

Danish

Jabberwocky

Et slidigt gravben vridrede
i brumringen på tidvis plent,
og lappingen var vaklig, og
det borte grøfgrin grent.

“Min søn, pas godt på Jabberwock!
Han river, og hans tand er hvas.
Pas på den onde jubjub-fugl
Og gribbekloens krads. ”

Han søgte længe fjendens spor
med sværd i hånd og meget mod
og rasted siden tankefuld
ved tumtumtræets fod.

Men mens han grod og stublede
jog gennem skoven glammende
den frygtelige Jabberwock
med øjet flammende.

Da svang han sværdet, en, to, tre!
og ho’det røg af troldens krop,
og med det døde monstrum gik
det hjemad i galop.

“Oh, har du fældet Jabberwock!
Vær priset, søn, for dåd og dyd.
Hurra for denne glædesdag!”
Han vrinsked højt af fryd.

Et slidigt gravben vridrede
i brumringen på tidvis plent,
og lappingen var vaklig, og
det borte grøfgrin grent.

Mogens Jermin Nissen

Kjeld Elfelt and Mogens Jermiin Nissen's Danish Translation of "Jabberwocky"

Anna Wegener

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* has been translated into Danish three times: in 1946 by Kjeld Elfelt (1902-1993), in 2005 by Vibeke Eskesen (b. 1944) and Peter Poulsen (1940 - 2024), and in 2015 by Christiane Rohde (b. 1944). Elfelt's and Rohde's translations were published together with the two translators' respective versions of *Alice in Wonderland*, whereas Eskesen and Poulsen's translation is generally considered a sequel to Ejgil Søholm's version of the first *Alice* book from 2000. There also exists a Danish translation of Tony Ross' adaptation of *Through the Looking-Glass*, translated by Hanne Leth and Jørn E. Albert in 1993.

Of the three translations, Elfelt's version is generally considered the standard Danish one. When it was issued by the publishing house Thorkild Becks Forlag in autumn 1946, it was praised as a landmark translation that elevated Carroll's work to the status of a children's classic in Denmark. Elfelt had a university degree in literary history and was a highly prolific writer, editor, journalist and translator. He is credited with more than 200 translations of books from English, German, French, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Estonian and Latin. Elfelt was particularly active as a cultural mediator between Denmark and Sweden. The majority of his translations are from Swedish, and he corresponded with several of the Swedish authors whose work he translated, such as Karin Boye and Fritiof Nilsson Piraten. Early in his career, he also published articles in Swedish literary journals about modern Danish poetry.

Elfelt did not translate Carroll's poems, however. These translations were

instead the work of Mogens Jermiin Nissen (1906-1972), a Danish librarian, poet and musician. Nissen published a number of collections of poetry in the 1920s and again in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, however, he is primarily famous for his musical scores. He wrote the scores for Harald H. Lund's lullaby *Elefantens vuggevis* (The lullaby of the elephant) familiar to every Danish child and several of Halfdan Rasmussen's poems.

Nevertheless, Nissen's translation of "Jabberwocky" has also earned him a place in Danish literary history. Later translators of Carroll's work have reused Nissen's version in appreciation of the high quality of the translation. It thus appears in both Leth and Albert's translation of Ross' adaptation and in Rohde's recent retranslation. In both of these cases, Nissen is credited as the translator of Carroll's poems.

This kind of intertextuality clearly shows how translations not only relate to their source texts but also to other texts in the target language, in this case previous translations of the same source text. However, in the case of "Jabberwocky" there is yet another kind of intertextuality at play in that the Danish translation is undoubtedly inspired by Gösta Knutsson's Swedish version from 1945. One might even say that it is partly an indirect translation from Swedish. I will first describe "Jabberwocky" in Danish and then briefly point out some of the conspicuous similarities between this text and the Swedish translation (see Björn Sundmark's contribution to this volume).

The first stanza probably cannot be credited to Nissen alone. It is likely that the two translators collaborated on this part of the translation, since it had to correspond to Humpty Dumpty's interpretation of "Jabberwocky" in chapter VI as translated by Elfelt. Nissen/Elfelt render "twas brillig" as "i brumringen", which to Danish ears sounds like "i skumringen", meaning "at dusk." Humpty Dumpty adds that the expression refers not only to this time of the day, but also to that fact that one is usually busy preparing dinner when dusk arrives: "så bruner man jo middagsmaden, og ilden brummer under gryderne ..." ("one browns, you know, one's dinner, and the fire hums under the pots ...", italics in the original). Nissen/Elfelt translate "the slithy toves" as "et slidigt gravben", thereby transforming Carroll's plural creatures into a singular one in Danish. In fact, all of the odd species named in the first stanza are translated with nonsense nouns in the singular form. "Gravben" looks like a compound noun containing the word elements "grav" ("grave") and "ben" ("bone"). However, Humpty Dumpty tells Alice that a "gravben" is a mixture of two creatures, "en grævling" ("a badger") and "et firben" ("a lizard"), while "slidigt" refers to the fact that the creature is both "slimet" ("slimy") and "smidigt" ("lithe"). To explain the mechanism whereby

two words are fused to form a new word – Carroll’s “portmanteau” – Humpty Dumpty provides the striking example of the word “pelikanariefugl”, created by the fusion of the words “pelikan” (“pelican”) and “kanariefugl” (“canary”).

Nissen/Elfelt formed most of the nonsense words in the first stanza by blending partly overlapping words. They did not translate “gyre”, but rendered “gimble” as “vridre”, meaning – according to Humpty Dumpty – “at bore og vride sig som et vridbor” (“to drill and twist oneself like a gimlet”). Alice construes “på tidvis plent” to mean “pladsen og plænen omkring soluret, der jo viser tiden” (“the place and lawn around the sun dial that shows the time”). In Humpty Dumpty’s interpretation, the other two creatures found in the first stanza, “lappingen” and “grøfgrin[et]”, are respectively a bird that looks like “en levende svaber ... af lapper og klude” (“a live mop ... of scraps and rags”) and a green pig that says “øf” (“oink”). However, the nonsense noun “grøfgrin” also carries connotations of fun and laughter – “et grin” in Danish means “a laugh”.

Throughout the poem, Nissen preserves the rhyming qualities of the original. He employs the ABCB-pattern throughout, whereas Carroll alternated this pattern with the ABAB-scheme. The rhymes are clear and strong (e.g. “mod”-“fod”, “glammende”-“flammende”, “krop”-“galop”) and there are plenty of ear-catching alliterations (e.g. “grøfgrin grent”, gribbekloens krads”, “meget mod”). There are fewer nonsense words in the translation as compared to the English source text. In fact, only the first (and the last) stanzas are dense with nonsensical expressions that perplex the reader. Some scattered nonsense elements can be found in stanzas two and three, where Nissen carries the words “Jabberwock”, “Jubjub” and “Tumtum” over into the translation, as well as in stanza four where he translates “as in uffish thought he stood” as “mens han grod og stublede”. This sounds funny in Danish, as if someone had stumbled over his or her words. It is in fact a spoonerism, in that the first two letters of “grod” have been transposed from “stublede” and vice versa (“stod og grublede” is the idiomatic Danish expression for being “deep in thought”, literally, “stood and pondered”). As for the rest of the poem, Carroll’s nonsense words have consistently been neutralized: e.g. Nissen translates “shun / the frumious Bandersnatch” in stanza two as “pas på [...] / gribbekloens krads” (“beware of the scratch of the vulture’s claw”), and renders “his vorpal sword in hand” in stanza three quite plainly as “med sværd i hånd” (“with sword in hand”).

In stanza five, the body of the monstrous creature is described as “trollens krop” (“the body of the troll”). By making this choice, Nissen links the Jabberwock to Scandinavian folklore and orients his translation towards the sphere of children’s literature. Nissen adds a drop of humour to his text by rendering “chortled in his

joy” in stanza six as “vrinsked højt af fryd” (literally “neighed with joy”), thereby turning the hero into a horselike figure.

The Danish translation of the first stanza is quite similar to Knutsson’s Swedish translation. In contrast, the rest of the poem is relatively autonomous from the Swedish version with the exception, perhaps, of the spoonerism in stanza four and lexical choices such as “glædesdag” in stanza six. It might therefore be hypothesized that the similarities are related to Elfelt’s involvement in this part of the translation, since his rendering of Humpty Dumpty’s explanations is very similar to Knutsson’s version. Knutsson’s brilliant translation of “portmanteau” as “pelikanariefågel” crops up in the Danish translation, a fact which reveals that Elfelt must have been familiar with the Swedish version and partly used it as an aid when drafting his translation of *Through the Looking-Glass*.

In some instances, the Danish translation improves on the Swedish one, as when Nissen/Elfelt translates “brillig” as “brumringen”, a word suggesting the arrival of dusk, instead of Knutsson’s “bryningen”, which makes Alice think the word has something to do with the break of dawn. However, even the choice to use “brumringen” could have been inspired by Knutsson. The latter has Humpty Dumpty say that it is the time of day when “man börjar bryna steken till middagen” (“one begins to brown the steak for dinner”), an explanation that appears in a slightly modified version in the Danish text. Elfelt adds that the word also comes from the humming sound of the fire under the pots (“at brumme” in Danish), but this addition is not strictly necessary to coin “brumringen” and could instead reveal Elfelt’s tendency to expand and embroider on Knutsson’s version. Other tell-tale words and expressions that point to a reliance on Knutsson’s work are “slidig” (Swedish: “slidig”), “på tidvis plent” (Swedish: “på solvis ples”), “lappingen” (Swedish: “lumpingen”), and the fact that the names of the strange creatures in the first stanza are translated with nonsense nouns in the singular form.

The 1946 edition of Elfelt’s Danish translation was, just like the Swedish one, illustrated by Robert Högfelt. In later editions, Högfelt’s illustrations were replaced by drawings by John Tenniel. Chapter VI of the 1946 Danish translation presents a drawing by Högfelt showing a “slithy tove.” This image fits both Knutsson’s and Elfelt/Nissen’s systematic preference for nonsense words in the singular form. However, the choice to use Tenniel’s illustrations in later editions in the place of Högfelt’s created a discrepancy between text and image. Tenniel’s illustration for chapter six presents several specimens of the strange creatures mentioned in the first stanza, which makes it consistent with Carroll’s nonsense nouns in the plural form and not with Elfelt/Nissen’s in the singular.

Translations into Danish

- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice i Æventyrland og Bag Spejlet*. Transl. Kjeld Elfelt. Poems translated by Mogens Jermiin Nissen. Ill. Robert Högfeldt. Copenhagen: Thorkild Becks Forlag, 1946.
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- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice i Eventyrland & Gennem spejlet*. Transl. Christiane Rohde. Poems transl. Mogens Jermiin Nissen & Christiane Rohde. Ill. Lewis Carroll. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde, 2015.