeatedly to this day; the Skoumal version has been published more often, its language being more modern and easily accessible for children. Císař, however, still appeals more to some readers who claim that he renders the books in their complexity. The Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer used his title of the poem – "Žvahlav" – in the Czech title of his short film *Jabberwocky* in 1971, and when both *Alice* books came out with new illustrations by Švankmajer in 2017, it was with Císař's translation.

Jaroslav Císař was the first translator of both Alice volumes. He was an astronomer and a diplomat, author of many articles on politics, and later he worked in the management of a leading Czechoslovak publishing house. He also accompanied T. G. Masaryk, the future president of Czechoslovakia, in his political negotiations in the United States during WW I.

Although not a translator by profession, he dealt with all the poetry in the two books very successfully – however he actually ‘outsourced’ the longest one, “The Walrus and the Carpenter”, to the writer Edvard Valenta. The *Alice* books have been very popular ever since his translation.

“Tlachapoud”, the second Czech Jabberwocky, came in 1961 with a new translation of *Alice* by Aloys Skoumal and his wife Hana Skoumalová. Aloys Skoumal was a literary critic, editor and translator of essential – and some of the most demanding – works of English literature, from *Tristram Shandy* to *Ulysses*. He also translated from German. His wife Hana focused mainly on literature for children (*Winnie the Pooh* and an adaptation of *Canterbury Tales*). Helena Čížková and Jiří Žák are active as translators to this day. Čížková is, among other titles, the author of a new – and very good – rendering (after almost sixty years) of Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*.

Of the five translations, one fully adhered to the form of Carroll’s poem: Čížková used the same iambic meter as Carroll – three tetrameters and a trimeter (4-4-4-3). Císař adheres to it almost as strictly, with a slight irregularity in the first/last stanza where he changes the last verse to a tetrameter. In these two identical stanzas, he also adds an unstressed syllable to the first and third lines, changing it to a double (feminine) rhyme. This extension is used even more often in the remaining three translations and is quite common in Czech translations of iambic poetry. It is considered acceptable because iambic verses are often perceived as trochees with anacrusis in Czech anyway, due to the natural stress which falls on the first syllable of each word.

Pinkava changed the scheme to four tetrameters (4-4-4-4) in three stanzas (3, 4, 6), Žák did so in all stanzas. Both of them also used the double rhyme more often. The Skoumals decided to replace the scheme with a trochee pentameter in all lines.

As to the rhyme structure, all translations eliminated the ABCB scheme in Carroll’s stanzas 3, 5 and 6, using a rhyme ending in each verse. This corresponds to the tradition in Czech poetry for children, where rhyming plays an important role. Most of them used the ABAB scheme in all stanzas; Žák was the only one to change it to AABB; also, the quality of his rhymes is poorer due to a higher occurrence of grammatical rhymes: “seděl-věděl” (sat-knew), “mával-dával”

(waved-gave), “leží-běží” (lies-runs). As a result, the rhyming of his version sounds almost like that of a rather naive poem written by a child.

The two main differences that can be traced in the translations concern (1) the syntactic and morphological soundness of the poem, (2) the use of neologisms, i.e. their frequency and the mechanism of their creation.

Firstly, the basic criterion for assessing the translations is inevitably their linguistic soundness. Many scholars pointed out that while ostensibly nonsensical, the poem strictly adheres to the rules of English syntax and grammar, thus allowing Alice to comprehend it in a certain way: Nida and Taber (1982: 34–35) use Jabberwocky to prove that “grammar has meaning”, and Alice confirms it herself in the book: “...However, *somebody* killed *something*: that’s clear, at any rate –”. It is solely the lexical level of language that is disrupted.

For a translator, it is essential to be aware of this fact. The sentences should be syntactically and morphologically correct in the target language. The same applies to grammatical words, pronouns, conjunctions etc., and even some of the semantic words are existing words of the language in question. Otherwise, the comprehensibility mentioned above can hardly be achieved. The nonce words – their part of speech and their form – have to be created to fit into this sentence structure.

The systemic difference between Czech as a highly inflectional, synthetical language with free word order, and English with its analytical nature, must be observed in the process of translation. However, this poses surprisingly little problem. In both languages, it is easy to decide whether the text is grammatically transparent, and whether the morphological forms are used correctly for the respective functions.

Both Císař and the Skoumals fully succeeded in this respect. Their poems read fluently and the grammar is impeccable, although Císař – like Carroll (see “hast though slain”) – opted for slightly archaized forms in some cases, so that inexperienced readers may be in doubt: e.g. “lita soka” instead of “litého soka” (the veritable enemy) was a form of accusative common in Czech poetry of the 19th century. Čížková’s syntax and grammar are good, arguably with two slight inconsistencies in the use of past transgressives. Žák manages to produce a grammatical text at the cost of simplifying the ‘story’. Pinkava is the least successful in making the poem grammatical: his “průvratná byla bokřavova” (both *průvratná* and *bokřav(a)* being neologisms, standing for *mimsy* and *borogoves*, respectively; *byla* = [she] was) has to be read as predication (“*bokřavova* was *průvratná*”, approximately ‘a borogove was mimsy’); however, “bokřavova” does not have the nominative ending required in a subject: it resembles a possessive form

(“bokřav’s” or “bokřava’s”) and does not fit in the sentence pattern. Elsewhere, a plausible syntactical reading can be found only with extreme effort, and it could be suspected that it was not intended by the translator at all.

Second, as mentioned above, Carroll’s word coinages are the other touchstone of the translations. Carroll creates new, nonsensical, nonce words, but – together with the explanations Humpty Dumpty gives to Alice – he offers his readers a fair picture of word formation in a language: some words are derivations (“brillig” from *broiling*, according to Humpty Dumpty), some are formed by combining two words, like compounds or blendings (lithey+slimy = “slithy”), and some are of unknown/unmotivated origin (“toves”). In the translation by the Skoumals, there is not a single unmotivated coinage, and most of them are blendings and compounds. Czech has almost no history of blendings, and the ones they introduced are very skillful; however, the number of compounds inevitably results in a relatively high number of long words (“tesknoskuhravě” from the Czech words for *wistfully+moaning*; “šumohvizdně” from *murmur+whistling*). In fact, this may have been the reason why the Skoumals decided to expand the meter to five feet. The high number of compounds may have been intended to make the poem more amusing for children as they can easily decompose and understand the unusually long words. However, the poem is less sophisticated than the original in illustrating how language works.

As to the other translations, Čížková and Císař show a good feeling for word formation, while Žák substantially reduces the overall number of coinages in the poem (he has, for example, not one in the third stanza, leaving out “vorpál”, “manxome”, and “Tumtum”).

The translation by Jaroslav Císař is a representative Czech translation. Císař managed to create an equivalent of Carroll’s poem, with some archaized word forms (“lita”, “strastna”) and an occasional inversion that also invokes the atmosphere of old poems (“svůj chopil vorpálový meč” – literally: “his [he] seized vorpál sword”). The word “ves” used in the sense ‘all’ does not exist in Czech anymore but it reminds of 19th century poems that were written to emphasize the old Slavic tradition. In the passage where Humpty Dumpty explains the new words to Alice, Císař successfully adjusts the text to his coinages. In the explanation of his nonce verb “batoumati se”, which he relates to the verbs “batoliti se” (to toddle) and “cloumati” (to batter/shake), he further elaborates on it in the style of etymological dictionaries when Humpty Dumpty adds a “rejected alternative”: “Some scholars maintain that it originated in the French ‘bateau’ [...] and that it therefore means to walk in a swinging manner like a ship, but that is not correct.”

Translations into Czech

- Carroll, Lewis. *Ža zrcadlem a co tam Alenka našla* [Behind the Looking-Glass and what Alenka found there]. Part of *Alenčina dobrodružství v říši divů a za zrcadlem* [Alenka's adventures in the realm of wonders and behind the Looking-Glass]. Transl. Jaroslav Císař. Prague: Fr. Borový, 1931.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Ža zrcadlem a s čím se tam Alenka setkala* [Behind the Looking-Glass and what Alenka encountered there]. Part of *Alenka v kraji divů a za zrcadlem* [Alenka in the land of wonders and behind the Looking-Glass]. Transl. Aloys Skoumal and Hana Skoumalová. Prague: SNDK, 1961.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Lovení Snárka* [The Hunting of the Snark]. Transl. Václav Z. J. Pinkava. Brno: Host, 2008. (Translation of Jabberwocky – Hromoplkie – added on pp. 117–119.)
- Carroll, Lewis. *Ža zrcadlem a co tam Alenka našla* [Behind the Looking-Glass and what Alenka found there]. Part of *Alenčina dobrodružství v kraji divů a za zrcadlem* [Alenka's adventures in the land of wonders and behind the Looking-Glass]. Transl. Helena Čížková. Prague: Nakladatelství XYZ, 2015.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Ža zrcadlem a co tam Alenka našla* [Behind the Looking-Glass and what Alenka found there]. Part of *Alenčina dobrodružství v kraji divů a za zrcadlem* [Alenka's adventures in the land of wonders and behind the Looking-Glass]. Transl. Jiří Žák. Prague: Nakladatelství XYZ, 2017.

Secondary Sources

- Nida, Eugene A. and Charles R. Taber (1982). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.