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### Tropes in translation

*An analysis of Dutch creative collocations and compounds translated into English*

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# 10

## General Discussion

Building on research conducted by Vanderauwera (1985) and Kenny (2001) I have spent the last nine chapters exploring the question of normalisation in translation. I have done so by focusing on six contemporary Dutch novels and their translations into English by six top-notch translators.<sup>66</sup> The question I asked was: ‘Have creative compounds and creative adjective-noun bigrams been normalised in translation?’, and the *general* answer I arrived at was: the translators in this study tended not to normalise, except perhaps when it came to oxymora. But my research also revealed unique stylistic fingerprints for each translator, and unique stylistic features for each co-text. So, I will begin by briefly revisiting these unique fingerprints and features (in 10.1 and 10.2) before going on to examine my general findings (in 10.3) along with their *significance* (in 10.4 to 10.7).

### 10.1 Unique Translators

At the level of the individual translator my research has shown – as surely we might expect – that translators differ from one another in how, and to what extent, they normalise, denormalise and ‘mitigate’ normalisation: each has their own style. David Colmer, for instance, in his translation of *De helaasheid der dingen*, showed himself to be master of alliteration with his “boozed-up bards”, “boozed-up barmaids” and “mephistophelean maniac”. He also added a number of transferred epithets (e.g. *truttig lemonade zopen* became “guzzling tight-arsed lemonade”), a stylistic trait that no other translator in this study shared.

By contrast, Sam Garrett not only avoided adding transferred epithets to his translation of *De inscheper*, he actually removed them, thus undoing the hypallage of the Dutch in a couple of cases (e.g. *laconieke ogen* became “carefree look in his eyes”). However, Garrett was uniquely daring in his denormalisation, giving us the bullish “chthonic roar” (for the more conventional *diepe ruisen*) and “bolted-down horizon” (for the more normal *besloten horizon*).

In her translation of *Sluitertijd*, Ina Rilke seemed, on the surface, to normalise quite a bit. But when we dug deeper, we discovered a master of implicitation: a translator ‘relanguaging’ in a myriad of subtle ways, giving us, for instance, the compact “ripple of curiosity and surprise” for *Er deinde plotseling een lichte*

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<sup>66</sup> This includes *Rupert, een bekentenis*, which was used for illustrative purposes in Chapter 2.

*opshudding door de winkel, een opgewekte verrassing*); the subtle “wealth of afflictions” for *ziekelijke rijkdom*; and the visceral “gouges” for *onherroepelijk relief*. These implicitations even made us re-question what it means to normalise.

Susan Massotty stood out in this study as the only translator of exophonic literature (i.e. the novel *Spijkerschrift*). Here she found herself engaged in a double act of translation, translating an author who, in a sense, had translated himself into Dutch from Persian. Here we noticed a tendency to ‘correct’, mainly at the level of the syntax because most of the *couleur locale* conveyed by the lexis had been kept.

And finally Jonathan Reeder, in his translation of *Bonita Avenue*, recreated Buwalda’s unique compounding style, giving us a suite of innovative English compounds, including words like “thoughtburn” (for *gedachtenbrand*), “half-yarns” (*halve waarheden*) and “sob-gob” (for *huilhoofd*).\*

The individual differences noted here are an addition to a growing body of research on translators’ unique stylistic fingerprints (e.g. Saldahna 2005, Bosseaux 2007, Wang & Li 2012), and an accidental contribution to research on the translation of exophonic literature.<sup>67</sup>

## 10.2 Unique Linguistic Contexts

At the level of the text, my research has shown that normalisation can be mitigated in a myriad of individual ways; it has shown that practically every bit of co-text matters, whether we are talking about the priming effects of, for instance, the d’s in *neerduikelende dieren* in the source text *De inscheper*; or the alliterative effects of “The first to let the amber fluid fuddle him is our Herman” in the target text *The Misfortunates*.

However, if we take a step back from the individual translators, their novels, and from the minutiae of the text, there are certainly some generalisations to be made.

## 10.3 Three Generalisations

The first generalisation is the flip-side to the point made in 10.2: normalisation is a slippery concept. In order to say whether or not a bigram or compound has been normalised, we always need to take co-text into account: a co-text which varies with every single example. This is an obvious point (indeed it has been made before, e.g. by Pym, 2005) but it is a point worth reiterating given the growing trend in empirical translation studies to extrapolate from a handful of simple features (e.g. Cappelle & Lock, 2017; Evert & Neumann 2017).

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67 Accidental because exophonic literature was not the focus of my study. However, my observations about the translation of *Spijkerschrift* corroborated Wright’s (2010) findings regarding the translation of exophonic authors of German novels.

The second generalisation takes us to the heart of the matter: this study has sketched a different picture to the landscape painted by Vanderauwera (1985) where “translators of Dutch fiction exhibited reserve in rendering unusual and mannered imagery and word choice in the target text” (p. 108). Vanderauwera reported overwhelming evidence of normalisation (although of course her report was not based on a digital corpus like my own (see Chapter 1.4)) whereas this study, conducted thirty years later, revealed a great number of unusual forms and images in English translation from Dutch. It examined in detail 106 adjective-noun bigrams and 47 compounds, giving a total of 153 linguistically idiosyncratic forms.<sup>68</sup> Of these, 82 (54%) were rendered into idiosyncratic English in translation and a further 37 (24%) were normalised but not in context; i.e. their normalisation was mitigated or compensated by the co-text. That left only 34 items (22%) which were classified as fully normalised out of the entire NL>EN dataset of 153 items. In addition, my study unearthed 30 ‘denormalised’ bigrams and compounds. These were creative bigrams or compounds in the target texts which did not correspond to creative bigrams or compounds in the source texts.

The third generalisation builds upon the second: whilst there was ample evidence that the translators of Dutch literature in this study did *not* exhibit “reserve in rendering unusual and mannered imagery and word choice in the target text”, they seemed to normalise oxymora more than any other trope. This was most visible in *Man on the Move* and *Bonita Avenue*. In *Man on the Move*, six out of the ten ST oxymora turned out to be normalised in the TT, and a further two (although not classified as normalised for independent reasons) lost their oxymoronic quality in translation; in *Bonita Avenue* all four of the ST oxymora were normalised in the TT. This is noteworthy given that these two translations were otherwise brimming with creative lexis.

A tendency to normalise oxymora was also detectable in *Shutterspeed*: four of the five instances of ST oxymora were normalised. However, it was sometimes hard to disentangle this from the implicature (see Chapter 7.5) which characterised Rilke’s translation style as a whole. And finally two of the four ST oxymora were normalised in David Colmer’s translation of *The Misfortunates*.

#### 10.4 Implications

This tendency to normalise oxymoron (if indeed it is a tendency) is an exciting finding because, as far as I am aware, there are no other studies which have made, or investigated, this specific claim. Moreover, if it turned out to be widespread, it could

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<sup>68</sup> These 153 forms include the four creative bigrams extracted from *Spijkerschrift* (discussed in Chapter 8) but not the more usual bigrams made extraordinary by the context.

have interesting implications for both cultural and cognitive theories of translation. As far as cultural theories go, it would reinforce the image of the translator as a cultural mediator, a mediator who feels the need to iron out contradictions, to make texts make sense (see Pym, 2015). As far as cognitive theories go, it could, for instance, lead to interesting research on reaction times to translating incongruent linked items such as oxymoronic bigrams. This idea, inspired by reading I have done on the Stroop effect, is purely speculative. But it would complement research like Miller and Kroll (2002). However, to qualify for any of this, the tendency to normalise oxymora would also have to qualify as a probabilistic law (Toury, 1995: p. 69). And there's the rub...

### 10.5 The Thorny Question of Statistics

My claim that oxymora are prone to normalisation is an exciting claim indeed. You can almost imagine it having its very own name – The Oxymoron Hypothesis, perhaps? But as seductive as all this may seem, it is freighted with methodological problems. In Chapter 3, we saw how fuzzy definitions of rhetorical tropes are – how oxymoron criss-crosses with and merges into a number of other rhetorical tropes.

This fuzziness makes my oxymoron hypothesis (at least as it has been configured here) singularly unsuited to statistical analysis, because the data which fed into it fail to comply with basic standards of clean input. Put another way, given the fuzziness of the data, it would be easy to obtain results which look statistically more significant than they actually are. To unpack this argument further, let's consider some laws of probability (and improbability) as expounded by David Hand, Emeritus Professor at Imperial College London and former President of the Royal Statistical Society, in his book *The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every Day* (2014).<sup>69</sup>

Hand's laws do not describe dry probabilities. Mostly they describe people, and what people do to skew probabilities in their favour. Hand came up with six main laws, three of which are particularly pertinent here; and we will begin with **The Law of Near Enough**. This law states that:

events which are sufficiently similar are regarded as identical. It accepts as a match things which are in fact merely similar. By doing so, it expands the number of potential matches. (Hand, 2017, p. 164).

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<sup>69</sup> Although Hand wrote his book in order to explain why it is that highly improbable events seem to keep on happening (hence the title *The Improbability Principle*), his laws relate to statistical input in general. They are the principles that everyone should think about *before* launching into any kind of statistical analysis to try and establish the statistical validity of their findings.

This law was clearly at work in the case studies, for my whole categorisation process involved finding near matches: the bigram *gelakte kereltjes* (gloss: varnished/lacquered young chaps), for instance, was classified as antipersonification along with *gepolitoerde jochies* (gloss: french-polished lads) but it could have been classified as metonymy. And *gepolitoerde jochies* in its turn could perhaps have been classified as an oxymoron because the smoothness of the polish contrasts with the roughness of the lads. (This is Wittgenstein coming back to haunt us again - see Chapter 3.5)

Next, let's consider **The Law of Look Elsewhere**.<sup>70</sup> This law, as the label suggests, describes our propensity to look elsewhere if we fail to find what we want in the first place we looked. And this is something I am guilty of too. In my analysis of *Bonita Avenue*, for instance, I classified the compound *perzikoortjes* as an oxymoron not because it was internally oxymoronic but because the compound as a whole clashed paradoxically with the word *doodgewoon* (dead normal), which appeared earlier in the sentence. In other words, in the process of collecting my data I took the liberty of looking beyond the compound, which was the declared unit of analysis for that chapter. More generally, my whole approach to deciding whether or not something had been normalised hinged on the idea of having to look elsewhere: on the idea of having to look beyond the bigram or compound and into the co-text.

Finally, let's consider **The Law of Inevitability**: "This is a simple and often overlooked observation, and one that in a real sense underlies everything else: it's the simple fact that something must happen" [ibid, p. 75]. This law can be seen at work in what statisticians call 'outcome switching', which is where you change what you are going to count after you have started counting. As it happens, there is an element of outcome shifting in this PhD as well. The truth is I never set out to count creative bigrams and compounds in terms of rhetorical tropes; initially I classified and counted them in terms of themes such as nature/ time/ people/ bodily functions etc.. It was only a couple of years into my research that my focus shifted to rhetorical tropes because tropes seemed to throw more light on the data. As innocuous as this move might seem (after all, don't most people shift focus in some way during the course of their PhD?),<sup>71</sup> when it comes to establishing the statistical validity of your

70 Hand actually calls this law "The Look Elsewhere Effect" (a term originally coined by particle physicists to describe apparently significant clusters of particles which are in fact chance artefacts of vast datasets) but for the sake of symmetry, let's call this a law too.

71 As if to confirm this, the venerable Susan Bassnett (in an interview which can be found on Anthony Pym's educational website for PhD candidates) states the following: "What I tell my incoming students is that just because they have established a clear methodology and a clear set of parameters, it doesn't mean that the thesis can't grow and change: it is essential that it does grow and change. So as a general rule of thumb, I tend to say: 'If you're still thinking in the same way at the end of two years [...] then there's something wrong because your ideas haven't developed'" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCUMVN2r4OE>]. What Bassnett seems to be saying here is that focus-shifting (or parameter-shifting, as she might call it) is an integral and desirable part of

findings, focus-shifting can be pernicious. To understand how, think of the card game Twenty Ones (whose goal it is to get five cards which add up to twenty-one)<sup>72</sup> and imagine this: you have been dealt your hand, you study it, and then you decide on the basis of your hand, which happens to add up to nineteen, that you are no longer playing Twenty Ones, but Nineteens instead!<sup>73</sup> It is easy to see how a player will win if she changes her goal after her hand of *cards* has been dealt. It is less easy to see how a PhD candidate can ‘win’ if she changes her goal after her hand of *data* has been dealt. But the bias is there and it exploits this law, The Law of Inevitability, which says: *something’s* got to happen.

Taken together, these three laws – The Law of Near Enough, The Law of Look Elsewhere and The Law of Inevitability – combine and intertwine to produce **The Probability Lever** (ibid, pp. 141-163), an unfair advantage which gives the researcher maximum **leverage** over her data, creating a false sense of significance, and thereby vastly increasing the likelihood of her hypothesis appearing to be right.

It seems, then, that we must abandon the very idea of statistical significance. For to hold onto it here would be to dig ourselves deep into an impasse: On the one hand (as demonstrated throughout Part 2), the specific details of co- and context matter massively. On the other (as laid out by Hand’s laws), the more we take co- and context into account the more we undermine the statistical significance of the findings.

So given that the notion of *statistical* significance is untenable here, could my findings be significant in any other way? To answer this question, we should take an even bigger step back and ask what kind of discipline Translation Studies is. Is it an empirical discipline? Or is it also a hermeneutic (interpretive) field of study as well – a field which can never be fully comprehended from the outside, but one which also needs to be experienced from the inside?<sup>74</sup>

## 10.6 Understanding/Experiencing from the Inside – Is TS also a hermeneutic field of study?

This is a rhetorical question because, I think, by this stage in the proceedings the answer has to be ‘yes’. To see this, let’s return to Daniel Hahn, award-winning

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the PhD process.

72 There are a number of variations to this game, but this is irrelevant to the argument.

73 This example comes from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0003jhhq>.

74 Hermeneutics has a long and complicated history (see Steiner, 1975 and Hermans, 2009), and the question of whether TS should be regarded as an empirical discipline or as a hermeneutic field of study has been prone to long and tortuous debates (see, for instance, the Forum pages of *Target* 12:1, 12:2 (2000) and *Target* 13:1 (2001)). I will not delve into those debates here but, for the purposes of this brief discussion, simply define hermeneutic(s) as ‘understanding or experiencing from the inside’.

translator and former chairman of the Society of Authors, who I quoted in the introduction to the case studies:

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.

Here we get a sense of the translator and his million individual choices. (A million is no exaggeration. The laws of combinatorics and permutations teach us that, even for a short stretch of text, the combined effects of all the features we have encountered – alliteration, eye rhyme, end-weight principle, the phonetic contour of the sentence, register, connotation, association etc. etc. etc. – multiply exponentially into the millions). These choices – these conscious or unconscious responses to multiple features in the co- and context – are individual because no two translators, when they “look elsewhere” within the co- and context, will look in exactly the same places. We also get a sense of how a translator might privilege certain meanings (by matching words to concepts “which are merely similar”) that another might not see. And at a more general level, we get the sense that Hand's laws – especially The Law of Look Elsewhere and The Law of Near Enough – are woven into the very act of translating. And the beauty of all this is that we can appeal to Hand's laws – laws which lie at the heart of statistics – to endorse a hermeneutic approach to TS. (That should take the wind out of the sails of those TS scholars who criticise statistical wisdom for its “scientificity and rigidity” [see Brownlie in Baker and Saldahna, 2009]).

If Hand's laws force us to abandon the notion of statistical significance, if they incline us towards a more hermeneutic approach, what kind of significance is left? One answer to this question is: empowerment.

### 10.7 Empowerment

A case for empowering translators was famously made by Maria Tymoczko in her long and learned tome *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (2007). But Tymoczko's monograph is a work of such erudition and abstraction that it is a challenge to identify with her ideas – a challenge, you could say with a touch of irony, to read her ideas hermeneutically. (After all, in his essay “Hermeneutics” (published

in Bowie, 1998, p. 12) Schleiermacher stresses the importance of “grasping [...] the individual”, something which gets a little lost in Tymoczko’s book.) So, to truly identify with this issue of empowerment, perhaps we should turn to the novel.

One novel that seems perfect for the job is David Lodge’s *Small World* (1984), a scene from which portrays a writer disempowered by the new-fangled discipline of Corpus Stylistics. Although Lodge depicts a *writer* of literature here, his take on empowerment might equally apply to the *translator* of literature – for, as we have seen, literary translators are writers too.

In the passage quoted below, we meet a novelist called Frobisher who, mid-career, is awarded an honorary degree by the “University of Rummidge” for his services to literature. After the ceremony, Robin Dempsey, head of the new Centre for Computational Stylistics (housed in “a prefabricated hut with a couple of sheep cropping the grass outside” and staffed only by Dempsey and a technician called Josh), invites Frobisher round to give him “a little souvenir of the day” – a printout of a corpus analysis of his entire oeuvre. Frobisher is not as pleased as Dempsey had imagined. We join Frobisher six years later, drowning his sorrows in a pub and confessing to his friend Persse what an ordeal the whole experience had been. The dialogue begins with Frobisher recounting his conversation with Dempsey:

“[...] ‘Anyway’, he [Dempsey] went on, ‘when we heard that the University was going to give you an honorary degree, we decided to make yours the first complete corpus in our tape archive.’ ‘What does that mean?’ I said. ‘It means,’ he said, holding up a flat metal canister rather like the sort you keep film spools in, ‘It means that every word you’ve ever published is in here.’ His eyes gleamed with a kind of manic glee, like he was Frankenstein, or some kind of wizard, as if he had me locked up in that flat metal box. Which in a way, he had. ‘What’s the use of that?’ I asked. ‘What’s the use of it?’ he said, laughing hysterically. ‘What’s the *use*? Let’s show him Josh.’ And he passed the canister to the other guy, who takes out a spool of tape and fits it onto one of the machines. ‘Come over here,’ says Dempsey, and sits me down in front of a kind of typewriter with a TV screen attached. ‘With that tape,’ he said, ‘we can request the computer to supply us with any information we like about your idiolect.’ ‘Come again?’ I said. ‘Your own special, distinctive, unique way of using the English language. What’s your favourite word?’ ‘My favourite word? I don’t have one.’ ‘Oh yes you do!’ he said. ‘The word you use most frequently.’ ‘That’s probably *the* or *a* or *and*,’ I said. He shook his head impatiently. ‘We instruct the computer to ignore what we call grammatical words – articles, prepositions, pronouns, modal verbs, which have a high frequency rating in all discourse. Then we get to the real nitty-gritty, what

we call the lexical words, the words that carry a distinctive semantic content. Words like *love* or *dark* or *heart* or *God*.' So he taps away on the keyboard and instantly my favourite word appears on the screen. What do you think it was?'

"Beer?" Persse ventured.

Frobisher looked at him a shade suspiciously through his owlish spectacles and shook his head. "Try again."

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Persse.

Frobisher paused to drink and swallow, then looked solemnly at Persse. "Grease," he said, at length.

"Grease?" Persse repeated blankly.

"*Grease. Greasy. Greased.* Various forms and applications of the root, literal and metaphorical. I didn't believe him at first. I laughed in his face. Then he pressed a button and the machine began listing all the phrases in my works in which the word *grease* appears in one form or another. There they were, streaming across the screen in front of me, faster than I could read them, with page references and line numbers. *The greasy floor, the roads greasy with rain, the grease-stained cuff, the greasy jam butty, his greasy smile, the grease-smearred table, the greasy small change of their conversations,* even, would you believe it, *his body moved in hers like a well-greased piston.* I was flabbergasted, I can tell you. My entire *oeuvre* seemed to be saturated in grease. I'd never realised I was so obsessed with the stuff. Dempsey was chortling with glee, pressing buttons to show what my other favourite words were. *Grey* and *grime* were high on the list, I seem to remember. I seemed to have a penchant for depressing words beginning with a hard 'g'. Also *sink, smoke, feel, struggle, run* and *sensual*. Then he started to refine the categories. The parts of the body I mentioned most often were *hand* and *breast*, usually one on the other. The direct speech of male characters was invariably introduced by the simple tag *he said*, but the speech of women by a variety of expressive verbal groups, *she gasped, she sighed, she whispered urgently, she cried passionately.* All my heroes have brown eyes, like me. Their favourite expletive is *bugger*. The women they fall in love with tend to have Biblical names, especially ones beginning with 'R' – *Ruth, Rachel, Rebecca*, and so on. I like to end chapters with a short moodless sentence."

"You remember all this from six years ago?" Persse marvelled.

"Just in case I might forget, Robin Dempsey gave me a printout of the whole thing, popped it into a folder and gave it to me to take home. 'A little souvenir of the day,' he was pleased to call it. Well I took it home, read it on the train, and the next morning, when I sat down at my desk and tried to get on with my novel, I found I couldn't. Every time I wanted an adjective, *greasy* would spring

into my mind. Every time I wrote *he said*, I would scratch it out and write *he groaned* or *he laughed*, but it didn't seem right – but when I went back to *he said*, that didn't seem right either, it seemed predictable and mechanical. Robin and Josh had really fucked me up between them. I've never been able to write fiction since.”

He ended, and emptied his tankard in a single draught.

“That's the saddest story I ever heard,” said Persse.

(Lodge 1984: 183-185)

The words *grease*, *grime* and *groaned* might have been significant for Dempsey, but once they were “locked up in that flat mental box”, they lost all significance for Frobisher, depriving him of the ability – the power – to write. But this witty (and poignant) portrayal of disempowerment could equally be seen as a humorous call for empowerment. The question is, then, how could poor Frobisher have felt more empowered? To begin with, he might have had more of a sense of agency if he had been given a choice in the matter, if he had participated in the project; but as a mere object of analysis, Frobisher could never identify with the findings.

This, I hope, will not be the case for my literary translators, who have generously contributed to this study by providing me with pdfs and encouraging me to examine their work. I want these talented translators – David Colmer, Sam Garrett, Michele Hutchison, Susan Massotty, Jonathan Reeder and Ina Rilke – to feel empowered, if they so wish, by the technology I have used: Word Sketch, my off-label use of Sketch Engine's Word List function, and much more besides. I want them to feel inspired by the Appendices (“a little souvenir of the day”!) much like you feel inspired to think up new words by repeatedly pressing on the Shuffle button in a game of Wordfeud. But most of all I want them to take issue with my analysis. As for my theory about normalising oxymora: they may see something in it. But whatever the case, I am oh so curious to hear their response.

### 10.8 And finally...

This thesis has looked at *how* translators translate; the following article (which I published in *Target* 30(1), 2018 and which constitutes the next chapter – Chapter 11) looks at the *why*. It is called On Randomness and goes more deeply, and perhaps more disturbingly, into the notion of empowerment discussed here.