"WRITE WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY, NOT WHAT I'M SAYING"[1]

May-Brit Akerholt

Some years ago *The Spectator* ran a literary competition asking readers to add or change the plot or storyline of a play, thereby irrevocably changing it. The winning entry read:

"Waiting for Godot. A play by Samuel Beckett. Act 1. Scene 1. Enter Godot."

A badly translated line may not stop a play in its tracks, but it may change it irrevocably; it may shift the intention of the playwright's original text and influence the interpretation, not just of a line but of a whole scene. And for more than a century, a number of inferior English translations have influenced productions as well as scholarship of Henrik Ibsen's plays.

There are different forms of translation mistakes. In one English version, Hjalmar of *The Wild Duck* plays "cream" instead of the flute; this is an error caused by the relationship between a non-Norwegian speaking translator and his dictionary: flute is 'fløyte' in Norwegian and cream is 'fløte' – and 'fløyte' in New Norwegian (nynorsk).[2]

But as Neil Bartlett argues, so what if you get a word wrong. Sometimes it matters little. Such linguistic blunders as Hjalmar's instrument will at worst cause a moment of confusion or hilarity. However, what if a whole passage is misinterpreted by a production team, or a scholar, because of getting one word wrong?

When I worked on my translation of *The Wild Duck* for a production, I discovered a mistake in one of the last lines in the Penguin version of the British translator Una Ellis-Fermor; a tiny error, but with ramifications.[3]

> RELLING Vi skal snakkes ved når det første græsset er visnet på hendes grav.[4]
>
> RELLING We shall talk when the first grass has withered on her grave.
>
> Ellis-Fermor
> RELLING: We shall talk about it again when the first grass is showing on her grave. (Ellis-Fermor, 1950/reprint 1973, p.259)

The Norwegian word for 'wither' is 'visne'; the word for 'show' is 'vise' – an 'n' less, and yes, anyone could make this mistake. I'm throwing stones in a glass-house. But unfortunately, it has been copied; four out of nine translations I checked have "show" instead of "wither", the highly respected translators Rolf Fjelde and James

[1] Jorge Luis Borges to his translator. Frawley (ed.), 1984, p.22.

[2] The source is www.ibsen.net.no

[3] Co-production between State Theatre Company of South Australia and Glen St. Theatre, Sydney, 1999, directed by Jeremy Sims.

[4] *Vildanden*, HIS, p.122. All Norwegian Ibsen quotations are from HIS: Henrik Ibsens Skrifter, UIO;

McFarlane among them. Or have they all simply misread the original the way Ellis-Fermor did?

One letter less, one different word … but a world of difference in meaning and interpretation. Hedvig dies in winter, and in the original, the period of mourning is long enough for the grass to have grown and withered; this is also emphasised in references to fertility ("nine months") and the seasons of summer and winter throughout. Thus, in this final piece of dialogue in *The Wild Duck*, not only have all these versions lost the symbolic link between nine months and Hedvig's life and death and the time of mourning, they have ignored the image of withered grass, which speaks about the nature of Hjalmar's recitations, and perhaps even his soul.

Fjelde has managed to make two distinct mistakes in Relling's line, in one sentence:

RELLING: We'll be lectured on this when the first grass shows on her grave.
(Fjelde, 1965, p.216)

Relling's "We shall talk" suggests that he intends to continue a dialogue with Gregers about his misguided ideals – and in the future, an important message of the play. Fjelde's version suggests something else altogether: that Hjalmar will lecture them. Because of the particular expression Ibsen uses here: 'snakkes ved', which suggests 'talk together', I wanted to put a slight emphasis on the idea of a discussion, and my performance version became: "You and I shall talk when the first grass has withered on her grave."

Ibsen took meticulous care in constructing his dramatic language. There is no doubt that mistranslations or misinterpretations of a word, a passage or a piece of dialogue, can change the dramaturgy of a work and distort the intention of a line, a scene, a character, and thus affect the interpretation of the line, the scene and the character. A moment early in Act 1 of *The Wild Duck*, in Werle's house, illustrates how Ibsen dramatises the style of the time's drawing-room banter with one stroke. The original line is convivial, elegant, slightly pompous:

DEN FEDE HERRE Men herre gud, er det sandt, at De har ophævet den velsignede røgefrihed? (HIS, p.6)

FAT GUEST But good God, is it true you've abolished our blessed freedom to smoke?

This is the Penguin translation of Una Ellis-Fermor:

FAT GUEST Now, now! Is it true that you've done away with that pleasant privilege of smoking where we liked? (Ellis-Fermor, 1950 / 1973, p.150)

Perhaps Ellis-Fermor wanted to re-create what she saw as a small-town Norwegian style to a more common, or similar English form of township banter. No matter what the intention, her version has lost both the 'body' and the purpose of the dialogue;

that is, its characterising quality, its dramatic intention. Moreover, the division of the line into two sentences has no specific rhythm; an actor may not find it easy to say the line without pausing for breath. This is a mis-translation in that it misses the point of the original line; it is a misreading of the character who says it and his relationship to the character to whom it is said.

A Doll's House seems to lend itself particularly to such 'mis'-readings. In the first scene we see Nora and Torvald together. He, too, banters when his wife asks for money for Christmas:

> TORVALD Nora! Er nu letsindigheden ude og går igen? (HIS, p.6)
>
> TORVALD Nora! Is frivolity getting the upper hand again?

There are other good alternatives to the last half of the line: on the loose again / getting legs again / finding its legs again; but 'frivolity' is the key word. The point is, he is both reprimanding her for spending money and celebrating her womanhood. 'Frivolity' suggests an appropriate combination of sexy playfulness and silly thoughtlessness, just like the Norwegian word 'letsindighed'. And by using it, I managed to create a tiny moment of Nora making fun of Torvald's vocabulary in the next scene when Mrs Linde tells her that she was awfully good at wasting money at school: "Torvald says I still am … But 'Nora, Nora' isn't as frivolous as you all think." In the original she says 'gal', in the meaning of 'silly', 'mad', but the word has undertones of 'wrong'. I thought to repeat 'frivolous' here would take nothing away from the intention of the original line; it might even add a touch to it!

It was a revelation to research other English translations of this line; here are a few examples, some are fairly new versions:

> Nora! Are your scatterbrains off again? (Fjelde, 1965, p.44)
> Nora! The same little scatterbrain. (Watts, 1965, p.148)
> Nora! What a little spendthrift you are! (Meyer, 1965, p.24)
> Nora! What a little featherbrain it is. (McLeish, 1994, p.4)
> Nora! There you go again. Scatterbrain! (Rudall, 1999, p.12)

Words such as 'featherbrain' and 'scatterbrain' are nothing but contemptuous, and 'spendthrift' is wrong in this context. While part of Helmer's male teaching ritual is to scold his wife's extravagance, he still "wouldn't want my darling songbird any other way", as he assures her. Some translations try to avoid insulting words by rewriting the line, and while I think these are more consistent with the original's dramatic intention, I do miss the hint of sexiness in 'frivolity':

> Nora! Is that dizzy little head of yours spinning around again? (Johnston, 2004, p.148)
> Nora! Are you being irresponsible again? (Tindale, 1991/2002, p.12)

Apart from Tindale's, these versions of Torvald line suggest a lack of a close dramaturgical interrogation of Ibsen's original text. They indicate the translators'

failure to give Torvald's character a voice which is dramaturgically suited, so his language becomes part of characterisation and storytelling – just like the Fat Guest's line in *The Wild Duck*. And as most are not written for production, they have not undergone the rigours of rehearsals, the final stage which makes a translation a piece of theatre.

Torvald's name for Nora, 'spillefugl', is a word Ibsen coined, with connotations of play, gamble, act, pretend, squander and more. But it does not translate as 'featherbrain' or 'scatterbrain', which he calls her in so many translations. This is Helmer's pet-word for his wife, and I doubt Ibsen intended that an audience should keep listening to him calling her abusive words.

The Norwegian scholar Edvard Beyer says about *A Doll's House* that there is "hardly a single line that doesn't have a demonstrable dramatic function. … And all of a sudden single everyday words take on a double meaning or foreboding undertones."[5] Yes. A playwright of Ibsen's calibre, who tried his hand at both acting and directing, is extremely alert to and familiar with all aspects of the art and craft of theatre. So I wonder if the translators whose work I discuss above had full access to what Ibsen wrote - not the words' lexical definitions, but their 'subtext' which creates the 'foreboding undertones', and how the words are used dramatically? Did they have access to what I would call the 'stage directions' to the actors embedded in Ibsen's dramatic language? In the final instance, it is not only a question of language expertise, but of professional theatre experience, such as production dramaturgy, and its immeasurable value in the art and craft of drama translation. For Ibsen's plays must be interpreted in terms of the dramaturgy of performance.

As Henry James maintains - "the author of *The Pillars of Society*, and of *The Doll's House*, of *Ghosts*, of *The Wild Duck*, of *Hedda Gabler*, is destined to be adored by the 'profession.' He cuts them out work to which the artistic nature in them joyously responds — work difficult and interesting, full of stuff and opportunity."[6] Few scholars - and audiences - saw the art and craft of Ibsen's writing with such shrewd insight – and in borrowed habit, too!

It is certainly my experience that theatre artists who work with an Ibsen text agree that he understands, indeed feeds, the actor's art; as if he 'imagines' how an actor will not only say a line, use his or her voice, exploit rhythm, pace and sound, but also what kind of physical reaction it might provoke. It is always worth listening to actors' instincts – they will let you know if your translation fails to give rise to performance. And the work should always be translated with actors' voices in mind; even better, with specific actors' voices in mind, if possible. To write dialogue for a particular actor – or a cast – means the language becomes idiosyncratic and characterising – and thereby universal, something which is amply demonstrated by the history of playwriting.

For dramatic language is a living organism. It is in the language that action happens. It is 'les mots qui saignent', as Michel Foucault claims; in all great theatre, it is the words that bleed; it is the words that "imitate the gestures and the state of mind of the characters … the words that adopt an attitude, not the body; that are woven, not the garments; that sparkle, not the armour; that growl, not the storm; that

[5] Beyer, 1978, p. 415.
[6] James, 1893, p.260.

threaten, not Juno; that laugh, not Cythera; that bleed, not the wounds."[7] Every moment on stage is manipulated by the text. But if a translator fails to recreate the original's world of conflicting and juxtaposed signals - its complexity or underbelly - directors and other theatre artists will be unable to realise them on stage. There are many imaginative reinterpretations, or adaptations, of Ibsen's plays; but you can only be inventive with his texts if you know exactly what is there in the first place.

The making of theatre "is an encounter between actor and text in a physical environment that illuminates the world of the play. … the mature actor can bring to the work not only talent and sensibility, a good resonant voice and expressive body, but a critical intelligence, a practical wisdom, and a strong dramaturgical acumen."[8] As a translator and dramaturg I react to how the performers on the floor in front of me treat the text, as well as to the text I hold in my hand.

I learnt more about my two professions of translation and dramaturgy in the rehearsal room, watching how actors and directors interpreted a dramatic text and transformed it into performance, than reading volumes at my desk. I learnt to listen to how the language sounded rather than just hear the words, to how the actors responded to the words I had given them, to how a gesture may be provoked by a line, or how it may prevent an action, in which case you have to ask: is that the intention of the original or have I missed something? A translator must uncover the unique possibilities for performance offered by the original text and recreate them in their new environment. All the elements of drama and performance – the actor's voice and idiosyncrasies, and the physical movement in the space they are in – can only come together in the rehearsal room. Unless the translator is present, the language of the rehearsal room is lost to them; a language which is "like life itself: it uses words, but also silences, stimuli, parody, laughter, unhappiness, despair, frankness and concealment, activity and slowness, clarity and chaos", according to Brook.[9]

I have often been afforded the privilege of having specific actors in mind when I have written my translations for productions. It has always proved beneficial. When I wrote a new translation of *Ghosts* with the Australian playwright Louis Nowra for a Sydney production, the director, Neil Armfield, suggested we should keep in mind that Robert Menzies, who played Osvald, was capable of putting a wealth of conflicting emotions into asking for a glass of water. Nowra and I were both familiar with Menzies' rather intense acting style, and knew this was good advice. We might consider a two- instead of a three-syllable word now and then, or a 'light' word instead of a 'dark' one, or a word with sharp instead of soft sounds. We reaped an unexpected benefit from this - I believe we also managed better to reveal the core of a line, even heighten its meaning, while the embedded emotions were added by the actor.

This is just a small example of how a few words changed during the translation- and writing processes – from first draft to the rehearsal version. The first part of the line stayed the same:

[7] Michel Foucault, 1964, p.62.
[8] Nick Enright, "Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture", 24.11.02, Belvoir Theatre, Sydney, Australia. It was broadcast on ABC Radio National 13 April 2003.
[9] Brook, 1972/1982, p.86.

> OSVALD Jeg har havt et anfald dernede. Det gik snart over. Men da jeg fik vide, hvorledes det havde været med mig, da kom angsten over mig så rasende og jagende; og så rejste jeg hjem til dig så fort jeg kunde. (HIS, p.76)

My first idiomatic translation:

> OSVALD I've had one attack down there. It soon passed. But when I was told what I had been like, I was overcome with a raging, tearing fear, and I came home to you as soon as I could.

Nowra and I came up with two further versions for the second part:

> OSVALD … I was possessed by a terrible fear and so I got home to you as soon as I could.

> OSVALD … I was stricken, cut through with fear, and I came home to you as fast as I could. (Akerholt & Nowra, 1999, p.137)

In the end, the director agreed with us that we should try all three alternatives in the rehearsal room, and the actor confirmed that the third option was the best. The first version sounded slightly melodramatic; and the second so ordinary that it almost felt like a cliché. But the strong, short sounds and broken rhythm of the third option emphasised the urgency of the line, and thus enhanced the character's state of mind at this point. Once I saw it in performance, it was, I believe, exactly what Ibsen wrote, but it took that process to find it out.

Each play has its own music, its own beat and rhythm, and unless the translator's instrument is as unique in its own way as that of the original writer, the new version will have no music of its own. Like the writers whose work they reinvent, translators are always on the search for this music; for 'le mot juste', the word - or line – which causes a movement to happen, or arouses an emotion, or a reaction which takes it a step further on the dramatic journey. And some of that is just innate, theatrical instinct, as the actor Geoffrey Rush points out in an interview about co-translating Eugene Ionesco's Exit the King. "You are constantly juggling what is going to be sharp and interesting in an actor's mouth. You think, oh, that's great, that word, because it has a big open sound and it really needs to hang in the air", he argues.[10] That is one of the reasons I believe that a translation choice should be regarded as a potentiality only, to be tested by the actors on the floor; because the many possibilities of a text must ultimately be experienced in light of its performability, or its effect as it 'hangs in the air'. A play's music can only be released through performance.

[10] Rush and the director Neil Armfield were interviewed on ABC's 7.30 Report, January 2012, about their collaboration on the Belvoir Theatre production of *Exit the King*, starring Rush, which toured nationally and internationally.

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Biographical note

May-Brit Akerholt has extensive experience as a translator as well as a production dramaturg of classic and contemporary plays. More than 20 of her translations have been produced by leading theatre companies around Australia. She is the English translator of the works of the Norwegian contemporary playwrights Jon Fosse and Arne Lygre. She finished her PhD (*The Dramaturgy of Translation*) at the University of Sydney in 2013. Currently she is working with Professor Julie Holledge and the Centre for Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo on a new project involving Ibsen's letters and theatre articles.

Summary

It is my experience that theatre artists who work with an Ibsen text agree that he understands, indeed feeds, the actor's art; as if he 'imagines' how an actor will exploit the language on the page, its rhythm, sound and pace, so as to make it come alive on stage. I believe it is important as the first priority to translate the work with actors' voices in mind. To write dialogue for a particular actor, or cast, means the language becomes idiosyncratic, characterising and thereby universal, something which is amply demonstrated by the history of playwriting.

This article discusses how the making of theatre is “an encounter between actor and text in a physical environment that illuminates the world of the play” (Nick Enright). Every moment on stage is manipulated by the text. But if a translator fails to recreate the original’s world of conflicting and juxtaposed signals, the theatre artists will be unable to realise them on stage. As a translator and dramaturg I react to how the performers on the floor in front of me treat the text, as well as to the text I hold in my hand. When all the elements of text and performance come together in the rehearsal room, the plays become anchored in a specificity whose ultimate result is universality. But the article also argues that mistranslations stop this from happening.

Interregnum is the process that takes place between the original play and the version in another “dress”. It involves a fine balancing act of creating a theatrical language for the target culture, while keeping the fundamental nature of the original.

