

Voices and Perspectives: Translating the Ambiguity in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Anna-Lena Pihl

Dept of Language Studies

Umeå University, Sweden

Kärnan i Virginia Woolfs roman To the Lighthouse (1927) är som i flera andra av hennes verk tvetydigheten, öppenheten för flera tolkningar. Berättarröst och upplevare kan exempelvis växla flera gånger, också i en och samma mening och det är ibland oklart huruvida dessa roller i en scen innehåller av olika karaktärer eller en och samma. Direkt återgiven dialog används sparsamt i romanen. I en kommunikativ situation får läsaren i stället, genom täckt anföring (erlebte rede; free indirect discourse) följa karaktärens inre tankar under samtalen, återgivna av den extradiegetiska berättaren. De ord som kan förmodas yttras avslöjas sällan för läsaren, eftersom dessa är underordnade det inre känslolivet. Det finns också en tvetydighet i romanen vad gäller hierarki, vilket som är den egentliga handlingen och vad som är sidospår. Effekten av tvetydighet är starkt kopplad till den lösa meningsbyggnaden, Woolfs speciella kommaterteknik. Trots deras betydelse i Woolfs skrivande förekommer det inte sällan i översättning att skiljetecken ändras och tvetydigheten påverkas. Jag kommer att ta upp exempel på hur tvetydighet skapas i To the Lighthouse och visa hur Ingalisa Muncks och Sonja Bergvalls svenska översättning Mot fyren (1953) genom olika översättningsval blivit mindre tvetydig och därmed mindre representativ för Woolfs berättarteknik.

Keywords: ambiguity, translation, Virginia Woolf, punctuation, *To the Lighthouse*

1 Introduction

As in several of her other novels, the challenge to the reader in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (*TL*, 1927) is the ambiguity; the novel is open to more than one interpretation. A narrative technique frequently used is free indirect discourse (FID). Significant for FID as narrated speech is its lack of a reporting verb. The narrator speaks from a character's point of view, rendered in third person narrative. Drawing on Gérard Genette, who distinguishes between narration and focalisation – who speaks and who sees in a scene – Kathy Mezi (1996: 70) stresses FID as the representation of a certain character's perception, that FID is the mode by which the narrator speaks for the character. Through this mode of narrating, the reader is also presented with the narrator's point of view, his/her observations of a character in a specific situation. Thus, FID as a narrative form allows the narrator to drift in and out of the minds of the characters and speak from their point of view. In some scenes in *To the Lighthouse*, the perspective

constantly floats; it is not clear whose voice is heard, and through whose point of view the story is perceived, since agency often shifts more than once even in the same sentence. Sometimes, a character's own voice can be distinguished, but direct dialogue is used very rarely in the novel. Significant to this multivocal effect is Woolf's punctuation technique. A feature often discussed in Woolf's writing is the loosely constructed sentence, also called the Woolfian sentence (Delorey, 1996: 105). A passage may start with one or two short sentences, which are then followed by a nearly page-long sentence – a row of sub-clauses, in which commas, semicolons, dashes, or brackets create shifts of voice and focaliser. Consequently, punctuation is significant to the reader's understanding of the novel.

Although the ambiguity is created through Woolf's non-traditional use of punctuation, analyses have shown that punctuation marks in her novels tend to change in translation. According to Rachel May (1997) and Elena Minelli (2005), there is a tendency among translators, regardless of target language, to use punctuation marks with a stronger function than what is used in the source text. The target texts indicate faithfulness to punctuation marks with a clear definition, such as full stops, but variations regarding marks within sentences (May, 1997: 5). Norms regarding punctuation of course vary depending on language and historical period, which is why the differences in punctuation noted in target texts by May and Minelli could be explained by the translators' efforts to be as true as possible to the grammar and logic of the target language at the time of the translation. The syntax and structure in Woolf's modernist novel *To the Lighthouse*, however, do not consistently follow the contemporary source language norms. Susan Bassnett (1991) argues that “[t]ranslators of novels take pains to create *readable* TL texts, avoiding the stilted effect that can follow from adhering too closely to SL syntactical structures, but fail to consider the way in which individual sentences form part of the total structure” (1991: 115). Focus on readability may seem warranted in the process of translating Woolf's novels, but without the translator's attention to the relationship between single units and the whole novel, the ambiguity Woolf creates in the source text is at risk.

This paper analyses punctuation strategies, agency and narrative technique by comparing Ingalisa Munck's and Sonja Bergvall's Swedish translation of *To the Lighthouse*, *Mot fyren* (*Mf*, 1953,) to Woolf's original text. I will argue that translational choices affect voices, focalisers and perspectives in a manner that negatively reduces the source text's ambiguity in the target text.

2 Voices in the Dinner Scene

Although no words are actually spoken, several voices can be distinguished in the communicative act between Mr and Mrs Ramsay during the dinner party, the most central scene in the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, "The Window." Observed from frequently shifting perspectives, the situation is described as an act of verbal conversation, though not words, but gazes and shots of emotion keep vibrating from one end of the table to the other, often in FID. Very little is revealed of what is actually being said in the scene, since talk is most commonly subordinated the inner thoughts of a character. During this non-verbal dialogue the perspectives constantly shift, slide like cameras in a film, viewing the scene first through the eyes of one character and the following moment another. Susan Dick states:

Woolf's narrator moves freely among the characters, entering their minds and using a subtle blend of quoted and narrated monologue, supplemented by description, to reveal their inner lives. Readers know the characters as they know themselves and as they are known to one another. Although the narrator places the characters in the foreground of the narrative and generally blends her voice with theirs, she also maintains an independent point of view which enables her to speak in her own voice. (1994: 766)

The narrator Dick describes is anonymous and not part of the story, in Genette's terms heterodiegetic-extradiegetic (Genette, 1995: 248). Nevertheless, she is still able to function as an external focaliser, as if she were there on the spot to observe the whole scene. Occasionally, she even becomes subjective. The dinner scene is one of many examples in *To the Lighthouse* where the characters' voices blend, and the narrator in turn shifts from objective storyteller to taking sides in the conversation. In this scene, the reader is allowed to "hear" Mrs Ramsay perceive her husband's frustration over Augustus Carmichael, who has asked for another plate of soup and thereby delayed the main course for the whole party.

- (1) It was unthinkable, it was detestable (so he signalled to her across the table) that Augustus should be beginning his soup over again. He loathed people eating when he had finished. She saw his anger fly like a pack of hounds into his eyes, his brow, and she knew that in a moment something violent would explode, and then – but thank goodness! she saw him clutch himself and clap a brake on the wheel, and the whole of his body seemed to emit sparks but no words. He sat there scowling. He had said nothing, he would have her observe. Let her at least give him credit for that! But why after all should poor Augustus not ask for another plate of soup? He had merely touched Ellen's arm and said:
'Ellen, please, another plate of soup,' and then Mr Ramsay scowled like that.
And why not? Mrs Ramsay demanded. Surely they could let Augustus have his soup if he wanted it. He hated people wallowing in food, Mr Ramsay frowned at her. He hated everything dragging on for hours like this. But he had controlled himself, Mr Ramsay would have her observe, disgusting though the sight was. But why show it so plainly, Mrs Ramsay demanded (they looked at each other down the long table sending these questions and answers across, each knowing exactly what the other felt). (*TL*, 2008: 78)

In this passage, voices and perspectives frequently shift between the narrator, Mr Ramsay and Mrs Ramsay, and it is not absolutely clear whose voice is heard at a certain moment. The words within the two parentheses belong to the narrator, who steps in to clarify to the reader Mr and Mrs Ramsay's mode of communication, which may seem a little overly explicit; this we understand. On a narrative level, though, the information within brackets functions as a reminder to the reader of this narrator's presence. Between these parentheses, the scene is mostly focalised through Mrs Ramsay, but sometimes through her husband. With the words "But why after all..." the narrator suddenly seems to step out of the objective role to express a personal opinion on the matter. Here, in the double agency of voice and focaliser, the narrator turns directly to the reader with the rhetorical question, and then describes in detail what really made Mr Ramsay so angry. Along with Augustus's harmless request in direct quotation, Mr Ramsay's behaviour is questioned as though the narrator is aligning with Mrs Ramsay, who in turn seems to catch the opportunity to find support in her effort to master her impatient husband, filling in "[a]nd why not?" The interplay between the voices gives the impression that the three – the characters Mr and Mrs Ramsay and now also the narrator – are actually involved in a dialogue.

The three voices are distinguishable also in the Swedish text, though there are changes regarding the different roles. The extract is shortened:

- (2) Men varför skulle inte den stackars Augustus ha lov att be om en tallrik soppa till? Han hade bara rört vid Ellens arm och sagt:
'En tallrik soppa till, är Ellen snäll', och genast blängde professorn.
Men varför inte? frågade mrs Ramsay. Nog kunde väl Augustus få sin soppa, om han ville ha den. (*Mf*, 1953: 108–109)

In the translated text, Mrs Ramsay's "[a]nd why not?" has been changed into "[b]ut why not?" ("Men varför inte?") This "but" as a linking word indicates an objection, in this case addressed to Mr Ramsay for his impatience. The "and" in the source text, on the contrary, suggests that Mrs Ramsay is agreeing with a previous utterance – the narrator's comment. Though she is addressing her husband, she is also seconding the narrator's argument that Augustus should be allowed to ask for another plate of soup. This means that she is acknowledging the narrator's active presence, which is not the case in the Swedish translation. The more precise "but" directly addressing Mr Ramsay rules out the interpretation that the narrator is joined in the conversation. The alternative interpretation that also the first words of protest are uttered by Mrs Ramsay who then repeats her own question does not seem likely, because of the way of naming Mr Ramsay. From Mrs Ramsay's perspective in FID, he would rather be referred to as "her husband." In the Swedish translation, he is called "the professor," which is an even less likely reference in this case and rules out the possibility that it is Mrs Ramsay's voice all through this passage. As a consequence, Mrs Ramsay is not acknowledging the narrator's presence in the Swedish text.

When Mrs Ramsay eventually fears that two of the children will burst into laughter, she hurries to give them an occupation.

- (3a) There was Rose gazing at her father, there was Roger gazing at his father; both would be off in spasms of laughter in another second, she knew, and so she said promptly (indeed it was time): 'Light the candles,' and they jumped up instantly and went and fumbled at the sideboard. (*TL*, 2008: 78)
- (3b) Där satt Rose och såg på sin far, där satt Roger och såg på sin far: båda två skulle vrida sig av skratt om ett ögonblick, det förstod hon, och därför skyndade hon sig att säga (det var också i sista sekunden): 'Tänd ljusen!' och då rusade de genast upp från sina platser och började leta på serveringsbordet. (*Mf*, 1953: 109)

In this extract, there are several examples where the change of punctuation marks reduces the ambiguity and causes differences in meaning. In the first sentence, there is in the source text a semicolon, in itself an ambiguous punctuation mark: stronger than a comma but weaker than a full stop. In this case, its function is to divide Mrs Ramsay's observation at the dinner table into two parts while still giving equal status to each part. In the target text, the semicolon has been replaced with a colon, which gives the second part of the sentence a higher intensification.

Like the source text, the target text has a parenthesis just before Mrs Ramsay asks her children to light the candles. The difference is in the contents and relates to the narrating voice. In the Swedish version, the words “indeed it was time” have become “and this was the last second.” In the original text, it is of course possible that the words “indeed it was time” are uttered by the narrator, but it is more likely Mrs Ramsay’s reflection in FID. She knows that she has to do something, instantly, to control the children, but the comment that it is time to light the candles concerns her duties at the dinner table. It is getting darker and the candles need to be lit, which the trouble with her husband nearly made her forget. In the translated text, this is doubtless the voice of the anonymous narrator, confirming that the children are seconds from bursting into laughter when Mrs Ramsay saves the situation by asking them to light the candles. In contrast to the ambiguity in the original text, the voice within the parentheses can only belong to the narrator; the comment is a stating of facts and cannot be Mrs Ramsay’s words.

When Mrs Ramsay asks Rose and Roger to light the candles, the comma in the source text has been replaced by an exclamation mark in the target text. As Minelli notes, an exclamation mark substituting a weaker punctuation mark “[h]as the effect of making the character’s voices ‘speak louder’ and ... adds an element of directness to the reported speech” (2005: 62). This is in fact what happens in the Swedish text. The narrator’s quoting of Mr Ramsay’s words becomes direct speech, in which Mrs Ramsay’s voice is literally amplified. This detail goes against the whole construction of Mrs Ramsay; not once in the whole novel is it indicated that she raises her voice to manage a situation. It is important to mention, though, that an interpretation where she actually raises her voice in this scene is possible in the reading of the source text, but the exclamation mark in the target text makes this the only possible interpretation.

3 Which is More Important?

While she was writing *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf reflected on how to create simultaneity in her novel to create an effect of doubleness for the reader. On September 5 1926, she writes in her diary: “Could I do it in a parenthesis? so that one had the sense of reading two things at the same time?” (*D*, 1980:106). Hermione Lee argues:

Brackets are a way of making more than one thing happen at once. *And* they also create an unsettling ambiguity about the status of events. It is difficult to say which is more 'important,' the death of Mrs Ramsay, or the fall of a fold of a green shawl in an empty room. If the novel makes us think of more than one thing at once, and exist in more than one time at a time, which takes precedence? Is the life of the Ramsays in the garden and house enclosed by the outside world as if in parenthesis, as the lighthouse is surrounded by the sea? Or is it the Ramsays that are the main text, and everything else in brackets? (2004: 736)

As Lee points out, the ambiguity in *To the Lighthouse* is caused by the nature of the information that is put within brackets, and how this information is narrated. If her novel were a film, Woolf could be said to play with different recording cameras and turn the stage set. Which scene is more important is not clear. Parallel stories take turns at being in focus, an effect caused by a creative use of parentheses.

One example of the novel's doubleness and uncertain status of events mentioned above is the parallel narrative in chapters 13, 14, and 15 in the first section, "The Window." Chapter 13 ends with Mrs Ramsay in the garden asking her elder daughter Prue a question. "Did Nancy go with them?" (*TL* 2008: 61). Her son Andrew has gone for a walk with two of the guests, and Mrs Ramsay wants to know if the younger daughter Nancy went with them. The following chapter is one parenthesis, several pages long, narrated as a separate story. The reader is not only informed that Nancy had gone with the others, but is also allowed to follow the characters on their walk, from the moment they leave the house till they are back just in time for dinner. Then chapter 15 follows; one single line without brackets: "'Yes,' said Prue, in her considering way, answering her mother's question, 'I think Nancy did go with them'" (*TL* 2008: 65). The reader is suddenly thrown back to the moment when Mrs Ramsay has just asked Prue the question. Prue answers and chapter 15 ends. In the Swedish versions from the 1975 second edition and onwards, the brackets designating chapter 14 are absent. In the first edition from 1953, the initial bracket is there, but not the closing one. Possibly, the single bracket was believed to be a misprint and was therefore omitted. The episodes are still separated by the chapter structure, but without the brackets the walk to the beach loses its status of a separate story and becomes a side-track to the "real" story, which is set in and around the house.

Another example involving brackets is in the middle section of the novel, “Time Passes.” The Ramsays and their guests have been moved away from the lights and their story seems to continue off stage. The setting is the deserted summerhouse, now in-habited by the forces of nature, poetically narrated with a focus on things and objects in the absence of people. The family members and their friends are now mentioned only occasionally within square brackets, brief links to scenes not viewed. Even such a major event as the death of Mrs Ramsay is announced this way.

- (4) [Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.] (*TL*, 2008: 105).

This is the only information whatsoever about Mrs Ramsay’s death, delivered to the reader retrospectively and without further comments. At this point in the text, the narrative is focussed on how the forces of nature mobilize to destroy the empty house and the reader is totally unprepared for this information. Jane Goldman (2008) argues:

This is the low point of ‘Time Passes’. There are other deaths recorded here, each in parenthesis – the fall of a son in the Great War, the loss of a daughter in the pain of giving birth. But it is the death of the novel’s central character, Mrs Ramsay, so casually reported, that most shocks. (2008: 62)

As Goldman points out, the son Andrew and the daughter Prue both die in “Time Passes,” just like Mrs Ramsay, which is reported to the reader in the same, brief way. Goldman does not comment on the type of brackets used, which in fact further stresses these short extracts and make them stand out even more distinctively in the text. Besides the three deaths, only three more events are treated in the same way: Mr Carmichael stops reading and blows out his candle at the beginning of “Time Passes”; Mr Carmichael has his poetry published; and Lily Briscoe and Mr Carmichael arrive at the house just before the end of the section. Woolf’s square brackets awaken questions: why are these other three pieces of information treated equally to the deaths of the family members? Which is the main story – is there a main story? Why are things that happen to the Ramsays and their friends – even the death of a central character – suddenly mentioned in such a brief way? Is it because these are less important compared to what happens in the house, or is it, by contrast, a way of stressing their importance?

The importance of the square brackets becomes evident when compared to a corresponding text where they have been replaced. In the Swedish translation, all of the square brackets in “Time Passes” have been substituted with regular brackets, except for in the first edition from 1953, where the short passage announcing the death of Mrs Ramsay has no brackets at all (*Mf*, 1953: 146). In later editions, though, regular brackets have been added (*Mf*, 1975: 132). As a consequence, the parts of the narrative Woolf chose to place within square brackets are not distinguished from other parenthetical information in this version and the effect is lost.

4 Cowper, Mr Ramsay and Cam

In the novel’s last section, the long-delayed sailing trip to the lighthouse finally takes place. Mr Ramsay, now a widower, is depressed and frustrated in his loneliness; throughout the section he keeps reciting William Cowper’s poem “The Castaway,” much to the uneasiness of Lily Briscoe and two of Mr Ramsay’s children, Cam and James, who are now teenagers. The poem’s second-to-last line “[w]e perished, each alone” is repeated several times in the text, sometimes deconstructed into fragments. In the text, Woolf’s punctuation technique indicates how the different characters perceive the words as they appear, and also in what way they are recited. When the boat with Mr Ramsay and the teenagers has almost reached the lighthouse, the Cowper-line is quoted by Cam, through her inner thoughts.

- (5a) Thinking this, she was murmuring to herself ‘We perished, each alone,’ for her father’s words broke and broke again in her mind, when her father, seeing her gazing so vaguely, began to tease her. (*TL*, 2008: 137)
- (5b) Försjunken i dessa tankar mumlade hon för sig själv: ”Var mänska ensam gått i kvav”, ty faderns ord sköljde åter och åter upp i hennes medvetande, men när han såg hur hennes blick irrade omkring började han reta henne. (*Mf*, 1953: 188)

The first time Cam repeats the line the words are placed within quotation marks and thus stand out in the text. She is still quoting her father to herself, as she heard him recite the line from Cowper’s poem. The Swedish translation pays extra attention to the line by letting it be announced by a colon where the original text has no punctuation mark at all. The next time Cam repeats the Cowper-words, the quotation marks are gone in the source text, but are still there in the target text.

- (6a) About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship had sunk, and she murmured, dreamily, half asleep, how we perished, each alone. (*TL*, 2008: 156)
- (6b) Ungefär här har ett fartyg sjunkit, tänkte hon och doppade fingrarna i vattnet och drömmande, halvsovande, mumlade hon någonting om hur “var mänska ensam gått i kvav.” (*Mf*, 1953: 213)

In contrast to the original text, the Swedish translation highlights the Cowper-line also in this passage. Moreover, Cam does not, as in the source text, murmur “how we perished, each alone,” but *something about* how we perished. As a consequence, she appears in the target text to be quoting her father all over again, rather than letting the words come from her inner self. Without the quotation marks, the words from Cowper’s poem almost float through the mind of the half-asleep Cam. The effect of the words almost hidden in the text is in fact what stresses their importance; this is where Cam is reconciled with her father. Until now, Cam and James have been joined in a pact against their bullying father, and been embarrassed by his loud recitations of poetry. Now Cam makes peace with him by making the Cowper-words her own. This effect is absent in the target text.

5 Conclusion

I have presented examples of how ambiguity is created in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and, further, demonstrated how translational choices in the Swedish translation *Mot fyren* affect this ambiguity. As it turns out, the choices in the target text do not always correspond to Woolf’s non-traditional punctuation technique, which becomes significant for the novel as a whole. In *To the Lighthouse*, punctuation marks are not just for separating words, clauses and sentences, but are in themselves communicating units that cause ambiguity in the text, for example, an uncertainty regarding the relationship between speaking and perceiving agents. Even so, one significant trait in *Mot fyren* compared to the source text is the use of punctuation marks with a stronger and more clarifying function. The consequence is that whereas Woolf’s loose structure opens up for more than one way of reading, the translated text tends to close off alternative possibilities through a structure that highlights one particular interpretation but rules out other readings or at least makes them less likely. In a communicative scene, this means a reduced number of voices, since one voice is amplified at the expense of the others. In the same way, Woolf’s creative use of brackets turns around the hierarchy between

events and makes the reader wonder which story is the main story and which is subordinated. This effect is weakened in the translated text, where brackets have been exchanged or even omitted.

In the act of reading, the ambiguity functions as an invitation to the reader, not to sort out the "correct" interpretation, but to reflect on the fact that different ways of interpretation are possible. Since the translated text in many ways tends to present *the result* of one of the possible ways of reading, it fails to provide *the clues* the reader needs in order to see the openings to the others. As a result, the target language reader is presented with a novel that is less ambiguous, and, thus, less typical of Woolf's narrative style.

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