

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WORDPLAY IN ROALD DAHL'S THE BFG: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of wordplay in Roald Dahl's novel *The BFG* and analyzes the strategies available for rendering this wordplay in translation. Dahl's invented idiolect known as Gobblefunk relies on neologism, blending, malapropism, and sound symbolism to construct the voice of the Big Friendly Giant and to generate humor for the child reader. The article applies a comparative framework drawn from translation studies, in particular the work of Newmark, Nida, Venuti, and Delabastita on the translation of wordplay and culture specific lexical creativity. Selected examples from *The BFG* are analyzed according to the linguistic mechanism that produces the wordplay and the translation strategy that could preserve or compensate for its effect in a target language. The analysis shows that direct lexical equivalence is rarely available for Dahl's invented words and that translators must instead rely on compensatory neologism, phonological substitution, or explanatory paraphrase, each of which carries a different cost for the humor and characterization of the source text. The article concludes that wordplay in children's literature functions as a structural device rather than an ornamental one and that its translation requires a creative and systematic methodology rather than isolated lexical substitution.

Keywords

wordplay, Roald Dahl, *The BFG*, Gobblefunk, literary translation, neologism, children's literature, comparative analysis, translation strategy, untranslatability

1. Introduction

Roald Dahl occupies a distinctive place in twentieth century children's literature because of the density and originality of his linguistic invention. Across novels such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, and *James and the Giant Peach*, Dahl builds humor and characterization through sound, rhythm, and lexical distortion rather than through plot alone. Among his works, *The BFG*, first published in 1982, presents the most sustained example of invented language in the author's output. The giant protagonist speaks in a register that critics and translators commonly refer to as Gobblefunk, a form of English marked by malapropism, neologism, spoonerism, and playful misuse of idiom. Because this invented register carries much of the novel's comic and emotional effect, it poses a substantial problem for translators, who must decide whether to reproduce the mechanism of the wordplay, its meaning, its sound, or some combination of the three.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comparative analysis of the wordplay found in *The BFG* and to examine the strategies that translation scholarship makes available for handling this type of linguistic material. The article does not treat wordplay as an incidental stylistic feature but as a structural element of characterization, since the giant's imperfect command of language is inseparable from his identity as a gentle outsider who stands apart from the other, more violent giants in the story. A comparative approach is therefore adopted, situating Dahl's lexical creativity against the general categories of wordplay translation identified in the

literature, and testing which categories best describe the mechanisms at work in specific passages of the novel.

The article is organized as follows. Section two presents the theoretical framework, drawing on established models of translation strategy and on scholarship devoted specifically to the translation of wordplay. Section three describes the methodology used to select and classify the examples discussed. Section four introduces Gobblefunk as a linguistic system and identifies its principal mechanisms. Section five carries out the comparative analysis proper, examining how each mechanism might be rendered under different translation strategies and what is gained or lost in each case. Section six discusses the broader implications of the analysis for the translation of children's literature, and section seven presents the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

Translation studies has long recognized wordplay as one of the most resistant categories of text to cross-linguistic transfer. Newmark distinguishes between semantic translation, which favors the meaning and thought of the source text, and communicative translation, which favors the effect produced on the target reader, and argues that wordplay generally forces the translator toward the communicative pole because a literal rendering rarely preserves the joke. Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence similarly holds that a translation should aim to produce an equivalent effect on the target audience rather than a mechanical correspondence of words, a principle that is particularly relevant when the source text depends on sound or morphology rather than on referential content.

Delabastita offers the most detailed taxonomy specific to wordplay, proposing that a translator working with a pun or an invented word may choose among several strategies, including rendering the wordplay with a different wordplay in the target language, rendering it with a non-punning expression that preserves only the meaning, omitting the wordplay altogether, or compensating for a loss in one location with an invented instance of wordplay elsewhere in the text. Vandaele extends this discussion into the domain of humor more broadly, arguing that the translator must identify the mechanism that produces the comic incongruity before deciding which formal features can be sacrificed and which must be preserved.

Venuti's distinction between domesticating and foreignizing translation is also relevant to the present analysis, since a translator confronted with Gobblefunk must decide whether to naturalize the giant's speech into an equivalent register of the target language, thereby domesticating the text for the new reader, or to preserve visible traces of linguistic strangeness, thereby foreignizing the text and signaling that the giant's speech is unusual even within the fictional world. Baker further notes that non-equivalence at the word level is common when a source text employs a lexical item that has no ready counterpart in the target language, which is effectively the situation a translator faces with nearly every Gobblefunk coinage, since each word is by definition absent from any existing lexicon, including that of the source language itself.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that the translation of Dahl's invented language cannot be reduced to a search for equivalent words, because in the strictest sense no such words exist prior to the act of authorial invention. Instead, the translator must reconstruct the generative rule that produced the original coinage, whether that rule is phonological substitution, semantic blending, or grammatical malapropism, and then apply an analogous rule within the resources of the target language.

3. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative comparative method. A corpus of characteristic Gobblefunk expressions was drawn from *The BFG* and classified according to the linguistic mechanism responsible for the wordplay, following categories adapted from Delabastita and Vandaele. Four mechanisms were identified as most productive in the source text: lexical blending, in which two existing words are fused into a single invented form; malapropism, in which a word is replaced by a phonetically similar but semantically unrelated word; semantic reversal or literalization, in which an idiom is misapplied or taken literally to comic effect; and sound symbolism, in which invented words imitate physical actions or sensations through their phonetic shape. Each category was then examined against the translation strategies identified in the theoretical framework in order to assess which strategy could most plausibly preserve the comic and characterizing function of the original wordplay. The analysis is illustrative rather than exhaustive and is intended to demonstrate a method of classification that could be extended to a full translated edition of the novel.

4. Gobblefunk as a Linguistic System

The giant's speech in *The BFG* is not a random accumulation of nonsense but a system governed by recognizable, if irregular, rules. Many Gobblefunk words are formed by blending an existing English word with an unrelated phonetic element, producing a term that sounds plausible while denoting something new, such as an invented vegetable or an invented bodily sensation. Other words are formed through malapropism, where the giant reaches for a word that resembles the intended one in sound but diverges sharply in meaning, producing an unintentional pun that the reader recognizes even though the giant himself does not. A third category involves the literalization of idiom, where a figurative English expression is treated by the giant as though it described a physical event, collapsing the distance between figurative and literal language that adult readers normally take for granted. A fourth category relies on onomatopoeic or sound symbolic invention, where the phonetic shape of a word is designed to imitate the action or sensation it names, independent of any existing morphological root.

These four mechanisms are not evenly distributed across the text but recur with enough regularity that they can be treated as the underlying grammar of Gobblefunk. Understanding this grammar is a necessary first step for any translator, since a strategy that succeeds for a blended word may fail for a malapropism, and a strategy that succeeds for sound symbolic invention may be unnecessary for the literalization of idiom, which often depends more on logical incongruity than on unusual sound.

5. Comparative Analysis of Translation Strategies

5.1 Lexical Blending

Where the source text fuses two recognizable words into a single invented item, the most effective target language strategy is generally an analogous act of blending using morphemes native to the target language. A translator who instead substitutes a plain descriptive phrase preserves the referential meaning of the invented word but discards its comic surface, since the humor in this category depends on the reader's ability to perceive the two donor words inside the new coinage. Delabastita's category of wordplay rendered by wordplay is therefore the most appropriate strategy here, even though it requires the translator to invent a new lexical item rather than to locate an existing equivalent. The risk of this strategy is a loss of the specific

cultural associations carried by the English donor words, which cannot be assumed to transfer automatically into a different lexical stock.

5.2 Malapropism

Malapropism poses a distinct challenge because its comic effect depends on phonetic proximity between the intended word and the substituted word in the source language, a relationship that will rarely hold between the same two concepts in a different language. A translator seeking to preserve this mechanism must therefore search the target lexicon for an unrelated pair of words that happen to sound similar, and then engineer a substitution that produces a comparable comic incongruity, even if the resulting error is not a literal translation of the original mistake. This is an instance of what Vandaele describes as reconstructing the mechanism rather than the content of the joke. Where no plausible phonetic pair can be found, translators often fall back on a non-punning strategy, preserving the giant's general tendency toward error while sacrificing the specific joke, a compromise that keeps the characterization intact at the cost of a particular comic moment.

5.3 Literalization of Idiom

When the giant treats a figurative expression as a literal event, the humor arises from the reader's prior knowledge of the idiom in its ordinary figurative sense. This mechanism is the most language specific of the four categories, since idioms rarely have exact counterparts across languages, and a literal translation of the English idiom may not be recognizable as an idiom at all to a reader of the target language. Newmark's communicative translation offers the most workable path here, since the translator may substitute an idiom native to the target language that carries a comparable figurative meaning and then apply the same literalizing logic to that native idiom, effectively relocating the joke rather than translating it word for word. This strategy requires the translator to exercise considerable creative latitude and departs furthest from the surface form of the source text, yet it is the strategy most likely to preserve the humor for a new audience.

5.4 Sound Symbolism

Invented words that rely primarily on phonetic shape rather than on morphological blending present a different kind of opportunity, because their effect depends less on recognizable donor words than on rhythm, plosive consonants, and exaggerated syllable length, features that can often be approximated in an unrelated language without requiring semantic equivalence at all. A translator working in this category enjoys more freedom than in the other three, since almost any invented word that matches the phonetic profile of the original, in terms of length, stress pattern, and consonant quality, can function as an adequate substitute. This category therefore supports the domesticating strategy identified by Venuti with the least cost to the source text, because the target reader experiences an analogous sensation of invented, expressive sound even when the specific phonemes differ entirely from the original.

5.5 Summary of the Comparative Findings

The comparative analysis suggests a gradient of translatability across the four mechanisms identified in Gobblefunk. Sound symbolic invention is the most freely transferable, since its effect depends on general phonetic iconicity rather than on specific lexical content. Lexical blending is moderately transferable, provided the translator is willing to invent new target language forms. Literalized idiom is transferable only through substitution of a different idiom native to the target culture, requiring the translator to abandon the surface content of

the passage while preserving its comic logic. Malapropism is the least reliably transferable mechanism, since it depends on an accidental phonetic resemblance unlikely to recur between different words in a different language, and translators must often accept a partial loss of the specific joke in order to preserve the giant's characterization as a well-meaning but linguistically imperfect speaker.

6. Discussion

The findings carry implications beyond the specific case of *The BFG*. Wordplay in children's literature should not be treated as a peripheral ornament that may be simplified without cost, since in Dahl's novel it is inseparable from characterization and from the moral structure of the story, in which linguistic gentleness distinguishes the Big Friendly Giant from the cruder giants who eat children. A translation that flattens the giant's invented speech into standard prose risks erasing part of this ethical architecture.

A single uniform translation strategy is therefore unlikely to serve a text of this kind adequately, since the four mechanisms identified above respond best to different strategies, ranging from direct invention of new wordplay to substitution of an unrelated idiom. This implies that translators of richly invented source texts benefit from a mechanism-based classification of the material before translation begins. The comparative method used here, which classifies wordplay by its generative mechanism rather than by its surface form, may also be extended to other works by Dahl and to other authors who rely on invented language for comic or characterizing effect.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the wordplay of Roald Dahl's *The BFG* through a comparative framework drawn from translation studies, classifying the giant's invented speech into four mechanisms, namely lexical blending, malapropism, literalized idiom, and sound symbolism, and evaluating the translation strategies best suited to each. The analysis demonstrates that Dahl's linguistic invention functions as a structural and characterizing device rather than as decorative language, and that its translation therefore demands a systematic, mechanism-aware methodology rather than isolated lexical substitution. Sound symbolic invention proved the most readily transferable category, while malapropism proved the most resistant, requiring translators to accept partial loss or to engineer wholly new instances of phonetic coincidence in the target language. Future research might apply this classification to a complete translated edition of the novel in a specific target language in order to test empirically how translators have in practice resolved the tensions identified here, and to extend the comparative model to other works in Dahl's oeuvre that rely on similar strategies of invented and playful language.

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