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## TRANSLATING STRINDBERGIAN IMAGERY FOR THE STAGE

Although verbal imagery — metaphors and similes — have long been considered of central importance in fictional texts, it is only fairly recently that translation theorists (Dagut, Newmark, Van den Broeck, Snell-Hornby) have paid any attention to it. Since imagery is most pronounced in poetry, it is largely the translation of it in this literary genre that has attracted attention. By contrast, problems related to the translation of imagery in drama have so far been neglected by the theorists.

”The essential problem posed by metaphor in translation,” Snell-Hornby states (56),

is that different cultures, hence different languages, conceptualize and create symbols in varying ways, and therefore the sense of the metaphor is frequently culture-specific.

English ‘She is a cat’ may *seem* to correspond to German *Sie ist eine Katze*, but whereas English ‘cat’ connotes spitefulness and malice, German *Katze* suggests grace and agility. A literal translation would here mean a falsification of what is implied in the statement. And what is implied constitutes the essence of the statement. To communicate this essence, the translator must find another vehicle, another animal perhaps, that in the target language has more or less the same tenor as in the source language.

With van den Broeck (74-83), we may distinguish between three categories of metaphors: (1) private, (2) conventional, and (3) lexicalised, each type representing an increasing degree of embeddedness in a particular linguistic and cultural system. Contrary to what one may think, private metaphors, van den Broeck claims, are the easiest to translate, since they have only a tenuous relationship to the source

language and culture. Lexicalized metaphors, on the other hand, being the most language- and culture-bound, are the hardest to find equivalents for in the target language. Yet since bold private metaphors may be difficult to grasp in the source text, this difficulty will remain when they are rendered more or less faithfully in the target text.

With regard to the translation of metaphors, van den Broeck (77) distinguishes the following modes:

1. *Translation 'sensu stricto'* occurs when both the SL tenor and the SL vehicle are transferred into the TL. If the vehicles in SL and TL correspond, the resulting TL metaphor will be idiomatic; if they differ, the resulting TL metaphor will either be a semantic anomaly or a daring innovation.
2. *Substitution* occurs when the SL vehicle is replaced by a different TL vehicle with more or less the same tenor.
3. *Paraphrase* occurs when a SL metaphor is rendered by a non-metaphorical expression in the TL.

This is a useful categorization, which helps to clarify why mode (1) may be functional when translating into one target language, while mode (2) or (3) may be more adequate when translating into another.

Roman Jakobson's well-known distinction between three kinds of 'translation' covers the basic transpositions<sup>1</sup> spectrum from source text to target performance:

1. Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.

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<sup>1</sup>I use this as an umbrella term for various kinds of shifts applying to drama, of which translation is one. See Törnqvist, 7-8.

3. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

(Jakobson, 145)

When claiming that translating for the stage involves all three categories, we immediately acknowledge the specificity of *theatrical* dialogue, the blueprint for a hypothetical performance intended for spectators who are also listeners. Unlike texts meant for readers, the theatrical dialogue, whether source or target text, is posited as (1) oral, enunciated in a certain tempo, tone of voice, etc.; and as (2) embedded in various visual signs (scenery, lighting, sound effects, costumes, movements, gestures, mimicry), as well as in, frequently, acoustic signs (sound effects, music). Since these stage signs will vary from one production to another, the dialogue, including the metaphors contained in it, will constantly appear in different audiovisual contexts, contexts which will qualify what is being enunciated. This applies, of course, also to imagery: a metaphor may be uttered in an ironical way; it may be linked to a piece of property, concretising the vehicle of the metaphor, etc.

No major playwright since the 1880s has made such a frequent use of verbal imagery as August Strindberg. In this respect he may be seen as a latter-day Shakespeare. But while Shakespeare's imagery is easily justified by the verse form of his dramas, Strindberg's is constrained by his ambition to write a prose dialogue which resembles everyday speech. As a result, Strindberg was forced to make frequent use of conventional — dead or faded — metaphors, metaphors which in the course of time have become household words. Quite often, however, he restores such metaphors to life and reminds us of the concreteness of the vehicle by giving them a surprising twist. Very characteristic, especially in the later plays, is the tendency to make common words metaphorically pregnant. This is particularly true of words indicating human relations (father, mother, child), whose meaning may vary considerably depending on the context. Such everyday words may not seem to present any difficulties to translators. Yet, if their metaphoric significance is overlooked, the temptation increases to replace the insistence on one and the same word in the source text with variation

in the target text. Consider the following keyword pattern in *Fröken Julie/Miss Julie* (1888):

JEAN. [-] hon gick med *smutsiga* manschetter, men skulle ha grevekronan i knapparna. (SS 23: 120)<sup>2</sup>

FRÖKEN. Tag mig bort från denna *smuts* som jag sjunker i!  
(151)

FRÖKEN. Att en människosjäl kan vara så djupt *smutsig!*  
JEAN. Tvätta'n då! (153)

JEAN. [-] det pinar mig se er sjunken så djupt, att ni är långt under er kokerska; det pinar mig som att se höstblommorna piskas sönder av regnet och förvandlas i *smuts*. (154)

JEAN. Ni är blek som ett lik och — förlåt, men ni är *smutsig* i ansiktet.  
FRÖKEN. Låt mig tvätta mig då! (172)

Edwin Björkman renders these passages as follows:

JEAN. [-] She wore the cuffs till they were *dirty*, but she had to have cuff buttons with a coronet on them.

JULIE. Take me out of the *filth* into which I am sinking.

JULIE. That a human soul can be so steeped in *dirt!*  
JEAN. Well, wash it off!

JEAN. [-] It hurts me to see you sinking so low that you are far below your own cook — it hurts me as it hurts to see the Fall flowers beaten down by the rain and turned into *mud*.

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<sup>2</sup>Emphases here and in the subsequent quotations in *SS*, the edition used by most translators, are all by me.

JEAN. You're pale as a corpse, and — pardon me, but your face is *dirty*.

JULIE. Let me wash it then —

Compare Elizabeth Sprigge's version:

JEAN. [-] She went round with her cuffs *filthy*, but she had to have the coronet on the cuff-links.

JULIE. [-] Lift me out of this *filth* in which I'm sinking.

JULIE. That any human being can be so steeped in *filth!*

JEAN. Clean it up then.

JEAN. [-] It hurts to see you fallen so low you're far lower than your own cook. Hurts like when you see the last flowers of summer lashed to pieces by rain and turned to *mud*.

JEAN. You're white as a corpse and — pardon me — your face is *dirty*.

JULIE. Let me wash then.

Whereas Strindberg consistently sticks to *smuts* and *smutsig*, the translators settle for variation. Björkman offers the series 'dirty-filth-dirt-mud-dirty', Sprigge the series 'filthy-filth-filth-mud-dirty'. The link between the third and the fifth passage is retained in Björkman's version through the correspondence 'dirt-dirty' and somewhat less noticeably in Sprigge's 'filth-dirty.' In the fourth passage Jean compares Julie's degrading herself by having intercourse with her servant — Jean himself — to the flowers turning into 'dirt.' The word has a moral undertone, lacking in 'mud,' precisely because it should suggest that it is above all Julie who has turned dirty. In the source text there is a clear verbal connection between the mother's *smutsiga* cuffs and Julie's feeling that she is sinking into

*smuts*, a connection obscured in Björkman's version but retained in Sprigge's.

In passage three, it is Julie who accuses Jean of being morally dirty. Her faded image comes to life through his concrete retort, which at the same time means an expansion of her imagery. It is *her* task, Jean says, not *his* to rid him of base morals, i.e. the blame is boomeranged to Julie and the class she represents. The enclitic form *tvätta'n* strengthens his retort. It has a vulgar ring — missing in the translations — indicating that Jean ascribes his base morals to his low social station, which in turn is a result of his being suppressed by the class Julie belongs to.

Shortly after this Jean again accuses Julie of moral baseness. But his accusation, unlike hers, is oblique. Comparing Julie to a flower that has turned to *smuts*, it emphasises his own compassion for Julie rather than her fate. The effect is the contrary of what is intended. We sense that with his flowery imagery Jean is merely pretending compassion.

Related to the 'dirt' pattern is the idea of falling — physically, socially, morally, religiously (Original Sin).

Consider the following pattern:

FRÖKEN. [-] jag längtar att få *falla*, men jag *faller* inte. (SS 23: 132)

FRÖKEN *skriker i krampanfall*. [-] Jag *faller*, jag *faller*!

JEAN. *Fall* ner till mig, så skall jag lyfta er sedan!

FRÖKEN. Vilken förfärlig makt drog mig till er? Den svages till den starke? Den *fallandes* till den stigandes! (149)

JEAN. Har du sett någon flicka av min klass bjuda ut sig på det sättet?

Sådant har jag bara sett bland djur och *fallna* kvinnor! (153)

Björkman translates this as follows:

JULIE. [-] I am longing to *fall*, and yet I don't *fall*.

JULIE. [*Crying hysterically*] [- ] I'm *falling*, I'm *falling*!

JEAN. *Fall* down to me, and I'll lift you up again afterwards.

JULIE. What horrible power drew me to you? Was it the attraction which the strong exercises on the weak — the one who is rising on one who is *falling*?

Did you ever see a girl of my class throw herself at anybody in that way? I have never seen the like of it except among beasts and *prostitutes*.

While Strindberg, here again, consistently sticks to the verb *falla* — to the extent that even the noun *krampanfall* seems affected by it, Björkman weakens the moral connection by settling for the straight "prostitutes" rather than the metaphorical "fallen women" (Johnson's literal rendering). Watts, finally, obscures the reference to women by rendering the sentence euphemistically: "I've never seen the like — except in the farmyard — or on the streets."

Sometimes even the name of a character has a metaphoric quality. In *Ett drömspel/A Dream Play* (1902), one of the characters is named Ordström (lit. Wordstream). A Swedish recipient has no difficulty in seeing it as a charactonym — and a 'pun' on the perfectly normal compound surname of Nordström (Northstream). Yet to name the character Wordstream would have meant turning Strindberg's drama into a restoration comedy. No translator has opted for this solution.

The situation is more complicated in *Påsk/Easter* (1901), where the play's antagonist eventually turns out to be a helper. This miraculous development is actually contained in the man's compound surname, Lindkvist (lit. Lindentwig). The name bears on the theme of the play, which links birch with Old Testament punishment (Jehovah) and linden with New Testament grace (Christ). Early in the play Strindberg introduces the latter concept:

ELIS. Vet du, jag tror att friden återvänder och att olyckorna tröttnat...

KRISTINA. Varför tror du det?

ELIS. Jo, även därför, att, när jag gick förbi domkyrkan nyss, kom en vit duva flygande; hon slog ned på trottoaren och fällde en *kvist*, som hon bar i näbben, alldeles framför mina fötter.

KRISTINA. Såg du, vad det var för en *kvist*?

ELIS. Oliv kunde det inte gärna vara, men jag tror, att det var frids-  
tecknet [-] (SS 33: 40-41)

ELIS. [-] Stugan står där i ordning, som den stod i vår barndom;  
*lindarna* stå kvar. (43)

ELIS. [-] Vet du, jag vaknade i natt vid studentsång; man sjöng: ”Ja,  
jag kommer, hälsn glada vindar ut till landet, ut till fåglarne, att  
jag älskar dem, till björk och *lindar*, sjö och berg jag vill dem  
återse. Se dem än som i min barndoms stunder...” (46)

Turning to Sprigge’s and Johnson’s translations, we can see that both  
retain the name of Lindkvist. The relevant passages in Sprigge’s  
version read:

ELIS, *recovering*. But you know I really believe peace is on the way  
— that our misfortunes are wearing themselves out at last.

KRISTINA. What makes you think that?

ELIS. Well ... partly because just now as I was passing the cathedral,  
a white dove came flying by. It swooped down to the pavement  
and dropped the *twig* it was carrying in its beak right at my feet.

KRISTINA. Did you see what kind of *twig* it was?

ELIS. I suppose it couldn’t really have been an olive branch, but I  
feel sure it was a sign of peace.

ELIS. [-] The cottage stands there waiting, just as it was when we  
were children. The *lime* trees are there [-]

ELIS. [-] Do you know, last night I was woken up by students  
singing the song that goes ”Yes, I am coming. Happy winds, go  
tell the earth, tell the birds I love them. Tell the birches and *limes*,  
the mountains and lakes, I long to see them once again — to see  
them as when I was a child.”



A shortened version of the corresponding passages in Johnson's translation reads:

ELIS. [-] and dropped a *branch* it was carrying in its beak right in front of my feet.

KRISTINA. Did you see what kind of *branch* it was?

ELIS. It can't very well have been an olive *branch*, but I think it was a symbol of peace [-].

ELIS. [-] the *lindens* are there [-]

ELIS. [-] "Tell the birch and the *lindens* I want to see them."  
[-]

Although the source text suggestively links the name of Lindkvist with *lind* (linden) and *kvist* (twig), this link will be noticed only by the scrupulous rereader of the play. It will no doubt be wasted on the spectator who is confronted with the source text. And it will be completely nonexistent both to the reader of the target text and the spectator of the target performance. As in the case of Ordström, only a translation of the name would here be of help. But neither Limetwig nor Lindenbranch will do. We have to accept the sad fact that the significance of the name can be communicated, via an explanatory note, only to the recipient it is not primarily intended for: the reader of the play.

As an example of how the playwright makes excessive claims on his recipients' alertness to his imagery, this is far from exceptional. A somewhat different example we find in the late chamber play *Oväder/Storm* (1907); says the Brother of the protagonist:

Jag tycker det är skönt att bli gammal, för då har man inte så långt kvar på *rekordet*. (SS 45: 13)

I think it's a wonderful thing to grow old, because then *the recording* has almost played to its end. (Jacobs & Flakes)

This rendering comes close to the meaning of the source text. As Jacobs has convincingly demonstrated with the help of another Strindberg text, where the same word appears, *rekordet* does not here refer to sport results. It refers to a kind of phonograph, a predecessor of the grammophone. But since "the word did not otherwise enter the Swedish language with that meaning" (Jacobs, 27), even the source recipients were and are at a loss. For the reader of the play, this problem can be solved through an explanatory note,<sup>3</sup> but for the spectator one would need to make use of an intralingual translation, a rewording of the text, to make the speech intelligible.

Five other target texts indicate that the translators — and who can blame them — have not grasped the meaning of the word *rekordet*:

I think it's a wonderful thing to be old — there's not so much left —  
on *the agenda*. (Quinn)

It's good to be old. One hasn't so long to wait. (Meyer)

I think it's nice to get old — then one doesn't have so much left on  
*the account*. (Johnson)

I must admit I rather enjoy growing old. No more rivalry or competition. (Martinus)

Yes, old age! I think it feels good to be old: you haven't so much  
further to go. (Ewbank)

Whatever we think of these solutions, it is clear that they are all more intelligible to a theatre audience than the metaphor used in the source text. Most of the translations convey the idea that old age is desirable because then life is nearly over. Martinus narrows the meaning somewhat by indicating that it is the struggle of (his) life, rather than life itself, that the Gentleman is tired of. Like Meyer and Ewbank, she

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<sup>3</sup>Surprisingly enough, this exceedingly private metaphor is left unexplained in the new standard edition of *Samlade Verk*, 58 (Stockholm, 1991).

abstains from imagery and paraphrases. As a result the Gentleman's speech becomes at once easier to grasp and more trivial.

As for the two target texts that retain the use of imagery, we may note that the vehicles differ both from one another and from that of the source text. "Account" relates to book-keeping — man's or God's; "agenda" connotes a life full of activities. Unlike these vehicles, "recording" has a dynamic dimension — retained in Ewbank's version — in its indication that the sounds we make simply by being alive are eventually bound to end in silence.

Once in a while Strindberg's habit of thinking in metaphoric terms may puzzle translators. In the opening of *Spöksonaten/The Ghost Sonata* (1907) we come across the following:

GUBBEN. Kanske förmögen?

STUDENTEN. Inte alls ... tvärtom! Jag är utfattig!

GUBBEN. Hör nu ... jag tycker, jag hört den rösten ... jag hade en ungdomsvän, som inte kunde säga *fönster*, utan alltid sa *funster* — jag har bara råkat en person med det uttalet och det var han; den andra är ni — är det möjligt att ni är släkt med grosshandlar Arkenholz.

STUDENTEN. Det var min far. (SS 45: 152-153)

In Björkman's rendering this passage reads:

HUMMEL. Wealthy, I suppose?

STUDENT. Not at all — on the contrary — poor as a *durmouse*.

HUMMEL. Look here ... It seems to me as if I recognised your voice.

When I was young, I had a friend who always said "*dur*" instead of *door*. Until now he was the one person I had ever heard using that pronunciation. You are the only other one.... Could you possibly be a relative of the late Mr. Arkenholtz [sic], the merchant?

STUDENT. He was my father.

In three other target texts the crucial bit is translated as follows:

OLD MAN. Do you know, it seems to me I've heard your voice before. When I was young I had a friend who pronounced certain words just as you do. (Sprigge)

THE OLD MAN. It's strange ... but I can't help thinking that I've heard your voice before.... When I was a young man I had a friend who couldn't pronounce *window*, he always said *winder*. (Sprinchorn)

STUDENT. [-] I'm *ab-absolutely* penniless.

OLD MAN. Wait a moment! I seem to know that voice. When I was young I had a friend who couldn't say *absinthe*, he always said *ab-absinthe*. (Meyer)

OLD MAN. I say...I believe I've heard that voice before... when I was young I had a friend who couldn't say '*window*', he always said '*widow*'[-]. (Ewbank)

In his introduction to the play, Sprinchorn (xiv-xv) comments:

One of the more interesting examples of what seems like a blunder, and which is always "corrected" by translators, is Hummel's remarking [-] on the Student's strange way of pronouncing the word "window." But, in fact, the Student has not pronounced the word at all. If this were a realistic play, there would be no explanation, just as there would be no explanation for the appearance of the Milkmaid as an apparition visible at first only to the Student. On the other hand, if the apparition can be accounted for as a symbol, so can the window. For Hummel is described later on as a thief who enters through windows to steal human souls, and here we see him as he first steals into the Student's life by means of a "window."

Sprinchorn is no doubt right in seeing an intended symbolic significance in the window rather than a sign of carelessness on Strindberg's part. But his argumentation is misleading. Hummel does not really

claim that the Student has uttered the word *funster*; he is merely saying that the Student's pronunciation reminds him of the way in which someone used to pronounce the word *fönster*, which is something else. Since the Student has just uttered the word *beröm*, presumably pronouncing it *berum*, Hummel's remark seems quite appropriate. Yet it is strange in another way. Hummel's implication that the pronunciation of the vowel (*u* instead of *ö*) be unique, or at least very rare, is absurd since this was, and still is, standard Stockholm pronunciation. It is in this way that Hummel "steals into the Student's life."

When Hummel proves to be right in his assumption that the Student is related to his, Hummel's, early friend, there are two possible explanations. Either he knows or suspects *for other reasons* that the Student is the son of his one-time friend and later enemy Arkenholz; his reference to the Student's pronunciation is then merely a wary way of establishing contact with him. Or else he is, like the Student who can see what others cannot see, provided with supernatural intuition. Since Hummel is the diabolic character in the play, both explanations make sense.

After a careful reading of the text we may arrive at this interpretation but in the theatre, where we have little time to ponder, we are as manipulated as the Student by Hummel's illogical reasoning. This strengthens our identification with the Student, who is the archetypal protagonist of the play, and that is, I believe, precisely what the playwright was aiming at.

It should be clear from the foregoing that *fönster-funster*, when enunciated on the stage, present a problem even to many source text recipients. The passage in which they are found, apart from being exceedingly mystifying, presupposes a knowledge about regional pronunciation that cannot be taken for granted outside Stockholm.

Turning to the translations we can distinguish different strategies. Sprigge empties the passage of its significance by paraphrasing it. Björkman, Sprinchorn and Ewbank try to find equivalents for Strindberg's implied variation *fönster-funster* with their "door-dur," "window-winder" and "window-widow"; but since "dur," "winder" and "widow" are idiosyncratic rather than regional pronunciations, the

way in which their Hummels manipulate the Student becomes less absurd. Meyer rationally `emends' the source text, thereby demystifying it. He makes the Student stammer and suggests that the way in which he stammers is inherited from his father. Something of the irony of the source text is nevertheless retained, since stammering, like regional pronunciation, is not an individual mannerism.

In the new Swedish standard edition of Strindberg's works, all the texts are provided with extensive explicanda.<sup>4</sup> *Miss Julie*, for example, has no less than sixty-seven word explications. In a performance we expect some, many, most or all of these words — depending on the intended audience — to be replaced by other, more intelligible words, even if it makes the text less suggestive or meaningful. After all, meanings that are not understood are — meaningless. The problem of complexity versus comprehensibility — more burning in the theatre than in the study — applies not least to the translation of verbal imagery. Certainly when we deal with texts that are a hundred years old.

There is perhaps some consolation in the fact that source text imagery is sometimes as difficult, or even more difficult, to grasp than target text imagery. On the other hand, source text imagery will often have an emotional, because culture-bound, impact on the spectator that target text imagery will not, or not in the same way. "Now summer vacation begins!" is the Son's concluding speech in *Pelikanen/The Pelican* (1907) as he and his sister sink to their death in the flames. Johnson's literal rendering of the original's "Nu börjar sommarlovet!" seems to strike a meaningful compromise between Paulson's "Now our long summer vacation is starting," which makes the tenor (death) too explicit, and Sprinchorn's "Now it's summer again!", which obscures the tenor by omitting the vehicle's `lov'

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<sup>4</sup>Ewbank is the only one of the Strindberg translators mentioned in this paper who provides ample explanatory notes, notes "primarily aimed at the directors" of the plays (9). Hopefully this laudable initiative will be adopted by future drama translators.

(vacation) and by stressing seasonal circularity by adding "again". Yet even Johnson is — necessarily — unable to transfer the *emotional* impact of the metaphor *sommarlov* which to Swedes connotes such things as a brief, sunny period of undisturbed freedom in a summer house close to water after a long, dark, cold winter in town.<sup>5</sup> In this particular case it refers to a vacation in the archipelago outside Stockholm, the emblematic paradise for Strindberg. The emotional tenor of *sommarlovet*, this must be our conclusion, is untranslatable. We have reached the limits for what a translator for the stage can do.

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<sup>5</sup>Even Swedes of today may find it difficult to empathize fully with the nostalgic reverberations at the end of the play. As Steene (56) indicates, perhaps only "en stadsbo ur den svenska medelklassen som växte upp i seklets början" could really sense "Strindbergs sinnligt laddade referenser till sommaren som ett nostalgiskt drömlandskap, ett barndomens förlorade paradis."

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