

## Conference Paper

# Cognitive Mechanisms for Creating a Genre form of Limerick As the Nonsense Literature

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## Abstract

The article proves that a limerick is a genre form of nonsense literature. It also summarizes the cognitive strategies used in the translation of Edward Lear's limericks into Russian. These strategies are used to convey the original structure and specificity of the semantic meaning of the limerick and include discursive construction --- the direct process of constructing a discourse of nonsense from special language resources, the construction of the world itself, the representation of new reality with the help of this discourse; interpretation --- adjustment to the current situation, when the original text is corrected based on the language parameters and specifics of native speakers world view; transfer of knowledge based on metaphor --- the transition from directly given knowledge to indirectly given knowledge. The primary cognitive mechanism underlying the limerick as a genre form is the discursive construction of a specific nonsense world. According to the analysis, most of the surveyed students prefer the translations of E. Lear's limericks, which are very close or entirely correspond to the characteristics of the original text from the formal point of view.

**Keywords:** Limerick, cognitive theory of translation, interpretation, knowledge transfer, conceptual integration

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## 1. Introduction

Limerick is a popular form of short humorous verse, frequently a bit ribald. Nowadays, it is essential to study issues related to whether limerick is a genre form of nonsense literature, what are the distinctive features of limerick and what cognitive strategies translators use to transfer the original structure and specificity of a limerick meaning.

Artistic discourse is an "integral fragment of the conceptual construction of the world"[1, 451]. Each person dreams, at least for a while, to escape from boring and "correct" reality, to feel like Alice in Wonderland. Nonsense literature is the chance to return to childhood looking at the world through the child's eyes. Limerick allows plunging into nonsense being a sort of a game between the reader and the poet. The game is based on strictly established rules, though. N. M. Demurova notes that "the essence of nonsense <...> is in this very childish "detachment", in the ability to look

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at the world with the "fresh" eye of a child [2, 76]. Foreign researchers of nonsense literature tend to treat nonsense as a phenomenon focused on the game --- "this is a game with only one order. This effect is not achieved by opposing order and disorder; however, it is achieved by opposing one system of order to another system of order, each of which has its logic, but cannot be a part of another system of order" (M. Holquist) [cit. ex: 3]. At the same time, one of the most important theoretical issues to be resolved is the issue of separation of "absurdity" and "nonsense" concepts.

Roland Barthes in his article "Literature and Meaning" contemplates the related concepts of "absurdity" and "nonsense" from the point of view of absence or presence of meaning: "It should not be forgotten that it is possible only to strive for "nonsense", to our mind it is something like a philosopher's stone <...> it is a hopeless idea "to destroy" the sense as it is impossible to achieve it. Why? This is because all the "hors-sens" is absorbed (it is only possible to delay this moment in the work of art) by "nonsense", which has a definite meaning (known as absurdity). <...> Thus, "nonsense" is always something literally "meaningless" or "contre-sens", there is no "zero-degree" meaning except in an author's aspirations, i.e. only as an unreliable delay of the meaning" [4, 195].

According to R. Barthes, in any single statement or in the whole text there is always a meaning, no matter how an author tries to "destroy" it, because human thinking is organized in such a way that a person at the subconscious level is looking for a meaning, comparing information with available experience, which is present in mind as cognitive models. Although nonsense has no specific meaning, it is the opposite of the absence of meaning, but not the meaning itself [see 5]. Literary nonsense, on the contrary, abounds in a new meaning, which is infinitely produced, thus compensating seemingly initial lack of meaning. Understanding literary nonsense is associated with the process of subconscious accumulation of meaning, in a situation in which meaning is supposed to be absent. At the same time, absurdity denotes a particular meaning or the absence of it without encouraging the reader to create additional meanings. Thus, nonsense is a game of a writer and a reader, which creates a particular order within itself and passes by specific rules, but if these rules are broken within the narrative, the characters of a story become the participants of the game.

V. Yu. Charskaya-Boyko distinguishes the notions of nonsense and absurdity and speaks about several conceptual differences at once. The key idea behind the works of absurdity is always to reflect the background of the world, to deny a particular social system, and to create a new reality in which it is often impossible to exist as thinking and sensing individual. According to V. Yu. Charskaia-Boyko, nonsense does not strive

to correct anything, "does not destroy ideas and meanings, does not try to highlight the negative aspects of human existence. It is a sort of a closed system --- a game of mind" [6, 216]. The researcher notes the ambiguity of the works of nonsense, which authors are "trying to compensate by strictly structured form", while at the same time in the absurdity the content is of primary importance. Thus, nonsense can be considered a specific literary mechanism, functioning according to certain rules.

E. V. Klyuyev also considers nonsense to be "a game by the rules" and claims that nonsense "is not a problem of the literary composition content, nonsense is a problem of form and text structure" [7, 294]. It is the form of a literary work of nonsense that is the anchor that holds the world of nonsense in bounds, preventing it from collapsing and finally going beyond the perception of the reader.

Thus, nonsense is a literary mechanism; a self-contained system focused on the game. Language means, and composition in the works of nonsense perform a world-modelling function, it is them that form a special reality, which is constructed by the author of nonsense texts in the process of associative and meaningful development of a text. In limerick, as a genre of nonsense literature, the comic effect is most often based on the transformation and reconsideration or destruction of the meaning of the well-known to a reader phraseological unit and precedent phenomena by creating an additional precedent background by specific language means or changing the initial meaning of the components of the phrase. Taking as a basis R. Barthes' point of view that it is wrong to understand nonsense as a complete absence of meaning, we believe that in limerick, as a genre of nonsense literature, an author does not pursue the aim as in literary nonsense of creating another reality, an illustration of the "underside" of something; for a limerick, the formal side of the matter is essential --- the metric and rhythmic form, without which limerick, as a genre, cannot exist. Translators use various cognitive strategies to recreate the original formal and meaningful specificities of a limerick.

**The object of the paper** is to analyse the limerick's composition, its structure and content and translation into Russian. **The subject of the project** is the comparative analysis of the limerick "There was an Old Man of Peru" translated by S. Task, D. Kovalevsky, S. Shorgin, B. Arkhiptsev, M. Freidkin [8], and determining the one closest to the original. **Our hypothesis** is that the additional information derived from the comparative analysis of the same limerick translated into Russian by different authors (based on the differences in composition and content of the original form and translation) is the key to choosing the closest literary translation. **The aim of the article is** to analyse examine five translations of the Limerick "There was an Old Man of Peru" in terms of

comparative analysis for choosing the one closest to the original and identifying the different cognitive strategies used by translators. To achieve the aim, we set **the tasks**: to find translations of the chosen limerick by various Russian poets; to analyse the chosen translations in terms of comparative analysis; to identify the cognitive strategies used by translators. To fulfil tasks, different methods were used: the study and analysis of various sources of information, e.g. critical literature and internet resources; component analysis of word semantics; contextual analysis; the readers' survey.

## 2. Methodology

**Theoretical-methodological basis of the research** is formed by works in the field of analysis and interpretation of nonsense as a literary phenomenon [2], [3], [4], [6], [7], etc.]. The evaluation of the translations of the limerick by Sergei Tusk, Danik Kovalevsky, Sergei Shorgin, Mark Freudkin, and Boris Arkhiptsev [8] is based on the parameter of correspondence to the poetic form of the limerick (this applies primarily to rhyme and rhythm), semantic closeness to the English original, the level of adherence to such rules of the limerick as the number of syllables per line, the metric type of rhyme (masculine, with an emphasis on the last syllable of the line, or feminine, with an emphasis on the second-to-last syllable) --- also on the basis of compliance with the original text.

Thus, the following formal and meaningful comparison criteria were defined:

1. Correspondence by foot (the basic repeating rhythmic unit that forms part of a line of verse).
2. Correspondence by the number of syllables in a line and the type of rhyme.
3. Semantic closeness of the translation in general.
4. Lexical proximity (the choice of words corresponding the most to the original).

The translations were offered to high school students with advanced study of English language and the first-year students of the philological faculty of Ural Federal University. The total number of participants in the experiment is 30 people.

The stages of the experiment:

Stage 1. Comparison of the original text in English with its five translations into Russian.

Stage 2. Distribution of translations in the sequence from the closest proximity to the original to the minimum for each formulated criterion.

Stage 3. Based on the results of the final sequence --- from the best translation to the worst - each translation received a place from the first to fifth.

Stage 4. Quantitative data were based on the previous stages and reflected the ratio of places (see paragraph 3.6).

## 2.1. The specificity of limerick's structure and content

Limerick is a humorous short poem, with two long lines that rhyme with each other, followed by two short lines that rhyme with each other and ending with a long line that rhymes with the first two [9, 893]. It consists of five lines, rhyming AABBA, and the dominant metre is anapestic, with two metrical feet in the third and fourth lines and the three feet in the others. A favourite diversion of Limerick writers, for instance, is to rhyme words (usually proper names) which are illogically pronounced.

The distinguishing trait of the limerick is that the first line states the existence of a certain person in a definite place. Very often, it is a weird character coming from some strange geographical place involved in an improbable incident -- all pressed in the shortest rhyming text possible. Sergey Task, one of the Russian translators of Limericks, precisely described it as "a long story which is very quickly related. In the first line, we meet with the main character living in some town or an exotic country, often contrived. <...> Sometimes the place is not mentioned at all. The second line is some event. In the third and the fourth lines, a sudden twist follows, and everything turns topsy-turvey. The last line being a variation of the first one, brings the plot to its unexpected finale" [10, 64]. The author tries to compensate the seeming absurdity of "the story" by strictly structured form, therefore the first and the last lines of the Limerick repeat. Aside from their first-rate nonsense, the distinguishing qualities of Edward Lear's Limericks are their coined words and their rhymes to difficult geographical names.

## 2.2. Bases for the comparative analysis of Russian translations of limericks by Edward Lear

The revealed secrets of composition, content and peculiarities of limericks allowed us to formulate the bases for the comparative analysis. The bases for the research are laid in the comparative analysis of the following:

- *the composition*: number of lines; meter feet; rhyme;
- *the content*: the odd character; the name of the place; the twist of the plot;
- *the translator's style peculiarities*.

The subject of the comparative analysis: five remarkable translations of a well-known Limerick "There was an Old Man of Peru" by the Russian authors made the subject of the comparative analysis. They are all acknowledged to be the best among the best: Sergey Task, Danik Kovalevsky, Sergey Shorgin, Boris Arkhiptsev and Mark Freidkin.

Let us analyze the cognitive strategies used in the Russian translations of limerick written by the pioneer of absurd poetry, E. Lear "There was an Old Man of Peru..." [11], [12], [13].

### 3. Results

On the one hand, the chosen limerick corresponds to the full requirement of the harmonious unity of the form and the content. On the other hand, it encharges a translator with a difficult task to relate the text of the original as precisely as possible.

*Here is the text of the original with the interlinear translation:*

*There **was** an Old **Man** of Peru,* (anapest)

Жил старый человек в Перу,

*Who **watched** his wife **making** a **stew**;* (amphibrach)

который наблюдал свою жену, приготавливающую тушёное мясо;

*But **once** by **mistake**,* (amphibrach)

Но однажды по ошибке

*In a **stove** she did **bake**,* (anapest)

В печи она запекла

*That **unfortunate** **Man** of Peru* (anapest)

этого несчастного человека из Перу.

#### 3.1. Translation by Sergey Task

Любимому мужу из Халла часто рыбу жена запекала. / Но раз по ошибке она вместо рыбки / Запекла-таки мужа из Халла.

Formally, the metre in translation coincides with the original (anapest/ amphibrach), but an extra unstressed syllable appears. What concerns the content, the translation differs from the original. The name of the town is changing for the sake of rhyming: Халла (Khalla) -- запекала (zare'kala). The **stew** means тушеное мясо while the translator exploits the word рыба (fish). The word любимый, which can be translated as **beloved**, thus adding a certain notion to the content, is neither presented in the

original verse. The line Запекла-таки мужа из Халла (trans. Finally cooked/baked her husband from Khalla) is immediately associated with the idiomatic meaning допекать, which in Russian is **to bother** or even **to drive someone mad** adding a notional attribute that contradicts the collocation любимому мужу (trans. beloved husband).

S. Task uses a cognitive "**knowledge transfer**" strategy, which is used to solve the problem of knowledge transfer from one sphere to another and underlies the non-letter use of language expressions [14, 29]. According to V.Z. Demyankov's definition, "knowledge transfer" is "transfer from person to person not only of practical and theoretical information, but also of skills, attitudes, and preferences in choosing approaches to solving daily or scientific problems" [Ibid.]

The most productive cognitive mechanism in the process of knowledge transfer is the metaphor as a "transfer from information given directly to information given indirectly" [Ibid.] Thus, after reading the line Запекла-таки мужа из Халла, the carrier of Russian linguistic culture has an association with the figurative meaning of the word "bake" --- допекать ("colloq. to annoy, not to give rest to anyone; to pester" [15]), which gives an additional shade of meaning, but still contradicts the combination of "*beloved husband*": the beloved wife does bake the beloved husband.

### 3.2. Translation by Danik Kovalevsky

Один старичок из Перу / На кухне смотрел на жену. / Торопилася szybko, / Запекла по ошибке

Невезучего старца в Перу.

In reference to the chosen metre feet, the translation above is closer to the original. However, the rhyme Перу (Peru) -- жену (zhenu) cannot be regarded as successful. For the sake of poetic metre, the translator chooses colloquialisms, for instance, торопилася (received standard: торопилась) and vernacular szybko meaning **quickly**. Besides, this is the instance of pleonasm. However, the most disappointing is redundancy of Russian conversational words and their sudden collision with elevated style старец (very polite: an aged man). This strange mixture contradicts the spirit of the original.

Any translation is intended to provide the reader with an "entrance" to the different cultural and cognitive space, as well as acquaintance with the "foreign" ethnocultural world represented in the original. To achieve this goal, D. Kovalevsky uses a cognitive interpretation mechanism. As noted by E. M. Maslennikova, different options are possible for a translator to construct the projection of the text as a secondary interpretation, one of which is "'adjustment" to the current situation, when the original is adjusted

based on the parameters and specifics of the receiving audience" [16: 790 ], that is, based on the specifics of the world view of native speakers of the translation language. In particular, this strategy is manifested by the fact that in order to keep up with the foot, the author chooses the vocabulary belonging to a specific form of the Russian language --- common parlance: торопилася ("to do something **in a hurry**" [15]), шибко ("colloq. **Fast**, soon" [15]). As a result of the repetition of similar differential semes in definitions, a pleonastic combination is created. Besides, it seems that typical Russian common parlance words poorly correspond to the spirit of the English text.

According to E.M. Maslennikova, the second variant of the text projection construction by the translator as a secondary interpretation is "the interpretation of objects and events by establishing (constructing) different links between different domains" [16, 790]. Thus, this translation also contains an unjustified stylistic mixture: the transition from the simplicity (торопилася шибко) to the high style (Старец --- "The respected old man" [15]).

### 3.3. Translation by Sergey Shorin

Наблюдал как-то муж из Москвы / За стряпнёю супруги. Увы! / Та, готовя харчи, / По ошибке в печи / Испекла муженька из Москвы.

The translation is performed fully by the metre feet and rhyme requirements. Intentionally or not, the author of translation transfers the place of action to Moscow. In our opinion, it does not correspond to the aim of any translator to relate the plot in a way proximal to the original. There is a grammatical inaccuracy муж из Москвы, which allows us to think that the husband was born in Moscow or he stayed in Moscow and managed to watch his wife who was cooking in another place at that moment. There are not any exclamations in the original like Увы! (exclamation of disappointment) in this variant of translation. The usage of colloquialisms стряпня, харчи, муженёк do the translation too close to our local lore. The words are chosen for the sake of preserving the rhyme and the metre feet.

Any translated (secondary) text finds itself in a special intercultural space, where the collective knowledge accumulated in the systems of the original language and the language of translation, as well as personal knowledge of the author of the original and the translator, begin to interact [16, 789]. There are various ways in which a translator can use a cognitive interpretation mechanism, one of which is to "adjust" to the current situation when the original is corrected based on the parameters and specifics of the receiving audience" [Ibid., 790]. In particular, this strategy is manifested in the fact



that the author chooses the vocabulary that belongs to a specific form of the Russian language --- common parlance (i.e. *стряпня, харчи* --- grub food, concoction) that does not correspond to the spirit of the English text. Such words are probably used to rhyme, and the ironically diminishing version of the "husband" (hubby) is used to keep up with the foot.

### 3.4. Translation by Boris Arkhiptsev

Невезучий старик из Перу, / Как супруга мяско на пару / Тушит, часто следил / Да  
и в печь угодил, / И запёкся старик из Перу.

The translation is accomplished in full accordance with the structure of the original: rhyming and metre feet satisfy the requirements, although in the second line it might have been better to translate: *Как мясо жена на пару* with the stress on the second syllable as in the original: Who **w**atched his wife **m**aking a **stew** amphibrach). The shift of the word *тушит* to the third line might seem a bit clumsy. The word unfortunate -- *невезучий* in Russian is replaced to the first line. However, it, by no means, spoils the translation which can be regarded as a successful one.

In the process of translation, B. Arkhiptsev uses a cognitive strategy of "**knowledge transfer**" --- the transfer of knowledge from one sphere to another on the basis of metaphor [14, 29]: after reading the line "И запёкся старик из Перу", there appears an association with the figurative meaning of the cognate word "допекать" ("*colloq.* to annoy, not to give rest to anyone; to pester" [15]), which gives an additional meaning and corresponds to the author's definition of the character "*the unfortunate old man*".

### 3.5. Translation by Mark Freidkin

Любопытный старик из Эль-Пасо / Наблюдал, как жена жарит мясо. / Результат  
был кошмарен:

Сам был вскоре зажарен / Тот румяный старик из Эль-Пасо.

On a formal level, the translation is accomplished in anapestic metre, but there is an extra syllable in each line. It is necessary to draw the readers' fascinated attention to the translator's talent for rhyming. The translation perfectly satisfies the requirements of rhyming. For the sake of a coined rhyme, the translator introduces into his creation a geographical name *Эль-Пасо* different from the original, though very close to Peruvian reality, and the adjective *румяный*, which bears additional notion does not correspond to the original metre.

It can be concluded that the translation perused above cannot be regarded as close to the original. However, the bright images prompted by the artistic freedom of the translator does this translation, though not flawless in the formal linguistic judgement, one of the leading choices of the readers taking part in our Readers' survey.

Another variant of the translator's construction of the text projection as a secondary interpretation is "modification of the represented meaning in the form of expansion or narrowing of the concept, partial change of focus, the actualization of the value feature" [16, 789]. For instance, according to R. Langacker, the action of the cognitive profiling mechanism consists in highlighting a specific conceptual base of a conceptual attribute called a profile against a particular conceptual base, which focuses the most relevant and vital in this situation characteristics of the concept.

Using the word "*ruddy*", which is absent in the original, M. Freidkin actualizes the cognitive mechanism of **profiling** (placement in the active zone) [18, 78], and human appearance appears to be a feature of profiling, which leads to the formation of the meaning of "*rosy*". The question arises: why instead of the word "*ruddy*" --- румяный was not used the exact meaning of the adjective "*miserable*" --- несчастный, feet in the metrical foot?

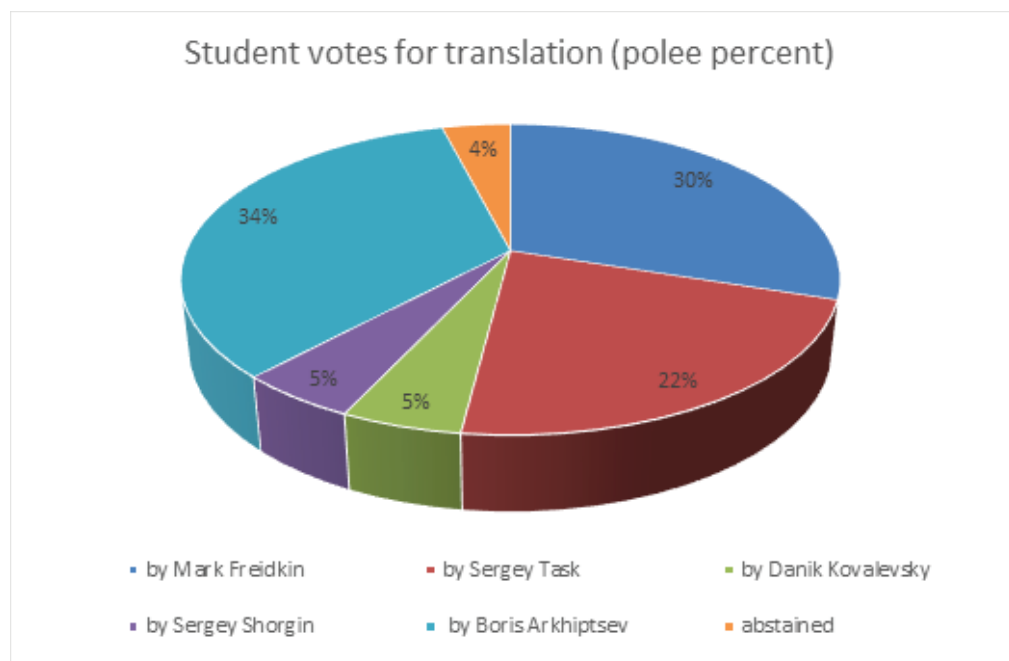
The possible answer lies in the parallel use of the cognitive mechanism of **conceptual integration**, according to G. Fauconnier [19], [20], [21], which is the basis of mental ability, leading to new meanings, conceptual compression, manipulation of meanings, and largely proceeds unconsciously [cit. ex: 22, 19]. In the process of conceptual integration four mental spaces are constantly constructed in the consciousness in the course of discourse formation: two input spaces --- in this case, it is румяный 1 (the direct meaning of "*ruddy*" [15]) and the румяный 2 ("*fig. Crispy, with golden-brown crust (about the color of baked and fried products [15])*"; the generic space "румяный старик из Эль-Пасо"; and on the basis of the common features of the two initial and combined domains, integrated domain is a blend, which is structured in mind and is the result of conceptual integration [cit. ex: 23, 575]: after his wife "*fried him*", the old man from El Paso seems to have acquired a crispy, golden-brown crust similar to the colour of baked and fried products.

### 3.6. Readers' survey and quantitative results

The practical part of the research work involved a method of the reader's survey. The results of the readers' public opinion poll could lay the basis of separate exciting research investigating the psychology of readers' perception.

Among 30 students of the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades:

- 30 % voted for translation by Mark Freidkin as the most appealing;
- 22% of the pollee voted for translations by Sergey Task;
- 5% for translation by Danik Kovalevsky and the same was the result with the translation by Sergey Shorgin;
- 34% voted for the translation by Boris Arkhiptsev as the most successful and closest to the original;
- 4 % of the polee abstained from choosing a single translation admitting the apparent advantages of all the works.



**Figure 1:** The distribution of translations placed as number 1 (the most appealing) during the survey.

The difference in readers' perception reflected in the diagram was commented by the students, and it led to a satisfying result proving the hypothesis: additional information derived from the comparative analysis of the same limerick translated into Russian by different authors is the key to choosing the closest literary translation.

The majority of readers (34%) have chosen the translation by Boris Arkhiptsev, which was acknowledged the closest to the original. Comparative analysis of translation brought us to the same choice. It is not by chance that Natalia Gorbanevskaya said about Arkhiptsev's talent of a translator: «He conveys both the plot and the sound, being precise in minute details and equilibristically soniferous» [11], [24].

Mark Freidkin's translation has obtained nearly the same number of votes being one of the most humorous ones, as the students explained. The minority of the readers' survey have voted for translation by Danik Kovalevsky, although the readers appreciated its trueness. However, as explained by the students, it lacks the donaire. Strangely enough, the translation by Sergey Shorgin being far from the original "geographically" and linguistically was assessed higher by the students. It seemed wittier to the readers.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Due to the research, we got glimpses of poetic metre, splendidly coined rhymes and poetic devices employed in creating a Limerick. The perused additional information showed that this literary genre did not outlive itself. The technique of creating limericks was developed by men of letters and all lovers of poetry. Also, this evolution seems to get no limits.

Laying the bases for the comparative analysis as the core method of the research and examining the composition (mainly metre feet and rhyme), the content and translators' style peculiarities in each of the five chosen translations, we dare draw a conclusion that the principal role in creating a successful translation of a Limerick belongs to its rigid structure and only then comes the content.

As a result of comparative analysis applied in the research, the closest to the original translation was determined. That was the verse translation created by Boris Arkhipstev.

The choice of the readers coincided with the results of comparative analysis. That might speak well both for the readers' taste or their good linguistic intuition and, to some extent, indicate the priority of the scientific method of comparative analysis.

Limerick as a genre of nonsense literature is based on the hyperbolicity of the effect of defeated expectancy, a striking emphasis on the difference between the inception and the result. In this sense, the limerick is close to anecdote.

Unlike the prosaic translation, poetic translation requires the best possible approximation to the original form, i.e., preservation of the original rhyming method, author size and, if possible, the same number of syllables in the translation line as in the original. Translated texts based on the language game often represent the author's interpretation of the original text, rather than an analogue translation, because they are designed for the perception of the reader who has a certain level of knowledge about the language and culture of the author's country, contain vernacular and slang transformations of the lexemes of the literary language and suggest the search for

an alternative precedent phenomenon close for the understanding of the Russian-speaking reader. In our opinion, the most successful is the poetic translation, which accurately conveys the meaning and form of the original. In this regard, among all the translations of Edward Lear's limerick, Boris Arkhitektsev's translation appears to be the most accurate. Quantitative analysis has fully confirmed this conclusion: most of the students surveyed prefer translations that are as close as possible or fully correspond to the formal indicators of the original.

The analysis has shown that the primary cognitive mechanism underlying the genre form of the limerick is the **discursive construction** [25, 74] of a specific, at first glance, absurd world, which includes, firstly, the direct process of constructing a discourse of nonsense from special language resources; secondly, the construction of the world itself, the representation of new reality through artistic discourse.

It seems that further study of cognitive mechanisms and structures underlying the discursive construction of subjective versions of reality in a literary text, as well as various transformations of the real-world view in the process of translation, replacement of reality with possible worlds in artistic discourse is very promising.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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