
Grammar lost in translation: A garden path in Christie's *Murder is Easy*

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Agatha Christie's detective stories are essentially of the 'whodunnit' genre, starting with one or more crimes (usually murders), bringing to the fore multiple suspects and in the final *dénouement* revealing the perpetrator of the crime, showing that he or she had the capacity and opportunity to commit the crime, as well as tracing its motive. The *dénouement* is achieved through the agency of a lead investigator, e.g. Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot etc. When developing her intricate plots, Christie also deploys grammatical and stylistic tools to create clues and red herrings for the alternative solutions to the mystery (Seago 2014). The present paper concentrates on Christie's implementation of referential ambiguity as a tool in developing the plotline. In the work under discussion, Christie misleads the reader by means of a 'garden path' ambiguity, carefully ensuring that the reader entertains the inappropriate interpretation of a referential ambiguity till the moment of *denouement*.

In *Murder is Easy*, the relevant 'garden path' ambiguity is created by the grammatical device of subject drop. This grammatical pattern, characteristic of informal spoken English, will first be introduced, after which Christie's use of subject drop and its implications for the development of the plotline will be considered in detail. The focus of the discussion is the last line in (1):

- (1) Matter of fact we had a bit of a row over something. Blinking bird she had
– one of those beastly tittering canaries – always hated them – bad business
– wrung its neck. (*Murder is Easy*: 178)

Two interpretations of *wrung its neck* are in competition: (i) 'I', i.e. the speaker, the default interpretation of the sentence in isolation, and (ii) 'she', the discourse topic, an interpretation which is consistent with the containing context. The second interpretation turns out to be correct. Interpreted correctly, this passage provides a clue to the identification of the perpetrator of the crime, by revealing their killer instinct, i.e. their capacity for killing, and their motive for the murders. I will show that the crucial line *wrung its neck* is echoed at various places reconnecting back to the ultimate cause of the crimes. Through these passages Christie maintains the garden path ambiguity, initially reinforcing the misleading default interpretation, and subsequently reversing to the correct interpretation. The second section of this paper investigates how the pivotal sentence *wrung its neck* is rendered in translation in Dutch, Italian and French.

References: • Seago, K. (2014). Introduction and overview: crime (fiction) in translation. *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 22, 2–14.