TWO BRAZILIAN-PORTUGUESE TRANSLATIONS
OF WORDPLAY IN
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

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Introduction

A VERY DEBATABLE ISSUE WITH REGARD TO the translation of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is the translatability of the several instances of wordplay which this work embodies and, thus, of the actual pos-sibility of rendering in the target-text the comic effect which is conveyed by wordplay in the source-text. This paper aims to present examples which seem to suggest a connection between the choices made by different translators in rendering wordplay and humour and their target audiences. In this sense, it brings out yet another relevant matter about the translation of *Alice in Wonderland*: the debate about its ambivalent target audience and the different solutions these translators present to the troublesome task of translating wordplay and humour.

The corpus for this investigation consists of two Brazilian-Portuguese translations of *Wonderland*: one by Uchoa Leite published in 1980 and designed for adults, and the other by Nicolau Sevcenko which came out in 1994, aimed at children. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to be judgmental about these translations. The goal here is simply to try to portray the existing relationship between the translation of wordplay and humour and intended audience. Also, as it is to be expected, due to pressures of time and

space not all instances of wordplay from Carroll's text will be dis-
cussed here. My aim is to present those instances in which the
divergences between the two translators' choices are best charac-
teristic of their intentions in reference to audience.

Two Different Renderings of Wordplay

One of the first examples of wordplay occurs, in Carroll's text, in
chapter IV. The title of the chapter itself is a play on words: *The
Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill*. In this chapter Alice is trapped inside
the White Rabbit's house. She cannot leave it because once again
she has changed size and is so big that her arms and feet are stuck
in the chimney and through the window. Her size obviously threat-
ens the White Rabbit who charges little Bill, the lizard, with the
task of sending her away. In fact, *Bill* is not the only creature that
the White Rabbit manages to gather around himself in his attempt
to expel Alice from his home. Also, all the creatures involved in
this passage with the exception of Alice are smaller in size than the
Rabbit (a lizard, two guinea pigs, some birds) and are authorita-
tively ordered about by him as if they were servants. One cannot
forget that what has made Alice enter the White Rabbit's house, in
the first place, was the fact that he mistakenly took her for his
maid, Mary Ann. As the chapter develops, however, the Rabbit's
authority is challenged, little by little, and a climax is achieved
through Alice's safe escape.

The play on words is quite obvious for an English speaking
audience since the lizard's name *Bill* is a homophone and a homo-
graph of the common noun *bill*, a notice. Besides the overlap of
meanings matches the situation in terms of power relations: the
White Rabbit cannot face Alice for she is bigger, he sends her a
bill, Bill, the lizard who is smaller than the Rabbit and therefore
less powerful and easier to be ordered about.

It is well acknowledged that both homophony and homography
are very rarely translatable in one-to-one terms from one linguistic

system into another. However, it is interesting to notice the way through which the irony and criticism of power relations as conveyed through the source play on words have been rendered in the two Brazilian-Portuguese texts under consideration. In the translation designed for adults, Uchoa Leite has named the chapter *O coelho envia um emissário* (gloss: The Rabbit sends a messenger in) whereas in the children aimed text Sevcenko has entitled his chapter *O Coelho em Apuros* (The Rabbit (is) in Trouble). In both translations the play and original comic effect achieved by the juxtaposition *Bill-bill* is lost but if one looks at transitivity, it remains clear that one of the textual functions of the play on words, that of a critique on power relations is, somehow, kept by Uchoa Leite in his adult targeted text. Observe the differences in clause structure between Carroll's, Leite's and Sevcenko's text and the different meanings derived from the two different translations:

Carroll	Leite	Sevcenko
The Rabbit sends in a Little Bill	*O coelho envia um emissário* (gloss: The Rabbit sends a messenger in)	*O Coelho em Apuros* (gloss: The Rabbit (is) in Trouble)
The Rabbit acts, he sends another creature to face Alice. This creature is small: *Little Bill*. This creature is supposed to deliver a *notice/bill*.	The Rabbit acts, he sends another creature to face Alice. This creature is supposed to deliver a notice for it is an *emissário* (a messenger).	The Rabbit does not act. He is in a bad situation, for one reason or another. His relationships with the other characters are not hindered. The Rabbit is the only character mentioned in the title.
A material process takes place.	A material process takes place.	A relational process takes place

This is one of several examples illustrating the point that while

Leite's text generally tends to preserve elements of irony and social criticism even when the actual rendering of the play on words is not possible, Sevcenko's text usually minimizes those elements and tends to concentrate on the story line.

Another example of wordplay involving a proper name occurs in chapter V, *Advice from a Caterpillar*. In this passage Alice is confused and worries about her real identity. She does not know who she is and cannot properly remember things which were part of her world before entering *Wonderland*. The Caterpillar, then, suggests that she repeats the poem *You are Old, Father William* meaning Robert Southey's didactic poem *The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them*. What Alice actually says out loud is a mock parody of Southey's poem where old age is not praised but portrayed as stupid and silly. In Carroll's text the name of the old man is kept as it was in Southey's original. This is meaningful for it indicates that such a name is not marked or foregrounded, that it functions as a label, in the same way that proper names function in everyday communication. If we look at the Brazilian-Portuguese translations of Carroll's parody, we will observe that Leite, in his adult targeted text, has rendered it as *Joaquim* while Sevcenko, in his children's text, has translated it as *João*. It happens, thus, that the most common equivalent of the proper name *William* is, in Brazilian-Portuguese, neither *Joaquim* nor *João* but *Guilherme*. The fact that neither of the translators have employed it in their versions is significant.

Southey	Carroll	Leite	Sevcenko
'You are old, father *William*', the young man cried...	'You are old, father *William*', the young man said...	Você está velho, *Pai Joaquim* — disse o rapaz — (gloss: 'You are old', father Joaquim, the lad said)	Você está velho, *Pai João* — disse o rapaz — (gloss: 'You are old, father João', the lad said)

Not considering at this stage questions of sound patterns which are certainly at stake whenever the translation of poetry is involved, it is my suggestion that in Leite's text the above mentioned shift, namely the creation of allusive wordplay, has been motivated by *compensation* both *in kind* and *place* (for a detailed description of the mechanism of *compensation* and its different types, see Hatim and Mason 1997:115) whereas in Sevcenko's text it has been motivated by an attempt to make the text more natural and idiomatic.

It is my suggestion that Leite has spotted the opportunity to make up for the loss inflicted upon his text by the impossibility of evoking, in Brazilian-Portuguese, the association established by a previous wordplay involving a name in English: *Bill,* the lizard / *bill, a* notice. This fact becomes quite clear if one considers that the name *Joaquim* revisits a Brazilian cultural frame which conveys the traits of silliness and stupidity portrayed in the source-text, as it will be unfolded next.

A common element within humour discourse is the tendency to make fun of minority social groups. It is a well established fact that within the domain of humour special attention has to be given to the role played by the *underdog*. Chiaro (1992), among others, refers to the common fact that members of minority social groups become subjects of derogatory jokes, that the mere mentioning of them is enough to set the scene for laughter. The role of the underdog is usually played by women, homosexuals, the crippled or by groups of a different ethnic background. Sometimes members of certain political parties take on this part. The fact is that different cultures pick on different groups, at different times, as *underdogs*: in Britain it is the Irish, in the U.S.A., the Polish, in Italy, the carabinieri, in France, the Belgium, in Brazil, it is the *Portuguese*.

Considering the above mentioned, Leite's choice for rendering *William* as *Joaquim*, a name of Portuguese origin which abounds in Portuguese jokes in Brazil and which stresses the points that Carroll's parody conveys, his text indeed indicates a concern with the achievement of textual equivalence.

Sevcenko's choice for the name *João* implies other considera-

tions. *João* is a very common Brazilian name and, because it is so common, its informational content is very little; it is not a name normally prone to foregrounding. Unlike Leite, Sevcenko does not profit from the opportunity to *compensate* for a previous loss. Instead, he seems to have opted for an unmarked Brazilian proper name in an attempt to simplify and domesticate his text.

However, wordplay in *Wonderland* far expands jokes around proper names. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of such device in this story is the one involving the homophones *tail*, the hindermost part of an animal and *tale*, a story. This occurs in chapter III, *A Caucus Race and a Long Tale*. The passage centres around the Mouse's misery and Alice's curiosity about the reasons why he is so afraid of both cats and dogs. The Mouse, then, proposes to tell his tale, his story which he describes as both long and sad. Alice, however, misjudges his comments and takes them in reference to his tail, part of his body. The result is a confused exchange which happens mainly as a result of collocation in English for Alice can perfectly understand the way in which the Mouse's tail can be *long*. She cannot, however, see it as being *sad*.

It happens that the most common equivalents of the items *tale*, story, and *tail*, part of an animal's body are, respectively, in Brazilian-Portuguese, *história/enredo* and *rabo*. The problem that both translators had to face is that the different collocational patterns of the items involved, essencial for the wordplay, is brought out by the fact that *tail/tale* are homophones in English whereas *história/enredo* and *rabo* are not in Brazilian-Portuguese.

Both translators have tried to cope with the problem by inserting into their texts items which would bridge the phonological gap between *história/enredo* and *rabo*. Leite, in his adult targeted text, introduces a paronymic idiom *de cabo a rabo* (gloss: from beginning to end) to refer to *tale*, while Sevcenko, in his children's text, enhances the passage through 1. Comparison, *Minha história é como um rabisco longo e triste* (gloss: My tale is like a long and sad line), 2. Paronymy, *rabisco* (line)/ *rabicho* (informal for tail) and 3. An explanation associating the inserted paronymic pair:...

comentou Alice, entendendo mal o que o Rato havia dito (gloss: ...said Alice, not really understanding what the Mouse had said).

Carroll	Leite	Sevcenko
"Mine is a long and sad tale!" said the Mouse turning to Alice and sighing. "It's a long tail, certainly," said Alice, looking down at the Mouse's tail; but why do you call it sad?"	— Todo o enredo de cabo a rabo? Ele é triste e comprido — disse o Rato, voltando-se para Alice e suspirando. — Que é comprido não tem dúvida — observou Alice olhando com espanto para o rabo do Rato — mas por que dizer que é triste? (gloss: — The whole tale from beginning to end? It's long and sad — said the Mouse turning to Alice and sighing. — It is, indeed, very long — said Alice — looking with surprise at the Mouse's tail — but why saying it is sad?)	— Minha história é como um rabicho longo e triste — disse o Rato suspirando. — É de fato, um rabicho muito longo — comentou Alice, entendendo mal o que o Rato havia dito e olhando surpresa para o rabinho dele. — Mas por que você diz que é triste? (gloss: My tale is like a long and sad line — said the Mouse sighing. — Indeed, it is a very long tail — said Alice not really understanding what the Mouse had said and looking with surprise at his tail. — But why do you call it sad?)

The fact is that though both Leite and Sevcenko have employed *compensation* as a technical procedure in their attempts to render or, at least, to suggest the homophony present in the source play on words, the outcome of their translations in what regards humour is, certainly, different. Sevcenko's text, although syntactic more complex, introduces an explanation which diminishes its comic impact since it renders flat that which should be picked up by the reader. Contrariwise, Leite's text, manages to maintain the path open to the reader's understanding.

The same chapter, *A Caucus Race and a Long Tail*, forwards another interesting example of wordplay, only now homonymy is the device employed. In this passage the Mouse assembles Alice and a series of other creatures to listen to a tale which he characterizes as *the driest thing I know*. The situation is a curious one since both Alice and the creatures are all very wet for they had been swimming in the pool of Alice's tears. As a result they are cold and uncomfortable and want to dry off as soon as possible.

Carroll	Leite	Sevcenko
"Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! I'll soon make you dry enough!" ... "This is the dryest thing I know."	— Sentem-se todos e escutem-me! Logo os farei secar rapidamente!... — Esta é a história mais árida que conheço. (gloss: — Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! I'll soon make you dry!... — This is the most arid story I know.)	— Sentem-se todos e me escutem! Sei como fazer todo mundo secar rapidamente! Esta é a história mais secante que conheço! (gloss: Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! I know how to make everyone dry very soon! This is the dryest story I know.)

In English the play on words is quite obvious since the Mouse intends to *dry* his fellow partners, to evaporate water from them, by telling a *dry*, dull, uninteresting story. As expected, the rendering of the homonymous pair as such is not possible in Brazilian-Portuguese. Leite, in his adult targeted text, has opted for the pair *secar* (v. to dry)/ *árida* (adj. arid). His choice seems to have been motivated, once again, by a question of collocation in Brazilian-Portuguese for even though *seco(a)* (adj. dry) and *árido(a)* (adj. arid) are commonly considered as synonyms, their collocational patterns is quite different. A person or piece of land can be said to be *seca* or *árida*, a story can only be *árida*. It is relevant to mention that the adjective *árido(a)*, when used in reference to a story or a

piece of writing, characterizes formal register.

Sevcenko, by his turn, has managed to convey the source play on words through the use of a paronym: *secante* (adj. 1. that which has the ability or capacity to dry; 2. boring or dull fact or person). Because the adjective *secante* in Brazilian-Portuguese shares phonological, graphological and semantic traits with *secar* (v. to dry) and collocates with *história* (n. story), his choice seems a very adequate one. From the perspective of the present analysis, however which aims to establish a relationship between wordplay and audience design, the most relevant point is the difference in register presented by the choices of the different translators. For whereas Leite opts for sophistication and an academic type of language through his use of *árida*, Sevcenko decides for a more colloquial, everyday language through his *secante*.

Perhaps one of the richest chapters of *Wonderland* in reference to wordplay is chapter IX, *The Mock Turtle Story*. It is in this chapter that the Ghyphon takes Alice to talk to the Mock Turtle and to listen to his story about his school days. The whole passage is an evident satire on Victorian education. Irony and social criticism abounds through several different instances and types of play on words. Among the several examples of paronymy to be found in this passage, one seems particularly relevant to my purposes here. It involves, in the source-text, the lexical items *turtle, tortoise and taught us*. Those items are used in reference to a school teacher.

Once again there is a lot at stake both in the analysis of the source-text as in its two different renderings. Turtles and tortoises are very similar animals. They are reptiles which are often times difficult for children and even for adults to differentiate. In English even their names are similar. The past tense of the verb to teach, *taught*, plus the personal referent *us* closes the paronymic circle in English.

In Brazilian-Portuguese the situation is quite different: a turtle is a *tartaruga* and a tortoise is a *cágado*. The verbs which are most commonly used to describe classroom activity are *ensinar* (to teach) and *aprender* (to learn). No paronymic relationship exists between

those items in terms of sound or spelling. Lets us then look at the way the two translators have dealt with the question.

Carroll	Leite	Sevcenko
"... The master was an old turtle — we used to call him Tortoise". — Why did you call him Tortoise if he wasn't one?" Alice asked. "We called him Tortoise because he taught us..."	A professora era uma velha Tartaruga... e nós a chamávamos de Tortoruga... — Mas por que Tortoruga, se ela era uma Tartaruga? perguntou Alice. — Nós a chamávamos de Tortoruga porque aprender com ela era uma tortura. (gloss: The teacher was an old turtle... we used to call her Tort-urtle... — But why Torturtle if she was a Turtle? Alice asked. — We called her Tort-urtle because learning with her was a torture.)	A professora era uma velha tartaruga; nós costumávamos chamá-la de Tetrarruga... — Mas por que Tetrarruga? Perguntou Alice. — É um nome tão esquisito que eu nunca vi! — Nós a chamávamos de Tertrarruga porque, sendo uma tartaruga velha tinha quatro rugas no pescoço... (gloss: The teacher was an old turtle; we used to call her Tetra-wrinkles... — But why Tetra-wrinkles? Alice asked. — It's such a strange name, I've never seen anything like it! — We called her Tetra-wrinkles because being an old turtle she had four wrinkles around her neck...

Leite has chosen to create a portmanteau word: Tortoruga. Such item rescues the source similarity between turtle and tortoise. It is constructed upon and embodies the meaning of two words: *tartaruga* (n. turtle) and *tortura* (n. torture). Sevcenko has also created a

(n. turtle) and *tortura* (n. torture). Sevcenko has also created a portmanteau word in his text: *tetrarruga*, a combination of the Greek prefix *tetra-* with the noun *ruga* (n. winkle). Sevcenko has also expanded his text so as to accommodate the explanation of the meaning of the newly created word. This expansion occurs through Alice's surprise at the novelty of the teacher's name.

Even if one considers the fact that many young Brazilian children may miss the meaning of the Greek prefix *tetra-* in Sevcenko's text, still it is quite clear that his choice for a more moderate stance towards didacticism, revealed through his association of wisdom with old age, is more typical of children's texts. Leite's choice, on the other hand, much more critical of the schooling system, associates learning with torture. This sharper, more ironical position, I suggest, is tunned with the way adults perceive humour, that is as a catalyst of society's flaws.

Conclusion

It has been the aim of this short paper to discuss those instances of translation of wordplay from *Alice in Wonderland* into two Brazilian-Portuguese versions which may indicate a link between the options of the translators and their intended audiences. From the examples discussed it seems suggestive that in the adult targeted text elements such as: power relations as conveyed through transitivity, concern with textual equivalence mainly realized through mechanisms of compensation and through a more formal register are used in the rendering of a critical, sharp and ironic view of Alice's experiences in wonderland. The translation of wordplay in the version aimed at children, on the other hand, tends to be more reader-friendly since it forwards explanations and comparisons. Also, in this last version one can easily spot a domesticating flavour since its language is simpler, more idiomatic, and its register usually informal. Such aspects seem to work in favour of a pedagogical posture. The convergence of those observations from two

different translations are indicative that humour as conveyed through wordplay in Carroll's *Wonderland* is quite complex for it operates in, at least, two levels: it is both a form of enjoyment and of criticism, a source of naïve pleasure and of bitter realizations.

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