

# Some uffish thoughts on the Swedish translations of “Jabberwocky”

**Björn Sundmark**

Malmö University

[bjorn.sundmark@mah.se](mailto:bjorn.sundmark@mah.se)

## Abstract

*In this article the “translatability” (and/or untranslatability) of nonsense is addressed. For this purpose, five Swedish versions of Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) are examined: the vocabulary, the syntax, the metre and rhythm, as well as the poem’s contextual framing, here mainly understood as the narrative in which Jabberwocky is embedded. Attention is also paid to the generic and stylistic context of the poem, and the corpus of Swedish translations. Such an exegesis is warranted by the status of Jabberwocky both as a seminal work of nonsense and as a translation showpiece. Influential critics, from Elizabeth Sewall (1952) to Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1994) have used “Jabberwocky” as a key nonsense text. And even when it is to question whether “Jabberwocky” is a good example or not – Michael Heyman, for instance, argues that “Jabberwocky” is something of an “outlier” in the realm of nonsense since its nonsense is linguistic rather than logical (2015) – it remains a defining nonsense text. Moreover, it is also a pivotal text in translation history. Indeed, because of the perceived difficulties in translating it, “Jabberwocky” has rightfully been called “the holy grail of translation” (Heyman 2015), something that is borne out by the large number of studies devoted to it, such as Pilar Orero’s 2007 monograph of several Spanish versions of “Jabberwocky”. What I bring to this critical discussion is empirical material that has not been brought to light before (the Swedish translations), and a new perspective.*

*Keywords: Jabberwocky, nonsense, translatability, Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass, Swedish.*

## 1. Introduction

In this article I am going to address the issue of translating humour – or, to be more specific, the “translatability” (and/or untranslatability) of nonsense humour. For this purpose, I will examine five Swedish versions of Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). I will ask, simply, “what has been translated?” and go on to examine the texts on the level of text – the vocabulary, syntax, and metre of “Jabberwocky”, its generic and stylistic characteristics – as well as its context, here

mainly understood as the Alice-narrative in which “Jabberwocky” is embedded. This last point is particularly important to my argumentation: “Jabberwocky” is integral to *Through the Looking Glass*, its nonsense effects depend on the ways in which Alice receives it, and on Humpty Dumpty’s “explanation” of it. To treat “Jabberwocky” as a discrete text is certainly a possibility, but by cutting off the contextual links a great deal of (non)sense will be lost. The reason why “Jabberwocky”, and the metatextual discussion of it in *Through the Looking Glass*, lends itself well to such an analysis is, as I see it, that it is a seminal work, both as a nonsense text and as a translation showpiece. Influential critics, from Elizabeth Sewell (1952) to Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1994) have used “Jabberwocky” as a key nonsense text. And even when it is to question whether “Jabberwocky” is a good example or not – Michael Heyman, for instance, argues that “Jabberwocky” is something of an “outlier” in the realm of nonsense since its nonsense is linguistic rather than logical (2015) – it seems destined to remain a defining nonsense text. Moreover, it also a pivotal text in translation history. Indeed, because of the perceived difficulties in translating it, “Jabberwocky” has rightfully been called “the holy grail of translation” (Heyman 2015), something that is borne out by the large number of studies devoted to it, such as Pilar Orero’s 2007 monograph of several Spanish versions of “Jabberwocky”. What I bring to this critical discussion is empirical material that has not been brought to light before: the Swedish translations.

So, having stood a while in “uffish thought” I now set out for that holy grail, “Jabberwocky”, while brandishing my vorpal sword.

## 2. “Jabberwocky” in the context of *Through the Looking Glass* (and beyond)

In the first chapter of *Through the Looking Glass* Alice finds a book, which she at first is unable to decipher: “she turned over the leaves, to find some part that she could read, ‘–for it’s all in some language I don’t know,’ she said to herself” (Carroll 1871: 20). This is followed by a single word followed by four lines of text – all of it reversed. However, when Alice realizes that the text is inverted she turns the book towards a glass and is able to read it, even if she still does not understand the meaning of many of the words. She thinks that it is “pretty” but also “rather hard to understand”, and she concludes: “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas–only I don’t exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something*: that’s clear at any rate–”<sup>1</sup>(Carroll 1871: 24). It is interesting to note that Alice treats the text as language/literature even before she understands a single word, her initial understanding being close to that of someone encountering a foreign alphabet. The words may be incomprehensible but the spatial ordering of the signs signifies written language. In the next move, Alice is able to “translate” most of the text into readable English by inverting the text. She seems to grasp the gist of it – somebody kills something; moreover, it fills her head with vague ideas, and she thinks it is pretty. I suspect that almost all novice language learners have had similar experiences of having just enough knowledge to understand what a text is about, even when missing every other word. And what is lacking in comprehension is made up by the experience of novelty and fascination that the new language carries with it.

The events of “Jabberwocky” are told in the past tense in chronological sequence. It employs a third person perspective. The first and last verses are identical; they set the scene, and establish a status quo before and after the action. Such repetition of an entire stanza as refrain is a conventional ballad trait. The second verse contains an admonition in direct discourse to the hero to be careful on his (implied) quest. This verse has a counterpart in the second to last verse, in which the hero is lauded for his victory. In verse three the hero sets

out, in verse four he encounters the Jabberwock, and in verse five he kills it and returns home. Thus, the three verses in the centre of the poem contain all the action.

In contrast to the conventional verse form, as well as the simple syntax and the straightforward storyline, the vocabulary of the poem is both innovative and challenging. The first stanza consists almost entirely of neologisms (11!) strung together by ordinary English articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. But meaning is still produced. Since the epic ballad structure provides a meaningful framework together with the normal sentence structure and the known words, it is possible to determine which word class the new words belong to, and guess what they mean. The new words are all highly suggestive, and, as Alice might have said, they “fill your head with ideas”. Later, when Humpty Dumpty explains the first stanza of “Jabberwocky”, the reader (and Alice) is given a demonstration of just how such verbal suggestiveness might work. It helps too that the other stanzas are less lexically demanding. Instead of eleven new words in four lines (twelve with the title), the other stanzas only carry two to five nonsense words per quatrain, something that of course facilitates reading comprehension.

In the narrative as a whole “Jabberwocky” serves several purposes. The episode is introduced rather randomly soon after Alice has arrived in Looking Glass house. Invisible, she has manipulated the writing of the White King. But when she sees the book with “Jabberwocky” she promptly loses interest in her self-appointed role as a royal scribe. This marks the beginning of the first “Jabberwocky” interlude. But soon this is over too: “‘But oh!’ thought Alice, suddenly jumping up, ‘If I don’t make haste I shall have to go back through the Looking Glass, before I have seen what the rest of the house is like!’” (Carroll 1871: 24-25). Thus, in the narrative, the episode serves as bridge. At the beginning of it, Alice is not yet quite part of Looking Glass land. She is invisible and much larger than its regular inhabitants. She is also still in her house, albeit a mirror version of it. One could argue that the fairy-tale-like theme of the poem and Tenniel’s full-page illustration of the battle between the boy and the Jabberwock set the stage for Carroll’s fairy tale. One could also say that Alice’s different whims (forcing the King’s hand, deciphering “Jabberwocky”, running out of the house) foreshadow what will happen in the upcoming chess game. There too Alice will engage in a quest of sorts (winning the game), and during her progress across the board questions about language and meaning are crucial. In that respect, “Jabberwocky” is a central text.

The poem would have been important even if it had not been brought up again, but when Alice asks Humpty Dumpty to explain “Jabberwocky” to her in chapter six, further meaning is attached to it.

“You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir”, said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called ‘Jabberwocky?’”

“Let’s hear it”, said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that were ever invented – and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet”.

(Carroll 1871: 126)

Of course, “Jabberwocky” is not the only Alice verse to receive commentary, or which serves an important function in the narrative, but the critical attention given to “Jabberwocky” by Alice and Humpty Dumpty is unprecedented. Actually, one could say that the explanations and translations become part of what “Jabberwocky” is; they are as indispensable to our experience of the poem as the verses themselves. I have already argued that this is a major reason why “Jabberwocky” should not be analysed as a discrete text, but my point here is that the translator/interpreter is also a source of nonsense. Here, one is reminded of Daniela Almansi’s observation that translation can be “integrated in the narrative and explicitly exploited to produce more nonsense” (2015: 58). In her discussion of John

Taylor's "Sir Gregory Nonsense his Newes from No Place" from 1623 she notes that the fictional translator of that poem fulfills the function of an "unreliable narrator" (ibid.). Now, Humpty Dumpty may not be the narrator, but he is certainly an unreliable translator, and his explanations produce more nonsense, as do all subsequent attempts at "translating" the poem, whether to English (in learned annotations) or into other languages. Translation makes for the proliferation of nonsense.

Alice repeats the first stanza before she is interrupted by Humpty Dumpty. He then translates the "hard words" for her. Some of them are what Humpty Dumpty calls portmanteau words, "two meanings packed up into one word" (27), such as "slithy" (lithe and slimy) and "mimsy" (flimsy and miserable). Others are clever coinages, for instance making verbs out of existing nouns: gyre (from gyroscope) and gimble (from gimblet), or contractions and re-combinations, such as "mome" ("from **home**") and "wabe" ("**way** beyond"). Of these, the portmanteau words have received by far the most attention by critics. From a nonsense perspective, however, some of the other neologisms are more interesting (being less obvious), such as the explanation that "*Brillig* means four o'clock in the afternoon, when you begin *broiling* things for dinner" (126). There are also explanations that seem entirely gratuitous like "toves are something like badgers – they're something like lizards – and they're something like corkscrews" and "also that they make their nests under sun-dials – also they live on cheese" (128). Words like "borogove" ("a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round – something like a live mop"), "rath" ("a sort of green pig"), and "outgrabe" ("something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle"), are also interesting, since they are more nonsensical than linguistically clever. Admittedly, it is possible to identify "rath" as a noun and "outgrabe" as a verb in the past tense (and "out" in "outgrabe" carries conventional meaning), but the morphemes "rath" and "grabe" can imply any noun and any verb respectively. Again, this is not to say that they do not carry associations (to "wrath", "wraith"; "groan", "gripe", etc., etc.), but these would be endlessly connotative, not denotative in nature.

Eleven of "Jabberwocky"'s neologisms are to be found in the opening (and closing) stanza. But there are another seventeen "hard words" in the rest of the poem. These words remain unexplained in the text itself – some appear to be portmanteaus or puns; others seem entirely nonsensical. There are also words that may be onomatopoeic in nature, such as "snicker-snack", and "Callooh! Callay!", a word formation category not mentioned by Humpty Dumpty, although the "hard words" in stanzas 2 through 6 are left to the reader to interpret. Depending on your knowledge of English, and your linguistic creativity, you will be jabberwockied differently – at least if you keep to the original text.

If the context of the poem is expanded beyond its function in *Through the Looking Glass*, there is a great deal more to go by, however. In 1855 Lewis Carroll wrote the pastiche "A Stanza of Anglo-Saxon poetry" for the amusement of his brothers and sisters (Gardner 1960). After some minor modifications this "fragment" was later adopted as the first quatrain of "Jabberwocky". Carroll appended a glossary to the fragment explaining the difficult words, much in the manner of Humpty Dumpty, although not always in agreement with his interpretations. For me (as I would imagine for a translator) the most interesting piece of information here is that Carroll's first impulse towards what would become "Jabberwocky" was to create a text that gave the impression of being old, archaic even. The very first word of the poem, "'Twas", signals a high poetic and old-fashioned register, even by Victorian standards; it is likely that it evoked associations with ancient, obsolete language. Martin Gardner's annotations to "Jabberwocky" (191-195) show that some of its nonsense words in fact had a pre-existence in the English language before Carroll. This is for example true of "gyre", "gimble", and "mimsy". We cannot know whether Carroll consciously gave them renewed currency or just happened to re-invent them. Regardless, words like these resonate

not only in that first “Anglo-Saxon stanza”, but throughout “Jabberwocky”, giving it an old English atmosphere. Carroll, moreover, continued to express an interest in Anglo-Saxon vocabulary even after he had expanded the poem into the “Jabberwocky” of *Through the Looking Glass*. In a letter, he writes that “the Anglo-Saxon word ‘wocer’ or ‘wocor’ signifies ‘offspring’ or ‘fruit’” (Gardner 1960: 195). Moreover, the ballad form, manifested already in that first, single stanza, has been associated with Medieval literature ever since the publication of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). The completed “Jabberwocky” poem actually strengthens the medieval connotations. The first fragment/stanza is merely descriptive, whereas folk narratives are usually more action driven. It can be added that the monster-slaying motif of “Jabberwocky” can be found in many medieval epics and ballads, as well as in medievalist-revivalist writings of the Romantic era.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Carroll revisited the island of the Jubjub bird and the lexicon of “Jabberwocky” once more in his 1876 nonsense epic *The Hunting of the Snark*, a work (he writes) “to some extent connected with the lay of the Jabberwock”. The fact that Carroll uses the ballad term “lay” shows that he continued to think of it in terms of medieval balladry. Carroll then proceeds to give instruction on how to pronounce some of the words in “Jabberwocky”, eight of which are actually used again in *The Hunting of the Snark*: “Jabberwock”, “Bandersnatch”, “Jubjub bird”, “frumious”, “chortle”, “galumphing”, “mimsy”, and “beamish”. And in a discussion of the word “frumious” he confirms Humpty Dumpty’s theory of portmanteau words. There are some further points of comparison. Both “Jabberwocky” and *The Hunting of the Snark* are quests and make use of the medieval ballad form – but where the former is successful and comic, the latter ends in tragic defeat. Both are nonsensical too, but where the nonsense in “Jabberwocky” is largely linguistic, *The Hunting of the Snark* is more existential and absurd in nature.

I now turn to the Swedish translations.

### 3. The Swedish translations

*Alice in Wonderland* was first translated into Swedish 1870 by Emily Nonnen; it was the third translation after the French and the German (both 1869). Since 1945 *Alice in Wonderland* has been continuously in print in Sweden, and often in several competing editions. I have examined this translation and publication history in detail elsewhere (2015a; 2015b). And in yet another work I have analyzed the Swedish Alices through the lens of the retranslation hypothesis, and discussed the idea of “longue durée” in relation to translation, that is, the possible implications of having a specific work in translation over an extended period of time (Sundmark 2014). However, while *Alice in Wonderland* has been available in more than ten complete translations, and appeared in numerous editions, the same cannot be said about *Through the Looking Glass*. The first translation, by Louise Arosenius, was published in 1899; it has since been followed by four complete translations, the most recent one from 2015. Perhaps the most graphic way of bringing out the widely different impact of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* in Sweden is to compare the number of editions over the entire publication period (1870-2015). Such a comparison reveals a 10 to 1 ratio in favour of *Alice in Wonderland*. In other words, in Sweden Alice is primarily a Wonderland phenomenon. By extension, this means that the status of “Jabberwocky” as a canonical poem is less assured than one might expect in a Swedish context. (At least this would have been true until Tim Burton’s 2010 *Alice in Wonderland*, with its heavy featuring of that poem.)

The five complete Swedish translations of *Through the Looking Glass* are, in chronological order: Louise Arosenius (1899), Gösta Knutsson (1945), Eva Håkanson (1963),

Harry Lundin (1977), Eva Westman, and Karin Sandberg (2015). Arosenius was the first to translate both Alice books into Swedish (separately). There were no second editions. Almost fifty years later Gösta Knutsson was engaged as translator for the 1945 prestige publication of both Alice books in one volume. It was a large format book (octavo) printed on quality paper, and furnished with lavish illustrations by Robert Högfeltdt. This publication marks the elevation of the Alice books to classic status in Sweden. The next translation is by Eva Håkanson; in all likelihood her *Through the Looking Glass* was commissioned by the publisher to complement an older translation of *Alice in Wonderland*. The subsequent translation, by Harry Lundin, has proven the most durable of all the Swedish translations, at least in terms of editions; it has been used in five different editions (Sundmark 2015b). The most recent version of *Through the Looking Glass* by Eva Westman (prose) and Karin Sandberg (verses) was prompted by the international “Robert Ingpen’s Classics” venture.

I will now analyze these translations. For practical reasons (page space) I present the six versions (the original followed by the five translations) in two tables with three columns each.

“Jabberwocky” (Carroll 1871)	“Jabberwocky” (Arosenius 1899)	“Jabberwocky” (Knutsson 1945)
’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe	Det brynigt var, och slidig måv på vägarn muntert gyrade. Slank var hvarenda borogåv, och villa grunen hyrade.	En slidig ödling borvlade i bryningen på solvis ples. Och lumpingen var brynklig, och den villa gruten fnes.
“Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch! Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun The frumious Bandersnatch!”	“För Jabberwock tag dig i akt, För bett, som dödar, klo så hvass! Fly Jubjub-fågeln, var på vakt Mot Bandersgripens lömska tass!”	Ack, akta dig för Jabberwock! Han biter och han klöser hårt! Och jubjubfågeln är så hemsk, Och gripen griper svårt!
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.	Han tog sitt väpnarsvärd i hand Och spejade och spanade. Så kom han till ett tumtum-träd, Där tyst en stund han stannade.	Han tog sitt stridssvärd fast i hand Och sökte länge fienden. Så kom han till ett tumtumträd, Stod där rätt länge sen.
And, as in uffish thought he stood, The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame, Came whiffling through the tulgey wood, And burbled as it came!	Men bäst han stod där, ljud ett skri, Och öfver skogbevuxen däld Kom Jabberwock på luftig stråt, Och ögat lyste som af eld.	Han stod där, gränkte, tubblade. Då kom med väldigt eldig blick igenom skogen Jabberwock Med girigt vilddjurslick.
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.	Ett, tu! Ett, tu! Hans väpnarsvärd vilddjurets hjärtblod druckit har. Till hemmet skyndar han med hast, ty “Jabberwocky” slagen var.	Ett, två! Ett, två! Han högg och högg Han högg med svärdet kors och tvärs! Ett huvud som trofé – så kom han hem i nästa vers.
“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy! O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!” He chortled in his joy.	”Har Jabberwock du fält, min son? Kom i min famn, min hjälte god! O, sköna dag! Hurra, hurra!” Han jublar högt i fadersfröjd.	Och har du dödat Jabberwock? Kom i min famn, min gosse god! O, glädjedag! Hurra, hurra! Hurra för mannamod!

“Tjatterslånet” (Håkanson 1963)	“Tjatterskott” (Lundin 1977)	“Jabberwocky” (Strandberg 2015)
Vid grilltock när de smiga gropp de snuck och spack på visotass. Helt jämrig då var skrangelmopp och grösen mommande bölsvass.	Det bryning var, och slimiga tovar i styckern gyrade och norrade. Smändiga var alla borogovar, och vilna rator skorrade.	’Det grafton var och prävlingar gräfsade och grav som propar. Snorpsna alla skrävlingar med mifräs stuvror tropar.
Sök skydd för Tjatterslån, min son, För bitska gap och snapparklor! Sky Jällonhök och fly ifrån Den hemska Haffagrip som glor	“För Tjatterskott se upp, min son, För tand som biter, klo så vass! Sky jubjubfågeln, fly ifrån Den vilskna banderryckens tass!”	“Se upp för Jabberwock, min son! För tand som hugger, klo så vass! Fly glubglubfågeln, löp ifrån Ondarg bandertjuses tass!”

<p>Han tog sitt hälfte svärd i hand Och sökte länge utan blund. Sen sov han i ett grönsaksland Och tänkte där en liten stund</p> <p>Då där han stod och grubblade Kom Tjatterslån med blick i brand. Den röt och ilskebubblade Och visade var spetsig tand.</p> <p>Han drog sitt hälfte svärd och svor Att utan snicksnack döda den. Det gjorde han, och sedan for Han i galoppens hem igen.</p> <p>Och har du dödat Tjatterslån? O, sabelfablig lyckodag! Kom i min famn, min tapperson, Så god och glitterglad är jag!</p>	<p>Han tog sitt stunga svärd i hand och irrade och snubblade. Så kom han till ett tamtramråd Och stod en stund och grubblade.</p> <p>Och bäst han stod där, ljud ett skrak, Och Tjatterskott med blick i brand Kom frustrande med väldigt brak Och visade varenda tand.</p> <p>Ett, två! Ett, två! Och in och ut Han stack sitt stunga svärd. Och Tjatterskottets huvud tog Han med till hemmets härd. [4343]</p> <p>“Du Tjatterskott har fällt, min son! Kom i min famn, mitt hjärtlingsgryn! O sköna dag! Hurra! Hurra! Han jublade mot skyn.</p>	<p>Han tog sitt grälska svärd i hand Och sökte länge ruskvild bast... Vid tamtramrådet rast han fann Och stod en stund i tankar fast.</p> <p>Och när försjunken så han stod kom Jabberwock med flamrött öga Skrumpande igenom straggig skod Och mummelbräkte i det höga!</p> <p>Ett, två! Ett, två! Gång på gång han stack sitt grälska svärd i basten, och dess huvud tog han med till hemmets härd.</p> <p>“Och har du “Jabberwocky” fällt min son? Kom i min famn, mitt hjältegryn! Åh, fantastulösa dag! Tallyhan! Tallyhon!” Han jublade mot skyn.</p>
--	---	---

The original “Jabberwocky” has a strong rhythm. The meter of the poem is iambic, with the occasional anapaest thrown in for good measure. Each quatrain has four verse feet per line (tetrameter), except for the concluding line, which has three (trimeter). A regular ballad stanza usually has a 4-3-4-3-pattern, but “Jabberwocky” is close enough with its 4-4-4-3-structure to approximate a basic folk ballad “beat”. Moreover, the rhyme scheme is ABAB, which is conventional in ballad poetry. Other phonological characteristics of the poem are sound repetitions, both in individual words, such as “Jubjub” and “Tumtum”, and in word units, such as “One, two! One, two! And through and through”. One can also find examples of alliteration (“the claws that catch”, “Callooh! Callay!”), and internal rhyming (“He left it dead, and with its head”). The syntax is uncomplicated and straightforward, tending towards parallel phrasal constructions (“Beware the Jabberwock... Beware the Jubjub bird...”).

Both Arosenius and Håkanson follow the iambic metre and the rhyme scheme of the original. However, where Carroll has three lines with four verse feet in each (tetrameter) followed by a line with only three stressed syllables (trimeter), they employ iambic tetrameter throughout. By contrast, Knutsson keeps Carroll’s metre intact: three lines of iambic tetrameter followed by one line in trimeter (4-4-4-3), but he simplifies the rhyme scheme, preferring an ABCB-pattern. Lundin and Strandberg are less assured versifiers than the first three. They often abandon the iambic metre altogether. For example, Lundin’s first verse, third line – “smändiga var alla borogovar” – has an initial dactyl followed by three iambs (the alternative scansion – initial trochee followed by four iambs – would give a redundant verse foot). Most of Lundin’s verses are in tetrameter, but in the fifth, the verse alternates between tetrameter and trimeter (4343), and in the penultimate verse he happens on Carroll’s pattern (4443). Strandberg also ignores the iambic beat now and again, as in the trochaic measure in “Ondarg bandertjuses tass” (verse two, fourth line), or when superfluous verse feet are added to a line as in “Skrumpande igenom straggig skod” (verse four, line three), or when a verse foot is deleted as in “han stack sitt grälska svärd” (fifth verse, second line). Both Lundin and Strandberg do adhere to Carroll’s rhyme scheme, however.

When it comes to other phonological repetitions one notes a number of alliterations in each version “spejade och spanade” (Arosenius), “gosse god” and “Ack, akta dig” (Knutsson), “god och glitterglad” (Håkanson), “blick i brand” (Lundin), and “gräfsade och grav” (Strandberg). The iteration of syllables and entire words and phrases in “Jabberwocky” – “Jubjub”, “tumtum”, “one two, one two, and through and through”, “Callooh! Callay!” – can

be seen to varying degrees in the Swedish translations. Arosenius, Knutsson, Lundin accept the word “jubjub” without changes, while Strandberg alters it to “glubglub”. Arosenius and Knutsson adopt “tumtum” as is, while Lundin and Strandberg change the spelling to “tamtam”, the effect of which is actually to make it sound more like the original. Håkanson is the only one who chooses to ignore the sound-repetitions of the words “jubjub” and “tumtum” altogether.

As for Carroll’s sound (and syntax) repetitions in verse five, most of the translators (Arosenius, Lundin, and Strandberg) translate the first set, the “One, two! One, two!”, but abandon the second verbal repetition, “through and through”. Again, Knutsson employs even more sound repetition than Carroll: “Ett, två! Ett, två! Han högg och högg / Han högg med svärdet kors och tvärs!” Thus he uses the word “högg” (to swing one’s sword) three times in a row. By contrast, Håkanson seemingly opts against repetition altogether. For in an ingenious recycling of the “snicker-snack” sound of the vorpal sword, Håkanson writes that the hero without “snicksnack” will kill it – “snicksnack” meaning chitchat in Swedish, but also referring to Carroll’s “snickersnack”. In other words, killing the beast without further ado. Maybe it can be taken as a comment on her translator’s practice as well, not to spend effort on “chitchat”, such as sound repetitions. These different stances towards sound repetition can also be witnessed in how the translators have dealt with the “Callooh! Callay!” exclamation. Arosenius and Lundin translate it with a double hooray: “hurra, hurra”. Knutsson, who enjoys repetition, adds a third hooray: “O, glädjedag! Hurra, hurra! / Hurra för mannamod!” By contrast, Håkanson chooses to describe the feelings rather than give vent to a double exclamation. Strandberg, on her part creates a repeated phonological exclamation with her “Tallyhan! Tallyhon!” Besides the (presumably) English fox-hunting connotations (“Tallyho”), and the similarity of the soundplay to “Callooh! Callay!” one wonders if the Swedish pronouns for he and she (“han” and “hon”) – here placed as suffixes – are intentional, and if so, why.

So far, I have chosen to discuss some of the 29 “hard words” in terms of their phonological properties, primarily. In the following table, all of the neologisms in “Jabberwocky” and their corresponding Swedish translations are displayed. Note that a hyphen indicates “no translation”. Words in square brackets imply that the translated word is in standard language (not “hard”, not nonsensical), or are new, but easily deciphered compounds. Two words in a single box means that a Carrollian neologism has given rise to two new words in translation.

<b>Carroll</b>	<b>Arosenius</b>	<b>Knutsson</b>	<b>Håkanson</b>	<b>Lundin</b>	<b>Strandberg</b>
”Jabberwocky”	”Jabberwocky”	”Jabberwocky”	Tjatterslån	Tjatterskott	”Jabberwocky”
brillig	brynigt	bryningen	grilltock	bryning	grafon
slithy	slidig	slidig	smiga	slimiga	-
toves	måv	ödling	gropp	tovar	prävingar, propar
gyre	gyrade	borvlade	snuck	gyrade	snorpsna
gimble	-	-	spack	norrade	gräfsade, grav
wabe	vägarn	<i>Solvis ples</i>	<i>visotass</i>	styckern	tropar
mimsy	-	brynlig	[jämrig]	smändiga	snorpsna
borogove	borogåv	lumpingen	skrangelmopp	borogovar	skrävlingar
mome	villa	villa	mommande	vilna	mifrås
raths	grunen	grutten	grösen	rator	stuvror
outgrabe	hyrade	fnes	bölsvass	skorrade	tropar
Jabberwock	Jabberwock	Jabberwock	Tjatterslån	Tjatterskott	Jabberwock(y)
Jubjub bird	Jubjub-fågeln	jubjubfågeln	Jällonhök	jubjubfågeln	glubglubfågeln
frumious	-	-	[hemska]	vilskna	ondarg
Bandersnatch	Bandersgripen	gripen	Haffagrip	banderryckens	bandertjuses

vorpall sword	[väpnarsvärd]	[stridssvärd]	hälfte svärd	stunga svärd	grälska svärd
manxome	-	-	-	-	ruskvild bast
Tumtum tree	Tumtum-träd	tumtumträd	[grönsaksland]	tamtamträd	tamtamträdet
uffish thought	-	gränkte, tubblade	[grubblade]	[grubblade]	[i tankar fast]
whiffling	-	-	-	frustrande	skrumpande
Tulgey wood	[skogbevuxen däld]	-	-	-	Straggig skod
burbled	[skri]	vilddjursslick	ilskeubblade	-	mummelbräkte
snicker-snack	-	[kors och tvärs]	[snicksnack]	-	-
galumphing	[skynda]	-	[galoppsan]	-	-
beamish boy	[hjalte god]	[gosse god]	[tapperson]	[hjärtlingsgryn]	[hjaltegryn]
frabjous day	[sköna dag]	[glädjedag]	sabelfabligh lyckodag	[sköna dag]	fantabulösa dag
Callooh! Callay!	[Hurra, hurra]	[Hurra, hurra]	-	[Hurra! Hurra!]	Tallyhan! Tallyhon!
chortled	[jublar högt]	-	[god och glitterglad]	[jublade]	[jublade]

Quantitatively, one can see a tendency to reduce the number of neologisms. Whereas the original “Jabberwocky” has 29 “new” words, Arosenius has 14, Knutsson 19, Håkanson 22, Lundin 21, and Strandberg 27. Across the board the retention rate is higher in the first stanza (10 or 11 out of 11), which is only to be expected since Humpty Dumpty’s explanations require them. But this means too that there is only space for another one or two new words per quatrain in the remaining five stanzas. And verses five and six in Arosenius and Knutsson are actually entirely without nonsense words. There is also a tendency to substitute nonsense words by new but simple compounds. Hence, instead of “beamish boy” we get “tapperson” [braveson] (Håkanson), “hjärtlingsgryn” [heart-pea] (Lundin), “hjaltegryn” [hero-pea] (Strandberg). Still, this is a step up from the conventional epithets of “hjalte god” [good hero] (Arosenius), and “gosse god” [good boy] (Knutsson). The overall effect of the reduction of the nonsense vocabulary is to make “Jabberwocky” more conventional. Another outcome is that the disparity between verse one and the rest of the poem, which is already pronounced in the original, becomes even greater in the Swedish translations, perhaps with the exception of Strandberg’s version.

The table also shows which words the translators have avoided in general, like “manxome”, “whiffling”, “snicker-snack”, “tulgey”, “uffish”. These words are no more difficult than the ones in the first verse. Translatability is not the issue. However, the obligation to translate them is not the same, since they are not required for the Humpty Dumpty chapter. Moreover, verses 2–6 are more action oriented than the first one. Thus, the Swedish translations promote story comprehension and story enjoyment over verbal challenge and delight. But if the overall picture is that there are fewer nonsense words in the translations, there are some exceptions to the rule. Knutsson equates “stood in uffish thought” with two verbs – “gränkte, tubblade” – made by taking apart the words “tänkte” [thought] and “grubblade” [pondered], and then reassembling them into two new word constellations. Strandberg also tends towards redundancy; for instance, she translates gimple by “gräfsade” and “grav”. Other Strandberg additions include “ruskvild bast”, where “ruskvild” is her compound translation of “manxome” from “ruskig” [horrible] and “vild” [wild]. But she also changes the standard word “foe” in the original into “bast”, a corruption of the word “best” [beast]. Similarly she renders “tulgey wood” with not one new nonsense word, but two – “straggig skod” – where the second word is a lightly disguised form of “skog” [wood].

“Wabe” represents a special case in many ways. Whereas both Arosenius find Swedish corresponding puns to “wabe” (**w**ay **b**ehind = wabe) with words like “vägarn” and “styckern”,

both Knutsson and Håkanson resolve the matter by picking up references from Humpty Dumpty's explanation and making nonsense words out of them. Thus, in Knutsson, the place of the sun-dial – "solvisarens plats" – is rendered "solvis ples" (where "ples" sounds like the English "place"). Håkanson, similarly, invents the portmanteau word "visotass" from "solvisare" [sun-dial] and "terrass" [terrace]. Strandberg for her part invents the portmanteau word "tropar", from "trampa" [step] and "gropar" [holes] to indicate the holes the borogoves make when circling the sun-dial.

I have already noted some carry over of phonological content from English to Swedish when it comes to words like "jubjub" and "tumtum". But there are some other examples where the original words have been used in some of the Swedish translations: "borogåv" (Arosenius), "borogovar" (Lundin), "gyrade" (Arosenius, Lundin). But most importantly the twin words "Jabberwock" and "Jabberwocky" continue to be used in three out of five Swedish translations. "Jabberwock" refers to the monster; "Jabberwocky" mainly functions as the title of the poem, but can also be seen as an adjective derived from the noun "Jabberwock" (cf. rock – rocky)<sup>3</sup>. This nuance is often overlooked in discussions of the poem, and it is of course easily missed in translation too. Both Arosenius and Knutsson, however, avoid the problem by retaining the original word pair. Strandberg also keeps the two words, but confuses the matter by using them synonymously, employing "Jabberwocky" (rather than Jabberwock) in the sixth verse: "Och har du Jabberwocky fällt min son?" [and have you slain Jabberwocky, my son?]. Håkanson and Lundin are more target-language oriented in this respect: Jabber is "tjatter" in Swedish, hence "tjatterslån" (Håkanson) and "tjatterskott" (Lundin). "Slå" means "beat", but "slån" (with the -n) is a berry (*prunus spinosa*), so the connotations are a bit unclear. "Skott" is "shot", so "jabbershot" would be a functional back-translation. Lundin does not differentiate between the title and the monster, using "Tjatterskott" for both. The article use is interesting in all five translations. Carroll uses the definitive article, "the Jabberwock", which indicates creature/species rather than proper name (cf. "the dragon" vs. "Smaug"), whereas the Swedish translations are all without the definite article, marking Jabberwock/Tjatterslån/ Tjatterskott as proper names. Because of this, it is possible that the use of the definitive article "Tjatterslånet" in the title of Håkansson also indicates a different level of categorisation (as in Carroll).

In general, the syntax of the Swedish translations accords well with the English original, following the standard conventions of English-Swedish translation practice. But there are some exceptions. Knutsson's and Håkanson's creatures in the first stanza are all in the singular rather than in the plural, for instance. What is potentially more problematic is that the last line of the first stanza in both Håkanson and Strandberg is grammatically more obscure than in the original English. The first stanza of the original "Jabberwocky" is easy to parse. Even with a great deal of unknown vocabulary, the morphology and sentence structure reveals which words are nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and which form they are in (plural, past tense, definite article, etc.). But Håkanson's "Helt jämrig då var skrangelmopp / och grösen mommande bölsvass" is a hypotactical construction, rather than a paratactical one. To make sense it needs the main verb from the preceding clause, "var" [was], as in "och grösen [var] mommande bölsvass". With conventional vocabulary a hypotactical sentence structure does not present much of a problem, of course, but here, in conjunction with the new words, the meaning becomes more demanding than in the original. However, Strandberg's rendition of the same passage is even more challenging. In "Snorpsna alla skrävlingar med mifrås stuvror tropar" it is the choice of the preposition "med" [with], rather than a straight connecting "och" [and] that makes it difficult. "Snorpsna alla skrävlingar med mifrås stuvror tropar" suggests that "mifrås stuvror" either is an additional modifier/attribute to the "mimsy borogoves" or something the "skrävlingar" [borogoves] use when they "tropar" [outgribe]. But one cannot be certain.

So far, I have looked at the metre, the phonology, the vocabulary, and the syntax of the Swedish translations. But as Orero has pointed out, the real problems of translating nonsense rarely have to do with linguistic challenges. It is on the semantic level that it gets tricky. Having said that, a reduction of the number of nonsense words, as we have witnessed in the Swedish translations, is not only a question of vocabulary; it is also something that will impact our understanding of the text. For if “Jabberwocky” is about making meaning (and how not to make meaning), fewer “hard words” will downplay that particular aspect. Another dimension of “Jabberwocky” that may be difficult to convey in translation is how the (mock) heroic register is played out. In my reading of the original poem, there is an enduring ambiguity: the poem is both heroic and parodic at one and the same time; the tension is never wholly resolved. Largely this ambiguity still resonates in the translations. However, when Håkanson translates the line “so rested he by a Tumtum tree” with “Then he slept in a garden patch” (my back-translation here, and in the following), the parodic register takes over. Similarly, when the line “long time the manxome foe he sought” is rendered “and [he] wandered aimlessly and tripped” by Lundin, the heroic potential is weakened. By inserting meta-textual comments in the poem, the possibility of an ambiguous reading, seeing “Jabberwocky” as both heroic and parodic, is also lessened. The best example of this is when Knutsson translates the lines “He left it dead, and with its head / He went galumphing back” by “A head as trophy / Then he returned in the next verse”. Of course, these are all perfectly viable translations if “Jabberwocky” is only seen as a funny, humorous poem, rather than as nonsense poem.

Maybe in line with the “humorous” and child-oriented interpretations that sometimes show in the Swedish translations, there is also a tendency to make the poem less frightening and graphic. In Arosenius the hero does not cut off the head of the Jabberwock; instead his “squire’s sword has drunk the heart-blood of the beast”. It is telling too that none of the translators attempts an onomatopoeic correspondence to the “snicker-snack” of the sword (although Håkanson in another context uses an approximation – see above). This accommodation to a child audience can also be witnessed in Håkanson’s choice of “Jällonhök” for Jubjub bird, where the first part, “jällon”, is child language for “lejon” [lion], and “hök” is the standard word for “hawk”. Several of the other nonsense words have a distinctly childish flavour, particularly in Knutsson (“lumpingen” [borogove], “grutten” [rath]), and Håkanson (“skrangelmopp” [borogove]).

By contrast, a more heroic and lofty diction is employed elsewhere. The “beamish boy” is translated as “good hero”, “good lad”, or “braveson” by Arosenius, Knutsson and Håkanson respectively. The phrase “chortled in his joy” is given as “He exulted in fatherly joy” (Arosenius), alternatively as “Hooray for manly courage” (Knutsson).

As noted by Humpty Dumpty, “Jabberwocky” is a poem of “hard words”. These words should not necessarily be viewed as nonsense. The opacity of the vocabulary could also be a sign that the words are obsolete or archaic. As we have seen, Carroll’s first impulse and starting point for “Jabberwocky” was the “Anglo-Saxon” fragment, and some of the neologisms could conceivably pose as old English words. In fact, Martin Gardner’s annotations to “Jabberwocky” indirectly testify to this. Likewise, some of the Swedish “hard” words could conceivably have been disused and forgotten words (for instance “grälska” and “hälfte” for “vorpal”), but many carry the mark of invention and coinage rather than that of the forgotten and obscure. However, archaic language can be suggested in other ways, too. In the original, the first line signals a lofty and old-fashioned diction with that first “’Twas”. In some of the Swedish translations of this opening a poetic and traditional tone is set by inverting the natural word-order. Thus, Arosenius writes “Det brynigt var” with the verb after the modifier, instead of “Det var brynigt”, which would be the more natural word order in Swedish. Lundin and Strandberg employ this strategy too. Curiously, however, Strandberg

also adorns her “Det” [it] with an apostrophe (‘Det [‘It]). In Swedish, as in English, apostrophes can be used for elisions, but in this case, it serves no linguistic purpose since “det” is unabbreviated. But although the apostrophe is wrong grammatically, one could say that it has a function: it signifies exotic strangeness.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this article I have asked “what has been translated?” of five Swedish translations of Lewis Carroll’s classic nonsense poem “Jabberwocky”. I have made a close reading of the text, paying special attention to its phonosyntactics and specialised vocabulary, as well as its context (Alice-narrative, generic, stylistic). My intention has not been to act as arbiter and pass judgement on which translation is best, but to shed light on which choices have been made by the different translators.

With regard to rhythm and metre, most of the translators, with the exception of Knutsson, have modified or altered the metre somewhat. Knutsson’s translation is also the one that makes the most of sound-repetitions, even if the rhyme scheme differs from Carroll’s. On the other hand, Knutsson takes more liberty with the narration than the others, often inverting or rephrasing the content of the verses.

As for vocabulary, the translators have reduced the number of new words in the body of the poem, either by not translating them at all, or by replacing nonsense words with standard vocabulary. The most recent translation (Strandberg) is the one that has the highest number of nonsense words, whereas the earliest one (Arosenius) has the lowest count. Other lexical tendencies are that some of the translators have chosen a more childish-sounding vocabulary; this applies both to the nonsense words and to the standard vocabulary (Arosenius, Knutsson). The softening of “Jabberwocky” can also be seen in the omission of the severed head of the Jabberwock (Arosenius). Another characteristic of some of the Swedish translations is that they make use of heroic-Romantic clichés and set phrases. All in all, these translation strategies result in Swedish “Jabberwockies” that are simpler to comprehend than the original. Shifting concerns about the audience, but also about the function of “Jabberwocky” within the main narrative, may explain these differences in complexity and accessibility of the translations.

The carry-over of some English nonsense words is another interesting feature. The only translator who avoids “loans” from the original altogether is Håkanson, the most consistent “Swedifier” of the text. The others adopt some of the original words, and notably three of them use the English title, “Jabberwocky”. It is worth noting, however, that most of the English neologisms are not transferred verbatim by any of the translators. In any case, it is possible to see two different principles steering the work of this group of translators: accommodation to the target audience and faithfulness to the original. Most of them try to achieve some kind of balance between these two ideals. It would have been interesting, however, to see a wilder, “Swenglish” translation, one that retains a great deal more of the original wording. Since “Jabberwocky” requires translation even in the original, and thus never can be an “invisible” translation (to use Venuti’s term), it could be motivated to retain/inscribe that very foreignness in translation.

Strangeness is important. “Jabberwocky” should give the impression of being in a different language. “It is all in a language I don’t know”, as Alice says when first encountering it. This effect is first created by the inversion of the text, then by the “hard words”, and finally by Humpty Dumpty’s translations and explanations. What the English reader is finally given is a partly (mis?)translated poem. But how does that come across in yet another language, such as Swedish? First, one can attempt to approximate the effect of the

original by coming up with Swedish-sounding words that seem old, new, nonsensical. We see this strategy most clearly at work in Knutsson and Håkanson. They strive to adapt the poem to the needs of the target audience. Another translation ideal is to be faithful to the original – working to retain words and even syntactical features of the source language. A specific reason to follow this approach in the case of “Jabberwocky” is that it is a text that gives the impression of being written in a foreign language only partially understood. Thus, it would make sense to retain as large a share of odd English-sounding words as possible in translation. We can see that approach in some of the translations (Arosenius, Lundin). I have already discussed a few words that have been carried over more or less verbatim in some of the translations (“Jabberwock”, “borogove”, “tuntum”); there are other that have been only slightly modified (“slidig” for “slithy” and “rator” for “raths”, etc.). With an even larger share of directly transferred nonsense words (“manxome”, “vorpall”, “frumious”, “galumphing”) the “English” *Verfremdung* effect would have been even greater, but the tendency is there.

Finally, to return to the issue of translatability, what these translations into Swedish show is that “Jabberwocky” is supremely translatable. Neither its metre, phonology, grammar, vocabulary, nor cultural and literary connotations pose unsurmountable challenges to a translator. This does not mean that any of the translations is perfect in itself, if that were even possible, but that taken as a whole they address all of these different aspects of translation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Actually, Alice’s initial interpretation of the poem is close and correct; Humpty Dumpty’s learned explication later on does not change that this is what the poem is about – somebody (a boy) killed something (a “Jabberwock”).

<sup>2</sup> Roger Lancelyn Green has pointed out that “Jabberwocky” could have been loosely inspired by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s *The Shepherd of the Giant Mountains*, which was translated into English by Lewis Carroll’s niece Menella Bute Smedley in 1846 (Gardner 1960: 195).

<sup>3</sup> It could also be a noun, as discussed by Carroll in the letter referred to earlier. But if so, it is not simply an alternative spelling to Jabberwock, but another word altogether. Carroll’s own suggestion is that it would mean “the result of much animated discussion” (Gardner 1960: 195). Another possibility is that it is the name of the language in which the poem is written.

## References

- Almansi, D. (2015). ‘Nonsensical translation: How to turn the spotlight on the blind spots of interpretation’. *Bookbird: Journal of International Children’s Literature* 53 (3), pp 56-65.
- Carroll, L. (1871). *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. London: Macmillan.
- Carroll, L. (1870). *Alice’s äfventyr i sagolandet*, transl. E. Nonnen, ill. J. Tenniel. Stockholm: Lamm.
- Carroll, L. (1899). *Bakom spegeln och hvad Alice fann där*, transl. L. Arosenius, ill. J. Tenniel. Stockholm: Norstedt.
- Carroll, L. (1945). *Alice äventyr i sagolandet och Bakom spegeln och vad Alice fann där*, transl. G. Knutsson, ill. R. Högfält. Stockholm: Jan.
- Carroll, L. (1963). *Alice i Spegellandet*, transl. E. Håkanson, ill. J. Tenniel. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

- Carroll, L. (1977) *Alice i Underlandet* och *Alice i Spegellandet*, transl. H. Lundin, ill. J. Tenniel. Uddevalla: Niloë.
- Carroll, L. (2015). *Alice i Spegellandet*, trans. C. Westman & A. Strandberg, ill. R. Ingpen. Stockholm: Wahlströms.
- Gardner, M. (ed.) (1960). *The Annotated Alice*. New York: Clarkson Potter.
- Heyman, M. (2015). 'Introduction to nonsense'. *Bookbird: Journal of International Children's Literature* 53 (3), pp. 5-8.
- Lecerle, J-J. (1994). *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Orero, P. (2007). *The Problems of Translating "Jabberwocky": The Nonsense Literature of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and Their Spanish Translators*. New York: Edwin Mellen.
- Sewell, E. (1971 [1952]). 'The balance of brillig', in Gray, D. (ed.), *Alice in Wonderland: A Norton Critical Edition*, New York: Norton, pp. 380-388.
- Sundmark, B. (2014). 'The Swedish translations of *Alice in Wonderland*,' in Douglas, V. & Cabaret, F. (eds.), *Retranslating Children's Literature*, Brussels: Peter Lang, pp. 121-134.
- Sundmark, B. (2015a). 'Emily Nonnen's *Alice* in Swedish: "Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice,' in Lindseth, J. (ed.), *Alice in a World of Wonderlands* (Vol. 1. Essays), New Castle, Delaware, USA: Oak Knoll Press and the Lewis Carroll Society of North America, pp. 573-580.
- Sundmark, B. (2015b) 'Sweden: Bibliography.' *Alice in a World of Wonderlands* in Lindseth, J. (ed.), *Alice in a World of Wonderlands* (Vol. 3. Checklists), New Castle, Delaware, USA: Oak Knoll Press and the Lewis Carroll Society of North America, pp. 937-949.
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility*. London: Routledge.