

# CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND TRANSLATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DISCOURSE AND IDEOLOGY IN TRANSLATED VERSIONS OF IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*

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## Introduction

Chinese readers have shown huge interest in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) since progressive Chinese intellectuals such as Lu Xun (1881–1936) and Hu Shi (1891 – 1962) translated and introduced the play to China in the early twentieth century. While Chinese scholars vigorously study *A Doll's House*, few seem to have made attempts to study the original play in Dano-Norwegian, let alone comparing the Dano-Norwegian source text and English target texts<sup>i</sup> with the Chinese versions. Like most Chinese readers, Chinese scholars tend to rely heavily on the Chinese translations, especially the authoritative Chinese translation done by Pan Jiaxun<sup>ii</sup>. Surprisingly, despite the fact that obvious differences are often found across various Chinese translations, it appears that not many Chinese scholars are interested in questioning and reflecting on the accuracy and faithfulness of the Chinese target texts. Possible issues regarding the Chinese translations are rarely mentioned. Little attention has been paid to matters that could arise from translation.

Nonetheless, issues arising from translation should not be neglected. The reason is twofold: Firstly, according to André Lefevere (1992) and Jiri Levy (2000), translation is not done in a vacuum. It is an important form of rewriting and a decision process influenced by certain linguistic, ideological and poetic factors. As a text begins to be interpreted and translated, its original ideology, values and norms will be shifted, diminished or lost, and new ideas might be added. In other words, translators should never be entirely 'trusted' – there is a huge possibility that translators may mistranslate, over-interpret, and 'rewrite' the original text, whether the translation alterations are intentionally or unconsciously made. Furthermore, as He (2004) notes, "no Chinese translation of Ibsen has been done directly from the Norwegian original. It is, most of all, English versions of Ibsen that have served as the source texts for Chinese target texts" (79). So to speak, if English translations of Ibsen's plays are not always accurate and reliable, Chinese target texts can be doubly so. On the one hand, translation alterations and even mistakes may be passed from the English source texts to the Chinese target texts in the process of 'translation replay'. On the other hand, translation alterations and/or mistakes may also be made by Chinese translators.

## Method of study

In light of this, we conduct a comparative study of translated texts of *A Doll's House*: with a special focus on the use of punctuation marks and repetitions, first we compare Ibsen's Dano-Norwegian source text with a number of English target texts, which include the English translated works of William Archer (1889), James McFarlane (1961), Michael Meyer (1965), Peter Watts (1965), as well as Rick Davis and Brian Johnson (1996). Although William Archer's English translation is often regarded as the most accurate, we found that punctuation, such as dashes and

repetitions in Nora's and Helmer's speeches, are most accurately rendered in Peter Watts's English version. Then, by using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, we examine closely the discourse in three different versions, namely (1) Watts's English translation (which is closest to the original), (2) Pan Jiaxun's Chinese target text and (3) Cao Kaiyuan's Taiwanese target text, focusing on the use of devices such as dashes and repetitions in the conversation between Torvald and Nora in the last scene of Act III.

### **Key findings and arguments**

We believe that some devices such as punctuation and repetition which function as disrupting the fluency of a discourse are significant in a text, and in a play, doubly so. At a microscopic level, to deploy the devices differently will vary the extent of discourse interpretation, such as characters' emotions; at a macroscopic level, it will alter one's perception of context, such as social significance. In *A Doll's House*, which examines a diversity of personal and social issues such as gender inequality, emancipation of women's status and self-discovery, such devices hail a highly essential role – to bring out the subtle conflicts inflicted upon individuals against themselves, individuals against each other and against society. Apparently, in Pan's version, punctuation, repetition and the like are dealt with differently from Watt's version and cause a significant change of implications. Therefore, a rise of inconsistent interpretation ensues. It is evident that the dashes and repetition in the conversation between Nora and Helmer in the last scene of Act III are largely ignored.

From the comparison between Watts's English translation and Pan's Chinese translation, we notice three main differences: (1) Pan alters what is before and after the dashes in the dialogue, (2) Pan tends to delete dashes in the dialogue and (3) Pan omits repetition patterns in the dialogue.

Because of this, moments of silence and hints of hesitation in Nora's dialogue disappear in Pan's translation. Our concern is that this may lead to a different interpretation of the mental struggle that Nora is experiencing in the scene. Interestingly, when we compare Pan's Chinese translation with Cao's (the Taiwanese version), we found Cao's translation, though not as popular and highly acclaimed as Prof. Pan's translation, is synonymous with Watts's English version and Ibsen's Dano-Norwegian version, especially in dealing with punctuation and repetition.

### **Use of dashes and their implications**

Before we look into the translations, let us look briefly at the functions of dashes. As we know, dashes can be used to indicate sudden changes in tone or thought within a sentence. For instance, in "I wish you could – oh, never mind", the dash indicates an abrupt change in thought and warrants. Also, in "I – I don't know", the dash implies there is a pause, a hint of hesitation and uncertainty in the speech.

In the last scene of Act III, dashes can be found quite frequently in Nora's speech. The following is an excerpt from the source text, together with Watts's English translation:

## [EXCERPT ONE]

**Source text**

Act III, last scene (page 123):

Nora: ...*(reiser sig.)* Torvald, –  
 i den stund gik det op for mig,  
 at jeg i otte år havde levet her  
 sammen med en fremmed mand,  
 og at jeg havde fået tre børn –. Å,  
 jeg tåler ikke at tænke på det! Jeg  
 kunde rive mig selv i stumper og  
 stykker.

**Watts's English version**

Act III, last scene (page 78):

Nora: ...*(Getting up.)* Torvald – it was  
 then it dawned on me that for  
 eight years I had been living here  
 here with a strange man, and had  
 borne him three children –. Oh, I  
 can't bear to think of it! I could  
 tear myself into little bits!

Here, the dashes represent short moments of silence in Nora's utterance. They suggest an outburst of mixed emotions – regret, frustration, pain, self-restraint and denial. This draws attention to and reflects Nora's unspeakable pain. Since the topic is too difficult and uncomfortable for Nora to continue, the silence protects her from mentioning further explicit and graphic descriptions of her failure. It stops hurtful memories from raining down.

Yet, in Pan's Chinese version, the dashes disappear:

**Pan's Chinese version (*Dashes missing*)**

娜拉: ... (站起来) 托伐, 就在那当口我好  
 象忽然从梦中醒过来, 我简直跟一个  
 生人同居了八年, 给他生了三个孩子。  
 喔, 想起来真难受! 我恨透了自己没  
 出息!

**Back Translation (*Dashes missing*)**

Nora: ...*(Getting up.)* Torvald, it was  
 then I felt like waking from a  
 dream, it is no different from  
 cohabiting with a stranger for  
 eight years, having borne him  
 three children. Oh, how awful  
 it is to think of it! I hate  
 myself for being so useless!

Without the dashes, the moments of silence and the fierce pangs of pain vanish from the dialogue. Nora now becomes abnormally and unnaturally indifferent and expressive in describing the failure in her marriage, motherhood and her life. Also, "I hate myself for being so useless!" shows self-resentment and anger towards the lack of accomplishment in life, but it fails to show Nora's lost innocence and the emptiness that haunts her.

In Cao's version, the dashes are preserved:

**Cao's Chinese version**

娜: ... (起立) 托伏爾德 – 後來我才  
 發現, 我和一個陌生人在這兒住了  
 八年, 跟他生了三個孩子 – 喔!  
 我不能再往下想, 我恨不得把自

**Back Translation**

Nora: ...*(Getting up.)* Torvald – it is  
 only until later that I discovered,  
 I had been living with a stranger  
 for eight years, had borne him

已撕爛！

Three children – oh! I can't  
continue to think of it, I wish I  
could tear myself into bits!

[EXCERPT TWO]

Another similar example is found in the following page of the play. Again, in Nora's utterance, as shown in the source text and the English version translated by Watts, a dash is used:

**Source text**

Act III, last scene (page 124):

Nora: Således, som jeg nu er,  
er jeg ingen hustru for dig.

Helmer: Jeg har kraft til at blive en anden.

Nora: Måske, – hvis dukken tages fra dig.

**Watts's English version**

Act III, last scene (page 78):

Nora: As I am now, I am no wife  
for you.

Helmer: I have it in me to become a  
different man.

Nora: Perhaps – if your doll is taken  
away from you.

Our interpretation is that Nora is not just unhappy with Torvald but also unsatisfied with herself. "I am no wife for you" implies that Nora sees what is lacking in her as a person. That is why she needs to get away and learn to become a better person.

The dash indicates a pause, as well as a co-occurrence of two contradictory ideas: should I leave home immediately, or should I give my husband a second chance? While Nora is thinking of leaving the doll's house, it crosses her mind that Torvald does have the potential of reflection and self-improvement. To Nora, it is possible for Torvald, if given a second chance and enough time, to become a different (and better) man one day. But then after the mental struggle, Nora decides to leave, for real changes cannot take place if she does not cease to play the doll's role.

In Pan's Chinese version, the dash is kept, but the phrases before and after the dash are reversed:

**Pan's Chinese version (*Phrases before and after the dash are reversed*)**

娜拉：照我现在这样子，我不能跟你  
做夫妻。

海尔茂：我有勇气重新再做人。

娜拉：在你的泥娃娃离开你之后——  
也许有。

**Back Translation (*Phrases before and after the dash are reversed*)**

Nora: As the way I look now, I  
cannot be your wife.

Helmer: I have the courage to be a  
better person.

Nora: After your doll has left you  
– maybe yes.

With the alteration, Pan's version shows the reader that Nora is very certain about leaving Torvald. The dash, together with the adverb of supposition 'maybe' (也许), has been moved to the end and becomes a post-modifier, ebbing the effect of pre-modifying the main clause "After your doll has left you" (在你的泥娃娃离开你之后). Now that the clause that carries heavy information is brought to the front, it implies that Nora feels Torvald is hopeless and she has no intention of staying at all. The chance of Torvald becoming a better man had she stayed has been ruled out completely, while if she leaves, there may still be a thin chance. Nora's strong will has been emphasized by repositioning the dash and the adverb. In contrast to the English version in which 'Perhaps –' precedes the clause and brings out the uncertainty first, we see very little mental struggle for Nora in the Chinese version.

In Cao's version, the phrases before and after the dash are in the right order and no alterations are made.

#### **Cao's Chinese version**

娜：現在我不是你的太太。  
赫：我一定會變的。  
娜拉：也許 – 假若你的玩偶不在身邊。

#### **Back Translation**

Nora: Now I am not your wife.  
Helmer: I will change.  
Nora: Perhaps – if your puppet is not beside you.

Dashes and repetitions do not only occur in Nora's utterance; they can also be found in the speeches of Helmer:

#### [EXCERPT THREE]

#### **Source text**

Last scene, Act III (page 124):  
Helmer: At skilles – skilles fra dig!  
Nej, nej, Nora, jeg kan ikke  
fatte den tanke.

#### **Watts's English version**

Last scene, Act III (page 79):  
Helmer: But to part! – to part from  
you! No, no, Nora, I can't  
understand that idea.

The dash, as an interruption initiated by the interlocutor himself (Helmer), implies a sudden revelation of the cruel reality he has been resistant to face. His revelation sees the dual form of this reality – the abrupt power shift of gender roles and the perceivable loss of social status due to the collapse of the familial structure.

In Helmer's mind, Nora's unequivocal rejection is analogous to the shift of power from being dominant to being dominated. The dash gives Helmer (the interlocutor) some time to figure out what is going on, as he has never been mentally prepared for such a reversed role, and avoids any further irrational burst of words. Because of this, the situation is aggravated and causes him to completely lose the domination he has always confidently kept intact. From a social point-of-view, this change of role from control to being controlled, implies an utter failure for Helmer, who, in the play, sees himself a successful social climber – he has a bourgeois family and a respectable job. Anything that affects such prestige and enjoyment will be an obstacle hardly accepted in a society of gender stereotypes.

Through words, the grim fate will emerge as an irrevocable form which Helmer cannot accept. The dash can allow time for Helmer to swallow all of his thoughts, calm his nerve and thereby regain the floor. Its implication is manifested in the interlocution and the context.

Followed by the dash is the repetition (no, no), which reinforces his reluctance to accept the fate and the power shift. Repetition is a common lexical device to prolong the interlocutor's speech in order to let him/her keep his/her floor. It symbolises his/her retrieval of a dominant role in a discourse, and in *A Doll's House*, this symbolism goes beyond family to society. It is a struggle of roles between Nora and Helmer, who represent their genders at large.

As shown, the dash serves as an interruption which lets him regain and collect his mind, paving the way for a strong objection, which comes through by him repeating 'no' twice. In a literal sense, 'no' directs to the idea of parting – a clear rejection to Nora's determined mind. Yet, psychologically speaking, such a device can give him time to take back the floor, to shift the power back to him and react accordingly. It signifies a victory readily hailed by Helmer, who fights on behalf of himself, a decision maker in the family and all the men who have been striving to keep the right and power in the society.

In Pan's version, the dash is removed and the repetition is interrupted by the name.

#### **Pan's Chinese version**

海尔茂: 要我跟你分手! 不, 娜拉, 不行!  
这是不能设想的事情。

#### **Back Translation**

Helmer: To part with you! No,  
Nora, no way! This is an  
utterly unthinkable idea.

The dash used to mark a significant pause has disappeared and we cannot tell if Helmer experiences the turmoil mentioned in the English version (and in the original text). Although exclamation marks are used and preserve a sigh of disbelief, it does not show any interruption and the effect caused by this. Instead, we are led to believe that Helmer objects to Nora's decision based purely on impulse. An outburst without pause fails to project Helmer's multi-faceted character and the complex motives behind the interlocution. Furthermore, the implication of struggle of thought and power between the genders highlighted in the theme cannot be brought out. Without immediate and exact repetition, the effects of prolonging the time in order to regain the floor and, therefore, the power, have been diminished.

The insertion of the name (娜拉) followed by an indirect repetition (不行) makes it a blunt demand which not only fails to reconfirm the need for Helmer to retrieve the floor, but also shows no power shift, as if Helmer had always stayed in a dominant position. His call for his wife's name between repetitions displays his usual confidence and signals complete control. A further change of repetition, from 不 to 不行, stresses that his power is asserted and any threat to his position is negligible. Had it been so, the interlocution would be cut drastically and its major effect of bringing out the inner conflicts would have been lost.

Likewise, in the following set of examples, different translated versions of the same scene are displayed for comparison. Again, Pan's Chinese target text is found to be unfaithful to the original play.

## [EXCERPT FOUR]

In Ibsen's original play and Watts's English version, the scene reads like this:

**Source Text**

Last scene, Act III (pages 125 - 126):

Nora: Jeg kommer visst ofte til at tænke på dig og på børnene og på huset her.

Helmer: Må jeg skrive dig til, Nora?

Nora: Nej, – aldrig. Det får du ikke lov til.

Helmer: Å, men sende dig må jeg dog –

Nora: Intet; intet.

Helmer: – hjælpe dig, hvis du skulde behøve det.

Nora: Nej, siger jeg. Jeg modtager ingenting af fremmede.

**Watts's English version**

Last scene, Act III (pages 79 - 80):

Nora: I know I shall often think of you, the children, and this house.

Helmer: May I write to you?

Nora: No – never. You must not do that.

Helmer: But at least let me send you-

Nora: Nothing – nothing –

Helmer: Let me help you if you are in want.

Nora: No. I can receive nothing from a stranger.

The pauses and the repetitions in the utterance, like “No”, “nothing – nothing –”, seem to suggest that Nora needs time to think and breathe – to decline Torvald's offer is miserable and very painful. After all, as she discloses, she will often think of her husband, her kids and the house. There is a slight shade of hesitation in her line.

Also, Nora has to repeat the word “nothing” two times to focus her energy, re-affirm her will to leave and persuade herself again not to change her mind. According to Johnstone (2004), repetition in conversation can minimize “hesitations and fillers while allowing people to keep the conversational floor as they think of what to say next” (146). From that, we can tell that Nora repeats herself in order to gain time to think, without showing obvious signs of hesitation.

However, in Pan's Chinese version, the dashes and the repetitions in Nora's speech are gone:

**Pan's Chinese version (*Dashes and repetitions of negation omitted; a strong modal verb used*)**

娜拉: 喔, 我会时常想到你, 想到孩子们, 想到这个家。

海尔茂: 我可以给你写信吗?

娜拉: 不, 千万别写信。

**Back Translation (*Dashes and repetitions of negation omitted; a strong modal verb used*)**

Nora: Oh, I will often think of you, think of our kids, think of our home.

Helmer: May I write to you?

Nora: No. Don't you ever write to me.

海尔茂: 可是我总得给你寄点儿—

娜拉: 什么都不用寄。

海尔茂: 你手头不方便的时候我得帮点忙。

娜拉: 不必, 我不接受生人的帮助。

Helmer: But I should write something to you anyhow –

Nora: Nothing is needed.

Helmer: If you need money I should help you.

Nora: No need, I do not accept help from a stranger.

Without the pauses and the repetitions of “Nothing nothing” and “No”, Nora seems very cold and abrupt in her answers. Also, the change of auxiliary verbs, from ‘can’ to ‘do’, as in the English version “I can receive nothing from a stranger” and Pan’s version “I do not accept help from a stranger”, results in a drastic change of tone. The former ‘can’ projects a soft tone, thereby softening her stance, which only presupposes how Nora treats Helmer in the future, and any hint that forges this link is not least improbable; whereas the latter ‘do’ carries a forceful tone, which amounts to a resolute attitude in rejecting Helmer and seeing him as a stranger under all circumstances, thereby eliminating all possible remedies and reconciliation. This conflicts with the repetition expressed in the earlier line of utterance, “I will often think of you, think of our kids, think of our home”, which suggests a longing for the past.

In Cao’s Chinese translation, a small change in the choice of words is noted; nonetheless, pauses and repetitions are kept:

#### Cao’s Chinese version

娜: 我知道我會常常想到你, 想孩子, 還有這個家。

赫: 我可以寫信給你嗎?

娜: 不 – 絕對不要, 你一定不能寫。

赫: 可是至少讓我寄你—

娜: 什麼都不要 – 一樣也不要。

赫: 假若你需要甚麼, 讓我幫你忙。

娜: 不, 我不能從陌生人那兒接受一點東西。

#### Back Translation

Nora: I know I will often think of you, think of the kids, and also this home.

Helmer: May I write to you?

Nora: No – absolutely not, you must not write to me.

Helmer: But at least let me send you –

Nora: Nothing – nothing at all.

Helmer: If you need anything, let me help you.

Nora: No, I can’t receive anything from a stranger.

#### Conclusion

*A Doll’s House* (1979) encompasses the fundamental problems that occurred within a chauvinistic hierarchical society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Morkhagen (2012), not until 1882 were Norwegian women given access to higher education and not until the 1890s were married women granted the right to control their own wealth. Also, Norwegian women were not allowed to vote until 1913. Through the monologues



and dialogues between Nora and Helmer in *A Doll's House* (1979), Ibsen reveals to us social and familial dominance, power struggle and abuse, and the liberation of mind. We are led to the inner thoughts of each and the conflicts between them through the analysis of discourse devices such as punctuation and repetition. They help stretch our imagination to the past and pave the way for questions: whom could she turn to after leaving home? Where would the money for rent, for food and other necessities come from? How could she make a living? Independence and survival require not just courage, but also money. We can imagine that by choosing to leave home, Nora will have to face huge pressure. Yet, the change of devices such as dashes and repetitions in Pan's version predicts the opposite: she could leave home proudly and happily without a trace of hesitation and mental struggle. Analysis along this line has also been found in some critics.

In *Father of Modern Drama: A Study of Ibsen's Psycho-realistic Plays* (2009), Li analyzes *A Doll's House* based on Pan's translation. Li quotes Pan's Chinese translation:

[Back translation]

Nora: ... (Getting up.) Torvald, it was then I felt like waking up from a dream, it is no different from cohabiting with a stranger for eight years, having borne him three children. Oh, how awful it is to think of it! I hate myself for being so useless!

Li (2009) then makes the following comment:

她并不悲观绝望，倒是欣喜于自己的觉悟和解放。所以她才能毫不迟疑地摔门而出！

(Back translation: She [Nora] is not pessimistic or hopeless; on the contrary, she feels great about her self-realization and liberation. That is why she can leave and slam the door without any hesitation!)

A similar comment is found in a recent article written by another Chinese scholar. In "The Moral Dilemma Ibsen's Female Characters Face" (2007), Liu also quotes Pan's Chinese version:

[Back translation]

Helmer: May I write to you?

Nora: No. Don't you ever write to me.

Helmer: But I should write something to you anyhow –

Nora: Nothing is needed.

Helmer: If you need money I have to help you.

Nora: No need, I will not accept help from a stranger.

Then, Liu (2007) claims, “原文中一連串的否定詞清楚地表明娜拉拒絕托瓦爾德的決心是多麼的堅定。” (Back translation: The series of negation shows clearly how determined Nora is in declining Torvald's offer). The interpretation by Liu, based on the different use of dashes and repetitions in Nora's dialogue in the Chinese version, highlights the fact that a disruptive device plays a significant role in a discourse and affects a reader's perception of the context. Here, the omission of dashes and repetitions, which presumably imply pauses and hesitation, has demonstrated a gross

effect – that Chinese critics see the play differently from the western critics. Eide made a significant point (1987, 146):

Chinese views on literature are no more monolithic than Western views. However, in the interpretation of Ibsen monolithic tendencies are obvious whereas the diversity is barely visible. Chinese critics after the May Fourth period wrote for an elite readership, as their predecessors had done; they assumed an audience with a shared educational and cultural background. This assumption made many of them treat Western authors as if they were as familiar as the most well-known Chinese authors. Perhaps this may explain why plays such as *A Doll's House* became transformed from a multi-faceted play to a slogan for female emancipation.

As noted, functional and syntactic features (mainly for disruption of an interlocution) not only affect how we perceive a play and its characters subtly, but also mark the unique status and implications of a particular version. We have demonstrated such effects on *A Doll's House* with reference to an English version (Peter Watt's) and a Chinese version (Pan's) accompanied by the original text (Ibsen's). The preference for certain syntactic use and functional devices shown in different translations may result in various interpretations of a discourse, hence perceptions of the context. The noticeable difference between Chinese critics and Western critics in analysing the play clearly indicates this. From translators to readers to critics, the influence has proven significant and substantial, and this starts from the use of punctuation and repetition.

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### Summary

Chinese readers have shown excessive interest in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) since progressive Chinese intellectuals such as Lu Xun (1881–1936) and Hu Shi (1891–1962) translated and introduced the play to China in the early twentieth century. However, until today, not many have noticed or mentioned issues that could arise from translation. While Chinese scholars vigorously study Ibsen and modern Chinese drama, few care to read the original play (in Dano-Norwegian) or the English translation, let alone comparing them with the Chinese version(s), which most Chinese readers actually read. In view of this, we look into three translations of *A Doll's House* – namely Peter Watts's English version, Pan Jiaxun's Chinese version, and Cao Kaiyuan's Taiwanese version. By using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, we discover that the discourse and power struggle of Nora and Torvald in Watts's and Pan's versions differ in various interesting ways. In this article, we will use the conversation between Nora and Torvald in the last scene of Act III to demonstrate how omissions, additions and alterations brought about by translations can change the discourse and create different ideological effects on gender relations and identities (192 words).

### Keywords

Critical discourse analysis, translation alteration, ideology, power struggle

<sup>i</sup> Our observation has been found synonymous with the description in *China's Ibsen*: "... In this aspect the Chinese reaction does not confirm the reader-response theory simply because so many of Ibsen's critics had not read the text. Much of the Chinese interaction was between a concept of Nora as an archetype (or a slogan) and the reader." (Eide, 1987, 146)

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ii Pan Jiaxun, Professor of Western Languages at the Peking University, is considered the most authoritative Chinese translator among Chinese scholars. As Tam (1985) remarks, “Pan’s continuous efforts in translating Ibsen through the 1920’s and 30’s made him an authoritative figure comparable to William Archer in England.” (135)