A view of the harbour of Copenhagen from the Opera House, Copenhagen, Denmark

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LITERARY TRANSLATION, POTENTIAL INTERPRETATIONS, AND CRITICISM

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Abstract

The article posits that 'literature' exists only in and after the reading of a specific literary text, and that criticism is a set of hypotheses about the potentials of specific texts. Given these two premises, criticism of the source-text and of the

target-language text cannot be the same in different language communities, no matter what pains conscientious translators take to produce a target-language text 'identical' to the source-language text.

Explicitly disregarding the most frequent problems caused by mistranslations and cuts, the article discusses differences between source-language 'originals' and target-language 'versions' that are introduced at the level of the editor, of the author, and of the translator. Referring to translations of traditional literature as well as folkloristic texts, and citing evidence from cross-cultural reader response studies, it is argued that texts in translation offer different potentialities than those which they offer in the original. Accordingly, criticism based on translation primarily constitutes part of the critical endeavor only in the target language and not in the source-language.

//… //36

In the increasing internationalization of literature and literary criticism, critics frequently refer to works of literature that they know only from translation.

There is nothing new in this: the Bible has been studied for nearly two millennia in translation, mostly, in the case of the new Testament, in two removes from the original (It has often been studied from the Latin translation of Greek which in term derived from Aramaic). However, the volume of translated literature and its impact on criticism today call for a review of some problems inherent in the critical use of translations. Apart from passing references in connection with specific translations there has been little discussion of this topic. Yet it is my belief that it deserves attention. In my view the existence of 'literature' is dependent upon a text being read and experienced as 'literature'. This experience is based on something external, viz., a static, typographical text consisting of black letters in series on white paper, representing words in some language. This text comes to life only in the dynamic flare of the reading process of readers who thus respond to the black wriggles. To the individual reader, this response to a static text is unique, but is also felt to be 'true' and the only one which is valid. In this context, criticism is a discipline based on the critic's own experience, and on the critic's ability to make hypotheses about other …./// 37 … readers' readings of the text. Criticism may refer to the text, to the interplay between passages, as well as to the mechanisms behind the interplay between text and reading that lead to interpretations, and so on.

I wish to emphasize that after translation the text has undergone a change. This entails that the potentialities for the critic's hypotheses are different in different languages.

Publishing houses may well be the scholar's (and reader's) worst enemy since it is not customary for them to inform readers about deliberate textual deviations, or even the omission of whole passages. Occasionally I have encountered translators, house editors, and heads of publishing houses who, as a matter of unofficial house policy, accept that books be cut by 10 to 15%.[i] Cuts and textual divergences may

even be found in 'the original language': conscientious translators of English-American works may find that the 'original' differs according to its place of publication; thus for instance, the text of Mr John Updike's *Couples* (1968) is not 'identical' in Great Britain and the USA. The British version, for instance, omits a passage referring to Ms Christine Keeler a call-girl who gained notoriety for having had an affair with a British Minister of Defense which brought about his downfall (1962-1963). In many modern bestsellers, the manuscript has not even reached its final form when it is sold to foreign publishing houses, which means that translators will either use an incomplete manuscript or will have to redo parts of their translation as the author supplies them with the latest versions. And in some cases, for instance when the book is marketed on the same day in both the original and translated versions, some of the last-minute changes simply cannot be found in translations for purely practical reasons. …// 38 …

But although omission is probably the greatest single source of differences between originals and 'works in translation', I shall not pursue this point in the subsequent discussion; rather I shall explore some translated texts in terms of readers' responses and of their potentialities for serving for critical hypotheses. On the one hand, I therefore use 'close reading' for my discussion of potential interpretations, and, on the other hand, supplement my hypothesis with empirical evidence.

Differences imposed by author

Discrepancies between 'the same text' in two languages may not necessarily involve translation proper.

The Danish author Ms Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen (1885-1962) wrote her stories in both Danish and English. There are marked differences between her stories in the two languages. The short story 'The Ring' will serve as an illustration:

> In the story, a newly-wed couple go for a walk to the sheep pen on their estate.The young wife who has vowed to herself never to keep any secrets from her husband, is happy beyond her wildest dreams. She has a minor altercation with him while they are at the sheep pen, and she walks home by herself. On the way, she wanders into a grove where she meets a dangerous sheep thief. In order to make him disappear she offers him her most precious possession - her wedding ring. It falls to the ground and he vanishes. With her whole world in pieces she meets her husband again, and tells him she has lost her wedding ring but does not know where.

….// 39 …

The story was first published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, in English, in 1950. It later appeared in the collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958).

The description of the fateful day starts as follows in the English version:

> It was a lovely July morning. Little woolly clouds drifted high up in the sky, the air was full of sweet

scents. Lise had on a white muslin frock and a large Italian straw hat. She and her husband took a path through the park; it wound on across the meadows, between small groves and groups of trees, to the sheep-field.

A translation of the Danish version runs:

It was a lovely morning in June. Light fleecy clouds drifted high in the sky, and the air was full of fresh, sweet scents. Lise wore a white frock and a large Italian straw hat with light blue ribbons. She and her husband took a track, romantically winding through the garden and the park, which then became a path leading across the meadow, between clusters of large trees, across a creek and along a grove, to the sheep pens. (My translation).

Later, when Lise stretches out her hand with her wedding ring towards the sheep-thief, the English version runs:

But he did not take the ring. As *she* let it go it dropped to the ground (My italics),

whereas the Danish version runs as follows:

But he did not take the ring. As *he* let go, it fell to the ground ... (My italics)
….// 40 …

The extracts reveal that in Danish there is greater detail, there are more colours, and the story takes place in late spring; here the young wife's betrayal of her marriage vows is less pronounced. Conversely, the atmosphere is rather more down-to-earth in the English version. It is summer, and the female protagonist takes the main initiative in the spiritual adultery that takes place: in other words, we argue that potential interpretations (based on the 'same' text in Danish and in English respectively) differ most markedly in terms of the degree to which the young wife is aware of her sexual desires.[ii]

But Karen Blixen insisted that she was a story-teller rather than an 'author'; consequently, she was entitled to make whatever changes she liked between different versions of what she herself considered the same story; and, as the originator of the story, she had the 'droit moral', the copyright, to do so.[iii]

The American and English translations of the Danish best-seller Mr Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1993), is a more obvious example of author interference. The novel was first translated into American as *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1994), but appeared after the English translation, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1993).[iv] The two translations have more than 5,000 minor deviations. Yet the English translation is based the American one, for after having carefully perused the American translation, the Danish author submitted a list of corrections to the American translator who refused to make the changes he requested. When other countries and the movie industry showed interest in the book, the author con-

sidered it wise to have an 'authorised' English version, since he realised that many small countries might translate the book from British English. So the English translation is actually the outcome of a cooperation between the Danish …// 41 // …. author and an Englishman working from the American translation. It is published with a fictitious translator's name. The complications in this case are many: the Danish author speaks English, but he is no native speaker of the language which means that many of his corrections are not idiomatic (witness the title). In addition, he did not realise that the translator may have adapted some features to an American audience: since the island of Greenland where the story unfolds is part of the realm of Denmark, Danes have a very high awareness of Arctic conditions (there are frequent news spots and programmes about Greenlandic life in television and it is featured in many books). So Danes understand Arctic references much better than the average American reader.

The translator's evaluation

I noted above that the suppression of passages and indisputable mistranslations constitute by far the largest single source of differences between source language originals and translated versions; nevertheless, we shall disregard such infelicitous changes in the present context. Instead we will give three examples of how the overall textual potentialities are changed in linguistic transfers.

The three cases differ at the textual level; in the first example, the order of presentation is altered; in the second example, specialist terminology is omitted; and in the third, one brief but crucial speech has been interpreted in a special way. The common denominator is that the linguistic middlemen have interpreted some factor(s) which is (are) organic to the work as a whole; these lead to changes in the textual potentialities, and hence differences in the reception and interpretation of the text in different languages. …// 41 …

The first instance concerns a children's classic: the German *Der Struwwelpeter* by Mr Heinrich Hoffmann. Hoffmann wrote this illustrated book for his three-year old son and was later persuaded to publish it; the book came out in 1845. The German book has a strong didactic slant; it opens with the poem about *Struwwelpeter*, who refuses to allow his hair and nails to be cut, and then goes into details the about disasters which befall disobedient children.

The book was translated into Danish in 1847 by Mr Simon Simonsen, a businessman who wrote occasional verses. The verses read fluently and amusingly in Danish, and the book has retained its popularity to the present day: by now it has

been published in c. 300,000 copies. There is, however, a significant shift in emphasis between the German and the Danish texts. In the German book, Struwwelpeter's sins are exposed at the beginning; in the Danish translation he has been relegated to the last page. The first story in Danish is 'Die Geschichte von dem schwarzen Buben' in which 'der grosse Nikolaus' (the original father Christmas with his red hat) punishes three 'racist' boys by dipping them in ink. In Danish one of the boys is holding a Danish flag in his hand; Nikolaus' top hat is blue; he is 'Den store Bastian'; and his name is also the title of the book: *Den store Bastian*.

The emphasis in the German book is on the disregard of parental advice, or on wrong-doing for which the perpetrators are punished; and the only story where retribution is inflicted by an outside agent, 'der grosse Nikolaus', is not set apart. Conversely, it is this very superhuman agent of morality who takes pride of place and title in the Danish 'adaptation'; the shift is so momentous that it has become part …// 43 …. of the target-language culture: 'Den store Bastian' is the proverbial bogeyman, not only for disobedient children but also adults.[v]

The other example is discussed by Jennifer Draskau (1989) in considerable detail: An English juvenile book details the gradual initiation of a young girl into the world of horsemanship. In the English original the girl's initial skepticism is shown by negatively loaded words; and, according to the point-of-view, the book is replete with horseman's terminology or 'specialist language'. In the translation there is no distinction between these types of language use; in addition a number of specialist terms have been translated by incorrect equivalents which are too narrow, too broad, or simply from other fields.

In this case, the effect of the translated text was checked with both non-specialists and specialists. The non-specialists had no serious problems with the book in translation, although the original author's intention of familiarizing readers with horse terminology, and of creating verisimilitude as well as entertainment for 'aficionados', was clearly lost. The 'specialist readers' (mostly juvenile horsemen), however, had a low tolerance of the mistranslated terms, and this destroyed their concentration on the book as reading matter.

The third example of how an interpretation shifts the potentialities of a work is taken from subtitling. A television play *Sweet William* (c. 1985) by British author Beryl Bainbridge runs for about 60 minutes. In the opening scene the protagonist, an English girl, is saying goodbye to her somewhat boring (British) fiancé who is leaving for America. Immediately afterwards, she falls in love with a charming but superficial American playwright. She becomes pregnant and decides to have the

child, although her new lover is married, chases women, and does not want to marry her. … // 44 ….

When the girl becomes aware of her condition, she confides in another woman who asks her:

> 'Did you take the pill?'
>
> 'I meant to.' (in a previous scene we saw her pull open a drawer and discover that she had not taken her pill).

As far as anybody could see at this stage, the Danish subtitle rendered this correctly: 'Did you forget to take your pill?' - 'I did not forget.'

But the emphasis has been shifted radically in terms of the play's wider context: what appeared accidental, perhaps the result of an unconscious wish in English, becomes a conscious act in Danish where the girl deliberately chooses to conceive a child with the charming American.

The implications of the change in this crucial scene become obvious at the end when, after the birth, the girl is sitting with her baby, her glance roaming around in the room, until it stops at the picture of her original British fiancé. She looks at the baby, and then again at the picture - and smiles.

To an English audience, it is clear that the girl's honest, albeit stodgy, British fiancé fathered the child. If we assume that her 'forgetfulness' was unconscious, she conceived a child by a reasonably pleasant man in the English version.

The Danish audience, on the other hand, is left in no doubt that this is the story of a girl who deliberately became pregnant by an unsavoury character. Whereas good wins out in English, bad is perpetuated in Danish.

It will be appreciated that in the three cases adduced there are extenuating circumstances, at least in so far as we may assume that none of the three linguistic middlemen were consciously aware that their …// 45 …. interpretations changed the potentialities in the reception of new audiences. My point is not to chastise them for their 'negligence', but merely to illustrate that when translators subjectively evaluate passages in a source text, this may affect the target-language text. The more 'organic' the component is in the text as a whole, the greater the chance that the text will alter course in the translation process; and, accordingly, that the target-language text will no longer be interpreted along the same lines as the original.

Social and cultural differences

My argument that translation may change potentialities in the textual experience is, I suggest, particularly obvious in literature with a strong cultural colour, such as folkloristic material. I believe that both good and bad translation may change the potentialities, that is, the critical hypotheses as well as the readers' responses because of the linguistic, social, and cultural transfers involved.

The very fact that words and syntactical phenomena do not correspond entirely over languages, may explain differences between originals and translations. The *Tales* (orig. 1812-1815) by the brothers Grimm have been translated into numerous languages, including Chinese. In the German originals, most characters have names ending with the neuter diminutive ending of '-chen' ('Rottkäpchen' = '*Little* Red Riding Hood') and girls are more often than not 'Mäd*chen*' which is also neuter. In English translations, such characters become 'it', 'she' or 'he'. In the German 'Little

Red Riding Hood', the wolf is male, the grandmother is female, and Little Red Riding Hood is neuter with pronouns in the corresponding genders. Danish translations follow the two Danish genders, so the wolf has the common gender and neuter …// 46 … pronouns, whereas Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are female with female pronouns. In Swedish, conversely, Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are female with female pronouns and the wolf is male with male pronouns: in other words, it is infinitely easier to read a story of seduction into the Swedish version than into the Danish and the German ones. There is even more to translations of the Grimm *Tales*: In the original German version of 'The seven young kids', the old goat is a she. A goat is normally common gender with corresponding pronouns and is rarely female in Danish. In older Danish standard translations, such as the one of Mr Carl Ewald from 1905, the goat is common gender with corresponding common gender pronouns, although it has seven kids. In the translation by Ms Anine Rud of 1970, however, the pronouns are female. In this case, we can thus see how any set of factors in the linguistic layer of the original may trigger off different realisations in the target languages, partly imposed by purely linguistic phenomena (different patterns for gender), but certainly also the translator's own gender.

There is an example of social differences in a folktale collected by the Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen which was translated into English for Stith Thompson's *One Hundred Favorite Folktales* (1968). In this tale, three brothers in turn take service with an ogre. The agreement is that they will be paid a princely sum, provided they do not lose their tempers, for in that case they will be ignominiously kicked out. The ogre cheats the two first brothers by promising them food 'tomorrow' several days running, until, desperate with hunger, they lose their tempers and their jobs. But when we compare the American version with the Danish original, we notice, for instance, that the long description of how the ogre and his wife are eating (while the first son goes hungry) is left out. In the Danish original the young men's father …// 47 … takes leave of his sons with the parting words 'I cannot afford to keep you here at home any longer *and feed you*'; the three last words in the Danish original are omitted in the American translation.

It is readily appreciated that the original and the translation cannot be read in the same way. In the Danish original, hunger was a daily reality for the original audience and the father's motives for sending out his sons was his poverty, and they lost their temper out of hunger: the story essentially deals with problems of sheer survival. This is completely absent in the modern American version. It must be interpreted in completely different ways: the three brothers are motivated only by greed in their dealings with the ogre; their father simply rids himself of Oedipal rivals; and he is a bad father who acts summarily and arbitrarily.

The inevitability of differences

So far I have been argued from the viewpoint that criticism is a system of

hypotheses about potential responses; however, I have only shown that in terms of textual criticism, there may be translation or linguistic transfers which non-specialists would probably call infelicitous. However, sometimes differences are unavoidable because of linguistic, social, religious or cultural differences which are reflected in languages.

I must stress at the outset that there is no taxonomy in the discussion below although the first example will be a a short unit, namely just one word:

In 1985 I supervised the translation of a Greenlandic tale into Danish and English;[vi] later readers from different countries were invited to read the story. The story deals with a woman who stays with a bear, betrays it and is punished.

…// 48 … In the story, the bear 'flenses' a seal. Being conversant with Arctic life, Danish as well as Greenlandic readers were familiar with the word ('cut up a seal') and registered no surprise. Conversely, the typical reaction to the term by readers from the English-speaking world was, for instance, "'Flense' is not a very common word in English, nine-tenths of the population don't know what this means." And, "'Flense'. What's that? ... It is a word I never heard before, can't even guess what it means."[vii]

Flensing a seal, Narsaq, Greenland

At a higher level it is interesting to note that the story as a whole was disliked and regarded as incoherent by the majority of the sixty readers from Denmark, USA, and other western countries. Conversely the report of the majority of the almost one hundred Greenlandic, Indian, and Nigerian readers did not indicate distaste. So there may be some cross-cultural similarities in the response to literature that go well beyond the textual level.

In 1980 I had similarly supervised the translation of a Turkish tale. In this tale a girl has to steal 'Beyoglu's apple'. On her way to do so, she stays overnight with an old woman who provides her with helpers. Because of this the girl is successful and brings Beyoglu's apple home to her father. Beyoglu, who has fallen in love with her, has her abducted by doves, and in the end the young couple are married by imams.

The process of translation brought out one difference in the strand of interpretation. In the Turkish original by Pertev Boratev (1969), direct and indirect

references to religion are interwoven in the story. In the beginning, the girl prompts her father to take a wager on her ability to obtain the apple, because she thinks that she will succeed with "Allah's help". She comes to a bridge which her horse is afraid to cross. …// 49 … She goes to do 'abdest', which can mean to 'take a crap', or to 'make holy ablutions' depending on the Turkish verb which follows. In the story, the word 'yapmak' implies that the girl takes a crap. However, this word is archaic, so some modern Turkish readers confused it with the other expression 'abdest alma' (= 'to make holy ablutions'): "The girl is able to succeed because she performs her ablutions and is therefore able to cross the bridge (because God helps those who have faith). Faith and religion should go before all else."[viii] The Danish 'equivalent' of this phrase did not evoke similar associations of this subtle point.

However, other references to religion could be rendered in Danish. This goes for an exclamation of the girl's when Beyoglu has manoeuvred her into a bathhouse and she is about to undress: 'Allah take the tailor: he has made the buttonholes too tight'. This remark serves as the girl's excuse for not taking off her clothes, and thus it implicitly protects her virginity.

In the original Turkish story, it is therefore much more obvious that the girl's quest for legitimate access to sex is sanctioned by religion than in the Danish version. Sophisticated Danish readers did respond to the textual strand stressing that the girl obtained legitimized sex, but none of the 150 European readers considered the religious aspect important.[ix]

Another unavoidable difference connects with the name of the young man, 'Beyoglu', whose apple the young girl must steal. When she finally meets him, readers from Denmark, USA, and Greenland typically stated that they had believed him to be an ogre. The Turkish readers reported no such associations: the explanation is probably that the name is popular in Turkish tales; and that in Turkish it is easy to see … // 50 … that it is composed of 'bey', a positive word meaning 'a powerful man', and of 'oglu', meaning 'son of'. Thus Turkish readers will know that 'Beyoglu' must be some kind of prince. It is, in other words an illustration of how readers with different cultural backgrounds will differ in their preconceived idea of characters on the basis of 'etymologically transparent' names.[x]

In view of the fact that the above examples are taken from conscientious and carefully checked and revised translations, we must posit that differences at the textual level are inevitable in translation. This being so, translations will differ from originals: since criticism is a systematic establishment of hypotheses about the experience of texts, the hypotheses it may establish on the basis of the 'same text' in different languages are not necessarily identical.

Cross-cultural vs. cultural components in texts

One problem about the different assessment of potential readings, about the hypotheses we make about them in criticism, and about the interpretations based on the 'original' versus 'translations' is that we rarely see 'original' and 'translation(s)'

simultaneously. Essentially, we are faced here with questions about the universality of phenomena and the applicability of my critical hypotheses.

Let us, for instance, consider some of the tasks we encounter in folktales from all over the world. We all know about the little girl who has to carry water from the well in a sieve, and the maid who has to wash a mountain of black linen. No matter what ulterior symbolic and psychological interpretations we give to these acts, it does not take much imagination to realize that these images of impossible tasks were born out of a reality where young servant girls felt desperate when they had to collect water in leaky pails or to launder the linen of a large household. …// 51 ….No tolerably faithful translation could change the universality of the surface inspiration.

But what about the numerous transformations into princes that occur when the princess kisses/kills the dog, the horse, the frog? Psychologically these offer few problems insofar as they provide universally understandable pictures of sudden infatuation, of the magic of falling in love. But who are we falling in love with? In *Arabian Nights* we find few transformed dogs: horses, perhaps stones, and the like - but not dogs. In northern Europe, dogs abound; and in Greenlandic stories, the potentially human animals are usually seals or polar bears. At this point there is a cultural and psychological variation which a translation cannot solve: different cultures have different high-status animals that may turn into human beings; or, conversely, low-status animals which show the animal side of man.

As symbols, these culture-bound norms about animal transformation do not apply in other cultures. Yet it would be simplistic to believe that we can exchange one animal for another - for the underlying psychology also differs from tale to tale, from text to text.

Concluding remarks

The problem is therefore that once a work of literature is translated it has undergone a process of interpretation (by the translator) and adaptation (to the new language). In this process, some passages and phenomena in the text shift their weight and importance for the 'interpretative potential'.

In some respects, there is little new in this contention: our understanding of writers and schools of authors changes over the ages, …// 52 …and even with individual readers in the course of a lifetime. Criticism of texts in translation is a legitimate part of the critical endeavour. It may be useful for our understanding of the 'original', as long as we bear in mind that there is a translation, 'an interposed text', behind the criticism.

Yet the fact is that some critical hypotheses about the 'same work' are not equally viable in all languages, or, in other words, *criticism based on texts in translation applies primarily to the target-language versions and becomes part of the critical heritage i.e. of the hypotheses about the readers' experiences, in the target-language culture*.[xi]

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Notes

i. During the research behind Dollerup (1987), this curious fact surfaced several times in talks with professionals. It must be stressed that the practice is never sanctioned publicly. The most interesting feature is that when the question is broached 'sub rosa', most professionals know of these practices in connection with translations into all languages. The reason is not hard to find: a rule of thumb indicates that a good translation between Indo-European languages, demands 7 to 15 per cent more text than the original (with variations between languages). In the article 'Seriously subversive' (*Times Literary Supplement* May 19-25, 1989: 546, Keith Walker cites an English example of the practice. Santoyo (1989) amply documents the widespread use of reduction in Spanish translations of English works. Poor translations tend to be up to 30% longer than the originals.
[Addition as of 2008: the practice seems to be on the wane CD]

ii. Since I have encountered the objection that the shift to active adultery may have been a misprint ('she' (=hun) for 'he '(=han), it must be stressed that (a) the writer of the Danish version and of the English version was the same, viz. Karen Blixen; (b) that the texts under discussion are both copyrighted by her estate; and (c) that no real-life reader will be comparing the Danish and the English texts; collations of the type made in the article are in the province of translation critics only.

iii. The relationship between Karen Blixen's Danish and English oeuvre is very complex. For additional information see Anderson (1997).

iv. For the details about author interference I am indebted to Ms Lotte Follin.

v. Stybe (1971) discusses the reception of *Struwwelpeter*, including its history in Denmark. The first Danish title was 'Vær Lydig' (i.e. Be Obedient). The story of 'Den store Bastian' was, however, always the first one in Danish editions, and it became the title of the book in 1867.

vi. The translation procedure is described in detail in Dollerup et al. (1993) # 120 on this homepage.

vii. The readers' experience during the reading (Danes, Greenlanders, and Americans) is discussed in Dollerup et al. (1988). The readers' responses after the reading (Danes, Greenlanders, Indians and Nigerians) are listed in an edited form in Bennett et al. (1989).

viii. The information on Turkish responses is given in Doltas and Sevgen (1985).

ix. For further discussion, see Dollerup et al. (1985: 43-59).

x. See Doltas and Sevgen (1985). However, the 'etymological explanation' is mine.

xi. The present article is inspired by work by the Research Unit for Experimental Studies in Reader Response, c/o The Centre for Translation Studies and the Department of English, University of Copenhagen. The studies have been supported by the UNESCO; by the NATO Scientific Affairs Division. I gratefully acknowledge the intellectual support of my two colleagues, Mr Iven Reventlow and Mr Carsten Rosenberg Hansen.