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Tropes in translation

An analysis of Dutch creative collocations and compounds translated into English

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Introduction

This thesis researches ‘normalisation’ in literary translation by analysing six prize-winning Dutch¹ novels translated into English by six top-tier literary translators. The novels in question are *Bonita Avenue* by Peter Buwalda; *De inscheper* by Otto de Kat; *De helaasheid der dingen* by Dimitri Verhulst; *Rupert, een bekentenis* by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer; *Sluiterijd* by Erwin Mortier; and *Spijkerschrift* by Kader Abdolah. Translated into English by Jonathan Reeder, Sam Garrett, David Colmer, Michele Hutchison, Ina Rilke and Susan Massotty respectively, their English titles read: *Bonita Avenue*; *Man on the Move*; *The Misfortunates*; *Rupert: A Confession*; *Shutterspeed*; and *My Father’s Notebook*. These six novels contain a wealth of quirky, creative language, making them invaluable case studies for anyone interested in the question of whether, and if so how, creative language gets normalised in world-class literary translation.²

There are various ways to define normalisation but the definition offered by Scott (1998, p. 112 in Delaere, I. & Sutter, G. 2017, p. 82) will suffice to get us started; it reads: “a term generally used to refer to the translator’s sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious rendering of idiosyncratic text features in such a way as to make them conform to the typical textual characteristics of the target language”.

1.1 How My Interest was Aroused

I first became interested in the question of normalisation in literary translation eight years ago when I was commissioned to translate the Dutch author Stephan Enter’s short story *Weerstand* (“Resistance”) for *Best European Fiction 2010*, edited by Aleksandar Hemon. When the corrected draft of my translation came back from the line editor, I was startled to see how some of the more unusual phrases had been transformed into something more normal. On the very first page, for instance, I was confronted by the following change: the phrase *een kastanjekleurige, tot spiegel opgewreven toog*, which I had translated as “a chestnut-brown bar, polished to a mirror gloss”, had been transformed by the editor into the more common and also

1 In line with the policy adopted by the *Nederlandse Taalunie*, here ‘Dutch’ refers to both the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands and the Dutch spoken in Flanders.

2 This thesis looks only at the questions of *whether* and *how*; the question of *why* is far too complex to address here, a point I justify at length in chapter 11.

more explanatory “[a] chestnut-brown bar, polished until it could serve as a mirror”. My own version, of which I later felt quite critical, had already toned down the Dutch metaphor to a “mirror gloss” (the original Dutch equates the bar with an actual mirror: A BAR POLISHED INTO A MIRROR), but the edited version had toned it down even more by painstakingly explaining the metaphor in the phrase “until it could serve as a mirror”. As a translator, I had always grappled with the question of how literal, idiomatic or free one was ‘allowed’ to be, and my experience of translating Stephan Enter for *Best European Fiction* only made me grapple more.

1.2 Descriptive Translation Studies

A year or so after my translation was published I discovered the field of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), which helped me to think about the issue in an entirely new way. This is because DTS addresses the question of how literal, idiomatic or free translations *should be* by, paradoxically, avoiding it. In other words, it replaces the *should-be* question with a systematic description of how literal, idiomatic or free translations *actually are* – across cultures, across place and across time. Founder of this approach was the by now legendary Gideon Toury, who introduced the notion of assumed equivalence – the idea that any translation is considered a legitimate translation if it is “presented or regarded as such within the target culture on whatever grounds.” (Toury, 1985, p. 20)³ The notion of assumed equivalence formed a radical break from the prescriptivism of the past, a prescriptivism that had dominated thinking about translation since antiquity, from Cicero to St. Jerome and from Luther to Nabokov (Schulte & Biguenet, 1992; Weissbort & Eysteinsson, 2006; Pym, 2010; Munday, 2012), and which I too had internalised, albeit in a self-critical, self-doubting way. Assumed equivalence freed translation scholars, and with it myself, from the arduous task of endlessly obsessing over the correctness of a particular translation solution and opened the way to the much more liberating job of describing how translations are actually created, in all their glorious multiplicity – and complexity. In other words, DTS, along with its notion of assumed equivalence, ushered in a whole new era of empirical translation scholarship.

1.3 Ria Vanderauwera and Polysystems Theory

One of the first, and oft-cited, studies to be carried out within this new empirical framework was Ria Vanderauwera’s 1985 publication *Dutch Literature Translated into English, The Transformation of a ‘Minority’ Literature*, a seminal work whose findings also resonated with my own (limited) experience. In it she surveyed some

3 This idea of assumed equivalence can perhaps also be traced back to Catford’s (1965) term “textual equivalence”.

50 Dutch novels translated into English between 1950 and 1980, observing how the creativity or quirkiness of the Dutch had often been toned down in English translation. She summarised these observations in the much quoted claim that “translators of Dutch fiction [into English] exhibited reserve in rendering unusual and mannered imagery and word choice in the target text” (ibid, p. 108), where ‘translators’ should be interpreted as referring not only to translators themselves but also to anyone involved in the final product, such as editors and grant-giving authorities.⁴

The examples Vanderauwera gave to illustrate her claim were manifold, ranging from the level of the word, phrase and sentence to the level of the paragraph and even the entire novel. For instance, of Ruyslinck’s novel *De ontaarde slapers* (trans. *The Depraved Sleepers*, 1957, R.B Powel, 1968), Vanderauwera noted how the curious two-word phrase *geurig verhaal* (Ruyslinck, 1957, p. 81) had been transformed into the idiomatic collocation “vivid story” (Powel, 1968, p. 48 in Vanderauwera, 1985, p. 108). Likewise of Teirlinck’s novel *Zelfportret of het Galgemaal* (trans. *The Man in the Mirror*, James Brockway, 1963) she noted how the quirky phrase *de uitgedunde harigheid* (lit. THE THINNED OUT HAIRINESS) and the longer *de ontkleurdeheid van uw voetspieren* (lit. THE FADEDNESS/FADED COLOURNESS OF YOUR FOOT MUSCLES) (Teirlinck, 1955, p. 22 in Vanderauwera, 1985, p. 39), had been rendered as “the thinness of the hair” and “the pallor of your muscles”(Brockway, 1963, p. 9 in *ibid*, p. 39).

Moving on to the level of the sentence, Vanderauwera (1985, p. 47) noted how in Bordewijk’s novel *Karakter*, the repetition of *zij stonden op een kleine spookachtige plek van de nuchtere stad, onder de zeldzame spookachtige plekken de kleinste en spookachtigste* (Bordewijk 1938, p. 248) had been simplified to “they were standing on a small spooky spot of the otherwise sober town” (trans. *Character*, Peter Owen, 1969, p. 196). And at the level of the entire novel she noticed how, for instance, Walschap’s novella *Celibaat* glided between the present and past tense, but how the translation fixed the narrative more conventionally in the simple past (ibid, p. 47). In addition she noticed how dialogue, implicit in the Dutch, was made explicit in the translation by the addition of quotation marks, as in *ge meent het niet met mij, zegt ze dikwijls, ge amuseert u maar wat* (Walschap, 1934, p. 51), which was rendered as “‘you aren’t serious with me,’ she often used to say, ‘You’re only passing the time’” (in *Marriage / Ordeal* trans. Alex Brotherton, 1963, p. 162).

Vanderauwera’s observations (more copious than the few examples given here) consisted of specific instances, analysed against a backdrop of specific conditions of production and reception, such as the readership, the publishing house, the financiers

4 The Dutch Foundation for Literature provides translation subsidies to foreign publishers on the condition that they use ‘approved translators’. The work of these translators is subject to quality control.

of the project, and perhaps most importantly of all, the relative status of source and target language (see below). So the important thing to bear in mind here is that Vanderauwera's observations were not only linguistic in nature, they were also cultural in nature. This is because they were influenced by polysystems theory, a socio-cultural theory of literature and literary translation, which Toury's colleague, Even-Zohar (1978/1990) had 'borrowed' from the Russian Formalists and imported into Translation Studies (Baker and Saldanha, 2009, p. 297).

Polysystems theory, when applied to translation, makes two major claims: (1) that literary translations are part of a larger literary system; and (2) that literary translations can occupy either a central (i.e. established) or peripheral (i.e. marginalised) position within that larger literary system. So taking inspiration from this theory, Vanderauwera argued that Dutch fiction translated between 1950 and 1985 occupied a peripheral position within the entire system of fiction published in English. And that this peripheral or minority status served as an explanation for the fact that many of the "translators of Dutch fiction exhibited reserve in rendering unusual and mannered imagery and word choice in the target text". In other words, translations from Dutch were expected to adhere to the norms (perhaps even the exaggerated norms (Baker 1996, p. 177) of English, the dominant system, and not to import into that system the quirkiness of Dutch.

1.4 Corpus Linguistics and Translation 'Universals'

Vanderauwera's much cited study of *Dutch* literature was particular in nature but it has, over the decades, contributed to key hypotheses concerning (literary) translation in general. These key hypotheses state that translations in general tend to be more simple, more explicit and more conventional than their corresponding source texts, irrespective of the languages involved. Research into these claims took off properly in the 1990s when corpus linguistics started to blossom. For although Vanderauwera's findings from the 1980s were based on a *corpus* of Dutch novels and their English translations, she conducted her research 'manually'. In other words she made no use of what we now understand to be corpus techniques. She did not, for instance, compare her corpus of Dutch source texts (STs) and English target texts (TTs) in terms of specific, well-defined features, stipulated in advance; nor were her comparisons exhaustive. Rather she selected salient examples from her 50-odd novels and, despite the enduring quotability of her findings, we have no way of knowing whether her examples of simplification, explicitation and normalisation were representative of her entire corpus, let alone (literary) translation in general.⁵ It

⁵ It would be difficult to go back to Vanderauwera's corpus and rigorously investigate all of the features she mentions because (1) it would be a nuisance to digitise her entire corpus, part of which is now

would take a spurt of technological innovation and a couple of generations of corpus TS scholars to study and test these new exciting claims in a more systematic way, studies which I will briefly – and selectively – review in Sections 1.4.1; 1.4.2; and 1.5 below. But first a quick word on the supposed nature and causes of simplification, explicitation and normalisation within the field of translation.

As we have seen, Vanderauwera analysed her findings in terms of cultural norms (i.e. a minority literature subjected to the norms of a majority literature), but once corpus linguistics had joined forces with translation research there followed a number of influential studies hoping to prove what has now turned out to be the largely discredited hypothesis that simplification, explicitation and normalisation are ‘universal’ features of translations (e.g. Laviosa-Braithwaite (1997), Laviosa⁶ (1998) and Olohan and Baker (2000), discussed further below). It is worth spelling this out here because the search for translation universals – bolstered by the building of corpora – has fuelled much of the research into simplification, explicitation and normalisation over the past couple of decades. In other words, research into simplification, explicitation and normalisation has, over the past couple of decades, been driven by the hypothesis that these features might be universal features of translation.

Highly controversial though the universalist claim now is, let’s backtrack to 1993 and witness Mona Baker declaring with much fanfare that Translation Studies was about to emerge from a motley field of loosely related subjects into a mature, well-defined discipline:

Large corpora will provide theorists of translation with a unique opportunity to observe the object of their study and to explore what it is that makes it different from other objects of study, such as language in general or indeed any other kind of cultural interaction. It will also allow us to explore, on a larger scale than was ever possible before, the principles that govern translational behaviour and the constraints under which it operates. Therein lie the two goals of any theoretical enquiry: to define its object of study and to account for it. (Baker, 1993, p. 235)

At the heart of this transformation from field to so-called discipline lay a host of recently built translational corpora (e.g. the Translational English Corpus TEC⁷; the English Comparable Corpus ECC (see Laviosa 1997); the English Norwegian Parallel Corpus (see Olohan 2006); and COMPARA, a parallel bidirectional corpus

out of print, and (2) it would be well-nigh impossible for a single researcher to analyse Vanderauwera’s +/- 25 linguistic features spread across 50 odd novels without drowning in a gigantic pile of data.

6 She dropped the Braithwaite from her name.

7 See <https://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/translation-and-intercultural-studies/research/projects/translational-english-corpus-tec/>.

of Portuguese and English fiction (see Frankenberg-Garcia and Santos 2003)) ready to lay bare ‘the nature of translational language’ to any scholar eager to use them; and that ‘nature’ was expected to reside in “features which typically occur in translated texts rather than original utterances and which are not the result of interference from specific linguistic systems” (Baker, 1993, p. 243). And those features were expected to include precisely those patterns which had been observed earlier by Vanderauwera 1985, namely patterns of simplification, explicitation and normalisation.⁸

Now that we have seen the relationship between corpora and translation universals on the one hand, and research into simplification, explicitation and normalisation on the other, it is time to look at a few actual studies. But before I begin, it is worth noting the following: although simplification, explicitation and normalisation can, and often do, overlap (as indeed my case studies will reveal) researchers tend to treat them as if they were three distinct phenomena. So for the purposes of this brief survey I will also treat them separately.

1.4.1 Simplification and Explicitation

Among the many researchers to adopt the new corpus paradigm was Laviosa-Braithwaite (1997) and Laviosa (1998), whose broad-brush comparison of translated versus non-translated newspaper articles and narrative prose fiction (taken from the ECC and the BNC) suggested that for both genres, translations were simpler than original texts to the extent they had lower lexical densities and a greater propensity to use high frequency words.

A few years later, Olohan and Baker (2000) discovered that the optional *THAT* after the reporting verbs *SAY* and *TELL* was far more frequent in the TEC (Translation English Corpus) than it was in the BNC (British National Corpus), a fact that was interpreted as evidence of translation-inherent explicitation. And a few years after that, Frankenberg-Garcia (2004) reported that the translations in *COMPARA* (a bidirectional corpus of Portuguese and English literary texts) were on average 5% longer than the source texts, irrespective of the translation direction – a fact which was also interpreted as evidence of translation-inherent explicitation (the assumption being that the translations are longer because they spell things out to a greater degree than their source texts).

1.4.2 Normalisation

As we have seen in the previous paragraph, simplification and explicitation have been operationalised in seemingly straightforward ways. But the operationalisation

8 Other universals were proposed as well, such as the Law of Interference and the Unique Items Hypothesis, but these will not be discussed here.

of normalisation is a more complex matter. Malmkjaer (1998), for instance, did not operationalise it at all, and neither did Øverås (1998) in her seminal study of Norwegian and English literary translation entitled “In Search of the Third Code: An Investigation of Norms in Literary Translation”, even though the ‘Third Code’ of her title was a tribute to the empirical idea of a universal language of translation (harking back to Frawley, 1984, p. 168).

It was not until the next millennium, once bigger and ‘better’ corpora had been made available to the research community, that normalisation would be operationalised properly. One of the first researchers to do this was Kenny (2001) in her book *Lexis and Creativity in Translation, A Corpus-based Study*. Here Kenny used frequency counts in what for that time were very large reference corpora (namely the BNC and the newly revamped Mannheim Corpora) to help her decide whether or not creative lexis in her corpus of German novels had been normalised in English translation.⁹ Although subsequent studies have looked at, and thus operationalised, normalisation in different ways, (e.g. William’s (2010) as the avoidance of loanwords in favour of endogenous synonyms; or Şerban (2004) as a shift from definite to indefinite reference), Kenny’s study remains a hallmark of method when it comes to creative lexis, and it is her method to which my own is indebted. (I shall return to this in Chapter 2.) Although Kenny’s study of normalisation was never intended to address the question of universals, her findings have sometimes been taken to provide evidence of them (Munday, 2012, p. 96). However, as we will see below, normalisation (along with simplification and explicitation) has by now almost disentangled itself from the whole question of translation universals.

1.5 Translation ‘Universals’ Discredited

Two and a half decades after Baker’s (1993) publication, corpus TS scholarship has reached a more measured position. For although corpus studies went on to generate more evidence of normalisation, explicitation and simplification. (e.g. Bernardini’s 2007 study revealing greater collocationality in the translational part of an English-Italian comparable corpus of translated and non-translated literary texts), their status as ‘universal’ features of translation is now widely questioned.¹⁰ This questioning took various forms: there have been studies showing that so-called universals are

9 NB. Kenny could only use the frequency counts for words, not collocations (as will be explained in Chapter 2.2 below).

10 I do not wish to give the impression that universalist theories were at any point universally adopted. There were many who were critical of them from the outset, namely scholars who might consider their approach to Translation Studies influenced more by cultural analysis than by hard-nosed empirical research e.g. Hermans, Arrojo, Venuti, Tymoczko. Nevertheless much research space has been dedicated to translations universals over the past two and a half decades, of which normalisation was an important aspect.

in fact genre specific (Kruger & van Rooy, 2012, Delaere et al., 2012); or language-pair specific (Delaere & De Sutter, 2017). Then there have been other studies which failed to uncover any evidence of normalisation at all (Marco, 2009); and studies where mixed results were found (e.g. Kenny, 2001). At the same time there has been renewed interest in the stylistic fingerprints of individual translators (e.g. Baker, 2001, Saldahna, 2005, Bosseaux, 2007); and new interest in the influence of personality and emotions on translation (Hubscher-Davidson, 2009, 2016, 2017); and even the influence of home working conditions on literary translation (Kolb, 2018).

The studies discussed in the previous paragraph were data-driven, but from a purely theoretical point of view, the idea of translation universals was criticised too: commentators such as House (2008) and Becher (2011) pointed out that translation is necessarily language-pair specific in that specific pairs of languages are always involved. They pointed out, too, that so-called universal features can almost always be accounted for by contrastive differences between languages as well as by pragmatic effects. And finally there were commentators who pointed out that even if normalisation, explicitation and simplification turned out to be persistent features of translation, they are not *unique* to translation, given that they can be explained by mechanisms which also apply to language and language-learning in general (e.g. Halverson, 2017) or, more widely, to social interaction in general (e.g. Pym, 2005 on risk avoidance). In other words, contrary to what Baker (1993, p. 235) claimed, so-called translation universals *can* be subsumed under other kinds of linguistic and cultural interaction.

1.6 Back Full Circle

In retrospect, perhaps, it is obvious that translation ‘universals’ would not conclusively be found, that much would turn out to depend on factors such as which languages pairs were involved, the direction of translation, the age and experience of the translator, the genre of the source and target texts, the translator’s individual preferences, the input of editors, and much else besides (Cohen, 2018). In retrospect, perhaps, it is obvious that all these things would make a crucial difference, but it is easier to spot the obvious with hindsight than it is to anticipate it in advance. So these studies were probably a necessary step in our understanding of translation even though that step has taken us back full circle to some of the issues addressed by Vanderauwera (1985) such as genre, the relative prestige of the source and target languages, and their effects on normalisation.

It is against this backdrop that I am researching the question of normalisation in literary translation. As we have seen, although normalisation was once viewed as a

translation universal, the past decade or two has witnessed a large-scale refutation of the hypothesis that normalisation is an inherent feature of translation. However, it is still relevant to ask under what circumstances normalisation occurs. So like Vanderauwera (1985), this research project spotlights Dutch novels translated into English, only a good 30 years on from the publication of her findings. It is interesting to return to the same area after so many years, for although Dutch is still a ‘minority literature’, its position on the world stage has greatly improved with more and more English language publishers taking on Dutch titles, even to the point of auctions being held for the rights to prominent novels (e.g. *De avond is ongemak* by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, 2018 / trans. *The Discomfort of the Evening*, Michele Hutchison, Faber, 2020; *Grand Hotel Europa* by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, 2018, 4th Estate, 2021). However, this research project should not be seen as a latter-day replication of Vanderauwera’s work. The enormous breadth of Vanderauwera’s manually conducted study meant, necessarily, that her analysis could never be exhaustive, not even for one particular feature. The enormous breadth of Vanderauwera’s study also meant that she spent more time focusing on context than she did on co-text, the linguistic context, a point we shall return to shortly.

Vanderauwera’s lack of exhaustiveness, or rigour, can be attributed to the technological limitations of her time. Today’s corpus techniques, by contrast, allow researchers to isolate particular features and analyse them on their own laptops, generating swathes of data, ranging from word lists to concordance lines, and from words sketches to multifactorial and regression analyses. However, the ‘swathes-of-data approach’ for particular features has its drawbacks too in that it often ignores co-text (e.g. Delaere & De Sutter, 2017). So my thesis, as well as spotlighting translated Dutch literature 30 years after Vanderauwera’s study, is an attempt to explore new methodological ground – the middle ground, say, between Vanderauwera’s sweeping context-driven approach, and Delaere and De Sutter’s approach where, more often than not, the co-text has been ignored. As we will see in the case studies (Chapters 4 to 9), focusing on the middle ground uncovers what Halverson (2017) calls local salience/priming, a feature she mentions having neglected in her own work. In the next chapter, where I explain how I adapted Kenny 2001’s method to explore my own research question, I will also explain the concepts of ‘local salience’ and ‘priming’.