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The Dramaturgy of Dialect: An Examination Of The Sociolinguistic Problems Faced When Producing Contemporary British Plays In The United States.

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THE DRAMATURGY OF DIALECT:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROBLEMS FACED WHEN
PRODUCING CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PLAYS IN THE UNITED STATES.

A Thesis Presented

by

TALYA ANNE KINGSTON

Submitted to the Graduate School of
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INTRODUCTION

While the United States and Britain both have proud and distinct theatrical traditions, each has been extensively influenced by the other¹. At the same time, despite a rich history of cultural exchange and the increasing convergence toward a shared set of cultural reference points brought on by television and the internet, the emotional language of the two countries remains subtly distinct. We often laugh at different things, for example, and American and British audiences will innately understand different political references. This is largely due to the fact that people from the same culture share a pallet of cross references that enables them to understand subtle jokes, references and subtext in the same way. When a play that was conceived in one culture is produced in another, these references and codes may provoke misunderstandings, even if the basic language of both cultures is the same. In this way, George Bernard Shaw's famous quip that Britain and America are two countries *separated* by a common language still holds true.

Furthermore, both countries contain numerous regional and racial sub-groups that speak distinct versions of English, often using different words, references and slang as well as different accents. These sub-groups each approach a given subject matter with a different set of assumptions and sensibilities. A family of Indian immigrants living in the Midlands of England, for example, will often utilize dialect and references that merge their Indian heritage and language with the dialect and references of the Midlands. This

¹ In this thesis, Britain refers to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The term "America" is intended to refer only to the United States and not the entire American continent.

enriching diversity has become particularly relevant to British theater since the 1950s which saw a rise in what the British have referred to as “kitchen sink realism” that included playwrights writing in “their own voices” and not in a dialect affected for the stage.²

As more and more contemporary British plays are written in distinct accents of English, an industry of dialect coaches has emerged, whose job has been to train American actors to not just speak with a “British” accent, but to be able to speak Liverpudlian, Glaswegian, or Working-class South London as the script demands. But even if speech patterns are mimicked perfectly, that is only scratching the surface. To fully realize plays in another culture, it is also important for the actors and the audience to understand the meaning of the words that are being spoken in the context of the culture of the play.³

Sociolinguistics, the examination of language as a social and cultural phenomenon,⁴ is a useful tool to use when looking at the dramaturgical problems faced when producing plays in an unfamiliar dialect. It began largely as an academic field of study in the 1970s, but broke into the public consciousness with the debate in America in the 1990s over the validation of Ebonics as a legitimate African-American dialect of English.

² British theatre artists refer to this accent as Received Pronunciation (RP). In America, a similar accent is commonly known as “Standard British.” In fact, it is far from standard. Very few, if any, people in Britain actually use this accent in their day-to-day interactions, but it has been cultivated for presentational use on the basis that it relies on good articulation. It is then mislabeled as “correct” speech.

³ These issues are not unique to American-British relations. The same issues arise in staging plays translated from a foreign language, as well as importing plays from other English-speaking countries such as the West Indies, Australia or South Africa.

⁴ Definition from Peter Trudgill. *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society*. London: Pelican Books. 1974. p.21

Sociolinguistics looks at the social codes in speech that provide clues to the background, class, and attitudes of the speaker.

Productions that skip sociolinguistic analysis entirely risk a superficial reading of the script. This cheats the audiences out of many of the subtleties intended by the playwright. An understanding of the correct usage of the words, sentences or rhythms of speech can inform important character and plot choices. In this thesis I will examine various problems that arise when producing contemporary British plays with dialects in the United States, and argue that it is up to the dramaturg as much as the dialect coach to bridge this linguistic gap between the audience and play.

Linguists differentiate between the terms *accent* and *dialect*, terms which in common usage are often interchangeable. In sociolinguistic theory, the term *dialect* refers to differences in grammar and vocabulary, whereas the term *accent* refers to the way that words are pronounced.⁵ Although issues related to accents and dialects are invariably interlinked, it is useful for the purpose of this paper to separate them in order to examine them more closely.

Dramaturgs routinely help actors understand a play's dialect. It is very common, for example, for the production dramaturg to produce a glossary of the play's vocabulary for the director and cast to use in rehearsal. Sometimes, it is not enough simply to look at the meanings and history of the word in question in an academic way. Actors, directors and

⁵ Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society*. London: Pelican Books. 1974. p.5.

playwrights also need to know how their particular audience will understand the words. For example, the word *fag* in a British script is a common slang reference to a cigarette. To an American audience it conjures up an offensive reference to a homosexual man. A comparison of contexts in this case will help ensure that the line does not project an unintended homophobic slant onto the character, and possibly jolt the audience unintentionally away from the action of the play.

Playwright Willy Holtzman was aware of this when writing his play *Bovver Boys*. The play is set in the 1970s in Dundee, Scotland, in a rough housing project. Holtzman was aware that his Scottish characters would have referred to themselves as living on a “housing estate” and that British audiences would immediately understand this to mean public housing. But Holtzman was writing the play in America for an American audience that would mistake the term “housing estate” to mean something more upper-class and suburban. If it were a screenplay, the writer could be more authentic in his choice of words and allow the camera to scan the surroundings and inform the viewer. A playwright, however, must rely on the words in the script to accurately convey the setting. It is these descriptions that the director and designers will use to paint pictures in the imaginations of the audience members.

It may seem as if the use of accents is less of a dramaturgical minefield, and that as long as the actor pronounces the correct accent well enough to be understood by an audience unaccustomed to hearing it, all should be well. For accents, however, it is also important that the dramaturg consider the listener’s understanding of the words that they are

hearing. For example, most British accents would pronounce the first syllable of the word “tuna” as “tch,” - a sound that to an American ear sounds more like the first syllable of the word cheese. An American production of a British play that employed this word might then pronounce “tuna” in a kind of hybrid accent that pronounced the “tu” as an American would. Although this would strictly speaking jar the language out of its British context, it might help an American audience understand where subsequent references to fish came from.

Accents become a particularly interesting dramaturgical problem when there are several different accents on stage. The dramaturg then has to consider not only the audience’s response to the accents, but how the differences in accents inform the audience about the relationships between the characters, and whether or not the different accents are integral to the production or an unnecessary confusion to the audience.

The West Coast premiere production of *Beautiful Thing* by Jonathan Harvey is a good example of the importance of this decision.⁶ The play is a love story between two teenage boys set in working-class South London. The characters all have working-class backgrounds except for one interloper. This man, Tony, who is dating one boy’s mother, is from a higher class and is trying to hide this fact so as not to stand out.⁷ This is made clear in the play where he not only constantly picks up lexical clues from the other characters and self-consciously uses them himself [dialect] but also tries to pick up the

⁶ Produced by the New Conservatory Theater Center (November / December 1998) and directed by Ed Decker with the involvement of the playwright.

⁷ In the script notes Jonathan Harvey states: “All the characters in the play except Tony have broad southeast London accents. [Broad in England is usually a euphemism for working class.]... Tony speaks with an irritating middle-class, trying to have street-cred accent.”

local inflection so as not to stand out [accent]. Tony's efforts would be immediately obvious and send some very clear sociolinguistic signals to a British audience. Although Tony's class is never overtly mentioned, it is intrinsic to the plot, since it is the reason that he never quite fits into his surroundings and ultimately it is also the reason that the boy's mother breaks off her relationship with him. The dialect coach for the San Francisco production therefore taught the actor playing Tony a different base accent, and the director asked the actor to follow the playwright's instruction of allowing the other characters' accents to drift into his. Despite the clues in the script, many of the San Francisco reviewers criticized this actor for the fact that his accent stood out and wandered.⁸ This implies that at least some of the American audience members had trouble picking up the sociolinguistic clues in the production. This could have led to these audience members missing important plot points or character developments. Confusion over accent can be so distracting that it draws the audience's thoughts away from the play.

The dramaturgical challenge, then, is not confined to creating an accurate portrayal of the world of the play, but also to layer in the need for an audience to understand both the accent and dialect. This would then engender an audience response that matches the playwright's and director's intentions.

One of the first issues that faces a director producing a British play in the United States is whether to use an accent at all. Many American directors, particularly those working

⁸ For example, reviewer Michael Scott Moore criticized Andrew Nance, who played Tony, for the fact that "his accent slips between various classes of British" [San Francisco Weekly](#). 3 December 1998.

without a good dialect coach, are afraid of the amount of time and concentration that it will take in rehearsal to create the correct accents, and prefer to divert that attention to other areas of the play. They may also fear the audience will be distracted by the accents and that this will distance them from the story being told. The choice of whether or not to use accents depends largely on how integral the geographic location is to the characters and plot.

Two plays that I'm currently working on couldn't offer more extreme examples of this issue. Both plays have been written recently by playwrights living in the United States, and both plays contain solely British characters. This, however, is where the similarities end. The first is a one-man play about the legendary Scottish poet William MacGonagall, set in 1887. MacGonagall achieved his notoriety by being a horribly bad poet but self-deluded enough to think that he rivaled his contemporary Robert Burns. The play utilizes a lot of MacGonagall's actual writing and therefore is written in dialect, and for the sake of the character and comedy of the piece would have to be performed in the right accent.

The other play is about the lives of three middle-aged, middle-class couples. Although the playwright is originally from Wales, she lives in the United States and has placed her characters in an urban context that could just as easily be Boston as Cardiff or London. The American director sees the British accent as an unnecessary distraction for both the cast and audience. The script contains references to certain British brand names (supermarkets, restaurant chains and food products) and a passage that refers to some particulars of the British education system. None of these is so integral to the plot that it

couldn't be changed to corresponding American references, - although, finding corresponding references with the same sociolinguistic codes embedded in them, as this paper will attest, is more challenging than it may at first seem.

The four productions I will consider in more depth in the body of this thesis have each dealt with this challenge in different ways. The first two plays, like the play about William MacGonagall, are deeply connected to the dialect in which they were written.

The Broadway premiere of *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett surprised all the critics by sweeping the 2006 Tony Awards. It was widely believed that some of the play's themes were too specific to Britain to be understood here, particularly by main-stream commercial audiences on Broadway. *The History Boys* company, while aware of these thematic and linguistic challenges, were concerned that the playwright's voice not be diluted by any script changes made for the American production. The play was presented by England's National Theatre with the same cast portraying the same roles that they did in London, thus allowing a direct comparison of American and British audience reactions.

I will next consider the play *Trainspotting*, adapted and directed by Harry Gibson from the novel by Irvine Welsh. *Trainspotting* follows a group of young, Scottish heroin addicts, and in keeping with this shocking subject matter, the American premiere of this production was directed at a more off-beat off-Broadway audience. Again, critics were unsure how American audiences would take to the strong language and Scottish accents

that were deliberately not watered down. In this case, both actors and audiences said that the strong dialect helped ground the text. Americans have used the dialect as a key into the world of the play. This production was also a success and, perhaps more surprising, has gone on to be popular in small theaters around the country.

The other two plays that I will look at are both farces, a genre closely associated with British theater. The comedy in both of these farces relies on an ordinary situation, (one to which the audience can easily relate) being turned on its head. In order for the situation and characters to be perceived as ordinary, the American producers of both plays decided to translate them completely into an American context.

Losing Louie by Simon Mendes de Costa recently premiered in New York with a new script.⁹ The playwright believes that the universal themes contained in his work make it ripe for re-imagining in a local context. In connection with this, I will also consider Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves*, which was also re-imagined into an American context for its Broadway opening in the 1970s. Both the American and the British version of Ayckbourn's script are available for production in the United States. I will reflect on what dramaturgical decisions had to be made in translating these plays, and how these decisions affected the finished product.

All of these plays were written in Britain and concern uniquely British characters and/or themes, and they have all been received positively by American theater audiences.

⁹ The original British version was titled *Losing Louis*. This play was given its American premiere at the Manhattan Theater Club in 2006.

Together they present a compelling case for the importance of considering sociolinguistic codes embedded in the text when producing a play from another culture.

CHAPTER ONE
THE USE OF DIALECT TO LOCATE THE PLAY

The History Boys

Alan Bennett is a perfect example of a British theater artist whose work is often thought to be too dependent on its colloquial British language, themes and characters for an American audience. Five decades of theatrical, film and television hits in England have rendered Bennett a household name in Britain. Americans are less familiar with his work for the theater and are more likely to have heard of his 1992 film *The Madness of King George*, which earned him an Oscar nomination, or his television series *Talking Heads*, which aired on PBS in the early 1990s. Despite winning a Tony award for his Broadway premiere *Beyond the Fringe* in 1963, the only other time an Alan Bennett play has been seen by a Broadway audience was in 1975, when *Habeas Corpus* received a luke-warm reception.

His latest play, *The History Boys*, is set in a high school in the 1980s in Bennett's native Yorkshire. Like much of his other work, most of the characters speak with Northern English dialects that will probably be unfamiliar to Americans. The story concerns a group of eighteen-year-old boys who have returned to high school for an extra semester in order to study for an entrance examination and interview for Oxford University. The headmaster is desperate to push the students into the prestigious university in order that their glory will reflect back onto his school. He hires a new teacher, Irwin, to teach them the examination tricks necessary to impress at Oxford. This teaching method is scorned

by their old teacher, Hector, who exalts learning for its own sake and prefers the boys to spend their time memorizing poems, songs and extracts from movies. This clash of educational credos is set against the backdrop of blooming sexuality that manifests itself in almost every interaction the boys have.

There was remarkable hype about *The History Boys* coming to Broadway, based mostly on the production's great success in London, Australia and on the first British tour. Normally American Actors Equity mandates that only lead actors can transfer with the production and the remaining cast must be filled by American actors. In a rare move, Equity allowed all the original National Theater cast members to reprise their roles on Broadway. For the purpose of this paper, this makes *The History Boys* a good opening example, since we can assume that the accents and diction used in the production accurately reflected the characters, the setting (both place and time), and the playwright's intention. Furthermore, as the actors remained in the same roles we can look at what thematic and lexical adjustments, if any, were made in an effort to help the American audiences to follow the plot.

Although the story itself certainly contains universal themes, they are manifested in references that are particular to the British education and class systems. References that would unquestionably be understood by British audiences are foreign to Americans, whose understanding of class and whose education system differs greatly. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic were concerned about how the play would translate in America. The

following opinion, expressed by *New York Times*' critic Sarah Lydall, was common to almost every article written on the subject:

What Americans will make of [*The History Boys*] is anybody's guess. Although the play's humor is universally delightful, some of the peculiarly English themes, especially the casual acceptance of Hector's would-be pedophilia, might have a harder time in translation. ...success has mostly eluded [Alan Bennett] in America. Few of his plays have transferred to New York. Perhaps it is because they come across as so very English. So finely tuned is his account of the minutiae of British life, so uncanny is Mr. Bennett's ear for dialogue and his understanding of the nuances of class distinctions, that his broader talents can be overlooked....¹⁰

To everyone's surprise, the response in New York was overwhelming and *The History Boys* swept the 2006 Tony Awards, picking up six awards including Best Play and Best Direction. In London, *The Times* theater critic, Benedict Nightingale, called the positive New York response to *The History Boys* "remarkable," saying: "It seems so English in many ways and it surprises me a great deal that it has been such a success. More fool me."¹¹

Sociolinguistic concerns that were raised during the New York transfer of this production are twofold; first, that the accents would be too strong to be understood; second, that there are words and references in the script that American audiences would not catch.

The National Theatre company performed *The History Boys* in various classes of the Yorkshire accent. On hearing the accents, English audience members would immediately

¹⁰ Sarah Lyall, from *Alan Bennett, author of 'The History Boys,' Speaks About, of All Things, Himself. New York Times*. 16 April 2006

¹¹ Quoted in *High Marks for the History Boys*, BBC News-Entertainment on-line. 12 June 2006. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/5070772.stm>> accessed 29 July 2006.

have located the play in the North of England. Most American audience members would certainly have picked up that the play is set in England but, being less familiar with the regional variances in British accents, probably would not have been able locate the play within a region of England.

It was largely a concern about the Northern English accents which prompted the Broadhurst Theater to stock up on copies of the script to sell at each performance. The theater also provides hearing devices to amplify the sound on stage in order to enable audience members to pick up words they may not be used to hearing. During the performance that I attended, I witnessed audience members praising the usefulness of these aids in deciphering the accents on stage.

The cast had also been concerned about whether their accents would be understood and report that they made particular concessions to the American audience in the first fifteen minutes of the play, during which the cast made a concerted effort to “plant” (or articulate) their words more clearly. For example, one of the Headmaster’s first lines in *The History Boys* is, “When did we last have anyone in history at Oxford and Cambridge?” If the audience does not understand what examinations the boys are preparing for and how important the results are to the whole school, they will miss the point of the play. Since this line is so important thematically, Clive Merrison says that he consciously stresses the words “Oxford” and “Cambridge” in order that they be understood or, as he put it, “Don’t frighten the horses, start them gently.”¹²

¹² Telephone conversation with Clive Merrison, 20 September 2006.

Merrison reports that his concerns about the Broadway audiences were somewhat appeased by “American audience members in London [who] reported that they were laughing even though they didn’t know why they were laughing.”¹³ This kind of group dynamic, where audience members may not understand exactly what is being said, but infer from the tone and the response of other listeners that they are, for example, being told a joke, is referred to by psychologists as the “mere presence effect.”¹⁴ While it is important that the audience be able to understand the words spoken on stage, we should not overlook the enjoyment perpetuated by listening to the tone of the actors and the response of other audience members.

To a certain extent there are always concerns about whether an audience is going to “get” a play, and Merrison reports that they had similar concerns before they opened in London, especially about a scene in a French class that is spoken almost entirely in French. The anxiety about this scene in America doubled since Americans are less likely than the British to have learned French in school, and the scene is written to be performed in French but with a British dialect that in England is referred to as “Franglais.” However, audiences on both sides of the Atlantic have loved that scene and it receives roars of laughter at every performance.

¹³ Telephone conversation with Clive Merrison, 20 September 2006.

¹⁴ This effect acknowledges the influence that the mere presence of others has on the way that we behave. (Guerin, 1986).

The main change that was made to the play as it was transferred to Broadway was that it was cut by about twenty minutes.¹⁵ Running at three hours, it was thought to be too long for a Broadway audience. Most of the cuts were made simply to shorten the length of the production, rather than out of a concern for sociolinguistic difficulties in the transfer. Classroom scenes were cut down and a whole scene between the headmaster and the new teacher, Irwin, in which the headmaster warns him not to mess up, was left out of the American production. This particular ensemble of actors had such an integral part in creating their roles that any cuts or changes were generally either initiated by them or negotiated with them rather than imposed upon them by the director or dramatist.¹⁶ Thus, in this case it was the actors who performed the important dramaturgical role of sociolinguistic translation in the transfer of the production. This is interesting since they were able to recommend minor changes in the language of the play based directly on their experiences on stage and in communication with the audience.

Prior to the opening of *The History Boys* in New York there had been concern about how the British terminology and vocabulary would translate. *Time Out New York Magazine* even produced a guide to the British terminology in the play which explained, for instance, that “Dons” refers to University Professors and “Sixth Form” is the British equivalent of eleventh and twelfth grade.

¹⁵ Alan Bennett is not known for the brevity of his writing! The script of *The History Boys* was cut by an hour even before it opened in London. Director Nicholas Hytner is experienced in cutting Alan Bennett’s work for the stage: the original script for *The Madness of King George* was six hours long before Hytner cut it.

¹⁶ Of course all changes were approved by both Nicholas Hytner and Alan Bennett before going into effect.

Changes that were made to the script specifically out of sociolinguistic concerns for the new American audience however tended to be small. For example, in the staff room an older teacher, Mrs. Lintott, asks Irwin if the boys have given him a nickname yet. She then reveals her own nickname: “Unsurprisingly, I am Tot or Totty. Some Irony there, one feels.” British audiences would laugh at this line, understanding “Totty” as slang for a young and attractive woman. In the American production, Frances de la Tour, playing Mrs. Lintott, changed her nickname to “Hot Tot” in order to retain the original humorous intent, without losing the rhythm of the original line.

Another example came from the first interaction between the headmaster and Irwin, in which the headmaster reveals that he went to Hull University (considerably less prestigious than Oxford or Cambridge). In the original British script, Irwin replies: “Oh. Larkin” referring to the well-known poet Philip Larkin who also attended Hull University. The Headmaster then retorts:

Everybody says that. ‘Hull? Oh, Larkin.’ I don’t know about the poetry... as I say, I was a geographer... but as a librarian he was pitiless. The Himmler of the Accessions Desk. And now, we’re told women in droves. Art. They get away with murder.¹⁷

As a concession to the American audience this reference to Larkin was cut. Considering that this play is littered with obscure academic references, it seems more likely that this cut was made because the American audience might not understand it as a derogatory reference to Hull, not because they would not understand who Philip Larkin was (especially since the line goes on to explain who he was).¹⁸

¹⁷ Alan Bennett. *The History Boys*. New York: Faber and Faber. 2006. p.11.

¹⁸ Interestingly, Alan Bennett’s National Theatre debut was portraying Philip Larkin in *Down Cemetery Road* in 1987.

Indeed, one of the charms of *The History Boys* is that you are flooded with references that audiences on both sides of the Atlantic half remember from school. The fact that it is set in a classroom allows the playwright the freedom to “show off” intellectually and teach the audience while Hector and Irwin are teaching the boys. The obvious joy the boys exhibit at their lessons is infectious, and you don’t really have to understand every word to be able to share in that joy.

In fact, having a distinctly British voice may have helped this play achieve its popularity in America. It’s a very specific voice, as Clive Merrison put it: “there is one character that is on stage the whole time and that is Alan Bennett.”¹⁹ There are autobiographical aspects to all his characters, and the company was concerned about not making cuts that altered the playwright’s voice by giving the characters references that might make more sense to the audience but would not have actually been used by these characters in the time and place that they are located. For example, there are repeated references to Hector misusing class time by teaching the boys songs by George Formby and Gracie Fields (famous British singers during the Second World War). At one point the company had suggested changing the reference to Ethel Merman, but “once you go down that road you ruin Alan’s voice.”²⁰

It seems then that *The History Boys* succeeded in the United States for the very reason that people feared it would fail. Although sensitive to sociolinguistic difficulties in the

¹⁹ Telephone conversation with Clive Merrison, 20 September 2006.

²⁰ Telephone conversation with Clive Merrison, 20 September 2006.

transfer, the company made minimal adjustments to accommodate them. They retained the very real sense of time and place, and relied on the diction of the actors, the education of the Broadway audience and the strong story to carry the play along. This production then proves the old adage that the more specific a story, the more universal its appeal. Now that the script is published and available for production, it will be interesting to see how the sociolinguistic problems in the script get addressed by American directors and companies.

CHAPTER TWO

DIALECT AS A STORY-TELLING AID

Trainspotting

Trainspotting is set in Leith, a small town just outside Edinburgh, in the 1980s. It was originally written as a novel by Irvine Welsh who had grown up in the housing projects of Leith and felt compelled to write about how they had been socially decimated by political neglect, that led to a wave of heroin abuse, which in turn brought on an epidemic of new HIV infections. The episodic novel follows a group of young heroin addicts through the tragedies of their lives as they cycle through recovery, denial and of course the overwhelming desire for the next hit. The hugely popular book was adapted into a play by Harry Gibson that premiered in 1995 at the Citizens' Theatre Company in Glasgow. Harry Gibson also directed the American premiere production at The Players Theater in New York City in 1998.²¹

Like *The History Boys*, *Trainspotting* is performed in America with relatively few script changes to accommodate its foreign audience.²² However, the working-class Scottish dialect that *Trainspotting* is written in is a lot thicker and less accessible to the New York audience than the educated English dialect of *The History Boys*. Theater veteran, Robert Brustein, described *Trainspotting* as an “incomprehensible piece of regionalism,” and

²¹ The play was originally commissioned as a radio play by the BBC, but they quickly dropped the project when they saw the raw language contained in the script. Danny Boyle was inspired to write the movie adaptation of *Trainspotting* after attending the Glasgow production of the stage adaptation. However, in the United States the movie was released first, closely followed by an American edition of the novel and finally by the play. This explains a popular American misconception: that the play is an adaptation of the movie.

²² E-mail correspondence with Arielle Tepper, the New York Producer of *Trainspotting*, 12 December 2006.

reported that the London production was “so steeped in impenetrable Glaswegian [sic] dialect and idioms that, lacking a translation, I had no choice but to leave after the first act.”²³

It was performed in New York, and in theaters across the United States, using American actors who affect the Scottish accent. Along with the question of how the American audience understands the language of the play, the American productions of *Trainspotting* therefore raise the interlinked, sociolinguistic question of how the dialect is communicated to the actors reading the script.

It should be noted that the dialect of *Trainspotting* is more than a reflection of the characters’ speech patterns, it is also part of the reason for writing the novel in the first place. As Welsh’s contemporary, the novelist James Kelman, declared when accepting his Booker Prize in 1994: “My culture and my language have a right to exist and no one has the authority to dismiss that.”²⁴ This nationalist sentiment, spawned by a decade of neglect by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, was popular amongst a growing number of Scottish fiction writers in the mid-1990s, who proudly wrote in their own dialect. The collected works of Scottish authors such as Iain Banks, Duncan McLean, Kelman and Welsh, have since been labeled a body of post-colonial literature.²⁵ In fact, the poetic language of *Trainspotting* is more than just a dialect of English, it is a

²³ “Robert Brustein on Theater: England Reaches Out.” *The New Republic*. 25 March 1996: 214.n13: 32-33.

²⁴ Quoted in Robert A. Morace. *Trainspotting: A Reader’s Guide*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. 2001. p. 51.

²⁵ Craig Cairns. *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. Edinburgh University Press. 1999. P.75.

language of its own, referred to as “lowland Scots”²⁶ with a proud literary tradition going back to poet Robert Burns and beyond. The rhythm and spelling of Burns’s verse reflects the speech patterns of lowland Scots, and though he was writing two hundred years before Irvine Welsh, their dialectic styles are not so far removed.

One of the first playwrights to indicate a dialect other than Standard British by writing it into the lines of the script was George Bernard Shaw who began in 1913 by writing Eliza Doolittle’s lines in *Pygmalion* in a Cockney accent. Shaw gave up three pages into the script stating within the copious stage directions: “Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London.”²⁷ How then, half a century later, has it become common place to do just that?

The clue comes by the fact that in *Trainspotting* the dialect is embedded in the play rather than imposed on it as a plot point. The play is mostly a series of monologues which give the characters ownership over its telling: it feels like their story that has to be told in their dialect. In Mark’s famous “Choose life” speech, for example, he describes going to his drug dealer’s house in order to purchase a substance to take the edge off his withdrawal symptoms:

Ah pull oot some crumpled notes fae ma poackits and flatten them oot oan the coffee table. He snaffles them and produces two wee hard bomb-shaped things wi

²⁶ The language is labeled “lowland Scots” to eliminate confusion with the Scottish language of the Highlands and Islands, whose traditional language is Gaelic. Although the definitions of what constitutes a dialect and what constitutes a separate language is somewhat blurred in Lowland Scots, the British government now accepts Lowland Scots as a regional language and has recognised it as such under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

²⁷ George Bernard Shaw *Pygmalion* Act One, scene one.

a waxy coat oan them. Ah'd nivir seen the likes ay them before... What the fuck dae ah dae wi these?

By warping standard English spelling, drawing out sounds that need more emphasis and cutting off sounds that are not pronounced, Irvine Welsh gives us a sense of the speech pattern, pitch and urgency of this character as well as encouraging an accurate mimicry of the accent. Thus, "out" becomes "oot", "from" becomes "fae", "pockets" becomes "poackits, "I'd never" becomes "Ah'd nivir" and "do I" becomes "dae ah". Like the rhythm of African-American Ebonics, the rhythm of this speech is culturally specific. It is very hard to read this play without mimicking the accent. The way that it is written gives the actors a sense of the rhythm and speed of speech as well as the background and state of the character speaking.

The characters in *Trainspotting* are definitely working class and the class struggle is hinted at in the play in the depiction of the Edinburgh Festival attendees that watch in disgust as Tommy, Mark and Allison taunt a squirrel in the park.²⁸ However, the point of using the strong dialect is not to emphasize their lower class background, but simply as an accurate depiction of their life. Therefore, although, according to Harry Gibson, *Trainspotting* has been translated into seventeen different languages, I would argue that translating it into another dialect of English would risk losing its very appeal. There is

²⁸ There is some irony in the stage adaptation that the characters so actively disdain the very theater audiences that would be watching the performance. This was further enhanced during the sold-out run of *Trainspotting* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1995, when "alternative tour guides" would stand outside the theater offering to take audience members on the *Trainspotting* tour of Edinburgh, and promising to show off all the places that the official tourist office recommended avoiding!

also a danger that in translation, this play would lose the rough edges that make it come to life.²⁹

We must assume then that it is important to the characters and plot of *Trainspotting* that the casual language remain intact. The warped spelling is not the only indication of the spoken accent of the text, it is also peppered with specifically Scottish slang words. Some, such as “wee” meaning small, “bonny” meaning pretty, or “laddies and lassies” meaning boys and girls, have long been common to Scottish high literature and culture and have traveled to an extent that they would be understood by most Americans. However, there are other words in the script that are just as common to Scottish speech but that have not traveled outside the Scottish borders at all, and therefore risk not being understood by a non-Scottish audience. These include: “bairn” which is common slang for baby, “wifey” which refers to a middle-aged, often middle-class woman, and “barry” as a description for something that is great. The sentence structure also reflects the dialect, and sentences are regularly fragmented by the inclusion of a “ya ken” (you know) typical of speech in the East Coast of Scotland.

Confusion over the use of slang words is compounded when the text utilizes a word that is common to both American and Scottish casual speech, but has different meanings in each country. In *Trainspotting*, for example, when characters talk about being “pished” they are describing being drunk (in England they would say “pissed”), but the word in America is more likely to mean that the speaker is angry. Another point of confusion

²⁹ Sarah Hemming, reviewing the 1995 London production for the *Financial Times*, pointed this out when she wrote: “There is a danger, which this production hovers just the right side of, that once it loses the raw desperation and initial shock value, it could become too fashionable and slick for its own good.”

may come when characters refer to something being good “crack” as meaning good fun.³⁰ An American audience member, especially while experiencing a play about drugs, could be forgiven for thinking that the characters are talking about cocaine.

The American edition of the *Trainspotting* movie contained subtitles and dubs the voices at certain points in order for the audiences to understand the Scottish dialect, and the American edition of the novel contains a glossary at the back. The play, however, rarely comes with either of these and American audiences often report that they felt like they missed some of the speech at the beginning of the play and when the characters sped up too much. However, they also refer to the fact that their ears “tuned in” to the dialect after a couple of scenes. It would then be a good idea for a production dramaturg to pass on Clive Merrison’s advice that it is important to “plant” certain words a little more in the first few scenes.

When defining slang words in another dialect it is important also to give the actors an idea of the sociolinguistic codes imbedded in the choice of one particular slang word over another. For example, within the script of *Trainspotting* there are many different slang words for women, each one describing a different type of woman and imbued with the speaker’s attitude to that woman. The description of a woman as a “lassie” implies a pretty and youthful girl, a “burd” (bird) is likely to be an object of sexual desire, whereas a “wifey” is older, stuffy and completely asexual in the eyes of the speaker.³¹

³⁰ This is actually a common Irish slang word that has traveled as far as Scotland, but is rarely used in this way in the United States.

³¹ All these are sexist descriptions were deliberately chosen by Welsh as an accurate reflection of the society that he is portraying. Welsh criticized fellow Scottish writer Kelman for censoring his work in this

A production dramaturg can also trace the protagonist's attitude to heroin through the different slang labels placed on it. The first time Mark mentions his drug habit it is in a direct address to the audience where he states rather formally, almost as if at an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting: "Ah've had a long-standing problem wi *heroin* addiction. Ah feel it's important to be honest and mention this to you". In the next scene, within a conversation between Mark and Simon, Mark refers to Sick Boy as "sick with *junk* withdrawal." Amongst the group heroin is almost never referred to by its proper name. While injecting the drug it is described in sexual terms as "my beautiful heroin's tender caress" and as a "life-giving life-taking *elixir*." Mark, in denial, describes the drug to his friends as "*smack*.. an honest drug, because it strips away delusions." While hiding the drug from police, they refer to it as "gear" and then when swearing off the drug, Mark often refers to it as "skag" or "shite." These labels give a clear character arc, which could be very helpful to the actor playing Mark. The arc is a lot clearer with an understanding of how these various labels are used and understood in Scotland. For example, the words "gear" and "shite" have other common uses in Scottish dialect. Scots generally use the word "gear" with reference to items necessary to their lives. "Shite", on the other hand, is literally a waste product. Smack was probably the most common slang for heroin in both American and Britain in the 1980s. A knowledge of these sociolinguistic codes is invaluable to the actors since *Trainspotting* largely revolves around the characters attitudes to the drug that has taken control of their lives.

way, saying: "The problem I have with Kelman is that he seems ideologically to censor his characters. They are always non-sexist and non-racist. But I don't feel like you can put these parameters on the characters you've created. If they seem xenophobic or bigoted you have to let them speak that way." (L C Smith). It is rumored, however, that the sexist views embedded in *Trainspotting* lost Welsh the 1993 Booker Prize.

The mostly minor changes that were made to the script generally had to do with cultural references that would not have the same immediate obvious sociolinguistic code imbedded in them for an American audience as they did in Scotland. For example, in the opening of the second scene, Tommy bursts onto the stage and greets Mark with “Oh to, oh to be, oh to be a Hibe!” (the Hiberian Football Club chant). For a Scottish audience this immediately locates the play geographically in Leith (where the Hiberian Football Club is located) and in the time period when the chant was most popular. It establishes the friendship between Tommy and Mark while hinting at a shared cultural background. In the American production Tommy greets Mark with a simple “Hey.” While this could hint at the friendship it doesn’t contain any of the sociolinguistic codes of the original.

Harry Gibson, who directed the New York premiere production has indicated that one of the biggest linguistic challenges for the American producers was the amount of swear words used in *Trainspotting*. Gibson refused to censor these from his script, saying: “language makes a great paint stripper. Used like a tool and my actors know exactly when to say "fuck" - it can cut through walls of pretension and prejudice.”³² Fuck is also, as noted by Bill Bryson in his writing on the English language titled *Mother Tongue*, an extraordinarily versatile word:

“It can be used to describe a multitude of conditions and phenomena, from making a mess of something (*fuck up*) to being casual or provocative (*fuck around*), to inviting or announcing a departure (*fuck off*), to being estimable (*fuckin-A*), to being baffled (*I’m fucked if I know*), to being disgusted (*fuck*

³² Quoted from Chris Mitchell’s interview with Harry Gibson “Trainspotting the play ten years on”

this), and so on and on and on.”³³

The problem with swearing is that it has varying degrees of offense depending on the listener’s cultural background, and so there is an inherent danger in throwing so much swearing at an audience from another country. At Gibson’s own count this 50-page play contains a total of 147 mentions of the word “cunt.” This word is generally taboo in American conversation and rarely heard on the American stage. As Gibson explains, in the context of this play it is not meant to be used as a shock tactic, it is simply a part of these characters vocabulary: “In Edinburgh housing schemes, I explain to people, cunt is a laddish term of endearment. You can say "Y'cunt-ye" to a mate and it's quite cuddly.”³⁴

This kind of mis-communication of *Trainspotting*’s language may have contributed to the fact that Harry Gibson created “the darkest version ever”³⁵ for the New York premiere.

When asked how the New York production was received Harry Gibson replied:

Sympathy for junkies isn't big on Broadway. And the language is way too bad for uptown folks. But for eight weeks it was a must see for Soho artists and Greenwich Village actors. The movie actor Brian Denehey said to me, "That is the darkest show I have ever seen." And he's been to some very dark places. Australia though was the opposite. One guy said to me, "That's the funniest first ten minutes of a show I ever saw.”³⁶

³³ Bill Bryson. *The Mother Tongue: English and how it got that way*. New York: Harper Collins. 2001. P. 216.

³⁴ Bill Bryson. *The Mother Tongue: English and how it got that way*. New York: Harper Collins. 2001. P. 216

³⁵ Harry Gibson. “Trainspotting.” *4 Play: adapted from the bestselling novels and novellas of Irvine Welsh*. London: Vintage. 2001. p.11

³⁶ Chris Mitchell. “Expletives Repeated: an interview with Harry Gibson.” *Spike Magazine*. 1996. <<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0997spot.php>> accessed on 1 December 2006.

When swear words are used in American play scripts they tend to indicate a serious or dark tone and so American audiences may find it hard to see the humor behind the use of them at some points in this play.

Even the meaning of the play's title can be lost on the American audience. Trainspotting refers to a particularly British hobby involving hanging around in train stations and noting the model, destination and reference numbers of the trains that pass through. In Britain, trainspotters are stereotyped as introverted and boring, the very thing that the characters in this play are trying to avoid. Being labeled as trainspotters in the final scene by an old drunk therefore has definite negative connotations that motivate the subsequent violence.

The irony for the characters in the play is that the train station they are hanging about in has been abandoned, thus metaphorically eliminating their way out of their situation. The final scene of the script, entitled "Requiescant in Pace," shows Franco, Alison and Mark confronting a drunk at the abandoned Leith Central Station. Franco realizes the drunk is his father. In the British production Franco and Mark urinate on the drunk and laugh while Allison sings "My life goes on in endless song...how can I keep from singing?" The lights fade out on this disturbing scene in the station leaving the characters abandoned trainspotting in a place where there are no trains to spot. The American production used a different ending, where only Franco urinates on his father. Mark edges away towards a writing desk where he types the first couple of lines of the play, then looks at Alison and smiles as the lights fade out. While retaining the cyclical nature of

the story, the American version allows the audience some resolution by implying that Mark and Alison have managed to extricate themselves from the drug lifestyle.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its gritty subject matter and challenging dialect,

Trainspotting continues to be produced in theaters across America. The productions tend to be in small, independent theaters or in University or College environments.

Although I have found that a couple of these productions mixed Harry Gibson's play with extracts from Irvine Welsh's original novel to create their own stage adaptation, none of the productions I found moved the location of the play or even made cuts out of concern about the dialect. Indeed, reviews of these productions often single out actors in order to praise their mastery of the Scottish dialect.

Rob Dario, who played Johnny Swan, in a production of *Trainspotting* in Vallejo California, refers to the performance as one of his favorite experiences in the theater.³⁷ This being Dario's first experience working with a play in an unfamiliar dialect he reported being terrified at first, but that ultimately: "the dialect grounded me, linked me to the real world of the play and gave me a framework to work around."³⁸ Typically, both the cast and the audience for this production tended to be young, and Dario noticed a dissonance for the audience between the familiarity of seeing characters who could have been in their lives on stage and the fact that they were speaking in a dialect that the audience had to work hard to understand. This juxtaposition of being pulled in and pushed away at the same time is an interesting lens through which to view the drug

³⁷ Darkroom Production. Performed at The Setterly, Vallejo, California in November 2005.

³⁸ Telephone interview with Rob Dario, 23 January 2007.

culture depicted in the play. It points towards a fact, common to both *The History Boys* and *Trainspotting*, that while certain sociolinguistic codes imbedded in the language of plays may be lost to a foreign audience, the language gains a mystique by being spoken in its intended accent that can compliment the themes being presented.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSLATING DIALECT

How the Other Half Loves and Losing Louie

So far in this thesis, I have examined plays that deal with very specific British sub-cultures (a public boys school in 1980s Yorkshire in *The History Boys*, and the world of heroin-addicted youth on the streets of Edinburgh in the 1990s depicted in *Trainspotting*). When a British play concerns more general themes, such as marriage or family life, it is tempting for American producers to re-set the play in an American context in an attempt to bridge a seemingly unnecessary cultural divide. It is generally considered that this translation can be achieved in three easy steps. The translators firstly transport the setting to an equivalent geographic and social location in the United States. Next, they change any overtly British references or words to their American equivalent, (“nappy” becomes “diaper”, “wardrobe” becomes “closet”, “pavement” becomes “sidewalk”, etc.) The final step is to direct actors to speak the lines in the relevant American accent, and bingo the play will easily transpose itself to a context more familiar to American audiences who, once this culture barrier has been removed, find themselves better able to identify with the universal characters and themes in the play. In this chapter I will argue that there are problems with using such an easy formula and ignoring the wider sociolinguistic codes imbedded in the language of the original location.

By examining two relatively similar plays, I will illustrate the sociolinguistic concerns addressed by the dramaturg when translating a British play into an American context.

How the Other Half Loves is a comedy by celebrated British playwright Alan Ayckbourn. It was originally produced in 1970 at the Lyric Theatre in London and is written in a middle-class southern British dialect that complements the play's location in the English suburbs. Ayckbourn is noted for his manipulation of time and space on the stage, and *How the Other Half Loves* exemplifies this technique. The play concerns a trio of married couples involved in a series of miscommunications that result from the discovery of a love affair between the man from one couple and his boss's wife from another couple. It takes place during two dinner parties given on consecutive nights, but we see the action on stage at the same time and on a set that combines two separate houses into one space.

Losing Louis by Simon Mendes da Costa also takes place in suburban England, and also pulls us back and forth through time. This time two brothers and their wives have returned to the family home for their father's funeral. Although the setting remains as the dead man's bedroom throughout, the action of the present is interspersed with scenes from the past which slowly reveal the family secrets. *Losing Louis* premiered at the Hampstead Theatre in London in January 2005 and the American script titled *Losing Louie* premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC) in October 2006.

MTC Artistic Director, Lynn Meadow, was attracted to the comedic farce in *Losing Louis* that she found reminiscent of Alan Ayckbourn.³⁹ She also felt that her audiences would relate to Simon Mendes da Costa's portrait of middle-class, suburban, Jewish life.

³⁹ Telephone interview with MTC Play Development Associate and *Losing Louie* dramaturg, Aaron Leichter, 10 October 2006.

However, she suspected that her audience would relate better to the Jewish themes in the play if it were situated in New York rather than a town in England. Mendes da Costa welcomed the adjustment of the setting to New York, remarking that a company in Finland had already transplanted the story to Helsinki. The playwright explained that:

Everybody who's done this play wants to do it in their own vernacular and their own style... You're dealing with secrets, you're dealing with sibling rivalry, you're dealing with people having to let go of their blame and of the past. So these stories fit into any culture. Okay, there may be some cultures where the story wouldn't be told in this way, in this bedroom. But certainly in England and America and Australia, and apparently Finland as well.⁴⁰

The playwright's opinion that *Losing Louis* is easily translatable was backed up by at least one reviewer of the London production who wrote:

As for the references to such British cultural templates as "the offside rule" and Lanzarote, the cup of tea as a social cure-all and lesbian jokes as the last word in risqué speech, there's little that is sufficiently specific to *Losing Louis* that it couldn't be lost (or at least amended) in translation. Chopped liver, after all, is chopped liver, no matter how you slice it.⁴¹

MTC Play Development Associate, Aaron Leichter, worked with the playwright on the translation. The American language was then finessed by the cast in rehearsal. Leichter reports that the first dramaturgical problem was to locate the play in a New York town comparable geographically and culturally to the Midlands village of the original script. For example, it is important to the plot that there is no synagogue in easy reach. This justifies the Jewish family's decision to bury their father in the local church yard in a service officiated by the local minister, rather than by a Rabbi. They eventually decided on Pound Ridge, located at the northern end of Westchester county, in an older, more

⁴⁰ Manhattan Theater Club interview of Simon Mendes da Costa by dramaturg Aaron Leichter published on the company web-site on October 6, 2006. Interestingly Mendes da Costa goes on to note that the Australian production is the only one so far to retain the original British script and setting.

⁴¹ *Losing Louis*, *Variety.com* review of the Trafalgar Studios West End Production

traditional upper middle-class commuter city with not many Jews. This was in part a personal recommendation from Jerry Zaks, the director of the production, who had grown up in the area.⁴² The choice of this location then necessitated other decisions, such as deciding where the character of Sheila is dying to go on vacation. In the original British script she repeatedly infers that her husband never takes her out of the country. The American script translates this to a desire to go somewhere sunny and has Sheila asking her husband to take her to Miami, but at the end has her dreaming of Paris. This elevated aspiration articulates a definite character arc in Sheila that doesn't overtly exist in the original British version.

How the Other Half Loves was also re-located in to the New York area for its 1971 American premiere starring Phil Silvers at the Royale Theatre.⁴³ It was a simpler geographic re-location because Ayckbourn's play, unlike *Losing Louis*, contains fewer specific geographic reference points. Neither the British nor the American script specify a town, and this lack of specificity benefits the script as it reflects and enforces the uniformity of suburban sprawl. While the geographic location of *How the Other Half Loves* may be nebulous, its characters, plot twists and comedy are all deeply rooted within the British class system. The class of the characters is embedded in their language, which sends clear signals to British audience members. These sociolinguistic codes contribute to the social foibles that make this farce humorous. The opening lines of

⁴² But the problem pointed to a bigger thematic problem: that just as gay American audience members may not relate to the portrayal of homosexuality in *The History Boys*, secular Jews in Britain practice and identify with their religion in a different way than the secular Jewish population in America. In America, Jewish influences are more visible in mainstream culture than they are in Britain.

⁴³ Now known as the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre.

the play are a perfect example of this. As the curtain rises we are introduced to Fiona who responds to her husband Frank playing loud military music by saying:

“That’s rather grotesque, darling. Do you have to do that first thing in the morning? I’m sure that you’ll do yourself damage one of these days. It’s twenty past. Did you know?”

Frank: “That’s rather why I switched the radio on.”⁴⁴

Just from this brief exchange any British audience member would immediately know that this was an upper middle-class couple and would therefore understand which side of the merged living room set they inhabited. This information is received primarily through Fiona’s ironic choice of the term “darling” (typically reserved by most lower middle-class British speakers for moments of extreme affection) and Frank’s use of the conjuncture “rather”, a word rarely used by middle or working-class British speakers in this way. Our assumption of this couple’s class is confirmed a couple of lines later when Fiona reports that she needs the car because she has “got an awful lot of dashing around to do.” To which Frank replies that “It’s jolly inconvenient.” Fiona and Frank’s use of the words “awful”, “dashing” and “jolly” coaches their obvious irritation in a passive politeness typical of an upper-class English exchange - even in the privacy of their own home.

Their formality of speech is also apparent in the sentence structure and length of the lines, especially when compared to Bob and Theresa’s much more direct exchange which is happening at the same time:

Bob (replacing the telephone receiver): “Morning”

Theresa: “Hallo. Who was that?”

Bob: “Just Business”

⁴⁴ Alan Ayckbourn. *How the Other Half Loves*, Act one, scene one.

Theresa: “Oh”
Bob: “Any tea?”
Theresa: “Just made it.”
Bob: “Oh. Good.”
Theresa: “On the stove.”⁴⁵

Even if all four actors had been directed to speak in the same “Standard British” accent, the class difference would be apparent by the choice of words. This becomes important later in the first act, as it lends weight to the way that Theresa reacts when she discovers that Bob is having an affair with his boss’s wife (Fiona). She is very direct about her distress with Bob, but because of the acknowledgement of the class gap between the couples, Theresa’s exchanges with Fiona are couched in politeness, Frank and Fiona’s class meanwhile makes the way that they navigate her infidelity much more believable:

Fiona: “It really wasn’t – I mean – nothing – He wasn’t half as nice as you.”
Frank: “Oh”
Fiona: “Are you going to forgive me?”
Frank: “Yes, of course. I mean, nothing much else I can do, is there? So long as you don’t make a habit of it.”⁴⁶

This exchange is believable because it is the way that these characters have been relating to each other through the entire play. Earlier in the play, Frank had alerted Fiona to the fact that they were “out of bathroom stationery.”⁴⁷ People who use euphemisms for toilet paper in the privacy of their own house when speaking to a spouse, clearly have a level of societal politeness that is embedded in their language.

One of the hardest things to translate from British to American English are the subtleties of class difference as articulated through language. This is a problem because it is a pervasive theme through most contemporary British drama and one that often is the

⁴⁵ Alan Ayckbourn. *How the Other Half Loves* Act One, scene one.

⁴⁶ Alan Ayckbourn. *How the Other Half Loves* Act Two, scene two.

⁴⁷ Alan Ayckbourn. *How the Other Half Loves* Act One, scene one.

driving force of British farce.⁴⁸ A constant awareness of the class differences of the other characters on stage explain why things remain unsaid and why motives are misinterpreted. It thus grants the playwright the ability to create instant awkwardness by revealing secrets at inopportune moments.

Dramaturg Aaron Leichter confirmed that the class distinctions between the characters in *Losing Louis* were the hardest thing to maintain in the speech of their American counterparts. In America class differences are referred to in play scripts in more direct monetary terms, and so Leichter relied on specific product references to articulate the important class differences between the two couples. For example, much is made of the fact that Elizabeth and Reggie own a new model Jaguar and Ferrari, whereas Tony and Sheila drive a Honda Civic (in the original British script a Rover). Leichter admits that they did not work too hard to maintain the class differences between the two brothers in speech, partly because it was hard to transfer the slang in a way that made the class

⁴⁸ The emotionally charged language that refers to the British class divide has also been hard to translate in the genre of musical theater, a genre historically dominated by American theater artists.

The Full Monty, by Simon Beaufoy, was a hit as a British independent film in 1997. It depicts a group of Steel workers in Sheffield, where the industry was decimated in the 1980s by the Conservative Government. In desperation for easy cash, the men form a striptease show. The musical version of *The Full Monty*, written by Terrance McNally with music and lyrics by David Yazbek, also features unemployed steel-mill workers, but the story is transplanted to Buffalo, New York. Although the characters faced similar personal problems (unable to pay alimony, etc.), the musical version is all about the strip tease show, and has eliminated all political content regarding the strikes and class divisions that had dominated the original film.

In contrast, the musical version of *Billy Elliot*, this time translated for the stage by a British writer/composer team of Lee Hall and Elton John, retained the location and political content with songs about solidarity on the picket line and hating Margaret Thatcher. As a result, despite being a hit musical in the West End, it has taken time to find an American producer. (The Broadway premiere is slated for 2008). Ben Brantley wrote of the problem in his review of the London production of *Billy Elliot*, saying: “Speculation has it that with its thick regional accents, local slang and period political references, *Billy Elliot* may be too British for Broadway.”

references understandable to Americans, but also because it was determined at MTC that nuances in class were not as interesting for American audiences.

The only character that deliberately maintained her class in her speech pattern was Sheila, since Sheila's crass nature and social faux pas are integral to the plot. As a result, Sheila's lines, such as, "I won't go on about your drinking if you for once just belt up about my smoking"⁴⁹ were retained in the American script despite the British words and phrasing.

Once the location has been decided the next step is to change any direct references in the script to British products or institutions. For example, in *How the Other Half Loves* a stage direction referring to a character picking up the *TV Times* was changed to *TV Guide*, and Theresa's letters to the editor of *The Guardian* became letters to the editor of *The Times*. *Losing Louis* is also littered with this kind of British references to things like A-levels (which became AP tests in the American script). Although it is relatively easy to find equivalent products and institutions in each country, they are rarely exactly the same and mention of them therefore carries different sociolinguistic meanings in each culture. *The Guardian* is a mainstream newspaper that overtly states its Socialist bias and is mostly read by people in Britain who have a higher education. Although *The New York Times* is a good American equivalent it doesn't carry exactly the same message. Similarly, Advanced Placement tests in America are much less mainstream than A-levels are in Britain. Like the newspapers, they are a good equivalent, but AP tests carry their own sociolinguistic messages to the audience that A-levels don't contain.

⁴⁹ Simon Mendes da Costa. *Losing Louis*, Act One, scene four.

One of the most interesting changes that was made in translating the play *Losing Louis*, was the change in its title to *Losing Louie*. The playwright claimed that, in Britain, the name “Louis” is pronounced as if it’s French. So MTC states that it’s the same title, albeit with a more familiar feel, in America. This was a joint decision by the playwright and director, to give the play a more American feel.⁵⁰

How the Other Half Loves also contains an interesting and seemingly arbitrary change of name in the American version, which changed the last name of William and Mary from Featherstone to Detweiler. It is particularly noticeable in the script since William is repeatedly referred to by both Bob and Frank by his last name.

In both *How the Other Half Loves* and *Losing Louis* the casual language reflects the home environment in which each play is set. Formal English is much more uniform grammatically in both countries than informal. In other words, American and British University professors would probably have more language in common when delivering academic lectures, than American and British teenagers would have speaking to their friends at the mall. There are noticeably fewer script changes in the scenes in *Losing Louis* that happen in the past when the characters are speaking more formally to each other, even in their casual setting. This is most noticeably true when Louis is confessing how much he loves Bella in Act One scene three:

Bella: More than Paris loves Helen?

Louis: More than Rhett loves Scarlett.

Bella: More than Apollo loves Daphne?

⁵⁰ E-Mail correspondence with Aaron Leichter on 8 November 2006.

Louis: More than Heathcliff loves Cathy.

These lines remained the same in the British and American scripts, reflecting the shared literary tradition that enables both audiences to understand the same references to famous lovers.

Translating the casual language in these plays was not merely a case of translating isolated words and references, such as “wellies” to “boots” but also involved many casual phrases that are common place in England, but would have stood out in an American context. So, for example, “Come along” became “let’s go” and “That’s wonderful. Crikey” became “Gosh, that’s so wonderful.”⁵¹ As the latter example illustrates, once you change one word you often have to reconfigure the sentence in order to make it sound natural.

One of the biggest differences between casual American English and casual British English is how British speech patterns are a lot more indirect. So, for example, in *Losing Louis*, Sheila complains about her husband’s drinking. In the British script she says: “You’ve not started already?” The accusation in this question is implied. The American translation is much more direct: “Have you started drinking already?”⁵² Later in the same scene Tony decides to call his daughter. In the British script he says, “Thought I’d call Claire.” The American script replaces this lines with, “I want to speak to Claire.” Again, a much clearer and more direct statement of intent.

⁵¹ Simon Mendes da Costa. *Losing Louis* Act one, scene one.

⁵² Simon Mendes da Costa. *Losing Louis* Act one, scene two.

Linguist Peter Trudgill hypothesizes that indirect speech is used more often in societies that are historically more hierarchical in structure.⁵³ In order to avoid causing offence to listeners who have authority over you, speakers have learned to couch their statements in ambiguity, or say as little as possible. When Frank and Fiona are speaking to their dinner guests in *How the Other Half Loves* they dominate the conversation, so that the effect is almost like a monologue with their guests William and Mary interjecting the odd affirmation to show they are still listening. This sends very clear messages to the audience as to the confidence that Frank and Fiona have of their social standing.

Indirect speech also leaves more room for subtext. British humor often relies on indirect speech as an aid to dramatic irony. This is particularly apparent in Ayckbourn's comedy which relies heavily on qui-pro-quo exchanges, such as this conversation between Mary and Frank, where he attempts to console her about her husband William's affair. Mary has no idea what he is talking about:

Frank: A lot of men get up to this sort of thing, you know. But it blows over.

Mary: Does it?

Frank: Almost invariably.

Mary: What does?

Frank: If you're in any sort of trouble at all – you know the sort of trouble I mean – please feel you can come and chat it over with me, or my wife. I won't try and pretend that William isn't going to be a great asset in our department. And it's my job, in so far as possible, to see he's happy. But I think that includes you.

Mary: Thank you.

Frank: My wife put me in the picture about you, you see.

Mary: Did she?

Frank: Oh yes. We don't have any secrets between us....⁵⁴

⁵³ Peter Trudgill. *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society*. London: Pelican Books. 1974. p.117

⁵⁴ Alan Ayckbourn *How the Other Half Loves*, Act one, scene two.

The irony also occurs in the fact that the audience already knows that Mary's husband's supposed affair is a ruse to cover Fiona's actual affair. This entire exchange, however, relies on a hesitancy and circuitousness that is typical of British exchange, and fairly untypical in America. The American script made two interesting adjustments to the above exchange. Firstly, in order to stress the class difference between the two characters the American script added Frank repeatedly referring to Mary as "my dear". Secondly, Mary's second line "What does?" was cut. In order to retain believability of the qui-pro-quo exchange the American script deleted this direct questions.

The humor imbedded in the language of *Losing Louis* was largely kept intact in its American translation. One of the most frequent criticisms of this play by American critics was that the overt sexual humor was inappropriate to the style of social farce that many compared to that of Neil Simon. Sociolinguistic theory refers to people having a different "verbal repertoire" depending on where they are. For example, you may be comfortable hearing verbal abuse thrown if you were in the midst of a crowd at a hockey game, but you would be shocked to hear the same sort of language used by congregants at a church service.⁵⁵ In *Losing Louie*, perhaps the formality forced on the American characters by the original British language, made the overt sexuality and jokes seem misplaced. It is possible that Americans are not used to middle-class sitting room dramas including crude sexual conversations such one in which the two brothers – one circumcised and one not – compare notes on masturbation. Anyone who has watched British situational comedies on television in the past decade would realize that British

⁵⁵ Peter Trudgill. *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society*. London: Pelican Books. 1974. p. 81

audiences are very accustomed to such things. Indeed, although the British press did have some problems with *Losing Louis* they did not mention the sexuality at all, whereas almost every US review of the production included the sexuality in its list of grievances.

Even if the writer had found the perfect American setting to compliment the cultural and economic backgrounds of the originally British characters, there are other problems with transplanting the action. This was articulated by Michael Feingold in his review of the Manhattan Theatre Club's American premiere production of *Losing Louie*: "The constantly rainy weather, like the endless grotty jokes about sex, bathrooms and funerals, belong to the mother country's cultural apparatus."⁵⁶

Not only is the constant rain particularly evocative of British summer weather, but as Peter Trudgill points out in his introduction to sociolinguistics, English people talk about the weather when they can't think of anything else to say but feel uncomfortable with silence.⁵⁷ It's a cliché, but almost every British audience member would both understand the cliché and have experienced this kind of conversation personally.

A similar truism is the British obsession with drinking tea (perhaps as a comfort from the constant rain!) It may sound stereotypical for an American, but in Britain people expect to be offered cups of tea several times a day, not just to quench thirst but as a comfort and show of hospitality and polite company. It is rare to be invited into a British home

⁵⁶ Michael Feingold *Two if by Sea: A Pair of non-English English plays forge into Broadway's deep waters*

⁵⁷ Peter Trudgill. *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society*. London: Pelican Books. 1974. p.1

without being offered a cup of tea. In the British version of *Losing Louis*, Sheila repeatedly offers her husband Tony a cup of tea in an attempt to both sober him up and calm him down. The American script changes the reference to a cup of coffee, a similar beverage that is more commonly drunk in American homes than is tea, but coffee simply does not have the same sociolinguistic codes embedded in it. The American play therefore cuts the repeated offer of beverages, and Sheila simply waits until Tony has calmed himself down before offering him a cup of coffee once.

Even with all the changes that MTC made to the *Losing Louis* script, a British audience member in New York asked Leichter if this had originally been written by a British playwright, saying that there was something about the rhetorical devices embedded in the lines that felt British. This led Leichter to conclude that ultimately it was still British writing because of the way the characters work: “I don’t know if there is ever a perfect adaptation of this kind given artistic intention and cultural differences.”⁵⁸

It seems that Alan Ayckbourn would agree with this sentiment and, even though the American version of *How the Other Half Loves* was relatively successful, playing for one hundred performances and introducing Ayckbourn’s work to a Broadway audience, Ayckbourn himself still considered that director Gene Saks’s Americanized language

⁵⁸ Telephone interview with Aaron Leichter, 20 October 2006

It is interesting to compare these theatrical translations with recent television series’ that have made the leap from Britain to America. The most successful recent television transplant is *The Office* which provided the American producers with the character relationships and work situation in which they have found themselves, and let them create the actual script from scratch. Other programs such as *Coupling* and *Men Behaving Badly* make the mistake of copying jokes word for word which ended up seeming forced when they came out of an American character’s mouth. In these cases, the script seemed misplaced and uncomfortable when shoe-horned into an American context.

“removed a lot of the richness and charm of the original script”.⁵⁹ The playwright has gone on to have many of his works produced in the United States but has never consented to have another script translated into an American context. However, although both versions are available for production in the United States, the American version of the script remains far more popular for both professional and amateur production.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Quoted in Simon Murgatroyd *The Alan Ayckbourn Archive Playguide*

⁶⁰ a representative at Samuel French reported that all five of the professional productions of *How the Other Half Loves* that were licensed in the United States in since 2003 used the American script. Telephone conversation, 5 February 2007.

CONCLUSION

One of the ways that theater enriches our lives is by encouraging empathy and allowing us to view the world through different eyes. Despite linguistic difficulties therefore, it is important that we keep producing theater from other countries. In theater, all the playwright's ideas and images must be communicated to the audience through the language choices in the play script. Even if this language is articulated exactly as the playwright intended it to be, an audience in another country may misunderstand, misinterpret or simply miss key plot points. The dramaturgical challenge, then, is to facilitate the dialogue between the play and its audience, to ensure that the playwright's and director's visions are communicated as effectively as possible.

It is tempting for Americans to see a foreign play written in English as being easily accessible and therefore not requiring the sort of linguistic support from a dramaturg that would be deemed necessary for a play written in a different language. Ignoring the dialect that the play is written in, however, risks divorcing that play from its context and robbing it of many of its meanings. This thesis supports an argument that sociolinguistic analysis is a useful tool for the dramaturgical analysis of any play text, but it is especially important when considering of plays written in a dialect foreign to the audience.

For example, consider the dilemma faced by Scottish playwright Douglas Maxwell, whose play *Helmet*, written in his native Scottish dialect is being considered for the New York Fringe festival this summer. This being Maxwell's American premiere, he told me

that he wanted to make “a plea for no Scots accents.... [since he] hate[s] false accents and it’s not vital...”⁶¹ I agree with Maxwell that the accent may not be as ingrained in the play as it is in Harry Gibson’s script for *Trainspotting* for example. However, I do think that if we lose the accent we also risk losing much of the musicality and humor in the language he has written. It will still be Maxwell’s plot but will it still be his voice? Clive Merrison’s comment about Alan Bennett being a constant presence on stage in *The History Boys*, also rings true for *Helmet*, which likewise springs from autobiography.

I was also alert to Maxwell’s use of the word “accents” rather than “dialect” in his plea. If there were no Scots accents in the production, there would presumably also be no Scots dialect. If we uproot the play in this way we will have to re-plant it somewhere. As I learned from studying the translations of *Losing Louie* and *How The Other Half Loves*, this will likely mean altering the location, references and character backgrounds in *Helmet*. These changes require careful consideration if they are not to undermine the tone and plot of the original script.

As in both *Losing Louie* and *How the Other Half Loves*, the humor of *Helmet* relies to a large extent on the audience and characters sharing a set of social norms, expectations and customs. These social norms dictate what is spoken about, what is not spoken about and the manner in which the characters communicate.

For example, British plays often rely on the still-rigid class system of their native country to set up awkward situations on which to hang their plot. This class system is often

⁶¹ e-mail correspondence with Douglass Maxwell, 13 February 2007.

de-emphasized or overlooked by American theater artists in their readings of the play. Whether or not the American director decides to stress the class differences in their production, it is an important dramaturgical consideration to look at how the language of the play is influenced by the class of the characters. Ignoring class can leave the actors wondering at the motivation for certain, seemingly unnecessary lines, but cutting these lines risks eliminating the complexities of the relationships portrayed on stage. Careful sociolinguistic analysis of the script can lead the American director to some creative ways to overcome this problem.

In *Helmet*, for example, the relationship between an Indian shop keeper and a young white boy who loiters in the store relies to a degree on the audience's shared understanding of the tensions between these racial groups in Scotland. These tensions are communicated through the speech of the characters and would need to be understood in order to sensitively translate the characters to an American context.

I advised Maxwell that a decision to use American dialect will probably lead to the creation of a separate American script for *Helmet*. If this is the direction that Maxwell and his American producers and director would like to go in, then I recommend Maxwell work with American collaborators to re-locate the play, but ultimately write the new American lines himself, so that his sense of humor and understanding of the characters be retained in the new version.

Should Maxwell and the company decide to use the Scottish version of the script in the American premiere, we are back to the original dilemma presented in this thesis: whether or not to perform the play in the Scots accent. This dramaturgical decision needs to include due consideration of the audience for whom the production is intended (in this case an off-Broadway New York audience). The problem with using American accents to read a Scottish script is that the language will appear false and divorced from the voices speaking it.

If the decision is made to retain the original accents, we can assume that Maxwell's stated hatred of "false accents" leads the director to either cast native Scottish actor or actors who are trained to affect convincing Scottish accents. In this case, (as in *The History Boys*) the audience will receive essentially the same performance as a Scottish audience would and the integrity of the characters and plot will remain intact. Since they are hearing the play in an unfamiliar accent, there will inevitably be some moments that the audience will not catch. This is often particularly true at the beginning of the script, since audiences often need time to "tune in". In this case, it will be helpful for the actors to slow down their speech or "plant" key words carefully. But, as the success of the American production of *The History Boys* attests, sometimes the audience doesn't need to understand all the references on stage, as long as the actors understand them, the audience can be carried along for the ride.

There is an added consideration that, if it is performed in Scottish dialect, the play will be classified by American producers and critics as a Scottish play. The Scots language

allows the audience to transport themselves through the actors' voices to a time and place they have never been. This works for *Trainspotting*, which is was partly written to draw attention to a particular location, population and social problem. The fact that Irvine Welsh wrote the text of *Trainspotting* phonetically in a Scottish dialect forces the actors into the poetic rhythms of the play and to a large extent informs the characters. In contrast, Maxwell reports that when writing *Helmet* he never considered the geographic location to be important, but simply wrote from a perspective and situation that he was personally familiar. Since this production of the play will introduce American audiences and producers to Maxwell's work, it is interesting to consider whether the perception that his writing is dialect-specific will promote interest in his work or turn people off.⁶²

It is neither feasible nor desirable for an American production to attempt to replicate a British production of a British play. It is important to take into account the broad reference points of the audience in attendance. If the play is going to be performed with a British accent, it may be necessary to "soften" the accent and "plant" certain words in order for the audience to understand what is being said. It may also be necessary to cut certain lines, jokes or references that will be misunderstood or confusing for the American audience. However, an understanding of the sub-text and sociolinguistic codes embedded in the play can help inform the company as to how the playwright meant the story to be told. They can then make dramaturgical choices that either reflect the original

⁶² There has been much discussion amongst American critics as to whether contemporary British plays are lauded simply by virtue of being British and if we, as American audience members, have different criteria for American and British drama on our stages. (Ben Brantley "Jolly Good Show... Or Was It?", Mark Steryn "What the Brits are Swearing.")

intent of the play or consciously change it, with the aim of giving every audience an opportunity to interact with the story that is being told in the fullest way possible.

APPENDIX

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

The following series of dramaturgical questions and sociolinguistic concerns would be useful to consider when producing a play that was written in a foreign dialect:

1. Am I interested in presenting the play in its original dialect or transporting it to a dialect common to the audience? If using the original dialect continue with 2 - 6, if transporting the dialect go to 6-10.
2. Will my audience be familiar with the accent? What pre-conceived associations do they have with the accent? How will these associations effect the way they view the characters, relationships and themes depicted in the play?
3. If the audience is largely unfamiliar with the accent, is the accent so thick that it will be important to slow down the delivery or “soften” the accent in order that the lines be understood? Are there any specific lines, references or words that it will be important to “plant” in order that the audience understand the major themes and action of the play?
4. Are there any references, words or phrases that will not be understood by my audience? How important is it to the play that they are understood? Is there a way that the actors can aid the audience in understanding these words by the way that they inflect their voices or by using a physical gesture?
5. Is my audience likely to be offended by any of the language in a way that was not intended by the playwright? How is this offense likely to effect the way that they view the play?
6. Do all the characters in the play all speak with the same dialect, or are there social differences such as class, race, ethnicity, religion written into the lines? How important are these social differences to the play? Will they translate effectively to my audience?

7. Where can I geographically locate the play so that the characters and setting fit in a way that will not disturb the essential story? What considerations does this change of location bring to the situations the characters find themselves in?

8. Which names and references specific to the original location of the play will need to be changed? How do these changes effect the characters and themes?

9. How does the sentences structure need to changes in order to make the characters voices sound natural in their new setting?

10. Can these changes be made in a way that still retains the unique voice of the playwright and the tone of the play?

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