

Fugard and the Recent Afrikaans Translations ● of His Plays: A Subversive Exercise?

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Summary

This article focuses on the Afrikaans translations of Fugard's plays – particularly the five plays translated by Idil Sheard and published by Maskew Miller Longman from 2005 to 2009. The discussion is placed within the framework of concepts and insights in current work in the field of translation studies (e.g. Venuti's notion of "homogenizing" and Leung's reference to "an ideological turn in Translation Studies"). The article addresses various questions: What are the implications of Fugard's use of Afrikaans words/phrases/songs in his English plays for the Afrikaans translations of these plays; are Afrikaans translations of these plays necessary and can one assess these translations (and their impact within the Afrikaans-language community) from a broader ideological viewpoint?

Opsomming

Die fokus in hierdie artikel is op die Afrikaanse vertalings van Fugard se dramas – veral die vyf dramas wat deur Idil Sheard vertaal en deur Maskew Miller Longman gepubliseer is gedurende 2005 tot 2009. Die bespreking is geplaas binne die raamwerk van resente konsepte en insigte binne die dissipline vertaalstudies (bv. Venuti se idee van "homogenisering" en Leung se verwysing na die "ideologiese keerpunt in vertaalstudies"). Die artikel spreek verskeie vrae aan: Wat is die implikasies van Fugard se gebruik van Afrikaanse woorde/frases/liedjies in sy Engelse dramas vir die Afrikaanse vertalings van hierdie dramas; is dit nodig om hierdie dramas in Afrikaans te vertaal en kan mens hierdie vertalings (asook die impak daarvan binne die Afrikaanse taalgemeenskap) beoordeel vanuit 'n breër ideologiese beskouing?

Introduction

Although Athol Fugard wrote all his plays in English and is usually described as an English South African playwright, one does find the use of other South African languages – especially Afrikaans – in many of his plays. In an article entitled "Between Languages: Athol Fugard and/in Afrikaans" (2010), I discussed in general Fugard's use of Afrikaans in many of

his English plays, focusing on both the socio-political context of this use (i.e. the relationship between Afrikaans and English in South Africa), as well as his own relationship with Afrikaans (e.g. as stated in interviews, as demonstrated by his support for Idil Sheard's Afrikaans translations of his plays, and as shown by his participation in Afrikaans arts festivals, such as the KKNK festival).

In this article I will focus on the Afrikaans translations of his plays, particularly on five of them by Idil Sheard in the period 2005 to 2009. The following aspects should be kept in mind as background for this discussion:

- The fact that Fugard, although seen to be an “English” playwright, often describes himself as a “bastardized Afrikaner” (Vandenbroucke 1986: 15); speaks Afrikaans; and states that he can identify with the Afrikaner¹
- Even though Fugard is a good speaker of Afrikaans, he does not feel competent enough to write in Afrikaans.² He is, however, able to evaluate the Afrikaans translations of his work and has, in fact, expressed a deep satisfaction for the work done by Idil Sheard – even to the extent of thanking her for putting his words in their “rightful language” (Rogers 2006).
- Although some of his work has been translated into Afrikaans before and has been performed in Afrikaans, it is only now that we have a very specific project dedicated to the translation of a substantial number of his plays.

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1. In response to a question posed by Benson 1993: 455) about his link with the Afrikaner Fugard said: “So I think like an Afrikaner”, he explained, “and believe that certain things about South Africa achieve their truest statement made from an Afrikaner background”; also in an interview published in *Die Burger* (11 June 2002: 4) the interviewer quotes from Fugard's *Cousins – A Memoir*: “I have often described myself as an Afrikaner writing in English, and the older I get the more that seems to be the truth, that my English tongue is speaking for an Afrikaner psyche”.
 2. In an interview by R. Vorster, entitled “*Die Afrikaner is 'n wit Bantoe*” (*Rapport*, 1984), Fugard states: “Baie keer voel ek 'n stuk is alreeds in Afrikaans vertaal nog voordat dit geskryf is. *Boesman en Lena*, die stuk oor twee bruinmense, moes eintlik in Afrikaans gewees het, maar ek skryf nie goed genoeg in Afrikaans nie. Jy moet ook onthou, al het ek hoofsaaklik Engels grootgeword, was my ma 'n nooi Potgieter, so ek is self 'n halwe Afrikaner”. [“Many times I feel as if a work had already been translated into Afrikaans before it had even been written. *Boesman and Lena*, a play about two coloured people, should have been in Afrikaans, but I do not write well enough in Afrikaans. You must remember that although I have grown up mainly in English, my mother was a Potgieter, so I am half an Afrikaner” – my translation.]

1 The Idil Sheard/Maskew Miller Longman (MML) Project (2005-2009): The Afrikaans Translation of Five of Fugard's Plays

This project started in 2005 when the publishers Maskew Miller Longman published the first Afrikaans translation of *My Life & Valley Song* by Idil Sheard as *Lied van die vallei*. According to the publisher, Mariza Steyn, the success of this translation (it received the SATI/Via Afrika Prize for translation in 2006),³ as well as Fugard's renown convinced them to continue to publish four more translations of his work, namely *The Road to Mecca* as *Met kerslig na Mekka* (2006); *Master Harold and the Boys* as *Master Harold en die boys* (2008b); *Booitjie and the Oubaas* as *Booitjie en die oubaas* (2008b) and *Victory* as *Victoria* (2009b).

It is clear that the main target audience of these five translations is Afrikaans learners in secondary schools (these translations are all accompanied by an introductory foreword which gives information on the playwright, the setting of the play, etc., as well as assignments and questions at the end of the texts, which can be used by teachers in a classroom situation). Although one finds in only some of the texts an indication or acknowledgement of authorship for this information and these exercises in only some of the texts (namely Iolanthe Grobler for *Booitjie en die oubaas* and A. van den Heever for *Master Harold ... en die boys*) I was assured by Ms Steyn that experienced teachers collaborated with them in this regard. *Lied van die vallei* is currently prescribed for Grade 10 learners taking Afrikaans as a First Additional Language in South Africa.⁴

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3. Idil Sheard has since 2006 also received an ATKV award at the opening of the ABSA Fugard Festival held in Nieu Bethesda in 2010 for all her Afrikaans translations of Fugard's plays (a total of nine to date).
 4. K.A. Appiah (in Venuti 2000: 417-429) describes such a translation as a "thick translation", namely

a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching; and here it seems to me that such an "academic" translation, a translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing. I have called this a "thick translation" (p. 427) A thick description of the context of literary production, a translation that draws on and creates that sort of understanding, meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others.

(Venuti 2007: 427-429)

One would, however, have liked in the case of these five MML publications that more care had been taken with this "supplementary" information –

Although the format in which these translations (namely the texts) are published clearly indicates the intended audience as secondary school learners and their teachers, these translations can, of course, also be used by the theatre community at large. It is also true that productions based on these translations have been performed at festivals where the general audience attended these performances (e.g. the recent premiere of *Victoria*, the Afrikaans translation of *Victory*, at the ABSA Fugard Festival held at Nieu Bethesda 26-29 September 2010).

1.1 The Five Plays

1.1.1 Locality and Language Linked

Most of Fugard's plays are situated in South Africa – often in specific regions like Nieu Bethesda in the Eastern Cape (where nine of his plays are set). In this town the coloured community is mainly Afrikaans-speaking while the white community is mainly divided into Afrikaans- and English-speakers (generally also bilingual). It is only *Master Harold and the Boys* which is situated, not in Nieu Bethesda, but in Port Elizabeth. *Master Harold and the Boys* was first performed in 1982 (Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven), published in 1984 and translated into Afrikaans in 2008); *The Road to Mecca* (premiered on 22 February 1985 at the Lyttleton Theatre, London; first published 1985; translated into Afrikaans in 2006); *My Life & Valley Song* (premiered on 15 August 1995 at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, first published in 1996; *Lied van die vallei* was first performed in 2003 in Nieu Bethesda and published in 2005); *Booitjie and the oubaas* was reworked as a play from one of the short stories in *Karoo and Other Stories* (2005) and translated into Afrikaans as *Booitjie en die oubaas* in 2008.

In a chapter entitled “Translation as Intercultural Communication”, Snell-Hornby (2006) observes that translations usually take place between languages where there is a cultural, geographical or temporal gap, which can complicate the translation process. In the case of the MML project, where five of Fugard's English plays have been translated into Afrikaans, no real cultural gap exists since many of the characters in these five plays are Afrikaans speakers – in fact the Afrikaans translations are probably a more “realistic” presentation of the Afrikaans speakers than the original English plays! It is also clear that there is no geographical gap at all – the setting of all these plays is South Africa. Furthermore there is no temporal gap – the time between the first performance/publication of most of these

especially with the sources used in the introductory sections. It is also a pity that none of the translations give a reference to which English edition was used for the Afrikaans translations.

plays and their translation by Sheard is relatively short. Although the textual surface of the Afrikaans translations does not seem to be influenced by the “gaps” identified by Snell-Hornby, another question related to this issue could be posed, namely: Is there not, nevertheless, a change in “perspective” for the Afrikaans receivers of these translated Afrikaans texts in comparison to their reception(s) of the original English versions? In other words, do the Afrikaans recipients of the Afrikaans translations experience these plays *differently* in comparison to how they experienced them previously in their English versions? It is, for example, obvious that these translations were and still are received with great enthusiasm by the Afrikaans media, the Afrikaans theatre community and the Afrikaans public in general.

1.1.2 Afrikaansness of Fugard’s English Plays

In a large number of Fugard’s plays, many of his white or coloured characters – although, of course, primarily employing English dialogue in these plays – are often seen and accepted by South African audiences and readers as being in reality Afrikaans speakers. Their names and surnames are usually a clear indication to South African audiences that they would probably be naturally disposed to be Afrikaans speakers (e.g. Abraam Jonkers/Buks in *My Life & Valley Song*; Ds. Marius Byleveld in *Road to Mecca*; Oubaas, Booitjie and Soekie in *Oubaas and Booitjie*). The way in which they often address others or are themselves addressed in Afrikaans (“Oubaas”, “Oupa”, “Ouma”) also strengthens this impression. The use of Afrikaans words, short sentences or even songs by these characters could thus be interpreted by the reader or spectator as simply being a permeation of this Afrikaansness of an Afrikaans speaker in the English text (i.e. of being an Afrikaans speaker speaking English). This is especially the case in *My Life & Valley Song* where both Buks and Veronica are clearly Afrikaans mother-tongue speakers. In this play one finds more than in any of the other plays the use of Afrikaans words, phrases, songs.

It is not only the fact that these characters use Afrikaans words, phrases, etc. which creates the impression that they are, in reality, Afrikaans speakers; it is also how they speak *English* which leads the reader/spectator to such a belief. Buks in *My Life & Valley Song*, for example, says to his daughter, Veronica: “Ja. And let me tell you my girl those are the best songs I ever hear” (2007: 43). If one compares this sentence with its Afrikaans counterpart (translated by Sheard as: “Ja. En laat ek jou nou vertel, my meisie, dis die beste liedjies wat ek nog ooit gehoor het” (2005: line 180)), it is obvious that no trace of the tense mistake of the English sentence is found in the Afrikaans version – the Afrikaans sentence is grammatically perfect. Another example is Veronica on page 68 of *My Life & Valley Song*: “Oupa hear about the business at the Post Office” and in *Lied van die vallei* line 631: “Het Oupa gehoor van die ding by die poskantoor?” While the

particular use of grammar in *My Life & Valley Song* is a distinctive aspect of this play and an indication that an English mother-tongue speaker is not speaking here (grammatical mistakes and use of an Afrikaans form of address are found throughout the play), this same sentence in *Lied van die vallei* loses this grammatical distinctiveness. In the Afrikaans translation the Afrikaans sentence is grammatically correct and the use of “Oupa” as a form of address by Buks’s granddaughter will simply be accepted as normal by any Afrikaans reader or spectator. Many similar examples can be given – also in the other plays. In the Afrikaans translation of *Master Harold and the Boys*, Willie speaks faultless Afrikaans, in stark contrast to the incorrect English which he uses in the original English text. A practice often found in Fugard’s English plays thus disappears to a large extent in the Afrikaans versions.

This practice is, of course, linked to the issue of homogenising, as discussed by Venuti (2000).⁵ When two languages (e.g. English and Afrikaans) are used by the characters in a play and one of them is also the language of translation (in this case Afrikaans), the text becomes homogenised, according to Venuti. The Afrikaans words and phrases in many of Fugard’s English plays are conspicuous to the reader or spectator, and the interplay of English and Afrikaans creates an interesting tension. This dimension within his plays disappears, of course, completely when they are translated into Afrikaans and only Afrikaans is used. As soon as this interplay between the two languages is no longer found in the translated text, the language, according to Venuti, becomes homogenised, even flat, and loses the tension created by the interplay of different languages as found in the original text. The Afrikaans words, phrases, sentences and songs are foregrounded in the English texts *because* they are Afrikaans, but in their Afrikaans translation they simply become part of the rest of the Afrikaans texts – and thus lose their distinctiveness.

This is not only clear from the examples given above, where grammatical mistakes found in the English utterances of the Afrikaans speakers are corrected in the Afrikaans translations. It is also conspicuous in sentences in the English plays where Fugard inserted Afrikaans words or phrases (a

5. Grutman discusses the same problem of so-called “multilingual texts”:

For reasons of convenience, many translators have thus largely annulled the effects a writer may have sought to obtain from the intertwining of languages. Translators of linguistic “hybrids” who *do* want to convey a sense of the original text’s balancing act between languages, on the other hand, go against the grain of institutionalized monolingualism The feasibility and the eventual success of a translation seeking to mimic the original’s multilingual layering will be in no small measure dictated by the prevailing attitudes, taste and habits of the potential audience.

(Grutman 2006: 3)

general practice in many of his plays), for example, in the following passage in *My Life & Valley Song*:

BUKS: Veronica! Veronica! What's got into you lately? You're as restless as a little dwarrelwindjie out there in the veld. What's the matter with you?
(Fugard 2007: 42)

Compare with *Lied van die vallei*:

BUKS: Veronica! Veronica! Wat gaan deesdae met jou aan? Jy is so rusteloos soos 'n dwarrelwindjie in die veld! Wat makeer jou?
(Fugard 2005: 21)

A similar homogenising effect takes place with some of the characters' names and designations in the translated Afrikaans texts. While the Afrikaans names or designations (e.g. Veronica calls Buks *Oupa* in both the Afrikaans and English versions) are conspicuous in the English plays, this feature disappears in the Afrikaans plays and the reader or spectator is not aware of it anymore.

Idil Sheard does try to address this consequence to some extent in her translations. One finds, for example in both *My Life & Valley Song* and *Victory*, where many Afrikaans words are used in the English plays, that there is also some use of English words in the Afrikaans texts. In *Victoria*, for example, there are approximately 64 English words (for example clue, share, job, self-employed, big time, gangs, criminal record, anyway, girlfriend, girl, fools, orders, stupid, bitch, darling, bargain, special, movers en shakers, gun, master). In the English version, *Victory*, we find approximately 29 Afrikaans words (e.g. Haaikona, kakhuis, dronklap, suip, mos, kos, meid, hardegat, hotnot meid, kak, stront, skinner, mors dood, plus a short Afrikaans song). We find, in fact, many more English words in *Victoria* than Afrikaans words in *Victory*. In both versions, however, the practice of mixing Afrikaans and English is clearly linked to particular characters: the old teacher, Lionel Benson, in the English play, *Victory*, speaks English faultlessly, with no casual insertion of Afrikaans words in his speech. In the Afrikaans version (*Victoria*), he correspondingly speaks only a pure form of Afrikaans, with no English words interspersed in his dialogue. In contrast, Freddie Blom (probably a coloured person) speaks an English which is mixed up with a number of Afrikaans words in *Victory*, and in *Victoria* an Afrikaans sprinkled with many English words.

Sheard also decided to keep some of the English designators in the Afrikaans texts where appropriate, namely "Miss Helen" in *Met kerslig na Mekka* and "Master Harold", as well as the "boys" in *Master Harold en die boys*.

This brings an interesting question to the fore: If one accepts that many of these characters are in essence Afrikaans speakers who are only speaking

English in the play because this is an English play and are in fact, continuously foregrounding their Afrikaansness by means of their use of some Afrikaans words and Afrikaans forms of address, one could ask how this aspect influenced the nature of this translation project. Did Fugard – even perhaps unintentionally – not also contribute in some way to Sheard’s Afrikaans translations by means of this practice? Did Fugard thus not already give implicit indications by means of these practices as to how his plays should be translated into Afrikaans? Is Fugard in this sense not perhaps a “subconscious” translator of his own Afrikaans translations since he does everything but write in Afrikaans?⁶

Another way of looking at this interplay of languages is propounded by Bassnett and Trivedi (1999: 71): “We have been used to thinking of cultures and languages as autonomous singularities. One translates a text, written in one language, emerging out of one culture. But what if, as is here the case, the ‘original’ text is inhabited by more than one language? Can the transfer of these texts, as Derrida asks, still be called translation?” and moreover:

It has become a commonplace of critical discourse to speak of the hybrid aesthetics of contemporary post-colonial writing, its creolization and multiplicity. Texts, like cultures, like national territories, are more and more the sites of competing languages, diverse idioms, conflicting codes. This “Otherness within” works to reconfigure a practice of translation defined in the West since the Renaissance as a transfer between linguistically unified texts. Increasingly, translation and writing become part of a single process of creation as cultural interactions, border situations, move closer and closer to the centre of our cultures. Writing across languages, writing through translation, becomes a particularly strong form of expression at a time when national cultures have themselves become diverse, inhabited by plurality. Whether in the context of the tensions of bilingualism or the developing modes of global vehicular idioms, the mixing of codes points to an aesthetics of cultural pluralism whose meanings have yet to be fully explored.

(Bassnett & Trivedi 1999: 72-73)

6. Fugard himself says in Vandenbroucke something similar about *Boesman and Lena*:

[W]riting in English when Afrikaans would have been possibly a richer medium ... the play was in fact translated before it was written. So there’s not really been any great need for that. But certain of my plays have been translated into Afrikaans. In fact, some of my Afrikaans friends claim, because I use a lot of Afrikaans characters in my plays, that my plays were translated before they were written. They claim I’ve translated from Afrikaans into English, and that the plays should go back into Afrikaans, if you know what I’m saying.

(Vandenbroucke 1986: 93-94)

2 Why Translate Fugard into Afrikaans?

2.1 Afrikaans/English Bilingualism

Many Afrikaans speakers in South Africa (especially whites) are bilingual (Afrikaans-English) and can usually understand and speak English with ease. This is also acknowledged by Fugard who, when asked in an interview by Mary Benson, “Have your plays been performed in Afrikaans?”:

Certain of them have, but it’s a very healthy situation in South Africa in that the degree of bilingualism (white South Africa has two cultures, two languages, Afrikaans and English) is near ninety percent. Most English-speaking South Africans know enough Afrikaans to go to Afrikaans theatre, and the same, even more so, with Afrikaans people, who are much more diligent in their bilingualism than English-speaking South Africans.

(Benson 1993: 391-392)

It is, however, also true that in some areas of South Africa – notably the Northern Cape – certain communities have difficulty in communicating in English and are mainly Afrikaans speakers. The coloured community of Nieu Bethesda is one such instance where Afrikaans is mainly used.

Generally, one of the main reasons for translating a text from one language into another is, of course, to make the text accessible to another language community. Idil Sheard (an inhabitant of Nieu Bethesda since 2002) told me in a conversation in 2008 that she wanted to translate Fugard’s plays – especially those set in Nieu Bethesda and with characters based on people from the town (Helen Martins, Buks, Oubaas) – into Afrikaans so that the community (especially the school children) would have access to these works.⁷ Although Sheard stated this as her main reason for embarking on this translation process, it is true that one still has to keep in mind the broader context in South Africa, namely the fact that most educated Afrikaans speakers, especially theatregoers, would be bilingual (Afrikaans-English). Thus, from the perspective of accessibility, this would not be the most important reason for translating Fugard into Afrikaans.

The comment by Idil Sheard does, however, link up with various issues addressed within the discipline of translation studies today – especially the focus on the special relationship between the source language and the target language.

7. Sheard is not only the translator of these plays, but also directed the world premiere of *Lied van die vallei* when the Afrikaans version was first produced with local actors on 24 September 2003 at the Nieu Bethesda Theatre.

2.2 The Relationship between English and Afrikaans: A Dominant Language versus a Minority Language

According to Meylaerts in Duarte, Rosa & Senuya 2006: 86-87),

it is the case in the last decade, e.g. through postcolonial studies, [that] research on cultural identity construction focused indeed on aspects such as “multilingualism” or “language plurality” Especially in territories where several languages function together and maintain by definition hierarchical – and sometimes even problematic – relationships This is especially the case when the language of translation is the locus of ideological struggle.

(Meylaerts in Duarte, Rosa & Senuya 2006: 86-87)

This is applicable to the situation today in South Africa where we have, since 1994, ostensibly given official status to all 11 indigenous languages in the country, although English has in reality become the dominant lingua franca of South Africa. In a chapter entitled “The Ideological Turn in Translation Studies”, M. Leung discusses what he considers to be a new “turn” in translation studies, namely that “this ideological turn refers to a new/renewed focus on the ideological significance of the act of translation; more specifically, it refers to a changed perspective of seeing translation as a means of ideological resistance” (Leung quoted by Duarte, Rosa & Senuya 2006: 129). The major ideas and concepts associated with this turn, namely “power, dominance, minorities, marginalization, resistance, politics and ideology” (p. 138) are currently being used within the present South African language debate (especially in Afrikaans, both in academia and in the popular media). One could ask if these translations of Fugard’s plays from English into Afrikaans (when so many Afrikaans speakers understand English) are not also an indication of a similar “ideological turn” within Fugard’s oeuvre. Fugard’s support for the Idil Sheard translations, as well as for Afrikaans – a language seen by many within the Afrikaans community as being under siege by the growing dominance of English in South Africa and often also as the language used by marginalised communities, such as the coloured community of Nieu Bethesda – can be regarded as being of ideological importance.

As Bassnett states,

translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum, it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.

(Bassnett 1992: 2)

It is against this background that I present the viewpoint that one can regard this translation project as being “subversive” in the sense that the prevailing dominance of English at the moment in South Africa is countered with these, probably unnecessary, Afrikaans translations.

Conclusion

Fugard is a world-renowned playwright and his plays (written in English) have been translated into many languages. As I have indicated above, the Afrikaans translations of his plays can be considered as a special development within his oeuvre. The main reason for this has to do with Fugard’s own relationship with Afrikaans (and the Afrikaner). The fact that he often uses Afrikaans words, phrases and songs in his plays and invokes a certain type of world view that is often associated with particular Afrikaans-speaking communities (coloured or Afrikaner) makes the Afrikaans translations of his plays unique in comparison to other translations of his plays.

The fact that there is also not an overt necessity to translate his plays into Afrikaans (most Afrikaans theatregoers are comfortably bilingual), which is usually the case when a text or play is translated from one language into another, underlines the fact that these translations (as well as other Afrikaans translations of Fugard’s plays) are different from translations of his plays into other languages. Most translations usually also occur in the direction of a translation from a minority language into that of the dominant language (thus an Afrikaans text into an English one), but in this case it is translations from the dominant language (English) into a language which has now lost a lot of its earlier power in South Africa, namely Afrikaans. The Afrikaans translations thus bring more issues (cultural, ideological, personal, etc.) to the fore than the mere fact that they are simply translations from one language into another.

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