

Viatcheslav Vetrov

The Linguistic Picture of the World

Alice's Adventures in Many Languages



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Viatcheslav Vetrov

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For Iwan and Svetlana

Babies are illogical;
Nobody is despised who can manage a crocodile;
Illogical persons are despised.
Therefore no babies can manage crocodiles.

Lewis Carroll, *Symbolic Logic*

Do not ask if a hare is literally mad in March but not in May.

Warren Shibles, *Wittgenstein: Language and Philosophy*

Mrs. Malaprop: I would by no means wish a Daughter of mine to be a Progeny of Learning; I don't think so much Learning becomes a young Woman – But at the same time, I would not have her so inarticulate in her Ideas as you mention. – For instance, I would never let her meddle with Greek, or Hebrew, or Simony, or Fluxions, or Paradoxes, or such inflammatory branches of Learning. Neither would it be necessary for her to handle any of your Mathematical, Astronomical, Diabolical Instruments; but, Sir Anthony, I would send her at nine years old to a Boarding School, in order to learn a little Ingenuity and Artifice; then, Sir, she should have a supercilious knowledge in Accounts – and, as she grew up, I would have her instructed in Geometry, that she might have something of the contagious Countries – But, above all, Sir Anthony, she should be Mistress of Orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as Girls usually do.

Richard B. Sheridan, *The Rivals*

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Preface

This is an unbirthday book. The date of its publication coincides with neither Carroll's nor *Alice's* anniversary and yet it has grown out of my courses on *Alice* given at the Sinology department of Heidelberg University and at the ILAS Institute of Kyoto University (Kyōdai) that incidentally began in 2015, i.e. exactly when the world was celebrating 150 years of *Alice*. And so, even if the study you are about to read does not share the honor of such monumental birthday books as *The Annotated Alice: 150th Anniversary Deluxe Edition* and *Alice in a World of Wonderlands: The Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece*, it is a great comfort to me to think that it originates in the same year when they were first published to celebrate Carroll's heroine.

In our courses, we investigated the reasons for the immense quantity of *Alice*-translations in the languages that we speak, the extension of the original plot through translation-languages, questions concerning the extent to which our thinking is guided by different linguistic categories and the relation of translator's creative individuality to the power of the collective picture of the world. As a matter of fact, for discussing these issues Warren Weaver's *Alice in Many Tongues* (1964) deserved special attention. In this pioneering study on *Alice*-translations, Weaver analyzed an excerpt from Chapter VII "A Mad Tea-Party" that had been retranslated on his request from fourteen foreign languages into English and the primary goal of examining these back-translations was to elucidate the following question: "How good a translation does this seem to be when examined by an English-speaking person?...does this translation capture and convey those aspects of the original which seem important to us?"¹ When reading his book, I was not so much interested in this particular question as in the theoretical implications of this analysis with its basic assumption that back-translations from one single foreign version may be regarded as enough evidence to pass a judgment on the language in question as a whole. One of the conclusions at which Weaver arrived following his method was the following general impression about the Japanese language:

1 Warren Weaver, *Alice in Many Tongues*, p. 77.

“The Japanese version both puzzles and intrigues me. The three retranslations we have, all being made from exactly the same Japanese passage, differ so much, one from another, that it seems clear that translation back and forth between English and Japanese must be a rather loose and vague business. Could, for example, two excellent Japanese scholars translate into their language two different books by an American or English author in such a way that a third Japanese scholar would recognize the similarity of style?... Japanese ... seems to suffer from the fact that this language communicates in a way which is really substantially different from English.”²

This conclusion seems to suggest that it is possible to speak about a specific national vision of a classic which is formed by the language of a given nation. The ‘suffering’ of Japanese was in his eyes evident, e.g. when he compared idiomatic expressions in the back-translations with those of the original: since “murdering time” was rendered in them as “wasting time” (Weaver, p.97) Weaver took it as a deficit peculiar to the semantics of Japanese in general. A similar observation was made when discussing Nabokov’s Russian rendition of “muchness” as “not enough of” (Weaver, p. 102.) Although Weaver did not use the term ‘the linguistic picture of the world’, in order to arrive at his conclusions, he must have been guided by the idea of an insurmountable impact imposed by languages on their speakers.

By contrast, the present study argues that no language imposes on its speakers something like a national interpretation of a literary work, that is, a reading of a text or even of some details in it that would be shared by the whole of the respective language community. In my analysis I was working with *Alice*-translations into six languages (Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian.) The range of languages under discussion is thus rather limited, yet, I believe, it is broad enough for a comparative investigation into translation practice.

Each of the six target-languages offers a great number of *Alice*-versions. In my study, I have drawn on only a small portion of them. Nonetheless, even a cursory reading of these texts is enough to see that the situation which Weaver observed in his back-translations from Japanese is actually common in all the languages under study: Chinese readings prepared by Zhao Yuanren and Ma Teng display a wide variety of differences in grammar, semantics, strategy of reproducing puns, parodies, etc. The same thing holds good for the Russian versions by Nabokov and Demurova, for the German *Alices* by Zimmermann and Teutsch, etc. Some of the translators whose renditions have been analyzed in this book are themselves either famous writers (Vladimir Nabokov) or scholars (Zhao Yuanren.) I could not provide the book with detailed biographical and bibliographical infor-

2 Warren Weaver, *Alice in Many Tongues*, pp. 107–108.

mation on the translators and discussed all of them on the same basis, i.e. as creative individuals who in the course of their lives felt inspired to produce a personal version of Carroll's book.

Readers who would like to learn more about their lives can gain much relevant information from the above mentioned monumental work by John A. Lindseth (Ed.), *Alice in a World of Wonderlands: The Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece* (2015.) Although its compilation was largely inspired by Warren Weaver's study and was dedicated to him, in one particular point it is markedly different to *Alice in Many Tongues*: its numerous contributions pay much more attention to the general diversity characteristic of individual renditions of Carroll. As an example, in discussing Chinese versions, Feng Zongxin has laid great stress on the particular philosophical, literary and linguistic mastery of Zhao Yuanren, that is, the first translator of the book who has not been surpassed by any later translators of the book into Chinese³.

Yet in one specific aspect this work is similar to that of Weaver: every language is discussed separately, as if it were hermetically sealed off from other languages. It hardly pays any attention to the mutual interaction of languages, their systematical convergence in certain areas and to the work of translating individuals against the background of these inter-linguistic phenomena. Both of these aspects will take central stage in the present study: For one thing, it will deal with *language that speaks* (*die Sprache spricht*) and more or less automatically steers its users in a particular direction which will be carefully examined from a number of perspectives (e. g. countability, gender, number, tense, aspect, etc.) and, for another, all language findings made by the translators under discussion will be regarded as products of their individual ability of linguistic seeing. The book begins with a discussion of these individuals. Chapter I introduces the translator in his/her visibility, i.e. as a creative speaker who, having produced his/her version of *Alice*, leaves behind a unique legacy for the rest of the world. Each of the subsequent chapters will keep an eye on their impressive resourcefulness in dealing with words, yet the focus will be put on a theoretical investigation into different linguistic problems.

3 Feng Zongxin, "Alice in Chinese Translation", in: John A. Lindseth (Ed.), *Alice in a World of Wonderlands: The Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece*, 3 Volumes, New Castle: Oak Knoll Press 2015, Vol. 1, pp. 187–198, here pp. 197–198. For translators of *Alice* into other languages under discussion see the following contributions in this volume: Isabelle Nières-Chevrel, "The French Translations of *Alice*: From an Ambivalent Literary Reception to a Masterpiece of Universal Literature" (Tr. by Justine Houyau), pp. 239–248; Emer O'Sullivan, "Miss Zimmermann and Her Successors: German Versions of *Alice in Wonderland*", pp. 259–269; Momma Yoshiyuki, "Alice in Japanese: Named One of 'The Best 100'", pp. 316–319; Adele Cammarata, "Italians Love *Alice*!", pp. 310–315; Liudmila I. Skuratovska, Maria I. Isakova, "Alice in Russian: A Metamorphosis", pp. 461–466.

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