

DIFFERENCE IN ASSOCIATION ABOUT BRIDGING THE CULTURAL GAP WHEN TRANSLATING IBSEN'S *EN FOLKEFIENDE*

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1. Opening

An English translator of Norwegian literature once spoke about the word “opphaldsvær”. According to him, it is only found in the Norwegian language. It is a term that describes the weather when there is no rain or snow or other precipitates from the clouds. It is a positively charged word. The existence of this word which underlines the good side of grey weather, tells something about being Norwegian. “Opphaldsver” describes, a not necessarily sunny, but at least not rainy weather, and brings with it a “let’s be happy it’s not raining” – kind of feeling. It is a word that springs out from a national spirit which has developed through the ages and can be detected in expressions like “Det finnes ikke dårlig vær, bare dårlige klær!” (There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing) and brings to our inner minds images of weather-beaten Northern Norwegians standing steadily in their fishing boats defying the cruelest of the natural elements,.

When one translates from Norwegian into different languages, many challenges arise. Like “opphaldsvær”, many words and expressions come out of a specific culture and in translating it into our target languages; we must twist our brains to create a similar association, a similar picture in the mind of the spectator or reader.

In this presentation I would like to focus on the cultural gaps that become apparent when translating *En folkefiende*, and on the difference in association words and concepts may have in the two languages.

2. Introduction of project

In Ibsen-In-Translation, eight translators work simultaneously on translating the same play into their target-languages of Classic Arabic, Chinese, Egyptian, English, Hindi, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. During the translation of *En Folkefiende*, the group met twice to discuss problems and help each other’s understanding of the play.

It intrigued me to see that very often more of us were struggling with the translation of the same word or concept. To me, this said something about Ibsen and the Norwegian culture, and about the culture into which we were translating. Here I would like to bring forward some of the issues we encountered.

3. Problems relating to Christian values

3.1 Swearwords

Many of the problems we encountered were related to Christian values, specifically to the Northern European Protestant culture. Translating swearwords was one of these challenges. However, in the Northern European countries of England and Russia, this seemed to go relatively smooth. Their problems lay in the choice among many possibilities; to find the exact nuance. In Russian, Olga Drobot attributed hell-related swearwords to Dr. Stockmann and heaven-related swearwords to the Judge. In

English, Barbara Haveland made a list of the swearwords Ibsen is using with a corresponding finely nuanced list in English. Translating into a Southern European and Catholic culture was a bit more problematic. According to the Spanish translator Cristina Baggethun, the Spanish tend to swear with sexual words, and if Christian, - then Catholic-related, i.e. to the holy Madonna and so on. However, for us translating to the non-European languages and non-Christian-cultures, it was more difficult to convey the fine nuances each of the swearwords provided. In Hindi one doesn't use religious swearwords, but refer to sexual relations within the family. This would have been too rude to use for the Ibsen-translation. So Astri Ghosh who translates into Hindi, used words from Urdu and Hindustani where religious swearwords are used. These are swearwords with associations to the Muslim world, which are closer to the Christian swearwords than the Hinduistic ones. For Astri, this had effects on the whole play. The Judge had to use Urdu words in other situations as well. This particular problem actually worked well, because Urdu was previously the official language in court. And the language fit well with the formal way the judge speaks. Japanese don't swear to God and the devil. You may find it in translated literature, but when you do, 「ああ、神様！」 (*Aah, kamisama!* Meaning "Oh, God!") or anything similar has a foreign and exotic ring to it, an air of inverted orientalism, a feeling of "trying to be western".

Not that they don't use charged words, but to express anger or surprise, Japanese would mostly use words related to what you do in the toilet. So as for Billing's favorite expression "Gud døde mig!" which literally means: "God kill me!", I often used 「くそ！」 (*kuso!*) which literally means "dung" or "shit".

In the west we have been brought up with Søren Kierkegaard's concepts of the three stages in life. The aesthetic stage, the ethical stage and the religious stage. In the lowest stage one is concerned about one's own enjoyment. About how things look, is superficial and selfish. The second stage is the moral stage. Here one becomes concerned about the relation to the others and to be fair and considerate. The highest stage is the religious one, here one sees not only oneself in relation to other humans, but also to God, and there is a commitment to God. These three stages don't quite fit in Japan. There the religious is so linked to the aesthetic. In the Shintoistic and Buddhistic religions of Japan, it is through the aesthetic, through purification and through beauty and even through pleasure that you reach the divine. Therefore, saying words that relate to the unpure and dirty, like 「くそ！」 (*kuso!*) is shocking in a similar way as religious swearwords are to Westerners.

3.2 The concept of "mådehold"

The concept of temperance, "mådehold" is very important for Aslaksen. Both in relation to alcohol consumption, but also in life generally. In Norway anno 1882, after Hans Nielsen Hauge's enormous influence on people and their relation to religion and his idea that it is sin to consume alcohol, the "avholdsbevegelsen" (abstinence movement) that refrained totally from drinking and "mådeholdsbevegelsen" (temperance movement) that preached temperance had many followers. Concepts equivalent to *mådehold* exist in English and Spanish, but in Russian, the concept of temperance in regard to drinking is non-existent. There was an abstinence movement initiated by the church in the 18th century, but the association the word

“temperance” brings in Russian, is apparently more in a sexual connotation. Surprisingly however, translating ”mådehold” into Egyptian and Classic Arabic was not difficult. They know westerners drink alcohol and have the words to express abstinence and temperance.

The idea that it is a virtue to temper oneself and to hold back, that seems to be found at least in each of our 8 languages. But the associations and the inner pictures connected to these expressions vary. In Japan and India, people have a totally different attitude towards alcohol, and “mådehold” and “avhold” become exotic western concepts.

3.3 ”Fritenker” and ”å være frisindet”

For Sherin Awahab and Randa Hakim who translate into Classic Arabic and Egyptian, what was more difficult was the concept of ”fritenker” – atheist and ”å være frisindet” – to be open-minded. In act one Ejlif tells his brother Morten, that if he wants to become a Viking, he must become heathen. In the Classic Arabic and Egyptian, this fragment had to be translated in an explanatory way, such as: “If you want to become a Viking, you would have to renounce your Christian faith”. The word “Christian” had to be included here. The same was the case for a scene in act four where Dr. Stockmann is accused of being an atheist. They had to take into consideration the censorship, but as long as it is not about renouncing the Muslim faith, it not shocking and is not censored. Olga also had a problem with these concepts. In Russia, before the revolution one had to be Christian, and afterwards – an atheist. Liberal thinkers were persecuted both before and after the revolution. So the words “fritenker” and “frisindet” carry very different associations in Russia and the Arab word. In Hindi the concepts of “fritenker” and “frisindet” get lost in translation, because according to Astri, there is nothing shocking about it. I also found these difficult concepts to translate into Japanese, since although the words exist, the shocking associations didn’t follow. These are such loaded words in this play. Japan is a country where religion in itself is not authoritarian. So the terrifying idea of someone rebelling against a religious Christian set of thinking and the taboo associated with it is not there.

4. Problems relating to societal organization and political ideology of the time

The Norwegian concept of “borger” with all its word-variations: ”borgerskap”, ”medborger”, ”borgerplikt”, ”småborger”, was a challenge for some of us, because it refers to a specific societal system characterizing Norway at the time of Ibsen. Especially in English and Russian, it was difficult to find the words that brought to mind the right associations. In Russian, Olga, told us there are at least 7 words to consider for the word meaning “borger”. *Burger, burzjua, burzjuj, gorozjanin, grazhdanin, mezjanin, obuvatel*. Although all these words literally mean ”borger”, a person belonging to that city or town, they have gradually gained different nuances. After the revolution in 1917, *burger, mezjanin* and *obuvatel* was used as derogative terms, meaning primitive, selfish and politically indifferent persons. In the Socialistic-communistic rethoric, the word *burzjua* is being used about the rich upperclass, and *burzjuj* is a derogative and aggressive variation of this word. *Gorozjanin* means anyone who lives in the city, regardless of class, and *grazhdanin*

which stands for civil rights fighter, was a prohibited word during the 18th century, because of its clear associations with democracy and revolution. So one can see that these words all have strong links to Russian history and politics, and whatever word the translator chooses, there are certain associations she can not shake off.

Strange enough it was the languages of the geographically closest Northern-European Russia and England that struggled most with this. In Japanese, Hindi, Egyptian and Classic Arabic this was not our big challenge: Sherin and Randa who translate into Egyptian and Arabic were maybe the two luckiest ladies in this context. They had one word in Arabic: "mowaten", and it covered what they needed.

5. Speechforms and hierarchy

The third problem I would like to mention is related to speechforms. Formal and informal speech and speechforms reflecting the hierarchy among the characters. Although some of the other translators had similar problems, what I will mention here is a language-specific problem I encountered in the process of translating into Japanese.

In 2010, I had the privilege of translating *Hedda Gabler* into Japanese for the New National Theatre Tokyo. During the first day of the reading rehearsal, the director took good time to list all the characters and their hierarchical positions in relation to each other. This amused me, but I was feeling that we were drifting away from the original. But in the course of these five days I realized how necessary this was in the process of making the play real and believable in the Japanese context. And now in the process of translating *En Folkefiende*, this has been an important first step in finding each characters' voices. Japanese has a wide range of speech styles and you can indicate where you see yourself in relation to the other. There is an expected way to speak; and there are fine nuances to this, and one can play with this. For example, although a publisher should speak with respect towards a judge, if their relationship is a close one, he would moderate that and thereby sounding more intimate. He could also overdo the respect, which would not necessary mean that the publisher highly honors the judge; it could create distance and coolness. To find the right position each of the characters have in relation to each other, and then giving them the right voice, and making that natural in the Japanese set of contexts, was a big challenge for me. Let me give a concrete example:

In the original text, the judge has a very characteristic style of speech. He and Dr. Stockmann are brothers. Still the judge speaks to the doctor in a very formal way. This creates a distance between the two, and in the Norwegian context, it functions and sounds natural. But when transferring this into a Japanese context it feels fake. A brother would never talk this formal. This has been difficult to get into Japanese.

Translating theatre from Norwegian to Japanese makes one realize how democratic the Norwegian language is in its structure. There is of course the usage of "De" and "Dem", and there are ways to create superiority or distance through the use of formal language. But in comparison to the Japanese language, it is quite equal. In Japanese, respect, lack of respect, underlying hierarchical positions and so on are expressed through nuanced use of language, and one does not need to express this through voice, facial expressions and gestures. Especially in the translation of

dramas into Japanese, this is a very important element. I must leave space equivalent to the original, for the actors to interpret their roles. I must not spell it out for them.

Before I finish, let me mention one little scene where Ibsen has hit the hammer on its head in Japanese comic setting.

In act 1, Billing comes too late to the dinner party and must eat cold roast all by himself while the others are in the living room. He does however not mind the cold meat, and is happily munching away by himself, saying he actually prefers eating alone. There is a slight comic element to this scene, but in Japan this is really funny. Ibsen has, unknowingly, used a Japanese comic prototype here. In a culture where food plays an important role, and one doesn't eat alone, but shall share with the others, - a character who prefers to enjoy it on his own is a comic variation of a glutton, a prototype of a funny character appearing in any situation from traditional comic storytelling of Rakugo, to cartoons, animations and sit-coms. In the Japanese version of *En folkefiende* Ibsen brings home a humor so Japanese.

6. Ending

Through our Ibsen-In-Translation project, we have been able to see Ibsen's drama travel in steadily transforming terrain. The words, concepts, values and ways of thinking that lie underneath, has traveled From Ibsen's Norway to England, which is still Protestant, Northern-European; to Russia, Spain, Egypt and Arabia; to India, and to China and Japan. It seems to me that in translating Ibsen to a language close to the Northern-European Protestant culture, the main challenge lies in finding the correct fine nuance. It is as if one has to work with a magnifying glass, not missing out on the small differences each word and concept carries. The further away the target-language gets from Ibsen's culture, the challenge changes into finding ways to bridge the gap of concepts, philosophies, values and ways of thinking while trying to make it feel natural in the new setting.

In this presentation, I have tried to give you examples of what we have seen as challenges in translating *En folkefiende*. I have tried to point at elements in the text that reflect the cultural gap between the original and some of the target-languages, and I have tried to draw forward words and expressions that carry with it a difference in association in the different languages.

Biographical note

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Summary

Ibsen-In-Translation aims at translating Ibsen's work simultaneously into the languages of: Classic Arabic, Chinese, Egyptian, English, Hindi, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. During the translation of *En Folkefiende* the group met twice to discuss problems and help eachother's understanding of the play. This article aims at

pointing out some of the common translation-problems the eight translators encountered, and to mention specific problems I encountered in the process of translating the play into Japanese.

During our two meetings, I saw that some problems were language-specific, and that some were common to more of us. We also discovered that some words and expressions are so rooted in the Norwegian culture and that a literal translation of such words and expressions create different associations in the target language. Among the problems we had in common, there seemed to be two main categories. 1: Concepts related to Christian values, and 2: Concepts related to the Norwegian societal organization of the time. Christian values-related problems consisted of translating swearwords, translating the concepts and the associations related to the words "temperance", "atheism" and "openmindedness". As for the problems relating to societal organization and political ideology in Norway of the time, concepts relating to the term "borger" was a challenge for many of us. As for me specifically, I also had the added challenge of fitting the relatively democratic language of Ibsen into the Japanese hierarchical languagesystem.

Keywords

Ibsen in Translation, Japanese, *En folkefiende* / *An Enemy of the People*, Cultural gap, Translation problems, Swearwords, Hierarchy in language