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Tropes in translation

An analysis of Dutch creative collocations and compounds translated into English

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Introduction to the Case Studies

In Part 1 (Chapter 2), I demonstrated how to extract creative compounds and creative adjective-noun bigrams from texts with the help of Sketch Engine. Specifically, I showed how this can be done using the Word List function in an off-label way, and I illustrated the technique using Pfeiffer’s *Rupert, een bekentenis*. Here in Part 2, I apply the technique to five more novels, listed above *Rupert* in Table 11 below.

Table 11: List of Novels, Authors, Translators and Publishers

	Dutch Title	Author	Dutch Publisher	English Title	Translator	English Publisher
1	<i>De helaasheid der dingen</i>	Dimitri Verhulst	Atlas Contact 2007	The Misfortunates	David Colmer	Portobello Books 2013
2	<i>De inscheper</i>	Otto de Kat	Van Oorschot 2004	<i>Man on the Move</i>	Sam Garrett	MacLehose Press 2009
3	<i>Sluiterijd</i>	Erwin Mortier	De Bezige Bij 2002	<i>Shutterspeed</i>	Ina Rilke	Harvill Secker 2007
4	<i>Spijkerschrift</i>	Kader Abdolah	De Geus 2000	<i>My Father’s Notebook</i>	Susan Massotty	Canongate 2006
5	<i>Bonita Avenue</i>	Peter Buwalda	De Bezige Bij 2012	<i>Bonita Avenue</i>	Jonathan Reeder	Pushkin Press 2014
(6)	<i>Rupert, een bekentenis</i>	Pfeijffer, Ilja Leonard	Arbeiderspers 2002	<i>Rupert: A Confession</i>	Michele Hutchison	Open Letter 2009

This list reflects the order in which the novels are treated – except for *Rupert*, of course, which was used only for illustrative purposes in Part 1.

The five cases studies presented in the next five chapters are all 21st century novels translated within the past 15 years, and selected for their stylistic creativity. Not surprisingly, however, each novel is creative in its own way. This means that the novels vary in the number of creative compounds and creative adjective-noun bigrams they contain. *De helaasheid der dingen* (Chapter 5), *De inscheper* (Chapter 6) and *Sluiterijd* (Chapter 7) yielded a host of quirky adjective-noun bigrams, so

bigrams are the focus of these three case studies. *Bonita Avenue* (Chapter 9), by contrast, yielded a host of intriguing compounds, so compounds are the focus there. This leaves *Spijkerschrift* (Chapter 8), mentioned last in this paragraph because it is something of an outlier. As the only example of exophonic literature³² in this study – as a novel singularly rich in unusual diction – I had expected it to be rich in creative compounds and/or creative bigrams as a result of interference or imperfect learning. I was wrong. Nonetheless I have included it here (1) because it is fascinating material in its own right, and (2) because it shows the limitations of operationalising creativity simply in terms of bigrams and compounds; for it is, after all, always useful to be aware of the limitations of one’s method.

4.1 Organisation of the Case Studies

I begin each case study with background information on the novel, author and translator, and then go on to explore the data itself. As part of the exploration, I

- categorise each bigram/compound as a rhetorical trope (e.g. personification, oxymoron)
- briefly discuss each bigram/compound in context, along with its translation
- come up with a ‘verdict’ as to whether or not the bigram/compound has been normalised in translation. Despite the complexity involved in deciding, I have restricted myself to three verdict types: NORMALISED / NOT NORMALISED / NORMALISED BUT NOT IN CONTEXT. The last of these means that although the Dutch seems to have been normalised, there’s compensation, or there are mitigating circumstances, such as lack of alternatives
- categorise the ‘denormalised’ bigram/compounds, and discuss each of these in context
- wrap up each case study with a general discussion of the data, looking to see whether certain tropes in particular might be more prone to normalisation than others.

I also provide

- an appendix for each case study, listing the ST and TT bigrams /compounds, their frequencies in reference corpora, and other relevant data. (The appendices can be found at the end of the book along with a key on how to interpret each column.)

32 Wright 2010 defines this as literature written in an adopted language.

As stated above, *Spijkerschrift* contains little in the way of creative compounds and creative bigrams, so this case study also spotlights other types of linguistic creativity; and Chapter 9 (*Bonita Avenue*), with its focus on compounds, also includes a section on morphology.

Before launching into the case studies themselves, first a quick word about ‘shadow translations’.

4.2 Shadow Translations

While discussing the creative bigrams/compounds and their translations, I often suggest alternative translations. My suggestions, however, are in no way intended to be improvements on the published version. Suggesting alternatives is simply a response to claims from both theorists and practitioners that there is no such thing as a definitive translation. As Daniel Hahn (2016), award-winning translator and former chairman of the Society of Authors and the Translators Association confesses in his blog *Ask the Translator* (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/interviews/ask-a-translator/>):

When a publisher commissions me to translate a novel, I do work under the pretence that I’m writing not *a* translation but *the* translation. That’s the pretence, and aspiration—as though what I’m writing is not personal and defined by its million individual choices, and not contingent. And yet I know, of course, that it must be, because another translator will notice things in the original that I don’t, or I’ll choose to privilege things that she won’t; because my palette for expression in English will be different from hers, because we all as writers of English have languages that are distinct, words or constructions we particularly like or don’t.

The idea that a translation is simply *a* translation (as opposed to *the* definitive translation we all aspire to) was also expressed in academic circles a few years earlier by Matthiessen (2001), who coined the phrase “shadow translation”. This term refers to “potential translations which could have been used but which were not” (Matthiessen 2001: 83 as quoted in Chesterman 2017, p. 241). So it is in the humble spirit of shadow translating that I suggest alternatives for the bigrams under discussion.

As will become apparent in the case studies, often when we are tempted to say that a translator has normalised a particular compound or bigram, there are features in the immediate linguistic context that substantially weaken the claim (hence the verdict type NORMALISED BUT NOT IN CONTEXT). And those features often come to light by playing with shadow translations.