Cracking the Code: Translation as Transgression in *Triomf*[1]

Leon de Kock

Summary

This article has been braided from two main strands: first, my arguments probe the conditions that pertain to the project of literary translation in South African letters, both in the light of my own research into and observations of conditions in the field, and my own experience as a working translator, a participant in a domain that I regard as extraordinarily rich but also highly problematic. Second, the argument considers aspects of my own translation of Marlene van Niekerk's paradigm-busting novel, *Triomf* (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2004), as a case history which serves as possible corroboration of my arguments in the first part.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bestaan uit twee gedeeltes: In die eerste plek stel ek deur my argumente ondersoek in na die projek van literêre vertaling in die Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde. Die argumente word toegelig deur my eie navorsing oor en waarnemings van die toestande in die veld, asook my eie ervaring as aktiewe vertaler en deelnemer in 'n domein wat na my mening buitengewone skatte oplewer maar ook hoogs problematies is. Tweedens werp die argumente lig op aspekte van my eie vertaling van Marlene van Niekerk se roman, *Triomf* (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2004). Hierdie roman speel klaar met bestaande paradigmas en kan moontlik my argumente in die eerste gedeelte van die artikel bekragtig.

1   Translating in the Seam

If writing in South Africa has historically been a vexed occupation,[2] then literary translation, too, has proved to be a hazardous engagement, a

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1.   This essay also appears in *Translation Studies in Africa: Central Issues in Interpreting and Literary and Media Translation,* edited by Judith Inggs and Libby Meintjes. Continuum Studies in Translation, Jeremy Munday (General Editor). London & New York: Continuum Literary Studies, 2009.

tightrope walk over a scene of daunting difference and blunt incommen-
surability. Translation, at some level, assumes that experience – if
experience is the substrate of literature – is prior to, or at least adjacent to,
or constitutive of, language (as language is arguably constitutive of
experience); if this is the case, it follows that divergent languages should
equally well be able to express the substrate of experience, or re-create it,
through translation, in translation's guise as a *mechanism* of transferring or
recasting meaning from one language to another. To some extent, this view
lies behind Walter Benjamin's fabulously appealing notion that there is
higher-order "pure language" that exists between the lines of all the
Babelesque "ordinary" languages, or mere operational languages, and that
all such languages, including the original text in a situation of translation,
are really engaged in the act of trying to approximate this higher-order
register, this "pure" expression of the experiential substrate.[3] So, in this way
of seeing things, the translated text and the source text are to some extent
equal contenders for an elusive, ever-beckoning goal of "pure" expression.
In this view, a writer's sense of experience, her reshaping of the
phenomenal world into an imagined world via the coding of one language –
the "source" language – can just as well be recast in another language, the
"target" language. Both languages, in this view, are engaged in the act of
approximating a higher ideal of expression, in Benjamin's terms. This is a
theory that appeals to the perfectionist in me, and it accords with that sense,
when writing, that one is engaged, à la Derrida, in a process of perpetual
displacement, of using language as a trace, forever *tracking* the darting,
fleet-footed, impossibly elusive prey of thought and being. However, taking
a view of the South African literary topography, there are two immediate
problems with the proposition that all languages are interchangeable,
Babelesque currencies scattered and all awry beneath the superior god of
metalanguage. The first problem is presented by the case of literary
expression – writing or orature – in which the experience relayed through
language is *integrally* defined and captured by irreducibly localised
expression, sui generis, giving it an ultra-thin translatability yield. The
second is a literary scene, such as that in South Africa, in which the
"translation" of *experience* itself, not just the literary *representation* of that
"translation" of experience, the mute difficulty of *that* project – recasting
perceived and reimagined experience about others and otherness in a
language other than that in which it arose – across different value systems,
incommensurably divergent cultures, unevenly aligned epistemologies,

2.   I have made this argument extensively in "South Africa in the Global
     Imaginary: An Introduction" (2004).

3.   Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator". In: Benjamin 1992: 70-82.
     See also de Kock (2003) for further discussion of Benjamin in relation to the
     Triomf translation.

opposing cosmologies and inconsistent worldviews, has historically been the core matter of the writing project itself. That is, in a setting of unresolved heterogeneity,[4] the translation of experience, the mediation of perception, and the static-ridden transfer of intercultural communication become the matter of a bigger, more problematic mode of translation.[5] This experiential and conceptual recasting of *modes of being* across languages is clearly a prior order of translation that precedes the sense and meaning we conventionally ascribe to the term. But the point must be made, because if, when we do literary translation in a situation such as this, the content of what we translate is already enmeshed in such prior acts of what I think of as modality translation, then the ordinary perils of misapprehension and mistranslation in the purely *literary* sense grow exponentially. When the mode and ontological substrate, and not just the style and the meaning, of the "source" code is so difficult to translate that the term "untranslatability" potentially comes into play, then to translate in the regular sense of the term is to deal with a second order of difficulty, a second order of possible "untranslatability".

  Both the problems sketched above can present very awkward conundrums in postcolonial contexts, rendering translation acutely problematic and robbing it of its more ideal cloak, in the classical sense, of elegant, neutral functionalism, since the choices made in its name ineluctably become potentially complicit in the unequal cultural trade-offs which are the stuff of colonial experience. However, if one is a postcolonial translator seeking to "foreignise" the source text in the name of an unconcealed index,[6] a trace that exposes the epistemological violence of translation, then the South African scene becomes more engaging than many others. Yet at a more pragmatic level, speaking from the practising writer's keyboard rather than from the theorist's, if such a thing is possible, the problems of intercultural translation in South Africa remain perhaps less a gleeful opportunity for rupture and more a question of substantial difficulty, severely marking what strikes me as, still, the key purpose of literary translation: to exchange literary meaning between different languages in a textual object which shows the highest equivalence of style, meaning, matter and form when read against the source text.

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4.   This point has been set out and extensively argued in de Kock 2001 (pp. 271-290).

5.   See Stephen Gray (1989) who makes a case for the southern African writer as, in essence, a "translator" across different systems of meaning and identity.

6.   Such as Lawrence Venuti (1995) and other postcolonial translation theorists would have us do.

To cite a very prominent example of the problem I am sketching in the South African literary-cultural encounter: when, in the late nineteenth century, the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, set out to record the stories and songs of an expiring Bushman culture by transcribing the utterances of /Xam communicants, prisoners they had extricated from hard labour on the Cape Town breakwater, they were taking on much more than they could possibly have imagined at the time. Bleek and Lloyd learnt the /Xam language from the mouths of their informants and they developed an orthography. They then translated the songs and stories they had so collected into English, the famous archive of which runs to about 12,000 pages and is housed in the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town. Retrospectively regarded, Bleek and Lloyd were engaged, imperfectly, clumsily, heroically and perhaps unwarily, in an act of experiential, cultural, cosmological and literary translation which, to this day, remains significantly defective. Defective not in the ordinary sense of all translations being by definition subject to the possibility of near-endless improvement, but in the sense of incomplete, incommensurable with the source "object" of meaning, and unable to convey anything even close to a "full" capture of the source meaning in its own right, its own ontological domain, indeed succeeding only in offering mystifying but highly intriguing traces of a culturally inaccessible, disappearing mode of perception, experience and expression.[7]

Why should this be the case? In terms of a history of translation in South Africa, Bleek and Lloyd are an emblematic case of colonial liminality. Though schooled in positivist philology, with its hopeful promises of transparency and equivalence, Bleek and Lloyd were unable to make full sense of what they were transcribing and translating because they were unable to see it except through their own frames of understanding, and the framing semantics of an English that was, to put it bluntly, unschooled in Bushman cosmology and culture. This point has been argued convincingly elsewhere and does not need elaboration now.[8] The Bleek and Lloyd example is an abiding precedent for the Quixotic and highly problematic nature of

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7. For a broader discussion, see Skotnes (2001 and 2007). See also Bleek and Lloyd (1911).

8. See, for example, Skotnes (2001). See also Martin Hall (1998), and Loren Kruger's discussion (2000) of Hall's essay, collected in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (eds Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, 1998); of particular interest is the argument about how the language and narrative of one of the /Xam informants, //Kabbo, evades Bleek's positivist philology as well as the imperial project of conquest and subjugation led by the former Cape Governor, Sir George Grey, Bleek's patron.

intercultural translation in South Africa.[9] It sets the historical tone for the project of translation in the southernmost landmark of colonial Africa, at once utopia and dystopia, le Vaillant's nymph-inhabited Arcadia, van Wyk Louw's wide and sad land, Eugene Marais's "Dark River", Dennis Brutus's place of "Sirens Knuckles Boots", Thomas Pringle's scene of charity for a Bechuana Boy,[10] and it continues to resonate in acts of daily cultural exchange. Deeper acts of translation – borderline crossings, intermeshing identity-tagging, mutual ascriptions across linguistic and cultural confluences, imperfect couplings, experiments in hybridity, like tattoos on skin, marked on the bodies of people as much as on the texts of higher learning – these engagements have all been inscribed in the country's very nature as a "seam", a cross-stitched fabric of "quilted" subjectivities, interwoven but straining at the joints.[11] When such awkward acts of ethnographic or cultural barter are implicated in literary translation, then translation as a mode loses its innocence, loses any chance it had of positivistic clarity, resorting to a half-life of opaque representation instead. Examples of literary translation of historical note, following Bleek and Lloyd, in which the sheer torsion is arguably palpable, and can be felt in the peculiar texture of its rarefied and strained language, include Sol T. Plaatje's rendering of Shakespeare into Setswana;[12] the many works of translating the Bible into indigenous South African languages;[13] the renderings of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

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9. The most accessible view of the Bleek-Lloyd project is via their book, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (Bleek & Lloyd 1911), which runs to 468 pages and demonstrates the attempt to "archive" living (in this case, dying) oral narrative traditions.

10. For a discussion of le Vaillant, see Gray (1979); van Wyk Louw's famous line "O wye en droewe land" is from the verse drama *Die dieper reg* (van Wyk Louw 1947); Eugène N. Marais's "Dark River" ("Diep rivier", a symbol of death), is from the poem of the same name (in Marais 1925); Dennis Brutus's poem "Sirens Knuckles Boots" appears in *A Simple Lust* (Brutus 1973); for Thomas Pringle's famous poem, "The Bechuana Boy", see Pereira & Chapman (1989).

11. See de Kock (2001) on the poetics of the "seam" in South Africa and Harris (2006) on the idea of "quilting" in the work and statements of Antjie Krog.

12. On Plaatje, see Willan (1996: 308). Plaatje translated four of Shakespeare's plays, two of which were published: *Diposho-phoso* (*Comedy of Errors*), Morija: Morija Printing Works, 1930; and *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara* (*Julius Caesar*), Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1937. The two translations that appear to have gotten lost are *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice* (Willan 1996: 308).

13. See Beck (1997) and Sanneh (1989).

Progress in African tongues;[14] A.C. Jordan's renowned translation into English of Xhosa oral-style short stories in *Tales from Southern Africa*;[15] H.C. Bosman's "English" Marico Afrikaans (and their literal translations back into Bosman's own, careless and Anglicised Afrikaans);[16] the English *literary* translations of the Portuguese *experiential* translation of a seafaring encounter with the Cape, found in Camoens's *The Lusiads*;[17] the subsequent re-renderings of the Bleek-Lloyd /Xam archive by several English-speaking, contemporary South African poets, now translating from Bleek-Lloyd English to a reinterpreted, or at least rearranged, metrical register, for a contemporary South African rather than a late-Victorian English palate;[18] and so the list goes on. All such examples arise from a need to bridge voids of understanding in a condition where the stakes are higher than mere literary appreciation, where, indeed, the very validity of countervailing forms of being and identity are at issue, their intrinsic nature and their transferability engaged in a value equation of material and immediate import. In the colonial project, and indeed in the postcolonial adventure, too, the lives of whole languages and literatures are at stake, their inner existence resisting the drift towards being miscast, misheard or mis-construed. Translation remains a currency of vital transmission, a cultural blood transfusion. Languages "other" than the great South African lingua franca, English – where the bartering and trading of meaning most commonly occur – still need to speak their integrity, their otherness, in the Big Brother language. The reasons should be obvious: English is now more than ever before a portmanteau – in the cyber-global world perhaps a Zip-file would be the more appropriate metaphor – a medium that takes writers into contemporary transnational channels of marketability and exposure. For translators working with South African texts in languages other than

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14.   See Hofmeyr (2004).

15.   See MacKenzie (2002) on A.C. Jordan's translation of Xhosa oral-style tales. Mackenzie says: "[W]hat we are dealing with here is not the translation of one language into another (although this does come into it), but, more particularly, the shift from one ontological mode to another" (p. 347).

16.   See the collection of Bosman's extant Afrikaans short stories, collected in *Verborge skatte* (de Kock 2001).

17.   See Gray's classic discussion in his *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979: Chapter 1).

18.   See Alan James (2001), Antjie Krog (2004), Stephen Watson (1991).

English, the historical burden of duty and conscience in the face of history is large. *Tradurre e tradire*![19]

2   Translating a "Bastardised" Text

How far can one go with language? How deep into the fissures of sensate being, the eyes that see, the ears that hear, the tongue that tastes and the processing apparatus that experiences phenomena and epiphenomena at first remove? This is the question that always strikes me when I set out on a project of extended novelistic translation. Speaking now not only theoretically but also as a working literary translator, writing up my *experience* of my own acts of translation,[20] I can record that it always feels, in the moment of embarkation, as if I have entered a kind of interzone, a place of great attraction and alluring power. It is a place where one potentially has the ability, in one's own hands, of creating a near-to-perfect simulacrum of imagined worlds, a character-infused "multiverse"[21] of perception and experience, co-drifting down an imaginative stream with an author for whom one has the highest regard. As a translator, you have the choice, or the talent, or the determination, to do this in an elegant economy of expression, an adventurous foray into risky, inventive reshaping, making a tour de force – you hope and pray – of comprehensive capture and addition to value in literary language that is evocative, stylish, and accurate to a fault.[22] That is the mission. For me, this comes before any of the questions of political import. The project, writ large, is a sensuous challenge, an engagement that combines the best of one's experiential exposure, range of imaginative possibility, and verbal prowess, sifting through nuance and weighing up texture, rhythm and narrative flow. In the case of *Triomf*[23] and

19.   To translate is to betray! Cf. Simon Lewis, "*Tradurre e Tradire*: The Treason and Translation of Breyten Breytenbach" (2001).

20.   Principally, Marlene van Niekerk's novel, *Triomf* (1999), and Etienne van Heerden's novel, *In stede van die liefde* (2007, MS).

21.   On the idea of a "multiverse", and on "co-drifting", see Kenny (1985).

22.   Such as I believe was achieved by Michiel Heyns in his value-enhancing English translation of van Niekerk's big follow-up classic to *Triomf*, entitled *Agaat* (2004b, 2006). See my discussion in de Kock (2007).

23.   Van Niekerk (1994). This novel swept the boards in South Africa in the 1990s, claiming several major prizes, including the M-Net Prize and the Noma Award, and it is generally recognised as a major work of Afrikaans fiction, perhaps the definitive anti- as well as post-apartheid novel in Afrikaans. The English version (van Niekerk 1999a and 1999b, 2004, trans.

its translation, this overall sense of challenge and opportunity quickly began to combine with the acutely problematic nature of the task at hand: how to speak in the flattened, overspoken registers of modern South African English and still convey the feel of a novel such as *Triomf*, a saga written in a scrupulously observed sociolect, a class and regional subcode of Afrikaans, dumbed down from the pseudo-professorial registers of the Nationalist[24] politicians who created the area called Triomf in the first place, and wrenched into the actual mish-mash of a colloquial, low-class, aggression-tinged, paranoiac, stained-by-ideology, bastardised-half-English idiom that is spoken in the house of Pop, Treppie, Mol and Lambert during the last days of apartheid. These characters, who bear the ultimate legacy of Afrikaner nationalism, are a sorry group of disappointed travellers on the final leg of the "Separate Development"[25] sortie, with little baggage left to carry except their own, overdetermined selves, forged in a frenzy of Nationalist "self-determination" ("selfbeskikking"), and now they have internecine family incest as their inheritance, their final homage to a form of ideological self-consumption, nationalism taken to a near-catastrophic human extreme.

In the case of *Triomf*'s translation, then, there was an alluring sense of attraction just in the ability to set the scene, to disgrace English with a contortion of prose that speaks in its registers but simultaneously registers a calumny of its purity. That was the greatest appeal of all when I approached the task of translating the novel, then still regarded by many as untranslatable. Why should it be inimical to translation? The answer was simple: its Afrikaans was half-English already. The calculated bastardisation of Afrikaans in the narration seemed impossible to "translate", because, as it was, the original *Triomf*'s prose already consisted of a mish-mash of English and Afrikaans in a register that was surely sui generis – or so people thought. My initial, knee-jerk response went something like this: if so many of the Afrikaans sentences in the novel contained so many borrowed English words and phrases, functioning in the Afrikaans as a register of colloquialism, and now performing a transferred semantic function in the

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Leon de Kock), won the South African Translators Institute Award for Outstanding Translation in 2000.

24.   In the South African historical context, "Nationalist" gains an added meaning, apart from the standard sense of the word "nationalist", referring also to characteristics of the political ideology created by the National Party in South Africa, which ruled from 1948 until the 1990s transition to democracy. "Nationalist" in this sense implies a particularly pronounced racial xenophobia, racial exclusion, outright racial discrimination and stratification, and cultural self-obsession.

25.   "Separate Development" was the "respectable" term for apartheid, conjured up by the ideology's architect, H.F. Verwoerd.

Afrikaans source text itself, then perhaps one could just reverse the process – write bastardised English sentences with an equal number of Afrikaans words and phrases, Afrikaans idioms and slang. But of course that would immediately defeat the purpose of translation, which is to foreswear any literal use of the source language at all, except perhaps in very occasional instances, followed by a glossary at the end of the text. However, it was clear from the start that this would be no mere instance of glossing a few foreign terms for local colour. *Triomf* was so peppered with explosive ruptures and assaults against the purity of Afrikaans, so many defacements of the pretty face of Afrikaans's grammatical propriety, that the thought of a glossary was simply far-fetched. Yet the possibility of reproducing the assault on "purity" of language remained enticing, because soiling the bourgeois niceties of "Algemene Beskaafde Afrikaans" (Generally Culti-vated Afrikaans, the carrier of Afrikaans nationalism), was for the author of *Triomf* a deliberate political and novelistic strategy. For her, "purity" had to be assailed at every level. "Purity" of language, in the ideological stratifica-tions that Afrikaans was subjected to under apartheid, ran parallel to purity of "group areas", purity of "self-determination", the ban on "mixed" marriages and "mixed" love affairs, and it lay behind the "cleansing" of Sophiatown to make Triomf. The "triumph" of "purity" came at the cost of lives and dignity; it ultimately impugned the dignity of Afrikaans, making it an enemy of its own, less purity-obsessed, dissident adherent. For Marlene van Niekerk, a disaffected, rebellious Afrikaner, writing in Afrikaans remained her only real choice, as it did for most mother-tongue authors, yet she felt compelled to use the language subversively, to turn it inside out and commit violence upon it in a raging assault on its tightly regulated modes of "proper" expression and form. So a parallel assault on the modalities of English, in an English version of such an Afrikaans novel, was therefore not only enticing, it seemed compellingly necessary.

But how to do it? The problem seemed huge. Fortunately, I did not then see it quite as clearly as the above description might imply. The sense of challenge grew as I found myself making do with what came to hand, producing a first draft as a template upon which to begin relentless revision and reshaping. Throughout the translation's initial drafting, the author and I were working on the basis that the English *Triomf* would be published in South Africa by Jonathan Ball and Queillerie (which, in the end, it was), and that we could therefore assume a South African English (SAE) readership. For me, this offered the partial "solution" of assuming that most readers were at least acquainted with Afrikaans, and that my rendering could, therefore, to some extent break the rules of strict translation in the cause of a thematically motivated rupturing of formal "purity", in the English version, too. In other words, if the original *Triomf* was a hybrid of Afrikaans with English, then my translation could, perhaps to a lesser extent, be a hybrid of English with Afrikaans. Many Afrikaans terms, idioms and phrases have,

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over the past two centuries or so, become part of SAE.[26] This led to the possibility that I might be able to renovate the stuffy registers of "proper" English, which was a politically loaded act, too, given the hegemonic role that English has played through the many decades of missionary imperialism and race-based segregation in the country's history.[27] Yet this would need to be done carefully. The histories of English-based and Afrikaans-based race coercion were arguably comparable, but certainly not identical. In addition, the specificity of dissident Afrikaans rebellion against Afrikaans cultural and political strictures needed to be respected and, if possible, rendered in translation.

My instinct was to create the sense, in the translated work, of a milieu, a class-based "atmosphere" in the language that could approximate working-class Afrikaans Triomf, sociologically speaking. I had grown up on the other side of Hurst Hill, which stands above Triomf/Sophiatown on the city-centre side, in the then-white area called Mayfair ("white", that is, apart from the shadow black servant population). In Mayfair, a similar social class to that in Triomf was complicit in a similarly race-laced compendium of vulgar behaviours, except for the fact that my own milieu had been formed within the registers of a streetwise, sloppy, slangy, degraded form of "Joburg" English. It felt to me that the English sociolect with which I had grown up could almost serve as a register of translation for the Afrikaans vulgate in *Triomf*, since there was a sociological similarity: white communities, working-class, racist, living in similar *actual* conditions, and physically proximate. It was a case of almost but not quite. I would have to rid my Mayfair-English of its strong Lebanese influences (arising from the substantial Lebanese community resident in Mayfair in the middle- to late-twentieth century), and stain it more pointedly with Afrikanerisms, local slang such as I also heard all around me, providing words like "oke" and "ou" for "fellow" or "chap", for example, and mixed English/Afrikaans usage such as "ag don't sig man" ("sig" meaning hesitate or waver, "ag" as in "oh", an exhortation). The English I grew up hearing was full of impure bastardisations, containing a similar quota of the reprehensible and the vulgar to that found in van Niekerk's novel, full of words such as "kafferboetie" ("kaffir-lover"), "moer" (multiple meanings: as a verb, "biff him one", as a noun, "vagina", "sediment", among other meanings), "bliksem" ("bugger" as a noun, "thump" or "beat up" as a verb), and so on. Just as many English words formed part of the lexicon of the Afrikaans characters in the novel I was translating, so many Afrikaans words had helped form the lexicon of the English I had grown up speaking. I had a considerable arsenal of such terms and expressions, and I was eager to use

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26. The best guide to which, in my view, is *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (Silva et al. 1996).

27. See my discussion in *Civilising Barbarians* (de Kock 1996).

them. It suited my own sense of narrative realism, my own feeling for the rough texture of the streets in which I had grown up. And the area in which I learnt such language upon my "native" tongue was virtually contiguous with the actual Triomf. Many if not most of my fellow SAE-speakers would have heard the kind of language I intended to use, or they would be able to get the drift, especially in a novel where the drift was meant to be fairly violent and the grain of the language was never meant to be smooth.

The narrative possibilities for my translation were beginning to feel like a rich brew, an intoxicating cross-fusion of texture and idiom. The Afrikaner-isms and occasional untranslated words would serve both to rupture the English text, spicing in the thematic element of impurity, and they would make the text *feel* Afrikaans, too, which was critically important – I wanted readers to read *through* the English into an Afrikaans world, imagining that they were in fact reading Afrikaans, hearing Afrikaans and experiencing an "Afrikaans" world. So, to some extent, the text had to perform an act of illusionism. The possibility existed to create, with both losses and gains in the translated work, a *hybrid*, bastardised translation that I could only hope would eventually, additively, create a similar feel to that of the original, despite the problem that the English words and phrases already in the Afrikaans original served a transferred, or transformed, semantic function as *part of Afrikaans sentences*, giving them a different contextualisation and a new slant, and even though any simple substitutions or reversals in the Afrikaans-to-English ratios of expression would be difficult and never a case of mathematical exactitude. It was a massive task, and eventually it exhausted me quite comprehensively. The translation went through count-less drafts and a seemingly endless process of re-sculpting, with much advice from and negotiation with the author, but eventually it simply had to be surrendered to the publishers, and to the intimidating machinery of reception.

I propose, in the remainder of this essay (sections 3 and 4, below), to discuss two particular aspects of this case history. Section 3 deals with the implications of a need that arose in the process of translating, namely to create two *variant* editions of the translated text. This brought about a situation in which the aim of rupturing the purity of language used in *Triomf* could be achieved both by means that were *external* to the English deployed, and by means that were *internal* to it. Section 4 deals with an instance of what I call "code-breaking", moments in the translation when I committed a transgression of the core duty of translator, which is never to leave entire sentences untranslated. Such code-breaking, I will argue, illustrates certain complexities of translation in intercultural situations in which a "masala" or "*bredie*" of languages is dished up by writers, who then want their works translated into only *one* of the languages that went into the stew in the first place, insisting (understandably) that the translator somehow retain the original flavour.

Both of the above-mentioned aspects came into play when, after the first few drafts of the translation had already been completed, news arrived that the author's agent in London had secured a British publisher for the English version of *Triomf* – the multinational group Little, Brown & Co. This news threw the cat among the pigeons, suddenly and substantially changing the entire picture from a translation point of view. I was called to a conference at the author's house in Westdene, Johannesburg, in the course of 1998, and we sat down to deliberate. What were we now to do, since all we had was a "hybrid" draft translation of the novel, surely unsuitable for international English readers?

Initially, we resolved, with deep reluctance, to root out most if not all of the Afrikaans words, phrases, idioms, curses and slang – meticulously beaded arrangements of translation that I had painstakingly put together over a period of about eight months – and find "standard English" equivalents for them. Needless to say, this came as an unpleasant shock to me. I was reluctant to give up the project of translational hybridity upon which I had so ambitiously embarked. Both the author and I were mindful of the need to keep the grainy, grimy texture of the translated prose intact. But it now seemed that rupturing the surface of linguistic purity, both an ideological and an aesthetic necessity, would have to be performed via means other than the use of semantically cross-infused Afrikaans terms that had either come into an SAE idiom over time, or which we had thought we could implant into the English text for effect. The defamiliarisation effect, as I like to think of it, was going to have to be achieved *within* the registers of English after all, not outside of it. This meant quite deliberately wrenching English for unfamiliar ways of expressing the outlandish Afrikaans semantic efflux everywhere on the riotous, scabrous surface of the original text.

So urgent did this task then seem to us, that van Niekerk and I agreed I would move into the author's guest cottage, in the garden of her house, for at least a week, so that we could do intensive brainstorming on all the terms that showed up in jagged red underlining on my screen display, words that the computer's automatic spellcheck was telling me were *not English*, or incorrectly spelled English. There were literally thousands of them. On the first night of my stay, I was struggling to sleep, distressed about the impending obliteration of my draft SAE translation, when I came up with a way of actually preserving the hybrid version of my translation while also changing it to "standard" English. The idea was simple – make two texts! Simply by saving an extra copy under a different filename, and by using the CTR+SHIFT+F6 function, I could alternate between what would become the "SA version" and a "UK version", with both files open at the same time, turning the Afrikaans slang into an urban English patois for the UK version, but leaving most of it intact in the SA version. When I put this idea to the author the following morning, she agreed, albeit warily. This would create additional complexity to an already overcomplicated situation, and it would

also necessitate a very great need for keyboard acuity: I would need constantly to be aware of which version I was working in at any given moment. Forgetfulness and/or confusion could have quite serious implications. But if I could crack this ambitious task, then we might emerge with a unique case of deliberately divergent translations: one an "externally" hybrid translation, for the South African market, and the other, for the UK market, a text whose hybridity and defamiliarisation effects would have to be *internal* to the standard English we were now compelled to use, with a glossary for a select number of words which simply would not yield to any form of translation whatsoever.

3   Internal Defamiliarisation

So we sat together with heaps of manuscript paper, making handwritten changes, deciding on each highlighted word or phrase as we encountered them. I would do the transcription later, in the evenings, in some cases making changes only on the UK version, and in others (where the revisions seemed especially good, and where we made additional, incidental improvements), on both versions.[28] An example of a more straightforward kind can be found in Chapter 8, where "Sies, Jannie!" in the SA edition (van Niekerk 1999a: 135), becomes "Sis, Jannie" in the UK edition (1999c: 164), and a paragraph or two down from this: "They kiss. Wragtag!" becomes "They kiss. Can you believe it?". "Sis" and "sies" are clearly very close, both of them expletives expressing disgust ("sis" being a widely used slang SAE alternative to the Afrikaans word "sies"), but "sies" carries a certain weight of vulgarity, a tinge of emphatic, unapologetic coarseness which is not nearly as pronounced in the somewhat more lightly expressed "sis" in English. And "wragtag", for the SAE-speaker, is a fairly well-known, guttural contraction of the word "waaragtig" in Afrikaans, meaning "having the quality of truth, or truthfully". The contraction, especially, with its double loading of gutturally expressible "a" and "g" sounds, communicates revulsion almost onomatopoeically, carrying for an SAE-speaker an instantly recognisable sound and feeling. This is largely lost in the bland UK version of this sentence, which I would classify as an example where translation entails a certain loss, and perhaps as a case where the translation fails to create the effect of "internal defamiliarisation". Yet, such smaller examples of translational weakness (when measured against the spiced-up SAE version) are in a sense rescued by the general drift, the sheer narrative momentum, of van Niekerk's powerful novel. It remains debatable to this day whether, in an example such as this, it might not have been a better idea to retain the foreign words even in the UK edition, relying on context for a

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28.   This process was discussed in de Kock (2003).

sense of meaning, and thereby foreignising the English text as well as sticking more closely to the original, which would have arguably been more consistent with the novel's overall thematic thrust. However, a policy decision was made, based on deliberations mutually and severally between translator, author, agent and publishers, extending beyond the translator's ambit alone.

The term that arguably created the most anxiety around its translation is the near-unspeakable slang Afrikaans conjunction *meidepoes*. This term, probably one of the most racially loaded and offensive descriptors in the entire argot of apartheid, combines a slang Afrikaans word for vagina, namely "poes" (pronounced "puss"), with the multiply resonant Afrikaans word "meid", derived from "meisie" ("girl"), but signifying a "coloured maidservant", according to one authoritative English-Afrikaans dictionary (Bosman, van der Merwe and Hiemstra 1967). In common, racist usage, "meidepoes" combines the sense of a black or coloured woman with a large connotative reflux of disgust, centred metonymically on the female genitalia. There is stuff here for an entire dissertation on gender stereo-typing, sexual and racial essentialism, and metonymic displacement. The author and I discussed the complexity and untranslatability of this word at length. Eventually, the simplest option was to use the term "coloured pussy", but in a separate instance we came up with what was, for me, a fabulously suggestive alternative, namely "toffee skirt". While the term "coloured pussy" gives one a deferred sense of the paradoxical, psych-ologically complex compound of desire and recoil contained in the conjunc-tion of racial abuse and sexual licentiousness that "meidepoes" arguably represents, it lacks the contextual and semantic punch of the original. In context, "toffee skirt", on the other hand (not an idiom in English), wrenches standard English out of its familiar idiomatic range of reference, allows a freer play of association, and evokes unexpected, lateral connections: "skirt" combined with "toffee" suggests a certain sticky, off-colour, licentious, possibly dirty, smudgy, low-class woman, especially given the colour and taste attributes, not to mention the texture, of toffee. Both appetite and surfeit, cheap attraction and recoil, are spring-loaded into that curious translational compound, "toffee skirt", which for me is one of the best examples of the kind of "internal" defamiliarisation I have suggested is an attribute of the English in the UK version of *Triomf*. As the author and I worked through the SAE version, making idiomatic and semantic leaps from "original" terms in the hybrid text to unusual and, at times, poetic switches and turns such as this, I began to wonder whether a strategy of internal defamiliarisation wasn't, in fact, the more difficult, and the more ultimately rewarding, option than the slightly more literal hybrid-isation of the translated text, such as I had fixed upon for the SAE version. I think this question remains open for debate. I do, however, feel fortunate in having both modes of translation, hybrid and internally defamiliarised, available in separately published editions.

4 Breaking the Code

In Chapter 13 of *Triomf*, in my understanding of the novel a pivotal passage of narration, the novel's internal hybridity comes to the surface, spilling over into a crucially important dialogue involving a character called Sonnyboy, and Lambert, the novel's child of incest. Lambert is a lumbering sociopath, emotionally and otherwise retarded, who was brought into being within the bosom of a family so indoctrinated into the ideologies of self against other that multiple, mutual incest becomes a logical imperative. Lambert is the grim, monstrous apogee of Afrikaner "self-determination" taken too far: stunted, brutish, inbred, an epileptic 30-something subject to violent seizures, seeking love but not knowing any language for it other than the culturally and racially exclusive terminology into which he was born. The author's underlying theme: if you cut yourself off for long enough in self-constructed ghettoes, the result will be incest, on the real as well as the symbolic level. The *bloedskande* (incest) that for years has been a regular eruption in the Benade home in *Triomf*, is an analogue for the incestuous workings of the entire Nationalist machinery and the many perverse social symptoms it spawned over more than 40 years in South Africa. In the end, this "caked up" ("saamgekoekte")[29] system implodes; and it is brought down precisely by Lambert, the system's karmic instrument, so to speak, its self-produced nemesis and agent of destruction. Chapter 13 is critical because Lambert has a *real* encounter with otherness for what is probably the first time in his life. Up until this point, his social and interpersonal existence has been conducted from behind the distorting lens of an ideology which stigmatises all instances of identity other than white Afrikaans.

In this chapter (entitled "Lucky Finds"), Lambert is forced into communication with what might be described as *strong otherness*. But before this happens, he gets mocked and harried by his own kind, by members of the AWB,[30] the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, in the form of two AWB adherents manning a stall in Lambert's neighbourhood. The AWB in 1994 was a militant, far-right group that tried, in various ways, to sabotage the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. After escaping their mockery for his unwillingness to be their dupe, Lambert proceeds to the local dump, carrying a plastic municipal rubbish bag, R50 and six Spur (steakhouse) meal vouchers. He is looking for discarded plastic wine bags, which he imagines he will use to store essentials such as petrol, in a hole he is digging under the surface of Triomf, for the family's escape to the "North" when

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29. "Saamgekoekte" ("caked together"), a term often deployed in Triomf, carries a particularly pungent connotation of hypostatised, hardened, stale and "stuck" coagulation, an unhealthy and stale overconcentration of elements.

30. In Afrikaans, the "Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging".

"shit hits the fan" in the country (i.e. democracy). He is also on a mission to improve his home environment for the visit by a "girl" promised to him by his devilish brother (father?), Treppie, for his birthday. However, once at the dump, he has a near-seizure and is saved from the grinding wheels of a dump truck by Sonnyboy. This character, Sonnyboy, is irreducibly cross-hatched and "impure" in Lambert's ideology. He is perhaps the book's most comprehensive "South African" character. By contrast to the drubbing Lambert is given by the AWB men, his "own kind", Sonnyboy not only saves Lambert's life, he also shows him kindness, and they find common ground with each other in the course of a conversation in which they smoke a reefer of cannabis together. Lambert initially goes into this engagement haltingly, but he eventually swops his R50 and six Spur vouchers for a revolver in Sonnyboy's possession, a pair of binoculars, and the *pasella* (free bonus) of an Mbira (*"umbira"* for Lambert), a hand-held musical instrument. By the end of the encounter, Lambert has been given a glimpse – not that he fully realises this himself – of how an alternative South African conversation might shape up, and in what kind of spirit it might be conducted.

Sonnyboy is best allowed to introduce himself. These are the words used in the UK translation, in the passage in which he explains himself to Lambert:

> "Look, that's how the dice fell for me here in Jo'burg. I'm a Xhosa, I come from the Transkei, and some of us are yellow." He touches his face. "That's why the bladdy Bushmen thought I was one of them, so I got a room in Bosmont right in among them. And they began talking real Coloured Afrikaans to me. So I got the hang of it on the sly, and I didn't say nothing, 'cause the less a Bushman knows about you, the better. It's a bad scene, the Bushman scene. They drink themselves stupid and then they rob and stab you and leave you for dead …."
>
> (van Niekerk 1999c: 275)

In the SA edition, this passage reads as follows:

> "Kyk, daai's nou my luck in Jo'burg gewies, nè! Ek's 'n Xhosa, ek kom van die Transkei af. En ek's maar so." He touches his face. "Toe dag die Boesmans ek's ok 'n Boesman, toe kry ek 'n room in Bosmont tussen hulle. En hulle praat met my regte coloured Afrikaans. En toe leer ek maar so on the sly en ek sê fokol, want hoe minder 'n Boesman van jou af weet, hoe beter. Dis 'n bad scene, die Boesmanscene. Hulle lê dronk en suip en steel en steek jou met messe en goed …."
>
> (van Niekerk 1999a: 227-228)

Apart from the four words outside of quote marks in this passage ("He touches his face"), the rest of it was left unchanged from its original form in the SA version of the translation. When I encountered this rare moment of

utterly candid self-description in the course of the novel, it struck me as untranslatable in a sense that goes beyond linguistic or idiomatic untrans-latability. I felt that Sonnyboy's description of himself *enacted* the hybridity of identity into which he had been inducted in the course of surviving outside of South Africa's white enclaves. Sonnyboy can speak Xhosa (and, in all probability, other indigenous languages, too), and when addressing Lambert he can adjust his lexicon to an Afrikaans in which he both mixes in English ("luck", "on the sly", "room", "bad scene") and in which he distances himself from what he calls "Coloured Afrikaans", a dialect he is telling Lambert he picked up "on the sly" while pretending to be a Coloured as a result of the yellowish pallor of his "Xhosa" skin. By contrast, Lambert can speak only Afrikaans and broken English. They are both low-life characters, and although Lambert *thinks* he is superior because he's white, the events of the chapter show that he is not, and that Sonnyboy is more resourceful, agile and in touch with the complexities of his shifting environment, not to mention a good deal more intelligent. If any character in *Triomf* is a "true South African", it is Sonnyboy, culturally hybrid, linguist-ically diverse, street-smart and fully indigenised. His enunciations enact these characteristics. To some extent, Sonnyboy's very being – his irremediable hybridity, his means of survival – rests on the tip of his versatile tongue. To *translate* such a mélange of mixed speech into the pallid registers of "standard English" struck me as a monstrous betrayal – *tradurre e tradire!* – a *denaturing* of the very fibres of Sonnyboy's necessary, irreducible specificity. If Sonnyboy stands in for an interracial South African self that proposes an alternative, to some extent, to single-stranded ethnic impositions and machinations of political identity, then how does one blandly go and strip him of precisely his multivocality in the name of translation? No, I would not do it. It went against the grain of everything I had been campaigning for, in the literary and teaching domain, in an attempt to break out from the ethnic prison in which I, too, had grown into adulthood in a white ghetto of Johannesburg. So I committed the first transgression of translation, which is to refuse to translate, insisting that my South African readers would understand at least part, if not all, of the mixed Afrikaans-English that Sonnyboy speaks in the passage quoted above. In literary terms, too, such a refusal to translate seemed significant in the South African literary and cultural set-up, because the passage in question, in my view, *is already a translation*. The very fibres of Sonnyboy's speech have been formed by the necessities of border-crossings, taking body and mind across boundaries, into unsettling and strange territories, translating experience into new forms of speech in very different tongues and idioms, as the generational journey from country to city and vice versa is made, recasting both older and newer forms of experience in evolving vocabularies and tongues, resulting, in the end, in series of what one might call "interlanguages", the above passage being a fine example of one of them. It

should be easy to understand, in view of such a history, such an achievement, why rendering a passage like this in English was never going to be a simple matter of what is ordinarily understood as "translation".

However, while I had my way in the SA edition, the UK edition could not countenance a whole paragraph of language that would be incomprehensible to its more conventionally English-speaking readers, and so we had to resort, as far as possible, to internal defamiliarisation, in terms and phrases such as "bladdy Bushmen", but in my view this entailed a loss, a casualty of translation that had to be made up, as far as possible, by contextual richness elsewhere in the chapter, and contextual information, both of which abound in van Niekerk's patient, probing, rounded-out fictional prose.

Chapter 13 contains code-breaking of another sort that deserves consideration here. The dialogue between Lambert and Sonnyboy is shot through with switches of language – from Sonnyboy's mixed urban patois to Lambert's degraded Afrikaans to Sonnyboy's own form of "black" Afrikaans to Lambert's broken English to Sonnyboy's own turns of English – so that translating their dialogue became an act of meta-translation. I say "meta-translation" because it forced into the forefront an awareness of the double layer of implied voice in a translated text. When a character like Lambert speaks in a translator's English (target language), both the reader and the translator implicitly understand the character "actually" to be speaking Afrikaans (source language). This means that the reader – and this naturally includes the translator, a reader first and foremost of both texts – reads "through" the translated text as one would look through a pane of glass, or a lens. The text serves to focalise the "actual" content, which is behind the glass of the lens, so to speak. So when one reads Lambert saying:

> Shuddup with that noise! Shuddup. It's fuckenwell eleven o'clock at night! What the hell do you people think you're doing?
>
> (van Niekerk 1994: 103)

one imagines him actually saying something that, if you could understand the source language, would read like this:

> Sjaddap met daai geraas! Sjarrap! Dis fokkenwel elfuur in die nag! Wat de hel dink julle doen julle!
>
> (van Niekerk 1999c: 96)

This comforting meta-sense of the real content, in a different language, "behind" the surface of the translated text, such as I feel a definite sense of when reading Constance Garnett's English translation of *Crime and Punishment* (possibly because of what strikes me as the "Russian" awkwardness of her English register), this consoling illusion of actually reading a foreign language, and hearing Russian characters speak their Russian selves *through* the transparent pane of a known language, this great art of translation, is

shattered when one's characters start speaking the "foreign" language *and* the known language in the same dialogue! This is analogous to Raskolnikov diverting into *real*, broken English in the midst of his Russian-rendered-into-English dialogue. How does one then distinguish the *real* (broken) English he is speaking from the "English" (actually Russian) he is speaking through the translator's code?

   Such a problem becomes even more acute when the register of translation itself deliberately approximates a kind of "broken English" anyway, in its seeking for the feel of the Afrikaans original. To make things further complicated from a translation point of view, the dialogue also contains Sonnyboy spicing in bits of Afrikaans into his English, which I left unchanged in the SA edition of the translation. The following scene, from the SA version of the translation, presents text that exhibits many of these elements. It contains whole passages of dialogue in a mixed register of English and Afrikaans, and it features both translated narrative description and untranslated hybrid dialogue text. To make these salient features clear, the words and sentences which appear in Sonnyboy's impure Afrikaans – that is, entirely untranslated text in the SA edition – are here rendered in bold text. For clarity, the UK translation of the Afrikaans that is here (that is, in the SA translation) left intact in Sonnyboy's speech, appears in square brackets immediately following the relevant bit of untranslated Afrikaans (in the SA version). Text in italics indicates Sonnyboy's and Lambert's actual English usage (i.e. text appearing in the original Afrikaans version of *Triomf* in English). So, **bold** = untranslated Afrikaans in the SA version; *italics* = English usage in the Afrikaans original text; square brackets = UK version's translation of language left untranslated in the SA English version; regular font = text translated from Afrikaans into English. The section of narrative quoted below occurs just after Lambert's near-seizure and Sonnyboy's rescuing him from the wheels of a dump-truck:

Lambert wants to get up, but his back feels lame. He can't get up nicely. The kaffir presses him softly against his chest, back down again.

   "*It's okay, my bra*. **Ek check vir jou net lekker hier**. [I'm just checking for you here.] *Wait, sit, it's okay. Are you feeling better now? You faint or what?* **Daai** [those] *lorries nearly got you, my man. Flat* **ge**squeeza **was jy** *nearly, my bra*, [you were almost squeezed flat, my brother] *flat* **soos** *a* [like a] *pancake. But I watch out for you, my man. I pick you up, I bring you here. I give you Coke. I'm your friend, man.* **Moenie skrik nie.** [Don't panic.]

   "*I'm not your friend,*" he says. "*I want to go home now.*" But he can't get up.

   The kaffir stands up. He takes a big step backwards. He motions with his hands. This kaffir's full of sights.

   "*Okay! Okay! Okay! You're not my friend, hey, you are my boss, right? Big boss,* **ja baas**. [yes boss, left as is in UK edition and glossed] **Ek's maar net 'n kaffer by die dumps, baas,** [I'm just a kaffir at the dumps, boss,] *okay? I catch* **flou** *whiteys here* [I catch whiteys who faint here]. *That's my*

job, yes? Here a whitey, there a whitey, faint. Faint left, faint right, faint centre, all day long. I'm the fainting boy, right?"

The kaffir turns his back to him. From behind it looks like he's laughing. Then he turns around again.

"'*Okay? Relax, my bra, relax* **net** [just relax]. *Boss, king, president, chief, caesar. Whatever. God in heaven, anything you want,* **ek sê** [I say]. *Any way you want it. At your service.* **Askies baas, asseblief baas, dankie baas**, [Excuse me boss, please boss, thank you boss] **ja baas, nee baas,** [yes boss, no boss, given in UK ed. as "ja baas, no baas" in italics and glossed] *sorry boss that I live boss*!' The kaffir turns away again. His hands are in ["at" in UK ed.] his sides. He drops his head and makes little shaking movements.

"*I did not mean that so, man. Thanks for your help, man, very* ["many" in UK ed.] *thanks. I just must go home now, that's all. I'm not feeling right, you see.*"

(van Niekerk 1994: 224-225)

In rendering the third-last sentence of this dialogue, I changed van Niekerk's more standard English phrase, which appeared in English in the Afrikaans original, "[t]hanks for your help, man, thanks very much", to a phrase more deliberately broken "[t]hanks for your help man, very thanks" ("very thanks" being the literal word order for "baie dankie" and indicating an obviously broken-English idiom, so as to make it clearer in the translation that Lambert is *really speaking English* here, very bad English, rather than Afrikaans translated into English). However, the editors of the UK version clearly missed my point, assuming that I had written unidiomatic English, and changed "very thanks" to "many thanks". (I had already surrendered the text to the mercy of the publishers and their editors.) In the rest of Lambert's originally spoken English sentence, the word order is sufficiently Afrikaans to indicate to the reader of the translation that, although he is reading English coming out of Lambert's mouth, it is not translated Afrikaans but original Lambert-English ("*I did not mean that so, man ...*" = "Ek het dit nie so bedoel nie …").

Looking now at the typeface medley of the passage quoted above, which offers a typographical analogue of the internal hybridity of *Triomf*, it strikes me that the novel's translation was, to some extent, an act of translation both as code-switching and as code-breaking; further, that this necessity to *break the code* of translation arises in transcultural semantic zones which I prefer to see as best explained by the cultural dynamics of the seam, that ever-recurring limit condition of South African letters, a paradoxical site of simultaneous convergence and divergence, cross-stitched in a compulsive urge to conjoin that which resists easy conjunction, a rich textual seam that runs through the entire field like a ridge, a persistent, abiding mark of difference. If anything was the real point of translating *Triomf*, it was to hold this seam together in all its contradictory tension and its peculiar torsion, indeed to maintain it as the work's ultimate textual integrity. That

was the real point of translating *Triomf*, the real triumph of the novel, and the great challenge of its rendering in English.

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Leon de Kock
School of Literature and Language Studies, University of the Witwatersrand
Leon.DeKock@wits.ac.za