

PÉTUR KNÚTSSON

## The Pointing Voice: How a Text Means

In textual studies, and particularly in translation studies, there is a marked tendency to ignore the sound-shape of the text, to discuss only the sense, the meaning of the words; and this silence goes all the way back to the beginnings, to the earliest discussions of translation, Jerome, Cicero and Horace. In my doctoral dissertation (Knútsson 2004) I took a different tack, focusing on the sound-shape of Halldóra Björnsson's (1983) translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*. I set myself to examine what I propose to call *intimacy* in textuality, the sound-shape of words in translation between closely related languages—in this case Old English and Icelandic—which I found reveals more clearly than many other types of writing the intimate machinery of textuality. More generally, I found myself emphasising the central importance of this sound shape in any reasoned discussion of textuality, and for our understanding of how a text *means*.

But if I say I am interested in the marriage of form and meaning you will immediately start thinking of onomatopoeia, the way the sound-shape of words mirrors their meaning: how *little* is a little word compared with *large*, and *petit* is a slip of a word compared to *gras*—the short front close vowels of *little* and *petit* requiring a chic, genteel oral gesture, while the long open back vowels of *large* and *gras* belong to the Menippean brothels and taverns. And if you look at words with that particular bias you can of course find lots of little thin, tight words with close front vowels signifying little thin things, and rolling thunderous words with long back vowels signifying large rolling things, and overlook all the words that don't follow this pattern, like *small* and *big*. While it is clear that there are onomatopoeic effects in language, we cannot systematically tie language to reality in this way.

Instead we tend rather to accept the Saussurean concept of the arbitrariness of the sign, which tells us that there is no 'logical' connection between the word and its referent. But then what do we mean by 'logical'? Josephine

*Hugvísindabing 2005*. Erindi af ráðstefnu Hugvísindadeildar og Guðfræðideildar Háskóla Íslands 18. nóvember 2005, bls. 223-233 • Ritstjórar Haraldur Bernharðsson, Margrét Guðmundsdóttir, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir og Þórdís Gísladóttir • Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands 2006 • [www.hugvis.hi.is](http://www.hugvis.hi.is)

Pasternak, Boris Pasternak's sister, thoroughly demolishes the Western, Aristotelian concept of logic in her book *Indefinability* (Pasternak 1999):<sup>1</sup> Logicians, she says, have 'the naïve belief that everything can be made feasible<sup>2</sup> as long as one sticks to their symbolic code.' For the term 'logical' simply means 'to do with the *logos*': if we maintain that there is no logical relationship between the word and its referent we are simply saying that we cannot find the words to express this relationship: which is one way of refusing to face the problem. Owen Barfield sees our modern divorce between the word and its referent as the result of many centuries of struggle with our own modes of perception, and his vision supplies Pasternak's 'indefinability' with such comprehensive theoretic support that one wonders whether they knew each others' work, although they do not to my knowledge refer to each other. Pasternak's striking opening account of the difference between the rose encountered and the rose perceived is remarkably echoed by Barfield's opening chapter in *Saving the Appearances* (Barfield 1988 [1957]), where he illustrates the way the human mind *figurates* a phenomenon such as the rainbow—along with all other phenomena, such as the rose, the mountain, and the Renaissance. For Barfield, the word and the phenomenon are coeval; and although we have irrevocably divorced them—a manoeuvre with both good and evil consequences—we can only go forward by acknowledging this divorce and admitting—and eventually redeeming—its failings.

Roman Jakobson is one of the few linguists who do not refuse to face at least the synchronic aspects of this problem. Jakobson discusses the Saussurean concept of the double articulation of language, conceived by Benveniste as the first and second order of linguistic signs: the first articulates the differential/distinctive function, having merely shape and sound, 'mere otherness'—these are the parts of language too small, if you like, for 'meaning'—; while the second order consists of larger groupings of symbols into units of what we call meaning—morphemes, words, sentence and so on. Jakobson's contention is that there is no strict division between these two types. He invokes 'the mythical, the poetic, the magical, and the playful use of language' (Jakobson and Waugh 1979), where the significative function shades into the shapes of the words.

It is here that Jakobson's analysis becomes relevant for intimate textuality, the connections between sounds and meanings across texts. In taking playful

<sup>1</sup> For a further introduction to Josephine Pasternak see Lock 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For Icelanders it should be pointed out that the word *feasible* does not mean *fysilegur* ('desireable') but rather *framkvæmanlegur* ('practicable')—a symptom of Icelandic-English intimacy to which I shall return later in this paper.

language, paronomasia, into the paradigm, Jakobson is addressing the question—although this may not be his intention—of inter- and intra-textual linkages, echoes between texts. An echo is a connection, or perhaps a relationship, with something else elsewhere: a linkage to a different text, or a gesture towards another part of the same text. Crucially, this linkage or gesture is not a phenomenon which has to do with any underlying structure, but occurs solely by virtue of the sound-shape, and the printed word on the page.

This is the central point of my discussion of Halldóra Björnsson's *Bjólfskviða*, in which, because of the similarity of Old English and Modern Icelandic, Björnsson is forever echoing the sound-shape of her source text. Often these echoes are simply etymological, the most natural Icelandic equivalent being a directly cognate form. This gives translations such as:

cyning	konungur	'king'
mere	mar	'sea'
sweord	sverð	'sword'
léof	ljúfur	'beloved'
bídan	bíða	'wait'

This observation may seem at first trivial, telling us no more than that Old English and Icelandic are closely related languages; but there is more to follow. For this echoism is very often non- or only partly etymological; it is as if the translator is committed to a degree of formal correspondence even when there are no etymological echoes available. Here are some further examples:

dolgilp	'foolish boasting'	dáradirfska	'foolhardiness'
oretmeccas	'battle-men'	örvameiðar	'arrow-men/trees'
heaðoræsa	'battle-rushes'	harðræði	'hardships'
hlaford	'lord'	hlévörður	'lee-warden, protective lord'

Björnsson's coinage *hlévörður* deserves particularly close attention: here as often elsewhere she is following skaldic tradition, where a variety of terms appears in *dróttkvætt* poetry modelled on the sound-pattern of the original Old English *hláford*, the ancestor of modern English *lord*. These skaldic forms include *láðvörðr*, *láðvörðuðr*, *láðvaldr*, *landvarðr*, *lavarðr*, and variations on this theme, all clearly modelled on a late Old-English form which had lost the initial *b*-. The modern Icelandic reflex is of course *lavarður*, a term which Björnsson could not use since it refers almost exclusively to the latter-day British peerage. She appears to have borrowed the element *hlé* 'lee, shelter'

from the appellation *Hléföðr*, which occurs as one of Odin's names in *Skáldskaparmál*; this is one of a group of *beiti* which includes *Hléfreyr* and *Hléföðr*, where the element *hlé/hlæ* is considered by Magnússon (1989, 338) not to be *hlé* 'shelter', but either the obsolete *hléð* 'famous' or *hlæ* 'burial mound'. Also in this group is *Hleifruðr* which seems to hark back to the original Old English form *hláfweard* 'keeper of the bread' which underlies *hláford*; and in fact Björnsson uses *hleifvörður* in an early draft of her translation before opting for *hlévörður*.<sup>3</sup>

Thus this important element in Björnsson's translation technique has long-standing roots in the relationships between Icelandic and the medieval Germanic dialects with which the Icelanders had intercourse. The technique is particularly visible in the treatment of personal names, which are often Icelandicized using non-cognate echoic elements. Thus *Ongeþéow* becomes *Angantýr* instead of *\*Anganþér*, and *Éadweard* and *Éadgár* become *Iátvarðr* and *Iátgeirr* rather than *\*Auðvörðr* and *\*Auðgeirr*. Björnsson is following established practice in Icelandicizing *Ecgeþéow* as *Eggþjófur* rather than *Eggþér* (cf. *Friðþjófur*). Later, in the same vein, *Zeus* becomes Sveinbjörn Egilsson's *Seifur*. Similarly we can point to countless movements of non-etymological echoes in Icelandic neologisms, such as *imago* > *ímynd*, *leopardus* > *blébarði*, *renaissance* > *endurreisn*, *domain* > *umdæmi* (a modern syntactic term), *feasible* > *fýsilegur* (see footnote 2 above).<sup>4</sup>

This is clearly a commonplace of language contact, not at all confined to closely related languages. A striking example occurs in the Greek word for Easter, *pascha*, adopted from the totally unrelated Hebrew *pesach*, but inevitably associated by the Greeks with *paschein* 'to suffer' and the derived noun *pathos*. Latin echoes *paschein* and *pathos* with *patior* and *passio*, again unrelated but echoic forms which later crop up in Icelandic in the *Passíusálmar*, the Passion Psalms. And the habit continues: the accepted translation of the orig-

<sup>3</sup> References and a more detailed discussion of *hláford*-*hlévörð* can be found in Knútsson 2004, 76–9 (section 3.4.1). The dating here is in fact quite problematic: the underlying OE form *hláfweard* 'warden of the bread' would seem to be the form which would prompt the second element *-vörðr/-varðr* in the Icelandic loan, and this would point to a very early borrowing; and in fact it may be that the Icelandic echoes in *hlé-* and *hlæ-* go back to these early times. Although the spelling *hl-* survives well into the 12th century it is clear from occasional early OE forms in *l-* that *b-* was lost before the turn of the millennium; but certainly not early enough for us to postulate a time when *-weard* was retained but *b-* lost (i.e. *\*láfweard* does not appear on OE). Note however that the *f* in *hláford* would always have been voiced, and towards the end of the OE period the word would have been pronounced as it is spelled in early Middle English: *laverd*. Possibly the Icelandic forms in *-vörðr/-varðr* are back formations from this Middle English form.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of these and other forms see Knútsson 1993.

inal Hebrew *pesach* into in English displays exactly the same non-etymological echoism: *Passover*.<sup>5</sup>

In the discussions of these echoic forms in my doctoral dissertation and in a series of three public lectures since,<sup>6</sup> I have suggested that the intertextual nature of echoic correspondences, whether etymologically grounded or not, is a feature of the identity of the text. Textual identity is one way of talking about textual meaning: just as the identity of a text depends on its status in the textual community, so its semantics depends on a consensus established by that community. The use of an echo, a pointer to another text or another language, always introduces a new and widened context, relocating the text into a greater landscape, adjusting its horizons, its identity, and its meaning.

In this series of lectures I have attempted to show, amongst other things, how Halldóra Björnsson uses the shape of her words, the formal echo, not only to recreate much of the shape of the original Old English text, but also to *triangulate* out to a third dimension, a third territory of texts. This is what happens with *hláford* > *hlévörður* discussed above; and one further example will have to suffice in this paper. In line 163 the *Beowulf* poet is describing the monster Grendel's lair on the 'misty moors':

hwyder helrúnan hwyrftum scrípað  
 'whither the hell-counsellors (i.e. demons) evasively crawl'

The translation reads:

hvarleiður helriði úr hvarfi skreið  
 'the everywhere-loathed hell-prowler (i.e. demon) crawled out of hiding'

A cluster of phonological intertextualities come together in this single line. They take control, governing aspects of the translation which might otherwise seem unmotivated, for it is not until we have examined the other texts that they invoke that we find the justification for the change from the plural *helrúnan* 'demons' to the singular *helriði* 'demon', or the change from the present plural *scrípað* 'crawl' to the past singular *skreið* 'crawled'. Björnsson's

<sup>5</sup> None of these forms are cognate: *paschein/pathos* are from \**kwentb-*, *patior/passio* from \**pei-*, and English *pass* from L. *passus* from \**pet-*; while *pesach* is of course not Indo-European.

<sup>6</sup> 'The intimacy of *Bjólfskviða*', Symposium on *Texts & Translations: Icelandic and others*, Den Arnarnagæanske Samling, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut 12 November 2004; 'The Naked and the Nude: Translating Intimacy', *Stofnun Vigdísar Finnbogadóttur*, 1 March 2005; 'Finger and Thumb: How to Point in Imaginary Space', *Stofnun Vigdísar Finnbogadóttur*, 15 November 2005.

unusual adjective *hvarleiður* ‘everywhere-loathed’, is a focal-point here; it occurs only once in Eddic poetry, in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 36:

Þú hefir etnar úlfa krásir  
 oc bræðr þínom at bana orðit  
 opt sár sogin með svöloom munni,  
 hefr í hreysi hvarleiðr scriðit.  
 ‘You have eaten wolfs’ delicacies  
 and dealt death to your own brothers;  
 you have often sucked at wounds with a cold mouth  
 and crawled universally loathed into your den.’

As it happens, there is a persistent relationship in the Old English corpus of poetry between the verb *scriðan* ‘to crawl’ and words beginning with *w-* or *hw-*, appearing in some 52% of occurrences of *scriðan* (Knútsson 2004, 91–97 [section 4.2]). Björnsson could hardly have been aware of this: she had read very little Old English poetry when she embarked on *Beowulf* (Knútsson 2004, 72) and in any case these figures were unknown until the publication of Bessinger’s *Concordance* in 1978, ten years after her death. Notwithstanding, her text highlights the echoism between *hwyrfum scriþað* (*Beo.*) and *hvarleiðr scriðit* (*Helgakv.*). And then, continuing our search for phonetic echoes triangulated on this passage, we find *Völundarkviða* 4:

austr skreið Egill at Ölrúno  
 ‘Egill glided [on skis?] eastward towards Ölrún’

where *skreið ... Ölrúnu* and *scriþað ... helrúnan* (*Beo.*) are alarmingly echoic. These word-shapes all lurk behind Björnsson’s *hvarleiður*, *helriði*, and *skreið*; and in adding *úr hvarfi* she also upholds the Old English affinity between *scriðan* and words in *hw-* (Icelandic *hv-*).<sup>7</sup>

These phonological linkages are thus breaches in the elusive boundary between Björnsson’s text and the other texts against which we must measure it. If texts have edges, as Derrida suggests they do,<sup>8</sup> they must dissolve on intimate contact. Here we see this contact in the act, and observe its fertility: time and time again the unconstrained association of form between the two texts, source and translation, involves a lateral coupling to a third text, to other third texts. But my question must now be: what is the voice speaking

<sup>7</sup> Knútsson (2004, 96) cites *Völundarkviða* as a source for other echoes in Björnsson’s translation.

<sup>8</sup> ‘If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge’ (Derrida 1979, 83).



the echo? Is it the writer's or the reader's? Is it the voice of a narrator or protagonist, of a dogma or of an era?

This question makes a fundamental assumption about the nature of texts: I am suggesting that the manifold voices of Bakhtinian 'free indirect discourse' inevitably cluster around the intertextual echoes that stand at the heart of textual meaning. To clarify my point, let me first dispense with the clumsy term 'intertextuality', which in English takes on a specious abstract quality lacking in the original French term, especially in its seemingly uncountable singular form and the resultant awkwardness of the plural 'intertextualities' as against *intertextualité(s)*. And we also need a cover-term for what we must otherwise call 'inter-, intra- and extratextualities', linkages not only to other texts, but to other parts of the same text, and to movements and events which lie beyond all texts. I propose to use the simple term 'index', the pointer, for all these modes of interactive energy, the synapses of which the text is woven.

This said, we can return to Bakhtin: the echo, the index of something somewhere else, must be 'heard' by the reader if it is to exist. It is the reader alone who perceives the voice, and must decide whether it is the writer's or some other's. Perhaps it is the reader's voice alone (which is undoubtedly how some of my readers will have responded to the echo between *hebrúnan* and *Öbrúnu* above). We have already seen that Halldóra Björnsson knew little Old English poetry when she translated *Beowulf*, although her translation evokes and even exploits a wide panorama of indexical echoes in the corpus of Old English poetry.<sup>9</sup> When such an echo is multiple (as most surely are), it can hardly be monologic except by an extraordinary sleight of hand. Whether the reader's or the writer's, whether spoken wittingly or unwittingly by the writer, this voice is also multiple, sometimes fragmented; and it also points in more than one direction at once, not as a forked tongue but as a bent finger pointing round the corner, over the horizon, into new and complex territory. The pointing voice speaks silently, but it is never quiet.

In the last of my recent series of papers I turned to the wider, non-textual environment, the surrounding reality. *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, is pegged down by a lattice of place names; the structure of the text is mapped on to the structure of the landscape. Clearly, I am attributing meaning to the constituent structure of the wider environment, either textual or extratextual: which of course is an essentially structuralist posture.

<sup>9</sup> The OE corpus consist of some 30,000 lines of the long Germanic alliterative line, or 60,000 lines of the equivalent of *fornyrðislag*.

But what I hope saves me from mechanical structuralism, from formalism, is my insistence on the role of the sound-shape in these movements, the importance of the surface. The mainstream of linguistics for over half a century now has assumed the existence of an underlying structure which is only imperfectly (if at all) represented by the shapes on the surface of the text. My belief however is that whatever may be gained by assuming an underlying structure is in danger of being lost when we begin to lose sight of the surface and try to handle these underlying structures as if they had a concrete and independent existence. This is what Owen Barfield calls 'idolatry', and he would agree with me when I say that extrapolation into underlying domains is a valid activity only insofar as it is accepted as hypothetical, as a secondary activity which cannot in itself support further extrapolation: and so in essence tautological. The important point to grasp here is that we must not lose sight of the visible structures, the ink on the page: for if we do we may not notice that many of these structures are in fact rather more visible on the surface than we take for granted. Insofar as this is so, the value of the exercise may return, and 'tautological' may not be the correct word.

In my doctoral thesis I rely on a concept I call 'implicate interference' to deal with this problem. 'Interference' is one of those words which has one meaning in everyday usage, and quite another in the sciences. Simple, everyday interference is a negative activity, even destructive; in translation studies it is sometimes used to indicate the unwelcome intrusion of phonetic material from the source text into the translation, denigrated by terms such as false friends, false etymology, failure to use the dictionary. Although everybody agrees that words like *Passover* and *Endurreism* are fully accountable, the phonetic undertow is dismissed as an unfortunate accident which shouldn't be discussed. This privileges the assumed underlying structures of language at the expense of the visible, the known surface shapes, and assumes a connection between texts or with the world outside language at a lower, unseen level of language, instead of at the surface. If on the other hand our starting point is the understanding that these surface shapes carry with them, in full view, all the textual information we can ever hope to glean, then we must look for ways to characterise textual intercourse, reading, writing, translation, call it what you will, as happening on this surface. Underneath the ink there is nothing. Even the palimpsest, the erased under-text, if it is there to be noticed, also inhabits the same surface.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I ask for indulgence here: my 'surface of the text' requires in fact the full prosodic patterns of speech and a host of metalinguistic and sociolinguistic features to register *everything*



Implicate interference, then, goes on at the surface, where since everything is visible, nothing is privileged. I borrow the term ‘implicate’ from David Bohm (1980): its primitive meaning is ‘in-folded’, and I use it to mean what the pure sciences mean by ‘interference’, the non-prescriptive term which does not rank the interacting energies into hierarchies, does not draw up tree-diagrams of deep structures. I share Deleuze and Guattari’s (1976) disrespect for tree-diagrams, which they call ‘arborescent’ structures, asserting that they allow only of hierarchical movement up and down insulated lines of descent, and disallow natural intercourse between the leaves themselves. But neither am I very happy with the rhizomic structures they propose instead, the unstructured criss-cross of connecting threads which I feel is still underlying, still not happening on the surface of the page, where all that can happen happens.

Implicate interference by definition collapses all the interacting fields of energy into one surface, or at least one field. We can think, if you like, of the original text of *Beowulf* as one such field, and Halldóra Björnsson’s translation as another; we then create a third field of interference when we compare the translation to the original, when we move both texts into the same cognitive space, the same arena of our thought, to produce a third text, our act of reading. The important point that I try to bring out in my dissertation is that the resultant third field of activity is not different in kind or complexity from the two primary fields: some fields are stronger, and may be dominant, but the difference is of quantity and not quality. From a readerly perspective it makes no sense to say that the Old English text is the original, and Björnsson’s translation the derived text: the reader’s text is his surface, no more or less ‘derived’ than any other text. And in fact for the majority of Anglo-Saxon scholars in the world today who look into Björnsson’s translation it is the Icelandic which is the puzzling text, the one that has to be accessed through the Old English. In the same way we read the Vulgate, or the Septuagint, or the Torah, as foreign languages, threading backwards from our own modern translations. The so-called “process of translation” works equally in both directions; and in both directions the starting-point is already a complex, ‘third’ text, an interference pattern between the written text on the page and the mind of the reader, inhabited by indices, the ever-pointing voices.

that is happening. But my point stands: none of these need to be ‘underlying’; they are all patent.

### *Bibliography*

- Barfield, Owen. 1988 [1957]. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. Western University Press, Middletown, Connecticut.
- Bessinger, Jess B., Jr. (ed.). 1978. *A concordance to the Anglo-Saxon poetic records*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.
- Björnsson, Halldóra B. 1983. *Bjólfskviða*. Fjölvi, Reykjavík.
- Bohm, David. 1980. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1976. *Rhizome*. Les Éditions de Minuit.  
Reprinted in Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille plateaux*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980 (9–37.) Translated as *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* by Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1979. Living On: Border lines. Trans. J. Hulbert. In H. Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, pp. 75–176. Seabury Press, New York.
- Jakobson, Roman, and Linda Waugh. 1979. *The Sound Shape of Language*. Harvester Press, Brighton.
- Knútsson, Pétur. 1993. Learned and popular etymology: prescription vs. intertextual paronomasia. *Íslenskt mál* 15, 99–120.
- Knútsson, Pétur. 2004. *Intimations of the Third Text*. PhD. diss., Det Humanistiske Fakultet, Københavns Universitet.
- Lock, Charles. 2002. Taking an And. *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire* 19.37–38, 232–41 (accessible at <http://www.uwo.ca/modlang/ailc/ReviewArticles/ReviewArticles1.htm>).
- Magnússon, Ásgeir Blöndal. 1989. *Íslensk orðsifjabók*. Orðabók Háskólans, Reykjavík.
- Pasternak, Josephine. 1999. *Indefinability: An Essay in the Philosophy of Cognition*. Ed. Arne F. Petersen. Preface by Dame Iris Murdoch. Tusculanum, Copenhagen.

### *Summary*

The Pointing Voice: How a Text Means

Keywords: sound shape, textual intimacy, implicate interference, tertiary textuality, triangulation

This paper reviews some the main points of my doctoral thesis, *Intimations of the Third Text* (Knútsson 2004), and summarizes the trend of my arguments in papers I have given since. I deal with concepts such as textual intimacy, implicate interference, tertiary textuality, and triangulation, and ask how a text refers to itself, how it refers to other texts, and how it refers to non-linguistic reality. Running through all these arguments is my concern for the physical realization of the text, the sound-shape and its written representa-

tion, and my affirmation of the primacy of this physical representation over assumed underlying linguistic structures.

My contention is that these physical features of the text are typically ignored in textual studies in general, and translation studies in particular. However, in the special case of translation between closely related languages, they cannot be suppressed. Such translation reveals more clearly than many other types of textuality the intimate machinery—the intimations—of textuality.

*Pétur Knútsson  
Department of English  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Iceland  
IS-107 Reykjavík, ICELAND  
peturk@hi.is*