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Tropes in translation

An analysis of Dutch creative collocations and compounds translated into English

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8

Case Study 4: *Spijkerschrift/ My Father's Notebook*

8.1 Background: The Novel and the Novelist

Spijkerschrift (2000), translated as *My Father's Notebook* in 2006, won Susan Massotty the 2007 Vondel Prize for Translation for capturing Abdolah's exotic diction⁵³, an exoticism which has to do with both the novelist himself and with the book's semi-autobiographical subject matter. Ishmael the protagonist (like his creator and alter-ego Kader Abdolah) fled to the Netherlands in order to escape the tyranny of his native country Iran. In a narrative which glides back and forth between past and present, between Iran and the Netherlands, we learn of Ishmael's early upbringing in a mountain village, his fond memories of his mother Tina, and of his deep attachment to his father Aga Akbar – a carpet-weaver by trade and a deaf-mute by birth. We also learn of the family's move to the city in a bid to educate the children, and we witness Ishmael grow into a smart college boy, a political activist and finally into a political refugee.

Crucial to the plot is the cuneiform inscription – the *spijkerschrift* of the title – hidden in a cave near Ishmael's home village. These mysterious carvings inspire Aga, Ishmael's father, to develop his own personal set of symbols, which he uses as a private language to write down his thoughts. As a deaf mute, this becomes an important means of expression. And these notes turn out to be one of the few possessions that Ishmael takes with him when he flees to the Netherlands. So years later, from the safety of his home in the polder, Ishmael dedicates himself to deciphering his father's notebook and with it, his father's past.

But that is not the only thing he dedicates himself to. Educated as a physicist in Iran, Ishmael/Kader Abdolah now turns his efforts to Dutch literature, enrolling himself on a degree course at the University of Utrecht. This enables him to write *Spijkerschrift* – writing which, unbeknown to him then, would earn him the *Ridder in de Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw* in 2000 and eventually the French *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des arts et des lettres* in 2008.

Ik kan het niet uitleggen. Omdat ik de zoon van Aga Akbar ben, zit ik nu hier met deze nieuwe taal te worstelen.

Spijkerschrift (164)

53 Prior to 2011, the Vondel Prize never minuted their jury reports. I am relating this from memory, having attended the ceremony myself.

“I can’t explain it, other than to say that I’m sitting here now, struggling with another language, precisely because I’m the son of Aga Akbar.”

My Father’s Notebook (p.138)

Unbeknown to him, too, was the fact that one day *Spijkerschrift* would also appear in English under that apt title of *My Father’s Notebook* (published by Canongate, who works “to unearth and amplify the most vital, innovative voices [they] can find”⁵⁴) winning Abdolah more accolades for his exotic diction. We shall return to this new language in 8.3 below but first a word about the translator, Susan Massotty.

8.2 Background: The Translator

As noted above, the American translator Susan Massotty (best known for her translation of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl. The Definitive Version* (1995)) won the 2007 Vondel Prize for her translation of *Spijkerschrift*. But she had already made her reputation as a translator of contemporary canonical and experimental Dutch writing before going on to translate Kader Abdolah. She had translated established contemporary writers such as Cees Nooteboom and Margriet de Moor; holocaust literature (Gerhard Durlacher as well as Anne Frank) and the works of writers such as the Libris Prize winner Abdelkader Benali, and the award-winning Frisian poet Tsjèbbe Hettinga.

In general, Massotty’s translations have been warmly received: Kathryn Harrison, in her review (*New York Times*, 13/2/2005) of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, named author Margriet de Moor “a gracefully economical stylist” singling out “the novel’s opening sentence [as] a perfect example of her style”. Harrison then went on to quote the thirty-six-word-long opening sentence *in English* without even mentioning the translator! I think, though, that we can interpret this as a compliment to Massotty and her style. Indeed “Massotty the stylist” had been acknowledged by *The New York Times* before: ten years prior to the publication of de Moor/Massotty’s *Kreutzer Sonata*, Patricia Hampl had approved Massotty’s “smooth” translation of Anne Frank (*NYT*, 5/3/1995); and three years prior to it, Emily Hall had praised her for her “elegant” translation of Cees Nooteboom’s *All Soul’s Day* (*NYT*, 21/12/2001). Only a few years later in *The New York Review of Books* (6 /3/2008) did J.M. Coetzee express reservations about her translation of Cees Nooteboom’s *Paradijs Verloren* (1997)/*Lost Paradise* (2007). Whilst praising her fluency, he added that “[s]ome of that fluency comes, however, at the cost of precision”.

The question of precision is something we will encounter again in Massotty’s translation of *Spijkerschrift* even though it had little bearing on how it was received by the English-speaking press. When Massotty published her translation

54 <https://canongate.co.uk/about/> retrieved 20/06/2019

of *Spijkerschrift* (2000) as *My Father's Notebook* in 2006, the critics hailed her as an elegant and fluent translator. Their reviews abounded with favourable epithets: “smooth”, according to Nora Mahoney of *The Times Literary Supplement* (5/5/2006); “a fluent translation convey[ing] the simplicity and exotic diction of the original Dutch” said Sasha Guppy of the *Times* (22/4/2006). And Ruth Pavey of *The Independent* (15/6/2006) wrote, “Susan Massotty’s translation is a gift to English readers”, a sentiment matched by the anonymous reviewer of *The Scotsman*, 30/4/2006, who wrote, “The prose – translated from the Dutch by Susan Mattotty – is excellent, able to hint at magic and tradition where necessary, but crisper when, say, describing Ishmael’s panicky preparations to flee into exile”. We will now zoom in on this language a little closer.

8.3 The Language of the Novel

From a linguistic point of view *Spijkerschrift* is ‘exotic’ in two main ways: firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the work is rich in references to Persian culture; in other words, it is replete with realia and quotations from Persian poems and songs. In, for instance, this snatch of dialogue spoken by Ishmael’s grandfather, ‘*Ik wil je als mijn sige-vrouw hebben. Wil jij dat ook?*’, the concept of a temporary additional wife is denoted by the Persian-Dutch compound *sige-vrouw*, and not naturalised to *minnares* (‘mistress’), thereby forcing the reader to look up the loan part of the compound in the glossary. And the same holds for the translation, “‘I’d like you to be my sige wife. Would you like that?’” As we can see, Massotty has not domesticated the term either, but rendered it as a transliterated Persian-English compound.⁵⁵

In the longer passage below, Massotty helps the reader more than the author does by providing a gloss mid-text instead of making the reader go to the glossary at the back of the book. Even so, there is no attempt on the translator’s part to erase or tone down the *couleur locale*.

Hij [Aga Akbar] begreep niet waarom de maan nu eens jong was en dan weer geleidelijk oud werd. Hij wist niets van de zwaartekracht, had nog nooit van Archimedes gehoord. Hij kon niet beseffen dat de Perzische taal 32 letters had: alef, be, pe, te, se, jim, tje, hé, gé, dal, zal, re, ze, zjé, sin, shin, sad, zad, teen, zeen, een, geeen, fe, ghaf, kaf, gaf, lam, mim, noen, waw, ha, jé. De pe van parastoe[3], gé van gorma[4], te van talebi[5] en een van eeshg[6].

Spijkerschrift (p. 13)

55 I am calling “sige wife” a compound because the first of the two words (at least to me) takes the stress. If this bigram were a phrase, the second word would take the stress (See Loach 1983 for a discussion of the prosodic differences between phrases and compounds).

He [Aga Akbar] didn't understand why the moon was small, then gradually got bigger. He knew nothing about gravity, had never heard of Archimedes. He had no way of knowing that the Persian language consists of thirty-two letters: alef, beh, peh, teh, seh, jeem, cheh, heh, kheh, daal, zaal, reh, zeh, zheh, seen, sheen, sad, zad, taa, zaa, eyn, gheyn, faa, qaf, kaf, gaf, lam, meen, noon, vaav, haa, and ye. The peh as in perestow (swallow), the kheh as in khorma (date), the taa as in talebi (melon), and the eyn as in eshq (love).

My Father's Notebook (p. 7)

If the first exotic layer of *Spijkerschrift* is its lexicon, then the second is its syntax, or phraseology. It betrays the author's Persian roots in a word order, or combination of words, that 'doesn't always sound quite right'. Take the following short excerpt in which Ishmael is trying to remember who had informed his father of something he did a long time ago at school:

De conciërge, de oude gelovige conciërge misschien, hij was het vast, hij rent nu door mijn hoofd naar ons huis.

Spijkerschrift (p. 169)

Maybe the janitor, the pious old janitor. It must have been him. In my imagination I now see him running to our house.

My Father's Notebook (p. 142)

The sentence *hij rent nu door mijn hoofd naar ons huis* is odd because the two prepositional phrases are syntactically level (just like the adjacent prepositional phrases in, say, *hij rent nu [door de straat] [naar ons huis]*) but semantically hierarchical: *door mijn hoofd* refers to the act of imagining, whereas *naar ons huis* refers to part of what is imagined. This clash of syntax and semantics adds metaphorical depth – metaphorically the janitor is now running through Ishmael's head. The English normalises this, however, by introducing a hierarchy into the syntax to match the hierarchy of the semantics. The phrase structure is now closer to, [In my imagination I now see him [running to our house]] as if Kader Abdolah had written, [*Door mijn hoofd [rent hij nu naar ons huis]*]. But in addition to normalising syntax Massotty also normalises the preposition. In the Dutch the janitor runs 'through' (NL *door*) his head; in English this is rendered as "in".

Recreating Abdolah's idiom in English posed something of a predicament for Susan Massotty. In an interview, she confessed to me:

[Translating] Kader Abdolah is an example of doing what you're not supposed to do. He has very simple style with the short sentences. And I think it's deadly when you translate that because it gets very monotonous easily [...] I know the German translator kept to that, [but] the Spanish translator and I both made longer sentences. I varied it more: I combined sentences and I also gave him a more sophisticated vocabulary. I think it works better. But you still get the *sense* that there are short sentences, and there are a lot, but not as many as he does. And that makes it real hard to translate. [...]

There's something endearing about the way Kader Abdolah writes in Dutch. He's learned 'our' language, and that adds to it somehow. And when you translate it, that element is missing, because it's a step away. So I just don't think it works. But morally, it was a struggle for me because you shouldn't be doing this. But nonetheless it was a well-considered decision.

Susan Massotty in an interview (2009)

This confession explains, to some extent, her translation of *hij rent nu door mijn hoofd naar ons huis*, but not entirely. Nor, as we will see, does it fully account for her translation of the adjective-noun bigrams, or indeed for the longer passage analysed towards the end of this chapter.

Given the novel's wealth of loanwords, given *sige-vrouw*, the bilingual compound discussed above (which, unfortunately, turned out to be the only one of its sort), and given Abdolah's inventive phraseology, I thought *Spijkerschrift* would be a fertile source of unusual adjective-noun bigrams. But I was wrong. The Sketch Engine program extracted only four creative adjective-noun bigrams from the Dutch text (namely *aanstellerig geklaag*, *dorstige zand*, *onleesbare gedachten* and *opgesloten zee*) and no additional ones from the English text, thereby proving that my method, as it stands, does not lend itself to all types of creative writing! To supplement my data, therefore, I decided to zoom in on a few seemingly non-exceptional bigrams to see if any tropes emerged from the context. This was often the case. I discuss four of these in Section 8.4 below, purely as an illustration, without making any quantitative claims (such claims being beyond the scope of this dissertation). After that I zoom in on a longer stretch of text which shows the trope of ambiguity at work. But first, the four creative bigrams and their English translations.

8.4 Four Zero-Frequency Dutch Bigrams

8.4.1 Hyperbole

aanstellerig geklaag (gloss: melodramatic lamentation) belongs to the phrase *geen aanstellerig geklaag* and occurs at the point Ishmael realises that his father (having moved to the city and having been forced to work in a factory) had genuine cause for complaint: *Dat was de eerste keer dat hij duidelijk bij mij over zijn werk klaagde. Ik zag in zijn ogen dat het geen aanstellerig geklaag was, maar een kreet om hulp.*

The phrase *aanstellerig geklaag* is almost a malapropism: rhythmically and phonetically it is close to the common collocation *aanstellerig gedrag*, which means ‘melodramatic behaviour’ or ‘acting up’. Replacing the common collocates *gedrag*⁵⁶ with the unusual collocates *geklaag* (‘lamentation’) has a curious, if not exactly comic, effect: the author reveals himself as a non-native speaker, amplifying the melodrama because the word *geklaag* also implies melodrama.⁵⁷ The hyperbole has been glossed over in translation: “That was the first time he’d complained to me so clearly about his work. I could tell by his eyes that it wasn’t a **foolish complaint** but a cry for help.” This would seem to be an example of Massotty making Abdolah’s vocabulary more native-speaker like, as she confessed in the interview. On the other hand, MELODRAMATIC LAMENTATION would not have conveyed the seeming artlessness of Abdolah’s prose.

NORMALISED

8.4.2 Metaphor

onleesbare gedachten (gloss: unreadable thoughts) refers to Ishmael father’s thoughts: the ones expressed in his notebook. As Ishmael sits in his study in Flevoland, bent over his father’s notes, he struggles to understand their content. *Het is een moeilijk karwei, want ik moet mijn verhaal baseren op de onduidelijke en onleesbare gedachten van een ander.*

Onleesbare gedachten is related to the common expression *iemand’s gedachten lezen* (‘to read someone’s thoughts’): something you do when you are particularly attuned to that person. But this bigram is stranger because it somehow implies that thoughts are by default readable, whereas Ishmael’s father’s thoughts are not. This strangeness has been toned down in translation to the more common collocation “incomprehensible thoughts” in: “It’s not an easy job. I’m forced to base my story on the frequently indecipherable and **incomprehensible thoughts** of another person.”

NORMALISED

56 There are 24 instances of *aanstellerig(e) gedrag* in Google Books and none for *aanstellerige geklaag*.

57 Fischer (2014) argues that the Dutch prefix <ge-> shares some of its features with transparent and opaque reduplication. Three of these features are ‘result’, ‘repetition’ and ‘pejorativeness’. Whilst the <ge> of *gedrag* could be associated with result, the <ge> of *geklaag* implies repetition or amplification, an element of meaning already implicit in the word *aanstellerig*.

8.4.3 Personification

dorstige zand (gloss: thirsty sand) occurs in a sentence in which Ishmael compares the soil of his adoptive home, Flevoland (where his Dutch friend Louis is from), to the soil of his native country, Iran: *Het vochtige zand was van Louis. Het dorstige zand van mij. De zee, de duinen, het hooi en de regen waren van hem, maar de nacht was van mij.* This poetic bigram (with 0 hits in nTenTen and 20 in Google Books, all of which seem to relate to the seventeenth-century poet Joost van den Vondel, who used the phrase himself), has been classified as personification for the obvious reason that *dorstig* ('thirsty') implies a sentient subject. Although THIRSTY SAND (which has 21 hits in enTenTen and far more in Google books) would not have been too outlandish, Massotty normalised it to "dry sand" in "Louis felt at home on wet sand; I felt at home on **dry sand**. The sea, the dunes, the grass, and the rain belonged to him, but the night belonged to me."

The passage quoted here not only shows an avoidance of unusual lexical combinations, but also of repetition: in the Dutch there are four clause-final instances of a prepositional phrase with *zijn van* ('are from'). In English, however, the first two of these have been paraphrased to give "felt at home on", perhaps because Massotty was aiming at elegant variation.

NORMALISED

opgesloten zee (gloss: locked-up sea) occurs in a scene where Ishmael, sat at his desk in his attic study, is looking out over the IJsselmeer, remembering a mortifying childhood experience: a long time ago, back at school, his headmaster had made him don a girl's costume and dance in front of the entire assembly:

'Dans!' riep de rector nogmaals.

Ik begon.

*Het zweet loopt zelfs nu nog over mijn voorhoofd. Ik kijk door het raam naar de zee, naar de **opgesloten zee** die met haar vuisten tegen de dijk slaat.*

The English translation reads as follows:

"Dance!" the principal hissed again.

I began to dance.

Even now the thought of it makes me break out in cold sweat. I look out of the window at the sea, at the **pent-up sea** banging its fists against the dyke.

Like *opgesloten zee*, “pent-up sea” has no hits in TenTen; and there are only fourteen occurrences of the phrase in Google Books. Moreover the English translation, like the Dutch, exhibits personification, albeit in a different way. In Dutch, *opgesloten* tends to be associated with human beings. From a random sample of 20 concordance lines in Sketch Engine, 18 have a human complement⁵⁸.

The personification works differently in the English translation: “pent-up” can modify nouns denoting human beings but generally modifies nouns denoting human emotions like FRUSTRATION, ANGER, RAGE, and AGGRESSION. By using the word “pent-up” the translator is also connecting the sea to Ishmael’s pent-up/bottled-up memory.

NOT NORMALISED

Despite *Spijkerschrift*’s exoticness, these were the only unusual bigrams to emerge. But as we will see below, if we take context into account, even the most simple bigrams reveal hidden tropes.

8.5 Common Bigrams Made Strange

Here I examine four unexceptional Dutch bigrams which become exceptional in context.

8.5.1 Iconicity

bekende geur (gloss: familiar scent) occurs in a passage describing Ishmael’s arduous climb up the sacred volcano Mount Damavand. As he approaches the summit he feels faint, but briefly musters up the strength to carry on before smelling the volcano and then passing out: *Ik herkende een geur, een bekende geur, de oude vulkaan, toen werd ik doof en het werd donker, helemaal donker. Ik viel.* This short passage has been translated as “I smelled the **familiar odour** of sulphur: the volcano. Then I went deaf again and it got dark—totally dark. I fell.”

With 215 hits in nTenTen, there is nothing poetic about the phrase BEKENDE GEUR in itself, but it becomes poetic in context: first Ishmael recognises a smell (*ik herkende een geur*); second he recognises it as a familiar smell (*een bekende geur*); and then he remembers where the smell is coming from (*de oude vulkaan*). In other words, the sentence unfurls along with Ishmael’s sense of smell; or, in the words of Leech and Short (1981/2007, pp.189–190) “as readers we do not merely receive a report of the fictional world; we enter into it iconically” through “the mimetic force of sequencing”. In English, however, there is less “mimetic force of sequencing” because the iterative process of becoming aware has been condensed

58 There were too few instances of OPGESLOTEN in nTenTen to produce a word sketch, so I had to use concordance lines instead.

into the crisply punctuated, “I smelled the familiar odour of sulphur: the volcano”, where the chemical source of the smell – sulphur – is explicitly stated.

8.5.2 Pleonasm

oude vulkaan (gloss: old volcano), quoted in 8.5.1 above has 194 hits in enTenTen and is obviously not unusual either. Deserving of attention, however, is the fact that the adjective *oude* (‘old’) has been omitted in translation. Perhaps this was an oversight on the part of the translator, or perhaps the translator felt that volcanos are old by definition, making the word *oude* redundant. I suspect the latter because the bigram occurs three more times in the novel, and each time *oude* is omitted in translation:

- (1) *Ik rook de geur van de oude vulkaan.* ® “I could smell the sulphur from the volcano”;
- (2) *de schaalvormige mond van de oude vulkaan* ® “the rim of the bowl-shaped volcano”;
- (3) *Het is de mond van een oude vulkaan die vroeger vaak uitbarstte* ® “It’s actually the mouth of a once-active volcano”.

The omission tidies up the childlike tautology but it also robs the text of one possible connotation of old, i.e. ‘familiar’/ ‘from my youth’.

culturele erfgoed (gloss: cultural heritage) is also tautological in the context in which it appears. It refers to the cuneiform inscription which inspired Aga to write his notebook, and occurs in a passage where we learn that the inscription is under threat: *Het spijkerschrift, het oeroude vaderlandse culturele erfgoed was in gevaar.* As can be seen, the bigram is part of a longer noun phrase containing three adjectives. In translation, the noun phrase has been pared down by the omission of one of the adjectives, (*vaderlands*) to give, “The cuneiform inscription, their **ancient cultural heirloom**, was in danger.” Like *oude vulkaan* above, the translator seems to be omitting material that might be perceived as redundant (i.e. cultural heritage in this context implies something national), even if this means smoothing out the writer’s pleonastic style.

8.5.3 Metaphor / Meiosis

volle maan (gloss: full moon) occurs in a passage where Ishmael remembers how Aga Akba would climb up onto a roof to gaze up at the heavens whenever there was a full moon; this ritual began when Aga Akba lived in Isfahan. The Dutch expresses this metaphorically: *Die volle maan had hij uit Ispahan meegenomen*, which literally says, HE HAD TAKEN THE FULL MOON WITH HIM FROM ISFAHAN. In translation,

the metaphor has been replaced by an explanation, aided by the words “enchantment” and “throwback”: “His enchantment with the **full moon** was a throwback to his life in Isfahan.” Even though the bigram “full moon” has been rendered literally, its trope (perhaps we could call it *meiosis* if we see the moon as having shrunk to the size of a portable object) has been eliminated.

We have just looked at four seemingly unexceptional Dutch bigrams, but seen how in context they acquire stylistic effects: the iconicity of *bekende geur*; the miosis of *volle maan*; and the tautology of *culturele ergoed* and *oude vulkaan*. And we have seen how these tropes have been toned down in translation. Now we will go straight to Massotty’s text and look at two English bigrams which reveal similar processes at work when traced back to the source text.

8.6 Other Curiosities

Contrary to the other case studies, I found no examples of denormalisation. However, my search for denormalised bigrams did unearth a number of curiosities, three of which are presented in 8.6.1 and 8.6.2 below.

8.6.1 Two Target Text Bigrams

opium-scented mouth refers to the mouth of Ishmael’s uncle Kazem Khan as he cradles Ishmael, just after he was born. Massotty’s version reads as follows: “Kazem Khan brought his **opium-scented mouth** to Ishmael’s ear and whispered [...]” Tracing this sentence back to the Dutch, we find *Kazem Gan bracht zijn mond naast het oor van Ismaiel en met een mond die naar opium rook fluisterde hij [...]*. Again, ‘redundant’ material has been edited out of the translation. *Zijn mond een mond die naar opium rook* has been slimmed down to “his opium-scented mouth”. But there is more going on than the deletion of repeated lexical words. The deletion of the indefinite article *een* also deletes a special effect: normally we use an indefinite article to refer to something for the first time, and once the thing in question has been introduced we can switch to a definite determiner. This holds for both Dutch and English. Here, however, the exact opposite is going on: Kader Abdolah uses a definite determiner first (*zijn mond*), and then the indefinite article (*een mond*). The effect of this is to make the mouth strange, and this is reinforced by the sequencing (see Bolinger 1952): first he notices *the* mouth, then he notices *a* mouth smelling of opium, whereas in the English, the mouth is from the beginning characterised by the opium-smell.

CIA-backed coup occurs in a passage explaining Aga Akba’s move to the city: “My father’s move to the city, for example, was prompted by a major shift in Iranian

politics: the **CIA-backed coup** that restored the young shah to the throne.” Tracing this back to the Dutch we find that the CIA-backed coup is described in very different terms: “*Mijn vaders verhuizing naar de stad bijvoorbeeld, was slechts het simpel gevolg [sic] van een aardverschuiving in de politiek: Amerikanen hielpen de jonge sjah op de troon* (gloss: the Americans helped the young shah to the throne). Massotty has undone the whole-part synechdoce (where the *Amerikanen* in general stood for the CIA in particular) and replaced it with a more literal description.

8.6.2 A Longer Stretch of Text

Having looked at a number of individual bigrams, we will now turn to a longer stretch of the source text. But first some context:

Most of the story is told in the third person, but towards the end of the novel (once Ishmael has deciphered much of his father's notebook) the narrator leaves us and we become privy to the aged Aga Akbar – the *ik* of the narrative now – and his internal ramblings. In the passage below, Aga is lost in thought as he trudges to the prison where *Goudklokje*/Golden Bell (his daughter and Ishmael's sister) has been incarcerated as a political prisoner. His thoughts dance around something *Tine*/Tina (his wife) has said:

Figure 19: A Longer Stretch of Text with the Gloss Beneath

1	<i>Tine zegt dat ik niet zo verdrietig moet zijn. Dat alles weer goed komt. Ze zegt dat als ik veel</i>
2	<i>verdriet heb, ik weer op de grond val en doodga. En als ik doodga, kan ik geen bezoek meer</i>
3	<i>aan Goudklokje brengen en Goudklokje zal altijd huilen in de cel.</i>
4	<i>Tine zegt dat als ik doodga, ik natuurlijk ook Ismael nooit meer zal zien.</i>
5	<i>Als Goudklokje later vrij is, kunnen we misschien een bezoek aan Ismael brengen. ‘We gaan</i>
6	<i>vliegen’, zegt Tine. Wie weet, misschien gaan we met z’n drieën bij Ismael op bezoek. Waar</i>
7	<i>woont Ismael ook alweer? Tine zegt dat hij in een land woont waar geen bergen zijn en de</i>
8	<i>lucht altijd bewolkt is. Dat het daar heel veel waait. En dat Ismael op de bodem van een zee</i>
9	<i>woont.</i>
10	<i>Op de bodem van een zee? Een zee?</i>
11	<i>‘Ja’, zegt Tine. Men heeft de zee aan de kant gezet, naar achteren geduwd. Er groeien bomen</i>
12	<i>op die bodem en er lopen koeien. Daar woont Ismael, maar ik snap er niets van.</i>
13	
14	
15	Tina didn't want Akbar to feel so sad. She told him that everything would be OK. “If you suffer
16	from too much sadness,” she said, “you'll fall down again and die. And if you die, you won't be
17	able to visit Golden Bell any more and then Golden Bell will cry in her cell for ever.”
18	Tina also said that if he died he'd never see Ishmael again, either. “Maybe we'll all go and
19	visit Ishmael when Golden Bell gets out of prison,” Tina said. “We'll take a plane!”
20	Who knows? Maybe one day they would.
21	“Where does Ishmael live?” Akbar asked.
22	“He lives in a country that doesn't have any mountains,”
23	Tina said. “It's always cloudy there, the wind is always blowing and he lives at the bottom of a
24	sea.”
25	“At the bottom of a sea? A sea?”
26	“Yes,” Tina said. “They pumped out all the water. Now there are trees growing on what used
27	to be the bottom of the sea and cows grazing on the grass.”
28	It didn't make sense to Akbar, but that's where Ishmael lived.

Gloss

Tina says that I mustn't be so sad. That everything will be OK. She says if I'm very sad, I'll fall down again and die. And that if I die, I won't be able to visit Golden Bell anymore and Golden Bell will cry in her cell forever.

Tina says if I die, I'll never see Ishmael again, either.

Once Tina is free perhaps we can go and visit Ishmael. "We'll fly," says Tina. Who knows, maybe the three of us will visit Ishmael. Where does Ishmael live again? Tina says he lives in a country where there aren't any mountains and where the sky's always cloudy. That the wind always blows there. And that Ishmael lives at the bottom of a sea.

At the bottom of a sea? A sea?

"Yes" Tina says. They got rid of the sea, they pushed it back. There are trees growing at the bottom of the sea and cows walking about too. That's where Ishmael lives, but I don't understand.

Immediately noticeable is the shift from the first to the third person throughout, and the shift from reported to direct speech in lines 15-17 and 22-24 (corresponding to lines 1-3 and 7-9 in the Dutch). The translation also brings more variation to the reporting verbs: *zegt*, the only one in Dutch, corresponds variously to "didn't want to", "told", "said" and "asked". But most noticeable in terms of literary tropes is how the translator approaches the ambiguity of the Dutch. For instance, it is not clear how the thought expressed in line 5 (*Als Goudklokje ... brengen*) originated. Is it something Tina had said, or are these Aga's own musings? Or did the author deliberately leave it vague in order to reflect Aga's muddled mind? Whatever the case, Massotty has undone the ambiguity by attributing the utterance to Tina with the help of inverted commas: "Maybe we'll ... prison" (ll. 18-19).

There is ambiguity in the next sentence too, although of a different kind. '*We gaan vliegen*' (l. 5-6) and "We'll take a plane" (l.19) are both direct speech and superficially synonymous. But the Dutch verb *vliegen* conceals an ambiguity. To see this, we need to remember that Aga Akbar is a carpet-weaver and recall the following passage from the beginning of the novel describing the region where he is from:

In die dorpen worden meisjes geboren die de mooiste Perzische tapijtjes kunnen knopen. Tapijtjes waarmee je kunt vliegen. Echt vliegen. De bekende vliegende tapijten komen daar vandaan.

Spijkerschrift (p. 13)

The girls born in these villages make the most beautiful Persian carpets. Magic carpets you can fly on. Really fly on. This is where the famous magic carpets come from.

My Father's Notebook (p. 7)

As should be obvious by now, within Aga's worldview, *vliegen* could also mean magically flying on a carpet.

The ambiguity in the Dutch just discussed arose from the lexicon and punctuation. In the following, the ambiguity is created by temporal markers – or rather an absence thereof in the Dutch. In lines 11-12 and 26-28, Aga struggles to remember what Tina (who, like himself, is uneducated) had said about Ishmael's new country, the Netherlands. The pivotal sentences are:

Men heeft de zee aan de kant gezet, naar achteren geduwd. Er groeien bomen op die bodem en er lopen koeien.

Spijkerschrift (p. 352)

“They pumped out all the water. Now there are trees growing on what used to be the bottom of the sea and cows grazing on the grass.”

My Father's Notebook (p. 301)

Apart from attributing words to Tina by enclosing them in quotation marks (again, in the Dutch it is not clear that Tina is being quoted verbatim), and apart from clarifying that water was pumped out of the IJsselmeer and that cows graze on grass, Massotty has ‘resolved’ the temporal ambiguity by adding certain temporal markers that were missing in Dutch. The Dutch gives us two main pieces of information: (1) they pushed back the sea, and (2) there are trees and cows at the bottom of the sea), but no indication as to which event came first. In English, however, tense and discourse markers have been added to give, “*Now* there are trees growing on what *used to be* the bottom of the sea.” This sequence of events is obvious to us, but to Aga Akbar (a deaf-mute with no education, a belief in magic, and a mind full of unreadable thoughts) things might appear to be the other way around; from his point of view the parting of the waters may have revealed trees and cows that were already at the bottom of the sea. Kader Abdolah's seemingly artless use of Dutch leaves room for both interpretations, suggesting that it might not be so artless after all. Ironically, in an attempt to make the language more sophisticated, Massotty has made this passage more simple because she has stripped it of its ambiguity.

8.7 Discussion

Of all the translations I have looked at in this study, *My Father's Notebook* is the only one that comes close to displaying the reserve “in rendering unusual and mannered imagery and word choice” that Vanderauwera spoke of in her study of Dutch literature translated into English (1985, p. 108). Yet the reserve we see here is unlikely to be simply because *My Father's Notebook* is translated from Dutch; after all, the other translators in my study did not exhibit a similar reserve. The reserve we see here, therefore, is likely to be because Kader Abdolah is an ‘exophonic’ writer: a writer expressing himself in a language that was foreign to him from the start. So when Massotty undertook to translate his book, she embarked upon a double act of translation. That is, she found herself having to translate Abdolah, who was in turn translating himself from Persian. Indeed, as Massotty confessed in the interview quoted in 8.3, she felt that this double act of translation required a little more intervention on the part of the translator. But was this really necessary? To help answer this question, let’s briefly turn to a study conducted by Wright (2010).

From her study of translated exophonic writers of German, Wright draws three main lessons: (1) “The creativity of the exophonic writer should not be attributed solely to a process of literal translation from the mother tongue” (2010, p. 26); (2) “Seeming ungrammaticalities in exophonic texts should not immediately be attributed to the writer’s imperfect command of his or her adopted language” (p. 27); and (3) “The translator should not be tempted to bridge the metonymic gap in the exophonic text” (p. 30), by which Wright means that the translator should hang onto estranging words and turns of phrase. If these lessons hold for exophonic writers of German, then perhaps they also hold for this exophonic writer of Dutch. Indeed we noticed some “startling stylistic innovations” (ibid, p. 26) in Abdolah’s writing, especially when it came to ambiguous syntax; and these innovations may well have been deliberate, and so not in need of ‘correcting’.

Wright’s third point (that the translator should hold onto estranging forms) is something she develops further in Wright (2016). Here she argues that the domestication-foreignisation debate used to revolve around the lexicon such that a translation was considered “foreignising” if it retained culturally specific items. To this extent *My Father's Notebook* is foreignising: Massotty went to great lengths to preserve the local colour of the original text, even consulting R.M. McGlenn for his expertise on the transliteration of Farsi into English. But, continues Wright, the lexicon is no longer central to the debate (ibid, pp. 43–52). Today – perhaps as a result of globalisation – publishers and readers are quite happy to be confronted with foreign lexis, meaning that the discussion has now shifted to the domain of grammar and style:

If reading tastes have evolved so that local colour – the culturally specific – is no longer as problematic as it may once have been, the debate about domestication naturally shifts to the arena of style. Stylistic domestication implies the imposition of target-language grammatical and stylistic norms on the foreign text in the name of producing a ‘readable’ or ‘accessible’ text. (Wright, 2016, p. 46)

My Father's Notebook, praised liberally for its exotic diction in English, is awash with examples which “[impose] target-language grammatical and stylistic norms on the foreign text in the name of producing a ‘readable’ [...] text”, from the normalisation of *dorstig zand* (gloss: thirsty sand), to the structural rearrangement of *hij rent nu door mijn hoofd naar ons huis* (gloss: he’s running through my head to our house) to the disambiguation of language representing a belief in magic. But clearly Massotty had an expert feel for how “to hint at magic and tradition” (*The Scotsman*, 30/4/2006) in order to keep the publishers and critics happy.