

(Mis)Interpretations and Untranslatables

Colin Irvine
Augsburg College

Watching for the hundredth or so time *It's a Wonderful Life* this last evening with my seventh-grade son and second-grade daughter, I found myself having to field a fairly uncomfortable and difficult pair of questions, something I am deft at doing in the classroom but horrible at doing when caught unawares at home. The first came from Junior, who asked as George Bailey was leaving his brother's wedding party and heading over to see Mary Hatch, "What does he mean by passionate necking?"

"Huh?" I shot back smartly, before adding nothing in the way of clarification.

Minutes later, his sister pipes up with, "What is he *talking* about—making violent love to her? What's *violent* love?"

The wife, a witness to this awkwardness, looked at me contentedly as if I were teaching a lesson on that horrible scene in *Beloved* and she were the Women's Studies Chair observing me in the month prior to my tenure review. [Can we leave this anyway, for those who do get the reference? I would imagine most English professor types would get it, or the drift of it. If not, no worries.]

"It's hard to explain."

"The necking part?" asked Junior, sensing an opportunity to make me squirm.

"Well, all of it."

“Do you and mom—”

“Let’s just watch, kay, and not talk for now? Remember, I am using this movie for class tomorrow, so we need to pay attention and not interrupt so much.”

And the truth is, it *is* hard to explain—as are so many other aspects of our language and our culture...or, at least this is a favorite hobby horse of mine that I’ve been riding recently in my various literature courses. Whenever the opportunity presents itself, I have stressed to my students the idea that literature is, at its core, about interpretations of interpretations. It is, I tell them, about those rare few who do it well; and it is also about the dramatic implications of getting interpretations wrong.

The intradiegetic narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” for instance, tries desperately to read her way back to sanity, focusing in her frenetic efforts on the wallpaper in her room; then, our student-readers try equally hard (or so we can hope) to read into and analyze her interpretations in a manner that parallels what happens in the story world specific to the narrator. Similarly, we see in a play such as *Hamlet* that every character’s survival depends at some level on how well he or she can interpret the often convoluted discourse and equally nefarious situations specific to the intertwining plots; beginning, fittingly, with “Who’s there?” the play is thus a series of (mis)interpretations that, I insist to the students, underlines the risks and rewards of getting one’s reading wrong. Along not entirely different lines, the story at the heart of *Huck Finn* features the (mis)adventures of a truly ignorant boy who cannot interpret or infer almost anything. His character takes cluelessness to new heights, and we know this by his inability to think literarily (he rubs the lamp, it should be noted by those wishing to argue that Huck is not a “perfect saphead,” until he “sweat like an Injun”).

But though it is fairly easy and often exciting to identify for one's students this motif tied to (mis)interpretations, I am discovering that it is often not nearly as pleasant to encounter this issue of literature's inherent ambiguity when attempting to *produce* texts that do *not* incidentally showcase one's failed efforts at capturing life through language. This, unfortunately, is especially true when dealing in another cultural currency, something I have been doing now for nearly eighteen months in an attempt to write a book about contemporary Norway and what it was like to live there for a year.

I discovered a couple of months ago when trying to translate a few important and characteristically Norwegian terms that I cannot convert into English many, if not most, of my original insights and experiences; or, to be more precise, I realized that I cannot do so in a manner that will enable my readers to interpret these things as well as I would wish they could. So, it turns out, I am no Mark Twain or William Shakespeare. This is a disappointing discovery, to be sure. But, realizing the incredible extent to which this is true was, nonetheless, liberating and empowering. This acceptance led me to conclude that the best way for me to go about presenting my interpretations of Norwegian life and culture would be to do so indirectly, through stories. Hence, guided by this obvious-to-you and new-to-me insight, I produced a chapter that heeds Anne Lamott's advice regarding early stages in the writing process, which is to write a sh%#\$y first draft. The text is printed here for your consideration; it deals with several timely and very untranslatable facets of Norwegian culture, one pertaining to volunteering, a second to good food, a third to winter, and a fourth to giving feedback, as in, Wow! Great job on your paper!

Dugnads—

I stayed close to home that early December afternoon, volunteering to pick up the kids up after school and meet the wife and mother-in-law for an expensive meal of pizza and ice water at Aker Brygge. En route, while on the T-bane and hearing the ins and outs of their day and week, my daughter, five years old at the time, informed me that the following Friday—“One week from today, Dad,”—there would be a “dugnad” at the school. Junior, in fourth grade at the time and attending the same school as his sister, seconded this information. Both, it needs to be noted, said so in a way that insisted I not only appreciate the enormity of the announcement but also instantly adjust any plans I might have on my calendar.

“What is a DOOG-nod?” I asked.

“Not a ‘dugnad,’” explained Jr., “a ‘dugnad.’”

“*You* know,” said the Bean, “it’s...it’s a *dugnad*.” Talking with her hands to drive home the point, she pronounced this and everything else so perfectly Norwegian that it simply sounded right, implying in this regard that all problems with understanding originate and conclude with those in the family who cannot make their mouths work as well as they should.

“Ya,” said Jr. “It’s where everyone comes to the school to do chores.”

“What?! Really?” I protested, my bottom jaw dropping theatrically.

“Dad. Seriously. It’s very serious.” I quickly gathered that you don’t even joke about dugnads.

“Are they mandatory? You know, *required*?”

“No. Geez, Dad. It’s a *dugnad*. Are you even listening? Don’t you get it?”

“I don’t know. But, so, we don’t have to go, then?” I asked, scratching the scruff of my unshaven chin.

“No, you don’t *really* have to, but—” said Jr., who was interrupted by the Bean, neither of them distracted by each other or the next stop and all people boarding at the Smestad stop.

“You don’t but you *do*,” she said, and though she was only five years old and dealing in another linguistic currency, you could tell she knew precisely what she was saying. She comprehended the nuance of it all, despite that she couldn’t find a way to convey much of what she understood so well to her dumb dad. Then, an idea struck her: “It’s like church, only more important.”

“Wow. That’s serious.”

“Ya, and it’s not like church, here,” clarified her brother. “It’s more like church at home, where people go every Sunday.”

“What if I’m going to be out of town for work? Or,” I said, my eyes getting big, my eyebrows rising to show them I was playing around, “what if your mom makes other plans? *Then* what?”

“Dad, this is serious. Honestly, we *have* to go. *You* have to go,” said the Bean, looking me right in the face, as old and solemn as I had ever seen her.

And, it turns out, she was right. They were both right, though I still haven’t the slightest idea how to define or describe what, precisely, a “dugnad” is. That said, I can say with certainty that it *is* serious, it is voluntary, you do have to go because it’s for the common good, and it’s probably, in Norway anyway, more important than church.

I absolutely love the fact that when you type in “dugnad” on the otherwise reliable (as far as I know) web page “Babylon 9 Norwegian to English,” the word that comes up in the English box on the right of the two arrows going either direction is, wouldn’t you know it, “dugnad.” Yep. “Dugnad” in Norwegian means “Dugnad.” So, there you go. Not to be outdone, the competitor in this field, “Imtranslator.com,” offers precisely the same exacting translation, as do several other such free on line services. My favorite among these, however, is “Stars.21.com” for the way it responds to this entry when you type it and press “translate.” Each time I tried it, the page flickered for nearly a minute—a row of boxes flashing on the screen at one point—before it finally spit out its answer: “dugnad.” The word so thoroughly stumped the web page that watching my PC struggle brought me all the way back to Matthew Broderick and the dated yet timeless 1983 movie *War Games*, when the computer (cleverly named Joshua) playing tic-tac-toe against itself raced faster and faster, the half-dome of screens intended to track incoming Soviet missiles during the Cold War in the bunker at NORAD flickering like strobe-lights, all of it building to the crescendo when the room goes still, the screens blank, and Joshua says in computer-simulated, stilted speech, “Strange game. The only winning move is not to play. How about a nice game of chess?”

Pålegg—

Because, as the translation services so thoroughly demonstrate, it doesn’t work to come at these things directly, I’ll follow Emily Dickinson’s lead once again and see if I can’t come at this second one slant.

My dad was once a professional baker: if you've known him for less than forty years, you might likely find this banal fact rather extraordinary, because it's probable that you have never once seen him bake bread, cake, cupcakes or anything else involving yeast and flour. Odds are, moreover, you likely have never even seen him make toast or turn on the stove, as he has convinced my mother that he is completely incapable of doing anything domestic in the kitchen, despite that he once earned a degree from the Chicago School of Baking prior to his promotion to foreman at Gai's Bakery in Seattle. That promotion meant a short stint at a bakery in San Francisco, where Dad learned the ins and outs of making the famous sour dough intimately linked to that part of the country. As he explained to me once while we sat at the kitchen table sharing the newspaper and waiting for my mom to finish making us breakfast, he had discovered that it was all about the water. "You couldn't reproduce that sour dough in Seattle any more than you could tap a well next to Puget Sound and expect to draw up water from San Francisco." As he said this, he smashed fist on the table as if he were giving a campaign speech.

"Over easy?" my mom asked, having heard this and every other one of his stories a hundred times.

"Understand what I'm saying?" he said to me, folding open the paper and then folding it in half.

"Scrambled for me, Mom. Thanks. What? No, I don't understand. Who's water where?"

Dad knew what he was doing when it came to marriage and, I discovered many years later—about thirty-five to be precise—also what he was talking about on the food front as well. (When giving up his promotion and moving to Boise to take over my grandfather's place on a construction crew so that my mom could be closer to her mother after her dad had died, my

dad negotiated his way right out of the kitchen duties for life: 55 years of marriage must be proof that this arrangement worked out fine for both parties.) Of course, when you're all of nine and more concerned about finding the comics in the mess that is the Sunday paper, stories of bread can be pretty bland and hardly memorable.

I have since returning from Norway tried like my dad did with San Francisco's sour dough to describe to people here at home what makes Norwegian bread and, more to the point, the practice of putting stuff on it so great. I have tried, in short, to translate into American the practice that is pålegg. According to Elizabeth Su-Dale's book *Culture Shock! Norway: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette*, "The word pålegg is almost untranslatable in any other language. It is unique to the Norwegian vocabulary and means 'something to put on bread.'" In English, when you put things on and in between bread, you make a sandwich. But making a sandwich isn't the same as having smørbrød, meaning an open-faced Norwegian sandwich. Nor is it one in several steps that culminates in or constitutes pålegg.

I came to understand after spending a few months in Norway why one of the first words the language CD's teach listeners after "God dag" "Var so god" and "Hva heter du?" is "smørbrød." Every lunch at every school I visited served smørbrød; and nearly every teacher not eating from the school's cafeteria pulled from his or her private mattpakke a petite portion of smørbrød.

So, what is it exactly? Well, I do not think it is merely the one-sided sandwich those skinny, fit teachers so carefully removed from their hand-sized lunchboxes. Nor do I think pålegg is, in its connotative entirety, the toppings for the bread. I think there is more to it. Pålegg is, of course, the stuff you spread or smear or stack on bread—such as brown cheese, fresh pink

shrimp, crisp, aromatic dill, thin, transparent slices of cucumber, rich red tomato, disgusting sardines (sill), even grosser liver pâté, all kinds of delicious jam, caviar forced like toothpaste from tubes, and just about anything else other than a second piece of bread. But it's also—at least it was for me when I lived there and spent the better part of my free time in our scullery of a kitchen (my wife negotiates as well as my dad)—the whole event preceding and accompanying the first fantastic bite down through those toppings and into that enchanting, irreproducible brød.

First, you head off to the store, where you find your way to the back corner so as to fondle the bread. You lift and gauge the girth of the loaves, find the one you like for reasons that defy logic, and then load up your hand basket with whatever excites you. After that, full of anticipation and brimming with joy, you skip home like Little Red Riding Hood, head into the house, and give a nod to the wife hard at work in her office before you set up shop in the kitchen. There on the counter you set out, slice, peel, assemble. Then, when everything is ready—after you have either made smørbrød to order for whoever is interested, or instructed everyone to help themselves—you enjoy a privately public experience, wherein you bite down into your sandwich among family or friends or colleagues into flavors that, for a second, make everyone and everything fade to the margins of that moment.

You think that I'm exaggerating here but I'm not, not much anyway. I can remember vividly watching the expressions on teachers' faces in faculty lounges as they left the premises, albeit fleetingly, the instant they sunk their teeth into the outwardly simple meal they held out in front of their faces as if it were an offering unto them from them, or perhaps from a thoughtful spouse or parent. And to watch in those schools where students in the cooking and baking educational tracts had prepared for my host teachers and me a tray of open-faced sandwiches was

to see what it means to make and to share this untranslatable thing. Honestly. The students took enormous pleasure in our pleasure, and that gave me pleasure, as did the sandwiches. How's that for a nice lunch in a faculty lounge?!

I have tried and failed to find this kind of bread here in Minnesota in order to perform pålegg—yep, I'm using it as a verb: if you can “beer” somebody, as in, “beer me, dude,” I can pålegg. I have even tried eating my sandwiches without the tops on them to see if that might help me conjure up once piquant memories that are beginning to go stale. No luck. And my mother-in-law, a fabulous baker in her own right, has even generously gone out of her way to track down Norwegian brød recipes so that we can have a worthy receptacle for the brown cheese and strawberry jam our friends from Oslo brought on a recent visit. But, though close, her bread and my best, most imaginative efforts have forced me to admit what my mother never will, which is that my dad was right.

Koselig—

For the sake of consistency, let's try the indirect route once more and see where that leads.

In mid-October, after encountering one of the neighbors down in the basement where each apartment had an assigned storage room for such things as old bikes, car tires, naughty children, firewood, and whatever else one wished to keep locked up and out of the way, I alerted the wife that we would need to order firewood soon, “before they run out.”

“Who?”

“I don't know. The people who cut down trees and sell them. The one guy from two floors up was down in the basement just now when I was putting away my bike. He was

checking to see how much he had left over from last year and said that if I we were going to get some we had better hurry.”

“How much is it?”

“What do you think?”

“Right. I’ll check our Nordea account and see if I need to move some money.”

That night I wrote in my journal: “Soon, now the firewood I ordered should arrive.” I felt a little like a cross between Knut Hamsun’s character in *Hunger* and Charles Ingalls, with only slightly less hair than Michael Landond, having not had it cut since late July due the fact a standard trim cost around \$55—even for a guy going bald.

I ordered “9 bundles,” each bundle representing a typical armload and costing 100 NOK. We thus needed to tap into the kids’ college fund to the sum of \$160.00. Sure, it was outrageously spendy, but let’s not lose sight of the fact that three rounds of beer for three people in Trondheim will set you back \$91.00, money well spent for certain. I had hoped, based on this precedent, that the tiny fires we would soon build in our open hearth in the corner of our cozy living room would be equally as enjoyable. I worried, though, that the kids might tend to binge, as their dad does when not monitored closely. My mind raced out to scenes from Christmas future: “—easy, Jr. One log at a time, Buddy. In fact, let’s go ahead break the little one there and feed this big one in slowly. This shit’s expensive, you know. Oh, hey, Sweetie. Come here, Bean. Scoot up here. Oop, careful. Don’t spill your dad’s beer. That’s it. Get right in there. Don’t be afraid you two. It won’t hurt. It’s just a like a candle, only smaller. Isn’t this nice and cozy?”

But the thing is, simply describing a room with a fire or a space littered with dozens of white tea candles doesn't adequately convey what it means for a room or residence to feel and to be koselig. So, let me try it this way, with broad strokes:

In the late fall and well into winter, koselig is hat-head for sure (especially for the kids), and snug wool socks pulled from the dryer. It's a family room with comfy seats for everyone, with someone's legs stretched and draped over your own. It's heated floors in the bathroom and an army of winter boots by the front door, with sleds at the ready outside in the hallway. It's board games, or no—it doesn't much matter—and trashy novels so good you don't mind interruptions because you know you can pick up where you left off. It's snacks, bowls of pistachio shells, a persistent hint of hunger, and certainty that though the stores may be closing soon because it's Norway, the fridge is full enough of good enough food for that night and, if need be, most of the rest of the next day, when near the end you'll gladly go out and get a few more necessities from the one place open nearly all of the time in Oslo. And, yes, of course, it is loads of candles, each lit with an anticipation of nothing in particular.

If on the very, very slim chance I had managed to convey some inherent, otherwise inexplicable quality of koselig just there, and if a Norwegian were reading it aloud in my presence, I would be the happiest man alive if that person were to respond with, "Ja! Ja!" sucking in both ja's each time, as if frightened or choking or asthmatic or all of the above.

Ja!—

First of all, it's not "ja" as in "job" or "jogging"; nor, strangely, is it "ja," as in, "Ya, I like the movie *Fargo*." Instead, the word, though enunciated with a "y" sound, is not spoken when

breathing outward but, rather, while sucking in, or, to use the proper phonetic term, aspirated. To understand what aspiration is and how it works, the common teaching aide-mémoire entails instructing a person to hold a lit candle in front of the mouth (you can use one of the candles from the above section if you don't have one of your own handy) and stating the words "pin" and "bin"; pin is aspirated, while bin is not; hence, the light flickers when one enunciates the former word but not when saying the latter—unless it is your spouse asking you when you're two hours late about your whereabouts, as in, "Where the Hell have you been?!"—answer: Hell (never gets old, nor do I, it would seem). But here's the thing: sometimes when Norwegians say "Ja" they do not aspirate and the candle light does not wobble. Other times, however, they do aspirate, though they do not exhale but instead inhale; in fact, sometimes the inhalation is so pronounced and so dramatic that it's not hard to imagine a middle-aged adult sucking out his or her birthday candles rather than blowing them as Americans might, the whole cake scooting an inch or so across the table in the process.

Clever as this illustration may be—and I'll grant that it may not be clever at all—it might be better in this instance to take the OED approach to defining this untranslatable, which differs markedly from the OCD method of simply saying over and over Ja! Ja! Ja! until one feints or the medicine kicks in. The most famous and prolific contributors to the OED—I don't have to tell readers of the *Forum*—were renowned philologists, including Alexander Beazeley (1830-1905), Fitzedward Hall (1825-1901), William Chester Minor (1835-1920), and an Oxford professor and, one would have to assume, a prized member of the New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973). Ever fascinated by the particulars, the OED home page points out that Beazeley produced "upwards of 30,000" quotations; Hall—a recluse—dedicated

four hours a day to this unlovely pursuit; Minor employed it as a major diversion while spending his adult life in the “Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum” after a killing a man (presumably with his pen); and Tolkien—this is the best bit of biographical minutia of the bunch—concerned himself during his tenure on the editorial staff “between 1919 and 1920” with “the range waggel-warlock,” as in, he spent an entire year searching for references to words beginning with W–A–G and only got as far as W–A–R. Had his family or friends made any snide comments about what he was doing with his enormous talents, he could a couple decades later enjoy the last laugh by pointing to such classics as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. And while one may have wished to console with the notion that writing these best sellers represented a real “Zinger” of sorts, anything in the Z’s would’ve probably made me him feel a little like a quitter.

Though I sometimes pretend to be one while teaching, I am not a trained philologist or etymologist and, even if I were, I don’t read Norwegian and therefore cannot undertake the OED methodology as one of the above-mentioned madmen might. Which is fine, because while understanding the word in context *is* key, it is nonetheless a term that not only defies translation but also, I’m told by those who do speak, read, and write Norwegian, dictation. In other words, though it is spoken often, it seldom makes it into literature per say because it is spelled the same as its cognate/counterpart, the non-aspirated “Ja.” To that torturous but true sentence, any good Norwegian philologist would, I would bet øre to kroner, suck in a serious Ja!

To be sure, there is something beyond charming about the aspirated Ja. I wish we had an equivalent, because I would love to be able to express to friends and students and to my wife and kids when they are talking about something that worries them dearly or gives them great joy, “Ja! ja,” as in, “I’m listening, I’m concerned, I’m interested, I’m present. Please, continue.”