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Not quite clean: Trailing *schoon* and its resonances

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Abstract

When *words* are translated from one linguistic repertoire to another, their *resonances* stay behind. This is a challenge for those who write in academic English while working and living in another tongue. Here, I exemplify this with stories about the Dutch word *schoon*. The dictionary translates *schoon* into English as *clean*, but it is *not quite* clean. For a start, the songs, books and other cultural resources that resonate in *schoon* are distinctively local. Next, the particular sites (say, waste water treatment plants) where *schoon* is strived for differ from their (diverse) counterparts where English is spoken and the ambition is *clean*. And if *dirt* has notoriously been defined as 'matter out of place', this spatial thought would never have arisen in Dutch, because *vies*, the most prominent antonym of *schoon*, is invariably visceral. Finally, in urban settings in the Netherlands, *schoon* stands out as an aesthetic, a moral and a hygienic ideal; knowing whether this is also true for *clean* would require fieldwork in English (but where, in which English?). These examples suggests that hoping to purify one's theoretical notions of empirical filth is a monolingual delusion. For, however well-polished, English concepts will never have universal salience: they are just (a version of) English. Good academics therefore artfully, carefully, mind the gaps between different ways of knowing, acting and speaking.

Keywords

equivocation, material semiotics, multilingual, pollution

In academia, in my particular corner of the world as in many others, writing is first and foremost done in English. In the Netherlands, where I was born and raised and where I have been living for most of my 61 years, my colleagues and I are supposed to publish in so-called *international* journals – *international* being a euphemism for *English language*. But English is not our *first* language. We therefore live in translation, even those of us who never migrated.[1] Writing in English comes with rewards: it allows our texts to travel. In the 1980s, when I started out as an academic, I wrote texts in Dutch. It was frustrating that the authors on whose insights I gratefully built, or whose arguments I

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proudly refuted, never took any notice.[2] And I couldn't blame them for it. I could read their English, French and German as Dutch schools insisted on the multilingual training of their students. But where and why should they have learned my Dutch? Once I started to go to international conferences, it became even more painful. I could tell people that I had written something that spoke to their concerns, but my texts remained opaque to them. So writing in English is wonderful in that it allows for intellectual exchanges beyond the relatively small circle of readers of Dutch. Exchanges, that is, with at least all academics who have had the chance and taken the trouble to acquire some proficiency in this particular imperialist tongue.[3] But this comes at a cost: within the Netherlands and Flanders what we write in English is, for all practical purposes, less accessible than what we write in Dutch.[4] And there are a few further complexities, too.

Of course it takes extra effort. A lot of it. With many years of training this improves a bit, but it doesn't go away. However, I am not out to seek your sympathy. Instead, I would like to take this occasion to address a matter of content. There are a lot of *resonances* to negotiate when one writes across different linguistic repertoires. For words do not just *refer* to entities that different languages cluster in different ways; with, say, the English word 'stone' representing a boulder, a pebble, a seed as well as a pit – entities not necessarily gathered together in other tongues. They do not just *do* things when used in practices; where, say, if one builder yells 'stone' to the other, this order, or request, may have the effect that a stone changes hands.[5] Words also *evoke*, there are absent/present realities that *resonate* within them; with the English word 'stone' calling up such things as stepping stones, including those that help people moving up socially, and rolling stones, including those that became legendary in the music scene. Such resonances are not simply characteristics of 'a language' – an allegedly well-rounded system of signs that may be caught within the confines of a dictionary. Instead, they have to do with all kinds of particularities of the practices in which words participate.[6] Some of these particularities I will touch upon in this text.

> *Touch upon*? That is English alright, but does it qualify as *academic* English? Maybe it sounds too light-hearted, superficial even, so that in one editorial round or another, someone with linguistic authority will change it into *present*. Should I maybe go for *exemplify* so as to underline that I am not after abstractions and generalities, but care about telling stories and specificities? *Analyse* is a possibility as well – that would also make things sound more serious, maybe, *analyse*, and stress that what I am up to is not just chatter but *theory*. Would it? And can I get away – in an academic text in English – with opening up questions and then never answering them?

The materials that I draw upon as I explore words-in-practices and their more or less elusive resonances all have to do with the positive qualification *clean*. But they are Dutch materials so what they turn around is *not quite* clean.

Cultural resonances

Anthropologists freely use the category of *Euro-American* when they make comparative contrasts with other large culture-clusters such as *Amerindian* or *Melanesian*. But as I

move between different European languages I keep falling into gaps. These hinder smooth transitions from one tongue to another. They make life difficult for a Dutch scholar reading French and German and seeking to write in English. But they are also cracks through which the light gets in.

'There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in', Leonard Cohen sang. It is a beautiful line. And as it is widely known, in an English language text I might want to use it without even naming the source. That is what 'we' do. *We* use hidden references to constitute ourselves as a 'we', a collective in the know. The undertones resonating in such sentences pleasantly perform cultural connections between 'us'. But then again. Not every reader of the present text will *get* this reference. You may be too young to have absorbed Leonard Cohen songs; you may not like his music; or his lyrics; your head may be filled with Spanish, French or Bangla songs. Now that I have made my source explicit, though, you might want to look it up on *Spotify* or *YouTube*. The song where 'the light cracks in' is called *Anthem.*

Some resonances can be spelled out and explicated. With others this is far more difficult. Given that you are reading this text, it is likely that you have the technical facilities and the skills necessary to now trace Cohen's *Anthem* – even if you didn't know it before. But my guess is that (unless you happen to have been raised in Dutch) you will have more trouble with *Floddertje* and her dog, *Smeerkees*. While to me they loudly resonate in *schoon*, a Dutch word central to the research project that I just embarked upon.

The name Floddertje does not exist outside the stories about her written by Annie M. G. Schmidt in the early 1970s. It resonates with *sloddervos* – sloven – and *flodderig* – baggy – in a light, affectionate way, made manifest by the *tje*, a diminutive. Smeerkees is also a creative composition, this time of a *smeerpoets* – someone dirty, and *keeshond* – where *hond* is the Dutch word for what in English is called a dog and *kees*-hond a particular breed of dog. When I go online to find out if once again there are resources that I can point you to, I find a collection of Floddertje stories translated into English. But it is out of print. The blurb: '*Once there was a little girl called Scrumple who was always grimy and covered in dirt. Except when she'd just had a bath. But she could never stay clean for more than half an hour. Scrumple constantly needed another bath, together with her dog, Splotch, who was always filthy too . . .*' However hard the translator tried, these English names do not have as much splash as their Dutch not-quite-equivalents. They miss a particular poetry – rhythm, music – that enlivens the original.

'How do you know?' one of the readers of an earlier version asked. As if it were a scandal that I claim knowledge about how things sound in the English language even though it is not mine.

Annie M. G.'s humour does not easily transport either. She ingeniously plays with stereotypes to do with Dutch 'housewives' that stem from a historical moment when most women in the Netherlands were doomed to stay at home and overinvest

in cleanliness. Annie M. G.'s way of surviving her sneakily sexist home country was to lighten it up with mockery.

> An example. Floddertje's mother goes out to shop. Floddertje is eating but even so allows Smeerkees to climb onto her lap. He wags his tail which sends a slice of bread with jam into the air. As it falls, everything gets dirty – the tablecloth, Floddertje, her dress, Smeerkees. To solve this problem, Floddertje puts all these things in the bathtub along with the household's supplies of soaps and cleaning powders. Given that she is such a dirty child, supplies are ample. Floddertje opens the tap and as water pours into the bath, all too soon she cannot control the foam. To avoid drowning, she escapes into the street. The foam follows. People in the street get scared and call the fire brigade. The firemen disperse the foam with water. A lot of it. Until a brave fireman manages to enter the house, climb the stairs and close the tap. Now everyone is happy: the streets have never been this clean! Floddertje's mother comes back from the shop and reproves her for being naughty, but then again, look how clean you are! And so, too, are Smeerkees, the dress and the tablecloth.

I study the topic of *clean* with a heavy theoretical agenda and driven by serious societal and ecological concerns. At the same time, I cannot forget about Floddertje. I might, of course, use her as material; as an instance of a former *Dutchness* that by now has faded; a self-reflective figure lightly ironizing my field. But I wonder. That Floddertje resonates in the Dutch word *schoon* makes her absent/present when I study *clean*. But how exactly? Not just as a topic. I have been formed by Annie M. G. Schmidt's vicious humour and by the way she pointed out, time and again, the bizarre within the ordinary. This means that beyond being a part of my *field* Floddertje is a part of *me*. She has helped to shape my research abilities. She informs the *sensitivities* that inspire and direct my enquiries.

> Floddertje is not the only Dutch figure to have shaped me. There are countless others. This being an academic text I might have foregrounded academic sources of inspiration. For instance, Lolle Nauta's argument that even theories that pretend to be abstract are best understood by foregrounding the 'exemplary situation' that, often by stealth, they reflect upon.[7] That is a relevant point of reference indeed. But when I study *clean* in everyday practices, my work is not just informed by theoretical repertoires, but also by the cultural resonances of the words relevant to those practices. *Schoon* resonates with *Floddertje*, not in 'the Dutch language', but in a gradually fading cultural repertoire articulated within that language.

Material resonances

In the Netherlands, waste water is pumped through the sewage system to what is called a *waterzuiveringsinstallatie. Water* = water; *zuivering* = purification; *installatie* = installation. When we were planning a field visit to one of these sites, I wrote to my colleagues, without having consulted a dictionary, that we were welcome at the Hilversum 'waste water cleaning plant'.[8] But in English, this plant doesn't *clean* waste water, it only

treats it. Fair enough. Actually, in this instance, 'waste water treatment plant' is the better term, for while a lot of pollutants are retrieved in the plant, the effluent is far from *pure*. It has been purified only to the extent that it meets the legal standards of *clean* – which have to do with low enough nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations, on average, over the course of a year. But effluent still contains micropollutants – such as remnants of medicines and drugs and microplastics – and, added to that, it still contains microbes, too. You are not supposed to happily swim in water that a waste water treatment plant has just treated: it is not necessarily *swimmable*. And it is certainly not *drinkable*.

> The plant in Hilversum that with six scholars based in Amsterdam we visit is remarkably clean. It is even its own kind of beautiful. The concrete of the buildings does not stand out as industrial white (like the waste water treatment plant two of us recently saw in Tilburg) and neither is it boringly grey (like the small one in De Meern where I went a few years ago on an open day). Different shades of warm red and light brown have been added irregularly, fluidly, to the sand-cement mixture and the result evokes *nature* rather than *technology*. The plant is adjacent to a small nature reserve and the hope was, we are told, that with its uneven, earthy colours it would blend in.

In the UK, Andrew Balmer and Susan Molyneux-Hodgson have explored the differences between waste water treatment plants and laboratories. 'Much like the laboratory, the sewage works is full of peculiar shapes, sounds and smells. But by contrast to our laboratory-experiences of bacteria as manipulable and yet vulnerable, and of the body as a danger to the bacteria, when one approaches the waste water sewage facility it is the body that is at risk in this immediately daunting and threatening landscape.'[9] Before reading the text from which I quote here, I didn't know the words 'sewage works' and 'sewage facility'. Apparently 'waste water treatment plant' is not the only name for this place in English. It is rather, or so I learn when asking someone in the know about it, a recent invention, crafted to avoid the harshness of 'sewage'. I am yet more surprised by the insistence on grime. In their field, or so Balmer and Molyneux-Hodgson tell, bacteria are lurking everywhere, not just in the sewage: 'in the water treatment facility . . . everything is a murky brown that has to be scrubbed and blasted off the body and other surfaces' (p. 68).

> The library of the University of Amsterdam does not provide me with access to the journal *Engineering Studies*. Hence, I have only been able to read the article just quoted because Andrew Balmer was kind enough to send it to me after (even though we never met) I asked for it in an email. Grateful for his collegial kindness, I respond after reading. I quote from my email: 'what struck me, too, was that by contrast to the muddiness you describe, the waste water treatment plants in NL that we visited are meticulously kept clean – we didn't even have dirty shoes when we left. There are the tanks of course; and handling those, or otherwise doing maintenance work, will be messy and dirty (our field work did not yet include any of that, we just "visited") but my impression was that cleanliness was part of local pride.' Andrew, in an email back, presumed that we visited a place for purifying

drinking water: 'we have a strict separation in the UK between the clean water facility and the waste water facility. This is reflected in the amount of time engineers put into maintaining the space surrounding the water. So it really is a muddy nightmare outside, and then very clean indoors.' But in our Dutch field, the separation between treating sewage and purifying drinking water goes a lot further. It is not an outdoors/indoors affair, drinking water is 'produced' in another site altogether. It is really the *waste water treatment plant* that is clean. When in a further email I underline this, Andrew jokes back: 'That is so impressive. Another reason to move to the Netherlands!'

Here is my puzzle. It is not that waste water treatment plants are different between the Netherlands and the UK. It is that getting to *know* about such differences seems to be necessary before I am able to write in English. And how do I get to know about the practices that English words incorporate, from the grime (mentioned in the original article) to the location of drinking water in relation to waste water cleaning (that I only learn about from Andrew's email)? There must be lots of further differences about which I have no inkling, even though they have serious consequences for what resonates in the English words that I may use when writing about this or that Dutch case. Learning that in English I should say 'waste water treatment' rather than 'waste water cleaning' is just the easy bit. The dictionary bit. It is a lot more difficult to find out about the realities that resonate within such words. The problems of writing in English stretch way beyond *English*.

The three waste water treatment plants that I so far visited in the Netherlands all have different colours: white washed; desolate grey; beautiful red-brownish. From that contrast I may conclude that the colour of the structures that make up waste water treatment facilities is not self-evident. But all three plants were clean. How, then, am I supposed to know that this is not the case elsewhere? And no, I do not insist on this cleanliness to suggest to my UK colleagues that the Netherlands is a better place to live. I say it to point at a particular difficulty of writing in a foreign tongue. Even if I use 'proper' English words, words that even a severe editor is unlikely to interfere with, they may not transport what I hope to say. For while for me they speak of my Dutch field, they may resonate with quite different realities for those who get to read my texts.

> If stories are about so-called 'far away' countries, we expect as much. *Of course* the treatment of sewage in Senegal or Bangladesh deserves to be explained to the readers of 'international' texts written in English. They – we? – are unlikely to have been there. But there also are differences between adjacent places in regions termed *Euro-American*. And how can I know what exactly these differences are without *doubling* my research and doing it in *English* as well as in *Dutch*? Added to that, in *which* English should I do added fieldwork – that of Durham UK, Durban SA, Dunedin NZ, or elsewhere yet again? And if I were to double, triple, quadruple my fieldwork, then what to attend to and what to leave be? Between different sites, there is no end to the specificities an author might try to explicate.

Words mean different things, not just between different languages, but also between different sites and situations. Different realities resonate within them.[10] In some cases and

to some extent it is possible to spell this out. This is what fieldwork is about, after all. As a field worker you try to describe a site so that others, who haven't been there, get some sense of it. But here is my point. When it comes to it, ethnography is premised on the *exemplary situation* of the traveller who comes home to tell her tales. It presumes that someone who is one of *us* goes to a faraway place and then comes back to explain to *us* how *they* are different. *We* are the implied audience and since the author is a part of *us* she knows what about *them* to write down and make explicit. She knows what *we* take for granted and what *we* are bound to consider surprising.

> But how can *I* know what *you* consider surprising? From language courses, novels and films I may learn *English.* But there is a lot that I do not know about 'readers of English' and their everyday realities. And if kind colleagues from the UK help me to attune my texts to the realities of 'sewage facilities' in that country, that still only goes so far. English is not euphemised as 'international' for nothing. *You* may be reading my words in Rio de Janeiro, Saint Petersburg, Osaka. How to guess what you hold to be self-evident, possible, or unimaginable? How to fine tune what needs to be said *in so many words* and what may be lightly skipped over? It is possible to tell fine stories, attentive to their details. But it is impossible to articulate all the resonances that echo in all their words. Hence, when texts travel, they are bound to transform along the way.

> This is my point: Not only translations are betrayals. A lot also transforms between authors and readers of English who work in different sites and situations. Even a banal description of a waste water treatment plant cannot be properly tamed, but stubbornly defies transportation. So much, then, for the dream of stable analytic categories, firm concepts, universally salient theory.[11]

Semantic resonances

The most likely antonym of *schoon* – a Dutch word translating the English *clean* – is *vies*. If Floddertje and Smeerkees are *not* 'schoon', they are 'vies'. But that does not turn *vies* into an equivalent of *dirty*. If only translation were that simple! It isn't. Even in cases where two words map on to one another relatively neatly, their antonyms may go off in different directions. And here is what makes *vies* so interesting: it is not just an antonym of *schoon*, but also of *lekker*.

> *Lekker* translates into English as *tasty* or *delicious*. While it used to pertain only to food, more recently it has widened out to other sensuous pleasures.[12] Yes, sex may be *lekker*, even if 50 years ago, when sex was more seriously sanctified, that sounded vulgar. Agreeable weather is *lekker*; pleasantly fitting clothes are *lekker*; and even work may be *lekker*: it is on days when things flow. *Vies* is a relevant antonym in some of these cases. Food is *vies* when it is unpalatable. Sex used to be *vies*, before it was *lekker*, as unless it was holy, it was shameful – but now it no longer is. The weather is *vies* when it is too wet to cycle. Clothing is *lekker* when it fits nicely, but when it is *vies* it needs a wash. Some work is *vies*, as it

> involves handling dirt or excrement, but working when one has no flow, while
> unpleasant, is not *vies*.

I greatly enjoy all these details, but I fear that for you they might be too much. So instead of further expanding this complex, criss-crossing semiotic network, I will zoom in on a *point*. Which is that the gap between *vies* and *dirty* may well be one of these cracks through which the light gets in.

In the social sciences Mary Douglas's assertion that *dirt is matter out of place* is repeated again and again. In its original incarnation – presented in the book *Purity and Danger* – it was an original idea.[13] But it has become a mantra and I wonder if it deserves to be endlessly reiterated. Douglas's concern was with categories. As she wrote that *dirt is matter out of place*, she was at the same time talking about situations in which categories need to be kept apart; circumstances in which it is ill advised to mix them up. Her *clean*, then, beyond its material incarnations, is about symbolic distinctiveness.

> In English, it is possible to distinguish between 'cleaning up' and 'clearing up'. But if Douglas defines uncleanliness as 'matter out of place', she blurs that distinction and makes *cleaning* and *clearing* flow over into each other. What is matter *in* place? When I try to imagine that, I dream up the higher middle class English households that figured in the children's books that I read – translated into Dutch – around the time Douglas presented *impurity* as a categorical danger. There, children were tasked to tidy the room where they had been playing. Puzzles, dolls and Dinky toys: they all had their own particular spot on a shelf in a designated cupboard. This seems to be the *exemplary situation* that best illuminates what it means to have a *proper place*. This situation may not be *English* so much as *Douglas*. But it is definitely *not* Dutch.

The English expression 'clean and tidy' suggests that these are different things, but it also makes it easy for *clean* and *tidy* to flow over into each other. This is far more difficult in Dutch. For when things have been put in their proper place, a Dutch playroom (living room, bedroom, office) is *opgeruimd. Opgeruimd* bespeaks a spatial concern – the noun *ruimte* translates into *space*; the verb *ruimen* evokes displacing, and *opruimen* (which has *opgeruimd* as it past perfect) is putting things in their designated place. But *schoon* has nothing to do with places. As *vies* is its most prominent antonym, *schoon* sides with *lekker* in that something that is <u>not</u> *schoon* is disgusting. *Schoon* and *vies* bespeak concerns that, rather than spatial, are visceral.

> *Schoon* calls up a floor that is no longer sticky, a dress without stains, a body that smells of soap, not sweat. The *schoon/vies* pair could never have illuminated a theoretical argument about the need to separate out categories. Instead, it suggests the need to spare sensitivities.

> Do I have the right to claim this? When two so-called *native speakers* of English commented on an earlier version of this text, the first insisted that I am mistaken about English. In daily life, he noted, *clean* and *tidy* are *actually* markedly

different and *clean* is about sensitivities, too. After all, next to *dirty* its antonyms also include *filthy* and *disgusting*. That was disappointing. Maybe I had to bow to his authority – English, after all, is not *my* language – but what, then, about Douglas and her 'matter out of place'? As I was wondering, the comments of the second reader came in. He wrote in the margins of my text that *clean* and *tidy* are *actually* hardly distinct at all. Or maybe, he added, this is just me, as in my daily life they amount to the same thing: housework that calls out to be done. The disjunction between my friends made me laugh.

Here is what I dare to write, then. I do not claim that infringing on the good of *cleanliness* is never sensitive. Instead, I claim that *schoon* is never spatial.

Words are not just spoken in practices, they also bespeak practices. This means that specific *exemplary situations* may hide, absent/present, within those words.[14] If you listen out for them, it is possible to hear them resonating. This helps in getting a better grasp on the strength and limits of the theories articulated in those words. The particular *pollution* that Douglas was concerned with in *Purity and Danger* could be remedied with *tidying*. It was dirt that, by putting it to one side, on a shelf, or in a bin, could be cleaned away. But the dangers that follow on from things being *vies* cannot be remedied in the same way. Cleaning something that is *vies* involves gut feelings. It is not a matter of transport but of transformation. Hence, theories articulated with the help of the *schoon/vies* pair are bound to go in different directions than theories informed by Douglas's *dirt is matter out of place.*

Mind you, I am not out to advocate 'Dutch theory'. I rather suggest that taking a detour through any language that is *not* English may help to shake up theoretical short-cuts that are *not just* specific to this or that theorist, but *also* depend on (a particular version of) English.

Douglas could never have written *Purity and Danger* in Dutch, for it would not have made sense to define *vies* in a spatial way. But what about English: do, after all these years, the dangers of uncleanliness still deserve to be theorised in a spatial way? Maybe that epoch is over. Who still dreams up nurseries to be tidied? And who, for that matter, still equates *pollution* with *dirt*? These days, the more striking *exemplar* of dangerous uncleanliness is rather the emptied plastic bottle.[15] Where is this *not* out of place?

Multilingual resonances

The dictionary suggests that the English word *clean* happily translates into the Dutch word *schoon.* But *schoon* is not quite *clean.* It has a more pronounced visceral twist. In addition, *schoon* also suggests an aesthetic pleasure that differs from the modernist ideals that have come to infuse *clean.* Clean calls up well-ordered categorisations, signals without noise, and buildings without frills – in a way that *schoon* does not.[16]

In Limburg, the southern region of the Netherlands where I grew up, *schoon* is pronounced as *sjoûn* and translates into English as *beautiful*. Despite almost two

centuries of trying, language boundaries in this corner of the world do not coincide with those of nation states. The *sjoûn* of Limburg is quite like the *schön* of the German spoken only a few kilometres away, across the border. A dress that is *sjoûn* has not just been washed and ironed, but its colours are pleasant and its fit is flattering. A *sjoûn* house has fine windows and rooms of an appealing size, not too small, not too big. And then it is possible to compliment someone by saying that they have accomplished a task in a *sjoûn* way. In this usage, the word widens out from 'beautiful' to express a more general positive apprehension.

In the northwest of the Netherlands *schoon* no longer translates as *beautiful.* But *schoonheid* – the noun made out of the adjective – still translates as *beauty*. Small wonder, then, that for those who listen out for historical traces, dialects and adjacent languages, the aesthetic resonance of *schoon* is acute. When English words have such half-hidden resonances, I risk missing them. Hence, I make mistakes. I write sentences which, by stealth, say things that I do not particularly want to say. If I am lucky, an avid English colleague or editor remarks on this and – caringly, brutally – corrects me. I am truly grateful for this; even if sometimes I struggle to defend my points. However, while those of us who cannot claim authority over English are bound to err, we also have something to offer. We may *add in* a few resonances that echo within *our own words* and think with them. In the case in point: as I do fieldwork into *clean* – or rather *schoon* – I wonder about the aesthetics relevant to local practices.

> For an evening, I trail a group of men and their machines as they energetically clean streets and squares after one of Amsterdam's day markets. Every morning the market stalls are laid out, every evening they are packed up again. Stall holders are supposed to put their debris in the large yellow plastic bags that they receive for this purpose from the organization that runs the market. But not all of them do. Customers, in their turn, are supposed to throw their waste in one of the bins that adorn the sides of the road. But not all of them do. Hence, by five in the afternoon, when the cleaners arrive, everything is messy and smelly. By nine, when they leave again, they have made an impressive, positive difference. That is part of what turns cleaning up after the market into a gratifying job. 'You arrive and the entire stretch is messy and *smerig* [filthy, like Smeerkees]. And then, when you leave, well – things look *mooi schoon* again.'

Here, the *mooi* is added to *schoon. Mooi* is a modest kind of beauty; or it may, as it does here, strengthen a word that already has a positive ring to it. In this little sentence fragment, the *mooi* stresses the *schoon*'s aesthetic undertones. When the street and squares are *mooi schoon* as all the debris has been trucked out (off to the incinerator), they are not simply well-ordered, but, more positive than that, look *nice*. All the cleaning efforts lead to them being *pretty*.

> Harry, the foreman of the group, takes me on a walk through the neighbourhood in which the market is situated. In this part of Amsterdam, inhabitants are supposed to put their garbage in underground containers. If they have stuff that is too large, they

are supposed to call a special phone number and set an appointment for the truck for *grof vuil* – large, bulky, heavy waste – to come and fetch it. But this isn't always done. People often put their bulky stuff out on the street, preferably near the underground containers. While this location shows their good will, it is counterproductive. For if there is stuff on the platforms attached to the underground containers, the designated machines are unable to lift up the containers and cannot empty their contents into the truck meant to carry it away. First, the garbage men have to get out and shift the stuff away. This is unpractical and when a single man is alone on his truck, it is often difficult, it takes time, it may be heavy. Pointing to a set of cardboard boxes, just next to a container, one that isn't full at all, Harry turns to me and asks: 'Do you understand that? Why do people *do* that?'

When Harry asks me why people 'do that', improperly putting boxes next to a container, he does not expect me to give an answer. I might have invented one. I could have replied that some people don't understand this business with the phone number; that the cardboard boxes are not easy to fold, especially for people who are not as strong as he is; or that it is interesting that people at least take the trouble to carry their boxes from their house to the container. But all of this would have been beside the point. Then and there, Harry is not inquisitive but exasperated. He himself is fully committed to making this neighbourhood *mooi schoon.* Then why are the locals so negligent, so insensitive, so painfully *improper*?

Schoon is not the only Dutch word that translates into English as *clean*. Another one is *proper*. Yes, this is a Dutch word. It is written in the same way as the English *proper*, but it is pronounced with a long o – proo-per. This term has moral undertones. This might come as no surprise for speakers of English, as the English *proper* is all about morality – the cleanliness having seeped out of it – despite its prominence in the French word *propre.*

> When we walk back to the truck that brought us to the market, I come across a single spot where beneath my boots the stones feel slippery and sticky. The lingering smell is disagreeable as well. Carefully, I suggest this, but Harry immediately, defensively, replies that if only I had been here earlier, I wouldn't say this. The difference is truly impressive. This spot was very oily and very smelly only two hours ago. Here, the fishmonger has been selling fish, both fresh and deep fried. Fat leaks from his car. Added to that, people have discarded remnants of their fried fish on the pavement. So, too, have the herons, that also freely spread their excrement. 'A few years ago, there was a strike', Harry says, 'all cleaners were on strike. But I would still come here and work this part. For things need to be clean here. Hygienic. People come and eat here.'

If streets and squares are *aesthetically schoon* such prettiness is pleasing: it adds to Harry's job satisfaction. His dissatisfaction takes a *moral* turn: why do people *do* this? And then there appears to be yet another way of valuing that is highly relevant to cleaning up after the market, one in which the good to be served is that of *hygiene*. People who eat food from market stalls should not catch infectious diseases. Bugs are to be scrubbed

away. They are to be killed with strong cleaning fluids. By men who are truly dedicated and who, beyond disputes about their salary, want eaters to be safe.

> *Schoon* is a composite value, it calls up different kinds of good. In trailing Harry and his men, I come across aesthetic, moral and hygienic repertoires of valuing.[17] I wonder if all three goods at stake – beautiful, proper, safe – resonate as loudly in *clean*. But how might I find out? I can ask my helpful English friends, but they have not done fieldwork with cleaners of a day market. They may know a lot about the word *clean* in other sites and situations, but not about the way it figures in my (or an equivalent, but what would be an equivalent?) field.

In the Dutch semantic network that includes *schoon* and *proper* and *puur* there are yet more related terms, notably *zuiver* and *rein*. If you speak German, you might recognise *sauber* and *rein*. A clean conscience is *zuiver*; and waste water, as we saw above, is submitted to *zuivering*. *Rein* is somewhat old fashioned, but the verb *reinigen* is still in use for particular kinds of cleaning, such as dry-cleaning, carpet cleaning and skin cleaning. What is more, these words are pertinent in practices beyond households, sewage systems, markets, hospitals and the beauty industry. In practices, that is, to do with theory.

> As I assemble resonances and slippages between the few closely related European languages that I have access to, I cannot help thinking of the different translations of the *clean reasoning* that stood out as an icon of the Enlightenment. In German, Kant wrote a *Kritik der **reinen** Vernuft*; in French this became the *Critique de la raison **pure***; in English it was translated into the *Critique of **pure** reason*; and while both *rein* and *puur* would have made sense in Dutch, the Dutch version contains a third term, it is called *Kritiek van de **zuivere** rede*. Should we indeed wash our words until they are clean and shining? I wonder whether calling for theory that is *schoon* might be an improvement here. My hope is not particularly with its hygienic or its moral overtones, but rather with its third layer, its promising aesthetics.

To conclude

Academic authors tend to put a lot of effort into closing down the gaps between the different variants of the terms they use. Hoping to build transportable theories, they celebrate 'the concept' – an honourable title given to a word defined in such a solid way that it is able to travel throughout a research project, between research fields, or even across disciplines, without transforming. However, if words are entangled with their semiotic as well as their practical contexts, it is impossible to make them immutable while they move between settings.[18] The dream of 'the concept' is faltering.

That words adapt is true *within* any so-called 'language', but the impossibility of semantic stability is all the more striking once you move *between* 'languages'. Elsewhere, this has been laid out and exemplified in work on the limits of translation.[19] In the present article, building on those insights, I have discussed it in the slightly different

circumstances of the author who cannot claim full authority over English, but still knows enough English – but what is enough? – to write in it.[20]

But if words cannot be fully stabilised, the idea that this might be possible is consequential. It means that some words gain prominence while others are sidelined; and that dominant meanings are strengthened while lesser ones are marginalised or lost. In as far as academic work is done in English, this affects not just English, but also academic work.[21] It leads to an undue linguistic impoverishment of English language linguistic repertoires and, added to that, foregoes the enrichment on offer in other tongues. In the present text, I have attended to a particular kind of richness, that of the *resonances* that echo within words. I have provided examples of cultural, material, semantic and multilingual resonances by visiting a few situations where the words *schoon* or *clean* are *spoken* and to situations that these words *bespeak*.

> Can I use the word *bespeak*, is that okay? My first English reader edited it away. The second wrote in the margin that he liked the fact that I revitalised this *old fashioned* term. I had no idea it was old fashioned. Can I use it?

Recognising the fluidity, adaptability, multiplicity, relationality – the context dependency – of words has consequences for theory. For, as it is, the social sciences harbour *theories* about such phenomena as taste, values, morality, materiality, inequality, work – what have you. These *theories* are made to travel: from the UK to the Netherlands; from France to Brazil; from Chicago to South Africa and back again.[22] The suggestion is that 'taste', 'values', 'morality' and so on are the same *thing* from one site to the next. But they are not.[23] That even between English and Dutch, closely related languages, there are impressive gaps, might serve to underscore this.

> While the word *schoon* may resonate with Floddertje, the word *clean* does not. While in the Netherlands a 'waste water treatment plant' is a clean place, in the UK it is not. While Douglas used a spatial version of 'clean' to argue for washed out, distinct categories, in terms of 'schoon' this would never have made any sense. The word *schoon* moves between aesthetic, moral and hygienic repertoires of valuing – and to know whether the word *clean* does as well, I would have to do added fieldwork (but where?). In the semantic networks that afford words with their meaning, *schoon* is related to the Dutch *proper, rein, puur* and *zuiver* – but also to the German *schön, rein* and *sauber* and the French *propre* – in ways that *clean* is not. Such a small linguistic distance; so many gaps!

What to conclude? One possibility is to acknowledge slippages but still aim for a theory that is 'as coherent as possible'. The other is to attend upfront to *things that do not fit*. To control, or, better still, to care for equivocations.[24] To juxtapose stories without seeking to fuse them. To craft patchworks in which the threads that connect the pieces together are clearly visible. Or, to shift back from visuals to sounds again: to sing tunes that are polyphonous; or to keep diverse resonances audible, even if they are dissonant.

The format of this text resonates with this way of understanding *theory*. I have not presented you with a firm, overall proposition supported by subservient facts that are staged as if I am out to win an argument. Instead, I have assembled examples of what *resonance* may be and what, in these cases, its implications are. And no, this is not a *Dutch* format. Instead, it is informed by the pains and pleasures of moving and moving again between different linguistic repertoires.

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Notes

1. That migration may come with bewildering effects of getting lost between languages is forcefully brought across in the remembrance, and analysis, of migrating from Polish in Poland to English in Canada in the book *Lost in Translation* (Hoffman, 1989). This title is used elsewhere, too, but this book stands out.
2. To remedy such lack of travel in at least a few cases, the journal *MAT* (*Medical Anthropology Theory*) started a series called *Found in Translation*. Here, in 2015, I was allowed to publish a belated translation of my 1985 article *Wie weet wat een vrouw is* – Who knows what a woman is. See for this, with a retrospective introduction, Mol (2015).
3. About how English got there, see De Swaan (2013). There are competing imperialist tongues around, like Spanish, but while they are imposed on in-country minorities, they have less traction across the borders of the nations where they are dominant.
4. This is not necessarily a matter of competence; the potential readership tends to understand English quite well. Other practicalities come into play. For example, Dutch language academic journals that used to cater to an interdisciplinary readership no longer exist because 'we' publish in specialist journals in English. There is of course discussion about this – in Dutch. Should I quote that? What does a reference to a Dutch book affect in a text in English (Boomkens, 2008)?
5. This stone-story forms the opening vignette of Wittgenstein's fabulous *Philosophical Investigations* that also leaves further traces in the present text (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009).
6. The shift from language-as-a-system to language-in-practice is clearly presented in Pennycook (2010).
7. For example, when Sartre theorised 'the stranger' in general terms he talked by stealth about the people one sees passing by when hanging out in a Parisian side walk cafe (Nauta, 1990). In a festschrift for Nauta, I first cast this idea in an auditory metaphor and wrote about *undertones* and *overtones* (Mol, 1994).

8. Thanks for a fun joint field visit and interesting discussions about it to Justine Laurent, Carolina Dominguez, Rebeca Ibañez Martín, Tait Mandler, Fenna Smits and Jeffrey Christensen.

9. Balmer and Molyneux-Hodgson (2013). I thank both authors for their work; and Andrew Balmer for his permission to quote from our email correspondence.

10. This is also why 'translation' has been mobilised as a metaphor for how realities (things, techniques) may relate from one setting to the next and why what later came to be known as 'actor network theory' was, early on, termed 'a sociology of translation' (Callon, 1984).

11. See also Strathern's to-and-fro between the categories of 'the field' and those used for 'analysis' (e.g. Strathern, 2004). Building on that, Law and Lin use Chinese terms to analyse fieldwork done in England (Law & Lin, 2018). What I am adding here is a further instability: that of ignorance about the empirical realities, not of 'the other', but of 'the reader'.

12. The term 'lekker' forms the focal point of a more extensive trailing (Mol, 2014).

13. The source text is more directly discussing categorisation and religion than dirty nurseries, water or streets (Douglas, 1966).

14. The notion absent/present is more extensively explored in Law (2002).

15. For how we got in this dire situation, see e.g. Hawkins (2011); and the contributions to Gabrys et al. (2013).

16. For a critique of the modernist dream of cleanliness and purity and a defence of the 'excluded third', the mess, the noise allowing for the signal, see Serres (2013).

17. Or, one might say in French, *économies de la grandeur* – translated into English as *economies of worth.* See Boltanski and Thévenot (2006).

18. The argument that here I make about *words* resembles – resonates with – earlier arguments made in *material semiotics* about the fluidity of techniques and technologies. See among others: Mol and Law (1994) and De Laet and Mol (2000).

19. For the case of philosophy, see the contributions to the fabulous Cassin et al. (2014).

20. Commenting on a previous version, Jeroen Boomgaard pointed out that in my analysis I follow the *author* and skip the work that *readers* do to remedy poor transportability. As readers, he insisted, we learn to adapt our understanding of what we read to what we know about the sources of a text. An intriguing further complexity, indeed.

21. For the argument that current academic repertoires are stuck in what can be said in English, argued through extensively analysed examples, see Wierzbicka (2013). Wierzbicka, however, believes that it is possible to use a simplified neutral language that travels across linguistic boundaries – thus disentangling 'language' from 'practices' in a way that goes in the opposite direction from what I am arguing here.

22. For more on the issue of *other kinds of English*, see Pennycook and Makoni (2019).

23. For the case of taste and tasting, see Mann and Mol (2019).

24. See for the notion of controlled equivocation, Viveiros de Castro (2004). And for the argument that equivocations may deserve care even as they defy control Yates-Doerr (2019).

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