Playbird or Featherbrain?

May-Brit Akerholt

Abstract Translation does not merely involve a linguistic interpretation but also a dramaturgical interrogation, including cultural and dramatic traditions in both the source language and the target language texts. "Mistranslation" does not simply mean choosing a "wrong" word. A word may change characterisation and interpretation. Henrik Ibsen coined the word "spillefugl" for Nora, with its ambiguous suggestions of "play", "gamble" and "perform". The word has often been translated as "featherbrain" and "spendthrift", or other derogatory expressions which change Torvald's attitude to Nora and the game they play together, and affect productions in English. This article discusses the implications of translation choices in *A Doll's House*, with particular reference to Australian productions.

Key words translation; misinterpretation; *A Doll's House*

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As Frode Helland claimed in his plenary address, there is no pure, uncontaminated original as such.[1] No, there is nothing "sacred" about Ibsen's original texts. However, it is of some concern that so many of the English translations which have almost become classics, and are used in teaching institutions and theatres, misrepresent or ignore some vital aspects of the original plays and thus disturb their dramatic intentions.

The Italian writer and translator Umberto Eco says he felt a "radical loss" of several expressions in a German translation of his novel *Baudolino*; however, he realised that if the translator had dared to use stronger expressions, the target culture readers may not have been convinced of the main character's use of language (*Mouse* 43). Eco's acceptance of the translator's choices shows a common translation dilemma. The language he wrote for his main character is created from the idiosyncrasies of his native tongue, a language his readers relate to, just as the translator tried to create a language for the character that his readers could relate to. However, if there is a "radical loss" in the German version, it means it has failed to recreate what was special, or unique, about the language of the original character. Thus a whole aspect of the characterisation has not been translated to the new language dress.

This complex question of idiosyncratic and characterising use of language becomes even more relevant in theatre translation where the dialogue is spoken by different characters, with different attitudes, different points of view, different styles of language. To refer to Eco again, "translation is not only connected with linguistic competence but with intertextual, psychological, and narrative competence" (*Experi-*

ences 13). He is touching upon one of my own convictions when it comes to translation: that it is crucial for a translator to be able to "read" or interpret the original plays' dramaturgy; that is, to know how to isolate how a playwright builds and manipulates a text and uses language as a characterising tool, structuring linguistic idiosyncrasies to build a theatrical language. At a translation conference in Norway,[2] Barbara Haviland discussed the problems of translating Solness' word "*sånn*" (*The Master Builder*) as an example of the way Ibsen builds characterisation. Having translated this play for a production in Sydney, I believe Solness' use of this word has an irony embedded in it; it is, in a sense, the character's way of mocking other people's view of him. But the point is, a translator must understand how each detail of the language functions linguistically and dramaturgically in order to create a new text that is a blueprint for performance as well as a dramatic narrative. Language and characterisation go hand in hand.

Dramaturgy is not about "explaining" meaning, but opening up for the complexities of a text, exploring its possibilities. It is about word choices and interpretation of how the words will function or be performed on stage, about the impetus for action, or lack of, which words contain, about the reasons a character says them and their effects on the character who receives them. Peter Brook suggests something similar in discussing his famous production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "... all the important work ... was based on my convincing the actors that there were two plays; one was what we call the secret play ... The other play ... has been discussed and worked over intellectually [and is] like dough that's been worked and kneaded, but the yeast was the sort of sensitivity that enables the actors to pick up the secret play—which runs parallel and through the apparent play—and to share their perception with the audience"(99).

In the final instance, it is the dough and the yeast that make up a play's dramaturgy. The Germans have a good expression for it: "sein und schein"—"be and seem". The text is the "sein" (it is, it exists), and the subtext, the "schein"—a complexity of thought behind, beyond, the actual words, lines, characters, story, theme; an otherness that adds dimension to the words. When "sein und schein" coexist, meaningful dramatic dialogue happens. And, as French writer Hélène Cixous argues, it is the director's role to "seek to bring onstage the conflicting meaning systems that are always lodged in a complex work";[3] to find and explore the yeast and the "schein". But unless playwrights, and their translators, create a complex dramatic language within which meaning is constructed through conflicting and juxtaposed signals, the work won't give rise to the imagination of the theatre artists who eventually will free it from the page. It is in the language that action happens. Every moment on stage is manipulated by the text.

I am in no doubt that Ibsen wrote his plays according to the dough and the yeast principle. This paper explores some of the ways he builds characterisation and action through language in the first scene of *A Doll's House*, looking at how the seeds for the last scene are planted from the very first scene.

Ibsen coined the word "spillefugl" for Nora, with its ambiguous suggestions of "play," "gamble" and "perform," and "spill" or "waste." My literal translation

"playbird" does lack the original's connotations of "waste," and to a degree "gamble".[4] The point is that the word is as ambiguous as Torvald's attitude to her. He is proud of his doll-wife, in a sense he even puts her on a pedestal for what he sees as her womanly qualities, or little female follies, at the same time as he reproaches her for them.

Just a few lines in the opening scene illustrate several interesting translation issues. The first translations are mine; I have kept the language vernacular, yet as close as possible to the original.[5]

> TORVALD: Has the playbird been out wasting money again?
> ...
> Nora! ... Is frivolity getting the upper hand again? (other possibilities: Is frivolity showing its head again? Is frivolity on the move again?)
> ...
> What are the birds called who always waste their money?
>
> And Nora's answer to the last line:
>
> NORA: Yes, yes, playbirds—I know, I know. But let's do what I say, Torvald; that gives me time to decide what I need most. (*Belroir: Word for Word* 18 – 19)

The following are from different English translations from between 1961 and 2004:

> TORVALD: Has my little featherbrain been out wasting money again?
> ...
> The same little scatterbrain.
> ...
> What do they call little birds who are always making money fly?
>
> NORA: Yes, I know—ducks-and-drakes! But let's do what I said, Torvald, and then I'll have time to think of something that I really want. (*A Doll's House* 148 – 50)
>
> * * *
>
> TORVALD: Has my little spendthrift been out squandering money again?
> ...
> Here we go again, you and your frivolous ideas!
> ...
> What do we call my pretty little pet when it runs away with all the money?
>
> NORAI know, I know, we call it a spendthrift. But please let's do what I said, Torvald. Then I'll have a bit of time to think about what I need most. (*Ibsen: Plays* 110 – 12)

* * *

TORVALD: Has the little spendthrift been out wasting money again?

...

Is that dizzy little head of yours spinning around again?

...

What do we call those little birds that are always spending their money?

NORA Spendthrifts—yes, I know, I know. But let's do what I say, Torvald; then I'll have time to think about what I really need. (*Ibsen's Selected Plays* 147 – 49)

* * *

TORVALD: Has the little spendthrift been out throwing money around again?

...

Are your scatterbrains off again?

...

What are those little birds called that always fly through their fortunes?

NORA Oh yes, spendthrifts; I know all that. But let's do as I say, Torvald; then I'll have time to decide what I really need most. (*Four Major Plays* 44 – 45)

There are some good lines here, and interesting bird imagery. However, like most English translations I have read, these, too, use a purely derogatory word for "spillefugl" or "playbird." The ambiguity is lost and the balance of the characters' "game" disturbed. I also find it difficult to believe that Nora would accept these words as Torvald's pet names for her.

Another point here is the way the translations ignore that Torvald depersonalises Nora - the two which do use "the" are not doing it consistently. Throughout the first scene, he distances himself from her—and perhaps also from himself, from his own feelings? - by using impersonal constructions. To say "the playbird" instead of "my playbird" is as quaint, or unusual, in Norwegian as it is in English. I see no reason, linguistic or dramatic, for any translation to substitute "the" with "my", even in a production set in contemporary times.

A third point of note is the particular language Ibsen has chosen for Nora in her answer to her husband: "But let's do as I say, Torvald. That gives me time to decide what I need most." Her choice of the words "decide" and "need" is significant. These words illustrate how Ibsen builds her character, suggesting that she is capable of making decisions, and that her pre-occupations with money comes from need, not dizzy waste; "think" and "want" cannot do that. Of course, an audience does not sit in the theatre and consciously interpret the line in this way. But an actor will use these words as part of an accumulating effect of a certain strength which keeps under-

mining the doll-image. The dialogue gives "stage directions" to the theatre artists who interpret the work for the stage; in this sense, "need" and "decide" are part of the play's "yeast". Throughout the first scene, tiny suggestions of another Nora keep adding to the image she presents to the audience; a Nora who is capable of telling Torvald to "do what I say." Her language belies the frivolous image Torvald has of her and subtly undermines the doll-wife face she presents to the world.

Thus the watering down of Nora's suggestive language in so many translations negates Ibsen's dramatic intentions. Fjelde uses "need" and "decide," and then he adds a "really", no doubt to emphasise her plea, with the result, I believe, that he dilutes the line instead. This tendency to use more words than the original is something that happens again and again in English versions, and has nothing to do with differences of language. To add little unnecessary words such as "really", "little," "very," merely takes away from Ibsen's concise yet inclusive stage-language. [6]

It is fine for translations to be imaginative and inventive, and to create specific dramatic languages for the characters in the new version, but not if they ignore the idiosyncrasies of the original, or the aspects of characterisation which are at the core of the play's action. The translation examples discussed here demonstrate a certain distortion of the original text; a failure to read the play dramaturgically. Just as Nora's dramatic language often has a subtext hinting at an underlying strength, or resolve, Torvald's particular use of language suggests a need to allegorise their life together. The idyll they both believe is built on a strong foundation, is constantly undermined by the dramatic language Ibsen gives his characters. I write this knowing the glass-house I sit in.

Edvard Beyer, in his "Postscript to *A Doll's House*," discusses how Ibsen's dialogue is close to everyday speech, at the same time as it is tightly organised and dramatically effective: "There is hardly a single line that does not have a demonstrable dramatic function.... And all of a sudden single everyday words take on a double meaning or foreboding undertones." [7] Yes, "close to everyday speech," yet a "tightly organised" form of speech. Perhaps the reason many translators make Ibsen's lines more colloquial than they are is because they think of Ibsen as a "naturalistic" writer, even as a "prose writer" as John Northam suggests (82).

But more interestingly, Northam also claims that in drama, translation choices are often made in reference to standard usage in the world outside theatre (82). That may well be one of the main reasons for deficient Ibsen translations; they are often written by people who are not intimately familiar with the theatre, who may fail to understand the plays' dramaturgy, and the way in which Ibsen's dialogue is written in terms of performance. They may fail to realise how actors use the language, how subtext works, how a line gives rise to a movement, how it contains stage directions for the performers. Ibsen knew.

Most of my Ibsen translations have been published after they have been produced. I have been lucky enough to continue to work on most of them in the rehearsal room, both as translator and production dramaturg. I have made the same discovery every time: the team's interpretation of characters and action also influences language choices and becomes part of the fine-honing of the final text.

【Notes】

1. Frode Helland said this in his plenary address "Empire and Culture in Ibsen: Some Notes on the Dangers and Ambiguities of Interculturalism" in the International Conference on Ibsen Between Cultures held in Fudan University in June 2009.
2. International Translation Conference organised by NORLA and the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, May 24 – 26, 2009, Ringerike, Norway.
3. Quoted by Morag Shiach in her book *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991)69 – 70.
4. This translation was initially produced by Company B Belvoir, Sydney, 1989. The cast of this production had reservations about 'playbird' initially, but accepted it after my explanation why I had chosen it, and soon they came to love it. And I am aware he calls her 'Ødeland'—squanderer, wastrel - once.
5. See Akerholt, "The Text, the Whole Text and Nothing but the Text in Translation," *About Performance: Translation and Performance*, Centre for Performance Studies, University of Sydney (1995):1 – 13.
6. On the other hand, little Norwegian words such as "jo", "javel", "sånn" and others which add tone and meaning can be a real headache to a translator, but that is another paper.
7. Beyer, Edvard, "Postscript to *A Doll's House*", *Henrik Ibsen, Collected Works*, vol. 4(Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 16th ed., 1978)415. The quotation is translated by me.

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