

Underground adventures

Stephanie Lovett reports on a major project in the US focusing on translations of *Alice in Wonderland*, including a three-volume book, exhibition and conference



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A ficionados of Lewis Carroll and *Alice in Wonderland* have long talked of how widely known, quoted, adapted, and translated this influential book has been since its first appearance 150 years ago. Its archetypal characters and situations, creativity, surrealism, subversiveness and cleverness have been the catalysts for every kind of artistic and commercial adaptation and adoption imaginable, including advertisements, avant-garde performance art, tattoos, operas, ballets, fashion, puzzles, continual references in books, articles and other media, and so much more. Translation into languages other than standard English is of course well known as a major aspect of this joyful appropriation and reuse of *Alice*, but until now collectors and scholars have had very little access to *Alice* in other languages. Warren Weaver's slim 1964 study, *Alice in Many Tongues*, has been the sole reference work.

With the 150th anniversary of the 1865 first edition of *Alice* in the offing, Lewis Carroll Society of North America (LCSNA) president emeritus and collector Joel Birenbaum began brainstorming ideas about a worldwide celebration, featuring exhibitions in New York City on a variety of topics. In 2008, he started talking with Jon Lindseth, a collector and member of the Grolier Club, about an *Alice* exhibition. Lindseth enthusiastically moved forward with the idea of a Grolier show on *Alice* in translation, and as the club expects a substantial catalogue documenting an exhibition, he also began exploring the parameters of how best to write about translations. This was the genesis for what became *Alice in a World of Wonderlands*: a three-

volume, 2,638-page work of essays, back-translations and bibliographical checklists; a spectacular Grolier Club exhibition running from 16 September to 21 November 2015; and two days of conferences, on 7 and 8 October, bringing together translators, scholars and enthusiasts from 24 countries.

Uncollected knowledge

The book is the work of over 250 volunteer writers, recruited by Lindseth through message boards, personal connections and dogged inquiry. Connections branched into more connections, and soon, all over the world, people were searching out books that had been known to exist in institutions but had not been documented, books rumoured to exist, and many, many hundreds of books known only to their translators, publishers and the children who read them. Lindseth found some books by asking university scholars to coordinate searches in their countries and report back (Zongxin Feng of Beijing University did this, for instance). One book was found when Lindseth phoned the social media officer at the US embassy in Ulaanbaatar and asked her to find a Mongolian *Alice*, which she did on her lunch break. He also recruited

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proofreaders/copy editors through a message board (and me, through the LCSNA, to coordinate this aspect), to bring the work of all these writers into a standard style for all three volumes.

The most important partner in this enterprise was Alan Tannenbaum, who undertook the creation of the master computer files, bringing data in more than 60 fonts from almost 300 sources into unity, standardising the bibliographical checklist, handling the complex issues created by the back-translations and their footnotes, writing over 168 programs and 6,000 lines of code, and so much more, delivering 2,638 camera-ready pages to the printer. He also co-curated the exhibition at the Grolier Club.

In order to make the most of this opportunity to bring together new knowledge about *Alice* in translation, Lindseth decided that three volumes were necessary. The third volume provides a record, in the form of bibliographical checklists, of over 7,000 editions of *Alice in Wonderland* – plus nearly 2,000 editions of *Through the Looking-Glass* – in 174 languages. These checklists identify each book by date, original title, title translated back to English, publisher, city, translator and illustrator, with options for notes and holdings. There is also the first ever index of illustrators of translated editions, documenting 1,200 names.

The largest numbers of editions are found in Japanese and Spanish, with over 1,200 editions each, followed by German at 562, Chinese at 463 and French at 451. Not only are languages from all over the world represented (Azerbaijani, Tongan, Xhosa, Icelandic, Montenegrin, Oriya, Jërriais), but there are also extinct languages (Old English), dialects (Orkney Scots), constructed languages (Blissymbols, Lingwa de Planeta), and alternative orthographies (Shavian, IPA). *Alice in a World of Wonderlands* retains Weaver's definition of a translation: a rendering that someone who reads only standard English cannot read.



The exhibition at the Grolier Club is a remarkable sight, telling the story of the project through objects and curation. There are cases about Lewis Carroll himself, including the first book to use his pseudonym, and about translating *Alice*. Carroll was active in the process of bringing *Alice* to other languages, and one case is devoted to translations during his lifetime, beginning with German and French in 1869. Seven cases display translations by geographical region, creating very interesting conversations among materials.

The two-day conference at the Grolier Club was part of a week of Alice 150 celebrations in New York. Approximately 120 writers from the project and other guests came


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together for eight talks and opportunities to interact. Children’s literature scholar Emer O’Sullivan opened the conference with a talk about the development of translation studies, and concluded with a quotation from David Crystal’s foreword about the translation community that has been created by this project. This was highly in evidence for those two days, as people with many different language backgrounds, scholarly interests and world views shared ideas.

Conference speakers

Our other seven speakers included Gabriel López of Barcelona, who surprised us with the news that many Spanish-language readers believe that a chapter about a horse created by a translator in 1952 is part of the original text. Derrick McClure of Aberdeen gave us a tour of Scots dialect versions, in which the Owl and Panther dine on haggis, tatties and neeps. University of Hawaii professor Keao NeSmith told us that Hawaiians, who have been highly literate since the 1820s, prefer foreignising translations as a way of

understanding another culture. From Zongxin Feng, we learned that of all Western classics published in China, *Alice* has the most editions, despite the three-decade gap of the Cultural Revolution. Russell Kaschula of Rhodes University in South Africa expressed concern about issues around literacy in minority languages and the creation of more literature for young people, and told delegates how he saw this project as a springboard. Sumanyu Satpathy of Delhi described the web of political and cultural issues involved with translation in a country with 22 official languages and 1,600 more spoken, and related *Alice*’s role in fighting fascism. Publisher Michael Everson closed the second day with a tour of some of the more unusual editions on his list, including Deseret and Ladino versions, and Michael Suarez from the University of Virginia gave the closing after-dinner speech.

Even for those of us who had worked closely on the book, everything was a revelation. Political and social factors in translation mixed in with linguistic factors, and one of the themes that quickly became evident was how closely tied all those choices are for a translator. For example, Kimie Kusumoto observed that it was culturally impossible not to change the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party when interaction between a young girl and a grown man has specific semiotic connotations in Japan, and López spoke about the first Spanish use of *Alice* as a revolutionary figure in a newspaper in 1921 Mexico. The complex, interdisciplinary nature of translation and the range of considerations, from technical to philosophical, were prominent throughout the two days. The conference closed with discussions about the future of indigenous languages and the good and bad sides of globalisation, and there was eager talk of a similar project for *Alice* illustrations – and of the many languages, from Tibetan to Lakota, yet to have their own *Alice*. 

A video of the conference will be available on the Grolier Club website, www.grolierclub.org. More information about *Alice* in a *World of Wonderlands*, including how to order a copy of the book, can be found at <http://aliceinaworldofwonderlands.com>.

Back-translations

The next feature of the book is the volume of back-translations. The intention of the project was to create and share understanding about the significance of *Alice* as a worldwide phenomenon, and the bibliographic census tells only one kind of story, albeit an extremely useful one. What makes the extraordinary numbers so interesting is the very intransigence of *Alice* to translation. The nonsense words, the parodies of Victorian poems, the puns and wordplay, the cultural embeddedness – apparently the very difficulty of translation has served as a siren call. While not necessarily a strategy used in the professional linguistics world, back-translations offer the general audience of this book a window into the kinds of decisions made in rendering *Alice* into other languages. The same passage from the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party can be seen in 207 back-translations, including both an early and a recent one in many languages, supported by substantial footnotes illuminating myriad linguistic and cultural decisions.

Lastly, the first volume takes this project from a collection of data to an extensive scholarly study, with essays on the story of *Alice*’s presence in each of 174 languages, numerous general essays, about 250 book covers and appendices collating data in several different ways. It is hard to overstate the value of the stories told in the essays, which cover everything from politically repressed languages such as Galician reclaiming their status to cultural differences in the acceptance of children’s books and complex interplays of politics, language, identity and literature.

The exhibition at New York’s Grolier Club features cases dedicated to *Alice* in many different languages