

Article

The Challenges of Translating Jane Austen's Irony: Samples from 150 Years of Norwegian Versions of the Novels

Marie Nedregotten Sørbo

Department of Languages and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Education, Volda University College, 6103 Volda, Norway; mns@hivolda.no

Abstract: Irony is often perceived to be an inherent quality of Jane Austen's narrative voice and attitude, but is it translatable? It has been argued that Austen should 'stay at home', since foreign versions tend to alter her novels in various ways. However, her novels are nevertheless translated into more languages, giving her a more global presence than ever before. What kind of Austen is received in these versions? Does she still have a sharp eye for human peculiarities and wry comments on the vagaries of romance? The study of Austen in translation is still in its early phase, with most languages yet to be investigated. This article will focus on Norwegian translations between 1871 and the present time. They include serials for newspapers and journals, paperbacks for the popular market, as well as handsome classic author editions. The challenge of understanding and transmitting Austen's irony cuts across such genres and channels of publication and is always a prominent issue when studying them. In this article, I will choose some examples of narrative irony from the novels and compare them to several translated versions (in back-translation). They serve as illustrations of what is at stake, but also, implicitly, as demonstrations of Austen's own peculiar voice and authorial qualities.

Keywords: irony; Norway; narration; translation; reception; Jane Austen



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When doing research for a monograph on Jane Austen's novels in Norwegian translation some years ago, I attempted to calculate how many translations there have been of her work around the world (Sørbo 2018b, pp. 9–10). I soon gave up trying to reach a reliable figure since there are no available data for many countries; the required research has simply not been done yet. The figure that I did arrive at was based on information from the seventeen countries and scholars represented in Mandal and Southam's *The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe* (Southam and Mandal 2014), as well as on David Gilson's 1982 bibliography (Gilson 1997) plus a number of more recent chapters and articles on translation in Turkey, Japan and China (Ebine et al. 2010; Tekcan 2008; Toplu 2004; Zhang 2011). Adding the information provided by these numerous scholars, I found that there must have been at least 680 foreign versions of Austen's novels by then. It was a very conservative estimate and probably far below the real number. Still, it tells us that Austen's work is widely spread and potentially much read, especially since the 1920s, and that her novels are far from merely a Western reading matter. On the contrary, the enormous potential reach of the numerous Chinese and Japanese translations far surpasses Austen's influence in the Nordic context, where I belong. We are just beginning to see glimpses of the impact of this global Jane Austen as scholars publish new studies of the non-European translations.

My own corner of the world can boast of being relatively early readers of Jane Austen in translation. After all, she had few nineteenth-century readers, whether in translation or in her original English. Nevertheless, her novels have been translated since 1813, in the years when she was still writing and publishing them, and there were altogether nineteen translations into six languages during the nineteenth century. While the first ones were into French and, gradually, German, the Nordic languages are well represented with two Swedish (1836 and 1857–1858), one Danish (1855–1856) and one Norwegian translation (1871–1872). The other nineteenth-century foreign language was Portuguese (1847).

Moreover, there is evidence that Austen was read in English in Norway two decades before she was translated for the first time. The prestigious male reading society Athenæum in the capital (Christiania, now Oslo) acquired three of her novels in English in 1852 and more in the following years ([Catalog over Athenæums Bøger 1852](#)). In addition, there are copies of the 1855 Danish translation in Norwegian library collections at the time, as seen in a newspaper advertisement for Engelsen's rental library ([Bergen Adressecontoirs Efterretninger 1856](#)). Since the Scandinavian languages are mutually understandable, this served Norwegian readers as well as the Danes.

Nevertheless, considering the later periods, Norwegians are far from the most eager readers or frequent translators. There were altogether thirteen translations of her novels between 1871 and 2022, by nine translators. Five of the translations are of *Pride and Prejudice*, while *Persuasion* has two, and *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* have only one each. In addition, there have been recent translations of *Sanditon* and *Lady Susan* published in one volume. My own contribution as a translator is also the newest of the set, and, for the first time, *Northanger Abbey* has appeared in Norwegian ([Austen 2022](#)). Hence, I come to the field of Austen and translation both as a literary scholar and as a translator, but I keep them separate here, by omitting my own translation from the body of material to be analysed.

The worldwide landscape of foreign translations invites the question of what translators and publishers want from Jane Austen's work. What purposes do the translations serve and what readerships do they address? Only a comparative close reading of the original novels with their translated versions can provide sufficient answers to these questions (an onerous but very rewarding task). The point of comparing translations with their source and with each other is first to find out how an author has been read in different contexts in different time periods. Is the Norwegian, French or Indian Jane Austen the same as the English Jane Austen? If, as is to be expected, an authorship will never be exactly the same in different languages, what then are these differences? Are there specific national characteristic differences, or, on the contrary, similar transformations of her texts in translations all over the world? These questions can only be answered by means of a plethora of translation studies, forming a transnational basis for assessing Austen's reception over two centuries.

This must take the shape of a joint scholarly project, examining the translated novels and sharing the results with each other. Such research will serve to fill in a hole in Austen scholarship where 'Studies of the translations . . . have been few' ([Gilson 1997](#), p. xxxiii). Despite such seminal contributions to the field as the studies contained in *The Reception of Jane Austen in Europe* ([Southam and Mandal 2014](#)), it is still often a neglected area of academic interest. Gillian Dow observes that 'relatively few scholars have considered the 'foreign' or 'translated' Austen comprehensively, or in any depth' ([Dow 2012](#), pp. 154–74). This need can be seen to motivate several of the contributions to this *Humanities* special issue on Jane Austen.

There is a single nineteenth-century translation of Austen into Norwegian of *Persuasion*, which, in this version, is titled *Familien Elliot* (the Elliot family) and was published as a serial in the newspaper *Morgenbladet* from 20 December 1871 to 23 January 1872 ([Austen 1871–1872](#)). There had been no record of this translation in Austen reception history until it surfaced about a decade ago.¹ It was then mentioned *en passant* in a history of the Norwegian press, along with many other examples of serialized novels in newspapers ([Nøding 2010](#)). Many of these enormously popular fictional serials were immediately republished between book covers, but this seems never to have happened to Austen's novel. Hence, the title was not registered in library catalogues and is still not found by searching university or public libraries. An interested reader would now find at least some of the relevant issues digitized by the National Library, but would be faced with the medieval Gothic script (Blackletter) still favoured by German and Scandinavian presses at the time.

Serials have not always been studied as part of translation history, but they need to be included if we are to form a fuller picture of the reception of an *oeuvre* at any given time. And the quality of translation is less dependent on the channels of publication than we often assume. In this case, *Persuasion* has been very intelligently and knowingly rendered by the anonymous serial translator, who evidently mastered the finer nuances of the English language well, although sometimes stumbling over the intricacies of Austen's narration, including her irony, as we shall see. I found a second (also unregistered) Austen serial in a family magazine a century later, this time a version of *Pride and Prejudice* sporting the title *Omvei til Lykken* (detour towards happiness) (Austen 1974). In the accompanying article to the first instalment, Austen is presented with understanding as an important feminist, pioneer writer. However, in this case, the editor/translator opts to abbreviate the novel substantially, which is in fact the opposite of the 1871 translation strategy, which tended to be expansive and explanatory.² Much of Austen's irony—although appreciated in the editor's separate piece on the author—is in effect lost in this 1974 abbreviation.

The first translation for the book market—as well as the next two—were all of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Elizabeth og hennes søstre* (Elizabeth and her sisters), translated by Alf Harbitz, was a testimony to the new academic and popular interest in the author (Austen 1930). The translation appeared on the market between the second and third editions of R.W. Chapman's scholarly edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen* (1923, 1926, 1933), and was most likely inspired by this. Alf Harbitz is a knowledgeable and competent translator who recommends Austen to his target group, here explained to be young girls. Austen's novels are immensely superior to their usual reading matter, he argues. Yet, he becomes a paradoxical receiver of Austen, since he also edits the novel throughout. This is partly common practice, and partly motivated by a wish to ensure that the book appears modern and an easy read. On a closer view, however, we can see that he cuts and reduces significant parts of Elizabeth's emotional life, as well as her irony and frustrated anger directed at men, at one point expressed in terms of her being 'sick of them all' (Austen 1983b, p. 154). Also, the narrator's ironic dismissal of Mr. Bennet's weaknesses as a husband and father in II, 19 (*ibid.*, pp. 236–37) are unwanted and censored (Sørbo 2014, pp. 134–35; 2018b, pp. 175, 184). This version of *Pride and Prejudice* is prettily illustrated with some of Charles E. Brock's 1895 pictures and is on the whole one of the nicest Norwegian editions, but Austen's story is sometimes equally—and disturbingly—prettified.

The post-war (1947) version was much less pretty, printed instead on cheap, thick paper and without other artwork than the dust wrapper. However, there is no compensation for this plainness to be found in other aspects of the publication. For the first time, Austen's translator (Lalli Knutsen) turns out to have little understanding of the style and a limited understanding of the language. This *Stolthet og fordom* (pride and prejudice) preserves the original title but abounds in banal language mistakes, some of which disturb the literal meaning and often also the ironical implications of Austen's sentences (see below). Knutsen was a writer herself, and produced many entertainment novels for young girls, as well as crime fiction co-written with her husband. She also translated in these genres, but is today entirely forgotten (Austen 1947).

The third Norwegian *Pride and Prejudice*, also bearing the title of *Stolthet og fordom* (ca. 1972), is a curious specimen of the vagaries of reception and the clash between translatative strategies (Austen 1972). It was made by Eivind and Elisabeth Hauge, a now forgotten translator couple. He translated many English-language authors, particularly in lighter genres (for instance, Agatha Christie), while she translated mainly children's books from Swedish. When studying their version of Austen, it becomes evident that there are two distinct pens at work. One of them understands well and aims to keep the original syntax and vocabulary. The other frequently misunderstands expressions and tends to resort to paraphrasing of passages (see below). Unfortunately, the distribution of text between them is very unequal; the experienced translator is less visible, and most of the novel is therefore poorly translated. This also affects the fate of Austen's irony in this version, as it is, indeed, often sacrificed in the many rewritings of her text.

Austen thus fared badly in the hands of mid-twentieth-century Norwegian translators but is much better understood in the earlier versions (1871 and 1930). However, the situation was improving. The turn of the millennium saw the apex of Norwegian Austen reception history, as five of her six major novels were translated by Merete Alfsen for one of the main publishing houses, Aschehoug.³ These translations have been reissued in different series since then, and are the closest Austen gets to a collected works edition in Norway, although it omits *Northanger Abbey* along with *Lady Susan*, the novel fragments, and the juvenilia. Merete Alfsen's translation strategy is to stay as close to Austen's syntactic structures as possible, while also opting for quite a nostalgic, Norwegian language style (especially in terms of vocabulary). She has a keen ear for Austen's irony and is often good at finding Norwegian solutions. The examples included here are from two of these five translations: *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

In recent years, three of the until now missing Austen titles have been rendered in Norwegian. The 2019 translation *Sanditon og Lady Susan* by Peter Fjågesund is a beautiful book illustrated by the translator's wife, Borghild Telnes. Filled with new silhouettes and vignettes in a pastiche style, it makes for an entertaining reading of these minor works. My own, *Northanger Abbey* (Austen 2022), is the first Norwegian translation of this novel, as well as the first of any of Austen works to be translated into the minority language New Norwegian.⁴ Nine different Norwegian translators have so far battled with Austen's irony and narrative complexities, but with what results?

I am particularly interested in seeing how Norwegian translators cope with Austen's ironic narrative style and targets.⁵ Irony is often perceived to be an inherent quality of Jane Austen's narrative voice and attitude—although admittedly sometimes ambiguous—but is it translatable? Irony may be defined as saying the opposite of what is meant, while assuming one's listeners or readers understand the joke. In Austen, it tends to rest in narrative comments that may or may not have been appreciated by translators in the past. Furthermore, her irony largely relies on subtler narrative techniques like free indirect discourse, *leitmotifs* and dramatic irony at the expense of the characters. It is perhaps easier to appreciate the author's frequent use of ironic jokes embedded in dialogues, and voices like those of Elizabeth Bennet and her father in *Pride and Prejudice* often (but not always) also ring out clearly in Norwegian translations. In the following, I will present some samples of Austen's ironic voice in Norwegian versions, all of them in back-translation to facilitate comparisons across languages.⁶

Austen's endings provide excellent illustrations of her ironic attitude (as do her openings), and the last chapter of *Persuasion* is no exception.⁷ It opens with an inescapably ironic distance from the love story that has just been completed:

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth. (Austen 1969, p. 248)

These lines are omitted in the earliest Norwegian version of the novel (Austen 1871–1872) but preserved in the modern one (Austen 1998). Although the anonymous nineteenth-century translator is otherwise very thorough in rendering most aspects of Austen's work, he or she seems at a loss to know how to deal with ironic commentary. Perhaps explicit narrative comments were perceived as undesirably old-fashioned at the time, although there were plenty of them around in contemporary novels, such as George Eliot's. The modern translator, Merete Alfsen, has a good ear for Austen's ironic comments, and rarely misses them.

In comments such as this, Austen turns romantic clichés upside-down and demonstrates their emptiness. The standard happy ending would give us a remarkable young couple whose love miraculously overcomes opposition and a lack of money. The author, however, sees fit to remind us that young love is a terribly common phenomenon. The

lovers are not necessarily wise or deserving, and as often as not, will not even make each other happy. It is their stubbornness that brings about the happy ending, not their virtues. Lovers are generally egotistic and may live to regret their choice. In the ensuing lines, the narrator admits that the lovers in her own story are different and more mature. So, she saves her romantic ending after all. Still, she embeds it in this ironic context. Austen is particularly fond of making jokes about love in her final chapters (as well as elsewhere), as if undiluted happiness would take her too close for comfort to sentimentalism. Her deliberately irreverent phrasing ('take it into their heads to marry') safeguards her from drowning in romantic clichés, even if adhering to the generic ending of the love story.

Austen's self-reflexive jokes about the narrator's role create similar ironic distance. 'Who can be in doubt of what followed?' draws the reader into the narration and is a humorous apology for embarking on the standard closure of the story. 'This may be bad morality to conclude with' is three things in one. It is a reminder that this is fiction, a constructed tale. It makes fun of the author's obligation to provide uplifting endings. And it is an ironic dismissal of the sentimental pretence that the good will prevail in the world. So, Jane Austen plays with the idea of going against convention but always delicately balances between disruption and confirmation of standard expectations. After all, her protagonists in *Persuasion* really are good people, and they do end up rich and happy, though not without satirical comments. The great paradox of Austen's popularity is that she is much praised for her enchanting love stories, and yet she never refrains from reminding us that there is no such thing as perfect happiness. Not to mention that, in this case, the lovers were also threatened by the dark shadows of impending war.

While Austen clearly directs her irony at lovers and love stories (her own included, as we see in a number of such reminders in all novels), her ironic targets further encompass, for instance, the state of marriage and the practice of parenthood, the privileges of the upper classes, religious authorities, the emotional and financial powerlessness of women and the state of female education. To start with the last, there is a distinctly ironic flavour in the first description of the Musgrove daughters (*Persuasion*):

who had brought from a school at Exeter all the usual stock of accomplishments, and were now, like thousands of other young ladies, living to be fashionable, happy and merry. Their dress had every advantage, their faces were rather pretty. (Austen 1969, p. 40)

The literal meaning of most words is perfectly rendered in the 1871 translation, but the hint of ironic distance is absent. The main reason is that Austen's overt ridicule of the education of girls in 'thousands of other young ladies' is deleted. Instead, the school is specified as 'a big girls' school'. It is as if the main point of the 'thousands' were the number of girls attending the school and not the number of girls that remain superficially educated.⁸ Furthermore, Austen's subtle modification in 'rather pretty' is omitted, so that they are simply 'pretty'. The fact that the same description serves for both sisters, as indeed for 'thousands' of girls, supports the author's irony about female accomplishments. Alfsen's 1998 version has rendered the observations on the school and the thousands of young ladies well, but curiously also misses the ironic modification of 'rather pretty', and instead translates this as 'had ... pretty faces' (Austen 1998, p. 43).⁹

Often the author's irony rests in such seemingly innocuous words and fine-drawn twists of phrasing. It is clear what translators are up against when taking on a Jane Austen novel; her language is finely tuned. Any translator needs to lend an ear to the subtle tones of words and phrases that often constitute Austen's irony. 'They might pass for a happy couple', Austen concludes the first description of the young Musgroves, who are equally stupid and tend to involve Anne in their quarrels too frequently (Austen 1969, p. 43). Austen's 'might pass for', with a wink, is in 1871 translated seriously: 'They must on the whole be called a happy couple.'¹⁰ The modern version is less complacent about their happiness but does not go as far as Austen in undermining it: 'they were apparently a satisfied couple'.¹¹ The substitution of 'satisfied' for 'happy' makes the utterance more

sensible, but less ironic. And there is a distinct difference between the factual observation ‘were apparently’ and the tongue-in-cheek ‘must on the whole be called’. The latter reminds us that ‘happy’ is something we ‘call’ people, and it is much harder to decide what they really are.

Similarly, in another example of ironically loaded phrases, Mr. Bennet’s teasing of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* may become pure politeness. At any rate, it does so in one of the Norwegian translations (Austen 1972). Instead of ‘he therefore started a subject in which he expected him to shine’ (Austen 1983b, p. 66), Mr. Bennet is much more considerate when he ‘started with a subject that he thought his guest would appreciate’. The word ‘shine’ indicates that Mr. Bennet expects a performance in silliness. Alfsen translates the passage and its context excellently, including its free indirect speech in her version: ‘a subject where he reckoned Mr. Collins would excel’ (Austen 2003).¹²

Austen may use repetition for ironic effect, as when Mr. Parker in *Sanditon* tries to convince the Heywood family to come to his new seaside resort of that name. He argues that their health depends upon six weeks every year of ‘sea air and sea bathing’, which taken together are:

anti-spasmodic, anti-pulmonary, anti-sceptic, anti-bilious and anti-rheumatic’.
(Austen 1983a, p. 373)

The recent Norwegian translation renders this as:

they cured cramps, pulmonary complaints, infections, gallstone and rheumatism.¹³

Translator Fjågesund does a very competent job of transmitting and explaining the factual, medical implications of these lines, but he does it without mimicking Austen’s list of ‘anti’-words. Hence, the comical repetition is gone, and Austen’s devastating irony on fashionable hypochondria is somewhat lessened. The force of Austen’s irony is even more striking considering that this fragment of a novel was written by a terminally ill author. In the months leading up to her death in July 1817 from a severe physical illness, she composed twelve chapters of this new, satirical work, which she had to abandon due to increasing weakness. Even when facing real illness, it appears that Austen could not help but laugh at it, and ridicule people’s obsessions with complaints and cures. Irony seems indeed to be an inherent quality of her nature as well as of her work.

Translator Lalli Knutsen misreads the irony of Elizabeth Bennet’s response to the plans for her sister Lydia marrying the unreliable rake Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth is almost rendered speechless—‘And they *must* marry! Yet he is *such* a man!’—managing only the briefest expression of the overwhelming absurdity of it all (Austen 1983b, p. 304). Marriage is necessary if Lydia is to have a decent life, yet marriage to a scoundrel must lead to a miserable life. When Knutsen translates only the first half of this line, the paradox, absurdity, and irony are all gone, and the remnants can easily be read as a moralistic conviction: ‘they must marry!’ The same happens again with the following passage:

And they are really to be married! . . . How strange this is! And for *this* we are to be thankful. That they should marry, small as is their chance of happiness, and wretched as is his character, we are forced to rejoice! Oh, Lydia! (ibid.)

A careful reading—noting the italics, the exclamation marks, the feeling of strangeness, the pitying exclamation—reveals that Austen again makes Elizabeth voice the absurdity of such a marriage. However, in Knutsen’s version, she only expresses serious gratitude that the marriage is to take place:

To think that they really will be married! . . . For this we have all reason to be thankful. However small their chances are for being really happy. (Austen 1947, pp. 260–61)

Knutsen’s version of Elizabeth is cynical: it does not matter that Lydia will be unhappy as long as their reputation is saved. Luckily, other translators have more felicitous renderings.¹⁴

Humour is as much a part of Austen's nature as is irony, and the two are indeed inseparable. The author who proclaimed that she could not avoid 'laughing at myself or other people' (if she were forced to write a historical romance) embeds humorous comments and comical situations throughout her stories.¹⁵ One of the most striking examples of this combination is her humorous but disturbing irony about the marriage market in a scene from *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet is still secretly considering her possibilities among the available bachelors, although she cannot refrain from ironical jokes about their (and implicitly her own) market value. Mr. Darcy is too arrogant, Mr. Wickham is a charming option, and her new acquaintance, Colonel Fitzwilliam, seems a pleasant man. The two of them have been flirting, and he evidently deems it a wise precaution to warn her off, twice reminding her that he is a younger son and younger sons must marry money. Elizabeth takes the embarrassing hint and resorts to a joke:

And pray, what is the usual price of an Earl's younger son? Unless the elder brother is very sickly, I suppose you would not ask above fifty thousand pounds. (Austen 1983b, pp. 183–84)

The joke about buying eligible marriage candidates and sorting them into price categories according to future prospects, although a humorous exaggeration, is still uncomfortably near to the truth. Elizabeth could have bought Colonel Fitzwilliam had she been rich, and as Mr. Collins so considerably reminds her during his unsuccessful proposal to her, she risks having no other offers than his own, since her fortune consists of only 40 pounds.¹⁶ The ironic significance of Elizabeth's joke is not caught by the ca. 1972 translators, Eivind and Elisabeth Hauge, who render it:

And what does a younger son need, then? Unless the elder brother is very sickly, he cannot very well be content with less than fifty thousand pounds?¹⁷

The joke about marriage as a market has disappeared, the sentences have become pointless and the passage illogical. Luckily, most other Norwegian translators have caught the joke and rendered it well.

Similarly battling with humour, the 1947 translator, Lalli Knutsen, apparently does not grasp Elizabeth Bennet's joking attitude to the problem of judging between Wickham and Darcy: 'There is but such a quantity of merit between them; just enough to make one good sort of man; and of late it has been shifting about pretty much' (Austen 1983b, p. 225). Knutsen renders it 'We have to change our opinion of them, but only one can be a good human being'.¹⁸ This is not funny, but on the contrary a serious statement. There are many such examples of Austen laughing at courtship procedures and the games people play to succeed in them.

Jokes and irony are both advanced language skills that present challenges for translators. The recognition of multiple meanings of words, the recognition of repetitions of certain phrases, or the juxtaposition of concepts, takes a finely tuned ear. The suspicion sometimes arises that deleted or rewritten irony in translations may be the result of a preconceived notion of Austen's novels as simple and straightforward romances, which can be edited without significant damage.

Jane Austen is considered an early master of free indirect narration, and it is, indeed, also one of her main ironic tools.¹⁹ The technique consists of merging a character's language with the narration by removing the tags of reported speech ('she thought', 'he said'). It has the effect of bringing readers close to the words and thoughts of the characters and may therefore be used to make readers understand and sympathise with their feelings. However, Austen also employs free indirect style to reveal and echo the silliness and stupidity of other characters and create a tone of ironic distance from her own fictional world, a tone which is almost constant in her novels. We will look at examples of both these effects.

Austen's pervasive free indirect narration proves to be the most challenging feature for the earliest translator of the 1871 *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot's apprehensions about meeting her old suitor, Captain Wentworth, again after seven years' separation are not only stated,

but reflected in the narrative itself. This consists of a series of short, breathless observations mirroring her confusion and dizziness:

... it would soon be over. And it was soon over [. . .] she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves [. . .] the room seemed full—full of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it.
(Austen 1969, p. 59)

In the nineteenth-century translation, this palpable proximity to Anne's feelings is lost, even if those feelings themselves are reported. All the fragments of thought are rephrased into full sentences, followed by an explanation: 'Anne felt utterly dizzy; it appeared to her that the entire room was full of people speaking all at once' (Austen 1871–1872, 27 December).²⁰ Alfsen's 1998 translation, however, is closer to Austen's phrasing and syntax here, but reduces the breathlessness a little by inserting an extra full stop before 'the room' (Austen 1998, p. 59).

Pride and Prejudice has equally striking passages of free indirect style, one of them at the end of I, 15, where first Mrs. Phillips' voice and then Mr. Collins' are echoed in the narration. To achieve this, Austen has heaped clause upon clause without full stops, as a reminder of the endless chatter of either of the two talkative characters. Clearly, this must have been considered a stylistic weakness by Alf Harbitz in 1930. In his version, Austen's ten-line sentence, echoing Mrs. Phillips' breathless gossip (Austen 1983b, p. 83) is split into no fewer than five sentences separated by full stops. The translator seems, however, to be aware that he has lost something, for he then adds 'In this eager talk' ('she was interrupted'), which is a way of telling us what we see for ourselves in Austen's text.²¹

When the novel reappears in a new translation in 1947, Knutsen simply omits the whole episode. In the third translation ca. 1972, Eivind and Elisabeth Hauge have (as usual) abbreviated and summarised the episode. The object is evidently to avoid the long, meandering sentences of Austen's free, indirect style. Hence, the sound of Mrs. Phillips' voice is lost, and all her lines are reduced to the bare report: 'She was full of questions.' Likewise, Mr. Collins' flow of words is straightened out into normal reported speech rather than free indirect speech. In the process, the most colourful of his expressions are deleted ('he could not help flattering himself however'). What is left is a plain, dull report.²² The 1974 and 2003 translators both preserve most of this passage, although with a somewhat reduced breathlessness.²³

In another instance, it is the Bingley sisters' phrases that colour the report of their visit:

The two ladies were delighted to see their dear friend again, called it an age since they had met, and repeatedly asked what she had been doing with herself since their separation. (Austen 1983b, p. 86)

This is far from a neutral report, since 'the two ladies' were not really 'delighted', they only said they were, and soon left. Their fake enthusiasm should be mirrored in translation. Knutsen merely translates: 'were delighted to see their dear Jane again, and asked how she had been since they parted', leaving only a small trace of the ironic echo in the phrase 'their dear Jane'.²⁴ Harbitz, for his part, seems convinced that they are sincere: 'were delighted to see their sweet friend again, they said it was an eternity since they had seen her and asked warmly how she was.'²⁵ Austen tells us that they kept repeating the same, empty question, while Harbitz says they were warm. The Hauges have gone furthest in giving up the echoes of personal voices and rewritten the whole thing into a plain report: 'The two ladies showered Jane with friendly remarks and asked what she had been doing since they last met.'²⁶ Alfsen's careful translation is again closest, but it proves difficult to find a phrase with the same personal tone as the repeated idiom of the Bingley sisters: 'what have you been doing with yourself?'²⁷

Austen's fondness for mimicking characters' speech and thoughts in free indirect style is carried further in her insistent reminders of their personal *leitmotifs*. She constructs her characters through their use of language, thus distinguishing Mr. Collins' hypocritical

formality from Mrs. Bennet's inconsequential chatter. In this way, Lydia always spouts senseless merriment, and can hardly speak without saying how much she laughs and how funny everything is: '... what fun! ... how I laughed!' (Austen 1983b, pp. 221–22). Even when she is implicitly destroying her family through her elopement, she does it laughingly, not through malice, but rather extreme stupidity (ibid., p. 291). When Mrs. Bennet instantly recovers from her illness on hearing of Lydia's marriage, she exclaims 'My dear, dear Lydia!—How merry we shall be together when we meet!' (ibid., p. 306). The word 'merry' in the context of elopement and scandal exactly fits Mrs. Bennet's superficiality, and connects her with her daughter. Neither she nor Lydia reveal the slightest understanding of what they have done to the rest of the family, or to themselves and each other.

Do translators see this connection, and this shared *leitmotif*? Lalli Knutsen does not; she translates the latter passage as 'How happy we shall be', which is a perfectly natural reaction for a mother on hearing that her daughter's reputation is saved.²⁸ Alf Harbitz and the Hauges have 'What fun it will be/we will have', which is closer. Merete Alfsen, however, has the most felicitous expression: 'How gay we will be', which sounds appropriately misplaced in the context.

One of Lydia's other speech habits is reiterating the exclamation 'Lord!' (Austen 1983b, p. 221). Knutsen translates this well, with her thrice repeated 'God!' in this place. But the Hauges retain only one of these, and replace the two next with 'Oh' or nothing at all. Alfsen, like Knutsen, sees the point, and even adds a fourth 'God' as a translation of 'Dear me!'²⁹ Knutsen also expands Austen's *leitmotif* by translating not only 'oh Lord!' (Austen 1983b, p. 317) as 'God knows', but by changing 'Good gracious' and 'But gracious me' (ibid., pp. 316, 319) to 'God in heaven!'³⁰ Harbitz has one 'God' and one 'Heaven!'. Again, the Hauges omit the 'Lord!' as well as the other expressions used here. Whether it is a censoring of bad speech habits or only a disregard of Austen's style, they lose essential parts of her ironic characterization.

Such repetition of favourite phrases distinguishes a comical character's peculiarities. Mr. Collins, for instance, always refers to his 'humble abode' (Austen 1983b, pp. 155, 215). The five translators have chosen mostly different synonyms for 'humble', but the point is whether they keep the repetition of the word they choose. Mr. Collins also recycles his favourite adjective in terms such as 'humble home scene' and 'humble parsonage' (ibid., pp. 66, 215, 216). Translators would therefore do well to employ the same word for all these instances.

Harbitz, in some places, disregards this *leitmotif*, turning Mr. Collins' sentences into normal and sensible ones. Alternatively, he translates with three different words: 'modest', 'humble' and 'simple'.³¹ Knutsen also loses one instance, and otherwise has two different adjectives, 'simple' and 'unpretentious', the last repeated three times, with variations.³² The Hauges, like their predecessors, skip the 'humble home scene', and then choose three different phrasings for the rest, one repeated.³³ The 1974 translator largely loses the effect of the repetition, although the first instance is translated 'simple home' (Austen 1974, part 3, p. 74). Alfsen varies between two different translations that are both repeated.³⁴ In all translations taken together, six different Norwegian words are employed to translate 'humble' in these passages, and the insistent motif is therefore less conspicuous than in the original novel.

The devil is in the detail when translators take on an Austen novel, and not even punctuation is neutral territory. Nor is it a safe country to wander into. As Katherine Sutherland has pointed out, the punctuation of the first editions cannot be assumed to be the same as Austen's (since lost) final manuscripts (Sutherland 2010). Collating the drafts that do survive of *Persuasion* with the printed edition, Sutherland argues that the editor, William Gifford, has removed dashes and added spaces and lines, inserted full stops and commas, all to make the structure more readable. This means that we cannot say for certain what Austen's own version looked like, but what we do have of hers, indicates a rather compact text and a frequent use of dashes. Nevertheless, despite Gifford's added punctuation, Austen's style remains her own, with lengthy and associative sentences.

Mid-twentieth century Norwegian translators, however, often choose to divide up these into shorter periods, which tends to create an altered tone and style, more factual and less reflective.

The most extreme example, however, of conspicuous typographical changes is found in Elizabeth and Eivind Hauge's ca. 1972 translation of *Pride and Prejudice*. There is a massive overuse of exclamation marks. In the conversation between Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam and Darcy at the piano at Rosings in II, 8, no fewer than fourteen new exclamation marks have been introduced instead of the original full stops, over one page of text. (Austen 1972, pp. 141–42). Usually seen as a sign of stylistic immaturity, this certainly changes Austen's calm and deliberate prose into something more youthful, breathless (at best) or naïve, especially since it goes hand in hand with syntactical changes from long, intricate constructions to short, simple statements.

Admittedly, Austen may have employed a few exclamation marks herself. She (or her editor) even lets Darcy use three in a row in his shocked response to Elizabeth's accusations in the first proposal scene: 'And this ... is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me! ... My faults ... are heavy indeed!' (Austen 1983b, p. 192). The problem, however, is that in the Hagues' version, these are drowned out by the overuse of them elsewhere. Darcy's outburst is preceded by eight new exclamation marks added to his and Elizabeth's lines (Austen 1972, pp. 154–56). The translators cry wolf when there is no wolf, and so lose the effect of the immense shock that Darcy receives and responds to.

Likewise, a quiet conversation between Jane and Elizabeth sharing their latest secret (Darcy's proposal) (Austen 1983b, pp. 225–26) is suddenly full of exclamation marks—nine new ones on one single page (Austen 1972, p. 182). Even when people are shouting at each other, as in the quarrel between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine in III, 14, Austen uses exclamation marks sparingly. The Hagues, however, use them abundantly; sixteen of them are added throughout this chapter (ibid., pp. 279–85).

The letter-writers of the novel are also turned into exclamation mark addicts. In Elizabeth's short letter to Mrs. Gardiner, giving her the news of her engagement, she uses one exclamation mark, while in the Hagues' translation, she employs nine. Mr Bennet, who does not usually exclaim much at all, and has no need for them in his ultra-short letter to Mr. Collins, still employs them twice in the translation (ibid., pp. 382–83).

The proliferation of exclamation marks in the ca. 1972 translation is arguably one of the most striking devaluations of Jane Austen's narrative style in the examined translations. Innocuous as it may seem, this little typographical symbol transforms Austen into a rather naïve novelist.

Translations have formed our perception of the author since the early days of her reception, and like screen adaptations, they constitute a *palimpsest*, a text that is superimposed on an earlier text.³⁵ Any foreign-language version of a Jane Austen novel will replace and hide her own text, and no translation scholar will pretend that the two texts are the same. On the contrary, it is often observed that due to the richness of languages, no two translations of a source text will be identical.³⁶ The German philosopher Walter Benjamin proposed an enlightening simile; that the source text is like the skin of a fruit while a translation is like the clothes on a body.³⁷ Hence, there are countless possibilities for translations of any given text. Translations, therefore, invite comparative studies, and my own interest has been in finding out how Jane Austen's ironical attitude and narrative are rendered in Norwegian versions. The present study begs to be supplemented with similar examinations of her transformations in other cultures. Examining how Jane Austen is read in other languages is an ongoing and highly rewarding, joint project.

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Notes

- ¹ This discovery and translation are also discussed in an article in *Persuasions* (Sørbo 2012). Despite sharing its title with Isabelle de Montolieu's *La Famille Elliot* (1821), which spurred the Swedish *Familjen Elliot* (1836), the Norwegian translation is new and independent of these. This article also considers the potential influence of James Austen-Leigh's 1869 *Memoir of Jane Austen* and the new Tauchnitz edition of *Persuasion* that both coincided in time with the Norwegian *Familjen Elliot*.
- ² The editor was journalist Lise Jor, but as she remembers the process in later years, she did not translate the novel from English, but based the serial on an earlier translation. However, I have so far not been able to identify an underlying version into any of the Scandinavian languages, and suspect that she may indeed have worked with an English edition.
- ³ *Emma* (Austen 1996), *Fornuft og følelse* (*Sense and Sensibility*) (Austen 1997), *Overtalelse* (*Persuasion*) (Austen 1998), *Mansfield Park* (Austen 2000), *Stolthet og fordom* (*Pride and Prejudice*) (Austen 2003).
- ⁴ For a consideration of the significance of this, see the section on Shakespeare and Austen in New Norwegian in Marie Nedregotten Sørbo (2019).
- ⁵ For a fuller discussion of the techniques and targets of Austen's irony, see Marie Nedregotten Sørbo, *Irony and Idyll: Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park on Screen* (Sørbo 2014).
- ⁶ For more examples and other aspects of the challenges of translation, see Sørbo, *Jane Austen Speaks Norwegian* (Sørbo 2018b). These back-translations, although necessary tools for comparative analyses across languages, are acts of translation in their own right, and can be subject to similar evaluations as those performed here.
- ⁷ For a discussion of varying translations of the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, see Sørbo, 'Interpretations of Jane Austen's Irony on Screen and in Translations: A Comparison of Some Samples' in *Women's Writing* 25:4 (Sørbo 2018a).
- ⁸ 'som havde erhvervet sig høiere Dannelse i en stor Pigeskole i Exeter, og nu blott tænkte paa at more og pynte sig. Deres Dragt var altid fiffig og smagfuld, de var smukke, muntre, livlige', Jane Austen, *Familjen Elliot*, 24 December 1871 (Austen 1871–1872).
- ⁹ 'De hadde . . . pene ansikter' (Austen 1998).
- ¹⁰ 'De maatte i det hele taget kaldes et lykkeligt Ægtepar' (Austen 1871–1872).
- ¹¹ 'var de tilsynelatende et tilfreds par' (Austen 1998).
- ¹² 'Han begynte med et emne som han mente gjesten ville sette pris på' (Austen 1972, p. 61); 'et tema der han regnet med at mr. Collins ville eksellere' (Austen 2003, p. 67).
- ¹³ 'de motvirket kramper, luftveisplager, infeksjoner, gallestein og revmatisme' (Austen 2019, Fjågesund, Trans.)
- ¹⁴ 'Og de må gifte seg!'; 'Tenk at de virkelig blir gifte! . . . Det har vi grunn til å være takknemlige for. Hvor små utsikter det enn er for at de skal bli virkelig lykkelige' (Austen 1947, pp. 260–61). Alfson introduces a 'likksom' (apparently) to emphasize the paradox: 'og det skal vi likksom være glade for!' (Austen 2003, p. 280).
- ¹⁵ In a letter of 1 April 1816 in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Le Faye 1995, p. 312).
- ¹⁶ For a discussion of this example in the context of courting as shopping, see Sørbo (2014, p. 50).
- ¹⁷ 'Og hva trenger så en yngre sønn?' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom*, p. 148). The joke is intact in Austen, *Elizabeth og hennes søstre*, p. 134 (Austen 1930); Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1947, p. 162); and Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 2003, p. 176).
- ¹⁸ 'Vi må skifte oppfatning av dem, men bare en av dem kan være et godt menneske' (Austen 1947, p. 196). Three translations, Harbitz, the Hauges and the 1974 serial, simply omit this sentence, and only Alfson gets the joke.
- ¹⁹ See Sørbo, *Irony and Idyll* (Sørbo 2014, pp. 26–27); Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Pascal 1977, p. 34). For comparison with other authors, see Jane Spencer, 'Narrative Technique: Austen and Her Contemporaries' (Spencer 2012, pp. 185–94).
- ²⁰ 'Anne følte sig aldeles svimmel, det forekom hende, at hele Stuen var fuld af Mennesker, som talte i Munden paa hinanden' (Austen 1871–1872, 27 December).
- ²¹ 'I denne ivrige snakk blev hun avbrutt' (Austen 1930, p. 59).
- ²² 'Hun var full av spørsmål' (Austen 1972, p. 65).
- ²³ Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 2003, p. 74); Austen, 'Omvei til lykken', (Austen 1974, part 4). In the latter, the passage forms the opening of the fourth instalment and is thus foregrounded.
- ²⁴ 'De to damene var henrykt over å se igjen sin kjære Jane, og spurte hvordan hun hadde hatt det siden de skiltes' (Austen 1947, p. 82).
- ²⁵ 'De to damene var henrykt over å se sin søte venninde igjen, de sa det var en evighet siden de hadde sett henne og spurte hjertelig hvordan det var med henne' (Austen 1930, p. 67).
- ²⁶ 'De to damene overøste Jane med vennlige bemerkninger og spurte om hva hun hadde foretatt seg siden sist' (Austen 1972, p. 75).
- ²⁷ 'De to damene var henrykt over å se sin kjære venninne igjen, påstod at det var en evighet siden de hadde møttes og spurte gjentatte ganger hva hun hadde foretatt seg siden de skiltes ad' (Austen 2003, p. 86).

- ²⁸ 'Så glade vi skal bli' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1947, p. 263)); 'Så morsomt det blir' (Austen, *Elizabeth og hennes søstre*, p. 197); 'Så morsomt vi skal få det' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1972, p. 240)); 'Så festlig vi skal få det' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 2003, p. 281)).
- ²⁹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 221. 'Gud!' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1947, p. 192)); 'Å' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1972, p. 179)); 'Gud' (Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 2003, p. 209)). Harbitz in *Elizabeth og hennes søstre* deleted the whole chapter (II, chapter 16).
- ³⁰ 'det skal Gud vite'; 'Gud i himmelen!'; *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1947, pp. 271–72); 'Gud'; 'Himmel!'; *Elizabeth og hennes søstre*, (Austen 1930, pp. 203, 206); Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1972, pp. 248–51).
- ³¹ 'ringe bolig', 'ydmyke bolig'; 'enkle hus', *Elizabeth og hennes søstre* (Austen 1930, pp. 54, 153).
- ³² 'enkle prestegård'; 'fordringsløse bolig' (twice); 'hvor fordringsløst vi enn har det', *Stolthet og Fordom* (Austen 1947, pp. 66, 139, 187–88).
- ³³ 'beskjedne bolig'; 'ydmyke bolig'; 'ringe hjem'; 'under vårt beskjedne tak' Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 1972, pp. 62, 127, 174).
- ³⁴ 'ringe bolig' (three times); 'beskjedne hjem'; 'om vi lever aldri så beskjedent her i vår ringe prestegård' Austen, *Stolthet og fordom* (Austen 2003, pp. 68, 150, 204–5).
- ³⁵ As employed for example by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Genette 1997, pp. 398–99).
- ³⁶ David Bellos refers to an experiment that proved the point (Bellos 2011).
- ³⁷ In his now canonical essay 'The Task of the Translator' (Benjamin 1999, pp. 70–82).

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