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# Translating Metaphors that Function as Characterisation Technique in Narrative Fiction

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## Summary

If the interdependence of the intratextual components of narrative texts is not taken into account in the translation of metaphorical expressions, the target text characters can become deviant mutants of the characters in the source text. This has important implications for the translated text as such and for the evaluation of the translated novel as a literary work of art.

## Opsomming

Die interafhanklikheid van die intratekstuele komponente van die narratiewe teks moet altyd in ag geneem word, veral wanneer metaforiese uitdrukkings vertaal word. Indien dit nie gedoen word nie, kan die karakters van die vertaalde teks in mutante van die karakters van die oorspronklike ontaard. Dié feit het noodwendig implikasies vir die vertaalde teks as sodanig en vir die evaluering van die vertaalde roman as literêre werk.

## 1 Introduction

Raymond van den Broeck (1981: 76), in his article on metaphor translation, distinguishes between decorative and creative metaphors. Metaphors discussed in this article fall into the latter category because they are employed as a fundamental characterisation technique in the award-winning Afrikaans novel, *Fiela se kind* [= Fiela's child] by Dalene Matthee (1985), which has been translated into English by the author herself.

In a narrative text, a character's speech is often used to reveal certain character traits. Speech may therefore be used as a characterisation technique. This is the case in *Fiela se kind*. In *Fiela se kind* different forms of language are used to portray the speech of different social groups: English and Standard Afrikaans for "educated" people and an imitation of the last century's Kitchen Dutch, resulting in a kind of "Forest Afrikaans", for the "uneducated" and unsophisticated woodcutters, farmhands and fishermen. Metaphorical expressions which manifest themselves in stylised, nonstandard forms of speech as a characterisation technique in *Fiela se kind*, are specifically to be examined in this article.

Translation of metaphorical expressions in the speech of characters has to be preceded by an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the narrative text. To this end an adaptation of Juliane House's model for assessing the quality of translation can be used (House 1981)<sup>1</sup> and attention should also be paid to structuralist models of narratology.<sup>2</sup> In this way metaphorical expression can be studied as something distinctly interdependent with the other components of the text which also determine characterisation, such as focalisation. A contrastive analysis can then be conducted by comparing profiles of the same character in the source and target texts to determine whether Matthee's

inability to translate the metaphorical expressions in her novel has resulted in an unfaithful portrayal of the characters in the target text.

## 2 Framework and Terminology for the Analysis and Interpretation of Metaphors in Narrative Fiction

In order to investigate the translation of metaphorical expressions in narrative fiction, it is necessary to make use of metaphor theory, in particular the interaction theory of metaphor<sup>3</sup> as developed and refined by Gräbe (1984, 1985).<sup>4</sup> If Gräbe's (1984, 1985) terms for the analysis of detailed and general interaction processes in poetic metaphor are used, it can be shown that a textual (i.e. global) rather than a merely syntactic (i.e. local) analysis of the interaction processes in complex literary metaphorical constructions is imperative for the interpretation, translation and evaluation of the text (Kruiger 1990). Although a global approach is advocated in most recent discussions of the translation of metaphor, regrettably only isolated local examples are used in each instance.<sup>5</sup>

Gräbe (1984, 1985) maintains that there are two basic types of metaphorical construction. In the first type the focus is usually a verb or an adjective which functions to specify the content of a noun or nouns in the syntactic frame metaphorically. The noun in this frame may therefore be described as an "argument" (subject or object), modified or qualified by a focus. However, the focus of a metaphorical construction does not have to be restricted to a single word, since an argument is often qualified by a "focus expression" (a focal word, focal phrase or even a focal sentence).

In the second type of construction two arguments interact and can be explicitly recognised as a tenor and a vehicle. However, according to Gräbe (1984, 1985) an explicit relation between tenor and vehicle is rarely given in one syntactic unit in poems and even when the tenor and vehicle are linked horizontally, they are textually specified.

The analysis of an isolated local metaphorical construction can be illustrated by means of the following example from *Fiela se kind* (Matthee 1985: 48):<sup>6</sup>

- (1) "Hulle het jou klaar hokgejaag, Fiela Komoetie. . ."

A                      FE

[= They have already chased you into a cage, Fiela Komoetie]

A = Argument

FE = Focus Expression

In Gräbe's (1984, 1985) terminology the pronoun "jou" [= you] in (1) is the argument and the verb "(het) hokgejaag" [= have chased into a cage] is the focal phrase condensed within a composite focus expression. The focus expression here is complex since it is a noun "hok" [= cage], which is hidden within the verbal focus "(het) hokgejaag" [= cage + chased]. Therefore the composition of the focus expression has to be decoded before any interaction process can be determined. In this case, "hok" [= cage], which conjures up connotations such as "animal" and "trapped", is semantically specified by the

verb "(het) gejaag" [= chased] by invoking connotations such as "driven" and "forced". Seen in isolation, it is literally possible to drive or force something into a cage. Now the local interaction process between the argument "jou" and its specified focus expression "hokgejaag" can be decoded. "Jou" is metaphorically qualified by "hokgejaag". In other words, someone has been caged. This primary qualifying function of focus expressions always operates in relation to arguments in the syntactic frame.

In some cases, however, the local interaction process between an argument and its qualifying focus expression requires the reconstruction of a second argument, which, in turn, triggers off implicit global interaction between arguments and focus expressions from different metaphorical constructions, resulting in global or paradigmatic interaction between tenors and vehicles in a text. The local interpretation of tenor and vehicle relations therefore leads to a global interaction between both arguments and focus expressions from different metaphorical constructions. In *Fiela se kind*, characterisation is determined by global interaction of metaphorically qualified arguments reflecting the semantic domains of farm, forest and sea.<sup>7</sup>

This secondary function of focus expressions, i.e. the reconstruction of a second argument, can also be illustrated in terms of the example above: "hok" [= cage] is a noun therefore a second, submerged argument (a manifestation at a higher level of abstraction) can be reconstructed, namely "dier" [= animal]. Combined with the focus expression in a literal sense, "dier" can be related comparatively to the argument in question. The reconstruction of a submerged argument such as "dier", prompted by the focus expression, allows for the reconstruction of a vehicle. It is thus possible to reconstruct an implicit tenor-vehicle relation:

- (2) "jy is (soos) 'n dier (in 'n hok)"  
       A                          A  
       [= you are (like) an animal (in a cage)]  
       [= Fiela is an animal]  
       Tenor          Vehicle

In (2) the relation between tenor and vehicle results in a nominal metaphor, similar to Black's (1962) "man is a wolf". However, although the structure might be similar, there is a considerable difference between a lexicalised<sup>8</sup> metaphor such as "man is a wolf" and a "literary" metaphor such as the reconstructed "Fiela is an animal" in (2) which interacts globally with other metaphorical expressions in the farm-life paradigm to represent Fiela's character trait as countrywoman.

Once local interaction processes between argument and focus expression and between tenor and vehicle (as well as their appropriate interpretative procedures) have been decoded as above, it is possible to see that Fiela experiences a sense of being trapped. She therefore compares herself to an animal that has been driven into a cage. The reason she feels this way, however, can only be explained globally.

When the immediate surroundings of the metaphorical expression "Hulle het jou klaar hokgejaag, Fiela Komoetie..." (Matthee 1985: 48) are taken

into account, it becomes clear that here Fiela recalls a traumatic experience. She remembers that she felt as though she had no control over matters concerning her life; that "they" were closing in on her ("Hulle was haar aan die vaskeer. Sy het dit geweet. . ." Matthee 1985: 48). Like a dumb animal driven into a cage, she senses the gate being closed behind her ("...hulle pak nog net die opening toe. . ." Matthee 1985: 48). She feels threatened and expresses her anxiety and fear in concrete terms by using an image from her environment – that of an animal trapped in a cage. In this manner she expresses her feeling of total dehumanisation, reinforced by means of another animal image: "Sy het geweet hoe die kloekhen voel as die valk in die lug hang en daar is geen skulpe vir haar om heen te vlug nie" (Matthee 1985: 50) [= She knew what the mother hen felt like "when the hawk hovered above her and there was no shelter to run to" (Matthee 1986: 65)].

The translation of some of the striking metaphorical expressions in Fiela's speech and their effect on the characterisation can now be studied in isolation and in context.

### 3 The Translation of Metaphorical Expressions in *Fiela se kind*

Although the title of the novel is *Fiela se kind*, the central figure is the (so-called) "coloured" woman Fiela and not Benjamin, her adopted white son. Most of the metaphorical expressions in Fiela's speech reflect her rural environment, her experience of farm life in the arid Karoo and her domestic activities. These metaphors can be grouped together in the semantic paradigm "farm life" which comprises the *tertium comparationis* of Fiela's character trait as farmer and countrywoman.

Fiela's speech presents her as the essential "earth mother", simple and unrefined – at times very uncouth – but proud and dignified. She is unsophisticated and therefore her speech abounds with concretisations of abstract concepts, feelings and emotions in terms of familiar objects from her environment.

The translator's challenge lies in sustaining the same interdependence between character, speech and environment.

The metaphorical expression "Hulle het jou klaar hokgejaag" [= they have already chased/driven you into a cage] in (1) has been translated as "They have you cornered already, Fiela Komoetie, she told herself. . ." (Matthee 1986: 64). This means that the source text (ST) metaphor has been substituted<sup>9</sup> by a lexicalised metaphor in the target text (TT):

(3) (ST) hokgejaag:

in 'n hok dryf [= drive into a cage]

in 'n hoek dryf [= drive into a corner] > cornered (TT)

"Hok" [= cage] in (1) and the reconstructed "dier" [= animal] in (2) both interact with other arguments in the farm-life paradigm and are examples of how Fiela's character trait as countrywoman is globally determined by associations and connotations conjured up by metaphorically qualified focus expressions throughout the novel. The fact that "hokgejaag" has been

substituted by "cornered", shows that the translator did not consider the specificity of "hok" [= cage] as a potential vehicle – "hok" belongs to the farm-life paradigm, "corner" as such does not. Both functions of the focus expression have therefore been ignored. Although "cornered" conveys Fiela's sense of helplessness and invokes connotations of "no escape", "trapped" and "being threatened", the concretisation of her feelings, her dehumanisation and the disregard of her human dignity have been lost in the translation – which would not have been the case if "Hulle het jou klaar hokgejaag" had, for instance, been translated as "They have you caged, Fiela".

Similar translation problems occur in extracts immediately preceding and following this example. "Hulle was haar aan die vaskeer" (Matthee 1985: 48) was translated as "They were driving her into a corner" (Matthee 1986: 63), instead of something like "they were ensnaring her". This latter translation would have sustained the source text image of Fiela being an animal trapped in a cage – an image which is of global significance in the novel. Similarly, "hulle pak nog net die opening toe" (Matthee 1985: 48), was translated as "What they are doing now is closing in on you" (Matthee 1986: 64), instead of say, "What they are doing now is fencing you in" which, again, would have reinforced the global specification of Fiela as one who has been dehumanised. The translation about the motherhen, cited above, on the other hand, is completely acceptable; the metaphorical expression was translated *sensu stricto*, i.e. both tenor and vehicle of the source text metaphor were transferred into the target language (Van den Broeck 1981: 77).

As in the case of "Hulle het jou klaar hokgejaag", the following metaphorical expression from the farm-life paradigm has also been substituted by one that does not belong to the same semantic domain:

- (4) "Dis Benjamin, my hanskind" (Matthee 1985: 18)

A FE

[= Benjamin is (like) a bottle-fed lamb]

A(T)

A(V)

A(T) = Argument with status of a Tenor

A(V) = Argument with status of a Vehicle

The adjectival focus "hans" which specifies "kind" [= child] in the focus expression "hanskind" is usually associated in Afrikaans with orphan or pet animals that are hand-fed such as lambs. In this context it can therefore be said that a nominal focus, namely "hanslam" [= bottle-fed lamb] is hidden in the focus expression "hanskind". Consequently, an argument with the status of a vehicle "lamb" can be reconstructed for the argument "Benjamin", which assumes the status of tenor. The vehicle in the construction functions to modify the tenor metaphorically: Fiela regards Benjamin as her "hanskind" [= pet child], a term she coined after "hanslam" [= pet/bottle-fed lamb]. Fiela took Benjamin in and reared him as her own in the same way that she would treat an orphan lamb. Benjamin, in fact, is also her favourite child.

"Dis Benjamin, my hanskind" has been translated as "It's Benjamin, my hand-child" (Matthee 1986: 29). This means that the source text vehicle "(hans)lam" has been replaced by another vehicle in the translation, namely

“(hand-)child”. A word such as “hanslam” could be translated by “pet lamb, house-lamb, bottle-fed lamb, hand(fed)-lamb” (Bosman et al. 1984), thus giving one an indication of where “hand-child” originated. However, although connotations such as “orphan” and “lost” which are conjured up by “hanslam” are retained in this translation, “hand-child” does not fit in the farm-life paradigm. Both functions of the focus expression have again been ignored.

Metaphors which manifest themselves in Fiela’s speech also reflect domestic activities such as cooking and sewing and contribute towards her characterisation as countrywoman. Unfortunately, most of these metaphors have either been paraphrased<sup>10</sup> as in the next example, or not translated at all.

(5) ST: Toe sy eers in die pad val, het die opgekroptheid bedaar, want *sy was soos ’n pot wat te vol is en eers moet oorkook*. Sy sou pad langs hou ingeval hulle met Benjamin aan die terugkom was. (Matthee 1985: 90)

TT: As Fiela began walking, *the anger welled up in her*. She would keep to the road in case they were on their way back with Benjamin (Matthee 1986: 113) [italics mine]

The interaction between the literal and the figurative parts of the metaphorical expression in the source text can be reduced to a tenor-vehicle construction:

(6) sy is soos (’n pot wat te vol is en eers moet oorkook)

A FE

[= she is (like) a pot (that is boiling over because it is too full)]

[= Fiela is a pot]

Tenor Vehicle

The focus expression (consisting of a noun “pot” that is syntactically specified by “wat te vol is en eers moet oorkook” [= that is boiling over because it is too full]) qualifies the argument metaphorically by connotations of anger and irritation. In the ensuing tenor-vehicle construction, the connotations conjured up by the second, specified argument “pot” are transferred to the first argument “sy”. “Pot” then is the vehicle by means of which the tenor “Fiela” is metaphorically qualified. In this case Fiela is upset because Benjamin has been taken away from her. She expresses her anger in concrete terms by comparing herself to a pot that is boiling over because it is too full.

The fact that the metaphorical expression in (5) has been translated by “the anger welled up in her” shows that the primary qualifying function of the focus expression in respect of the argument has been ignored. As a result the concretisation of an abstract emotion gets lost in the translation. If, because of the fact that the source text metaphor has been paraphrased, Fiela’s speech in the translation does not reflect her domestic activities, her characterisation will be adversely affected.

Unfortunately not one of the metaphorical expressions in Fiela’s speech that reflect sewing as a domestic activity has been translated. For example:

(7) ST: “Maar nou wil baas hier kom sit en voorstel dat ’n kind van drie van daar af tot hier kon gedwaal het?.. *Baas moenie vandag op my werf kom*

- goed aanmekaarlap wat nie aanmekaar hoort nie*". (Matthee 1985: 20-21)  
 TT: "Are you suggesting that a child of three could have wandered over here?... So don't come and stick pieces together that do not belong together". (Matthee 1986: 32-33)
- (8) ST: "Moenie wegdraai nie! *Laat ons hierdie ding lostorring en reg aanme-  
 kaarsit vandag*". (Matthee 1985: 274)  
 TT: "Don't turn away Benjamin! We must talk this over properly". (Mat-  
 thee 1986: 314)
- (9) ST: *As die duiwel net nie so aan haar bly torring nie!* (Matthee 1985: 91)  
 TT: If only the devil did not keep on pestering her so! (Matthee 1986: 114)
- (10) ST: "Dit sal nie reg wees as jy hom verder loop staan en verpluk nie, Fiela.  
*Dit sal nie help om aan te hou torring oor 'n ding wat nie gaan rafel nie*".  
 (Matthee 1985: 164)  
 TT: "It will not be fair to him to go and mess things up Fiela, it will not help  
 to meddle". (Matthee 1986: 195) [*italics mine*]

The verb in (7) ("aanmekaarlap" [= sew]), as well as the verbs in (8), (9) and (10) ("lostorring" or "torring" [= unpick]) are all paradigmatically related to one another because of their connotations with sewing. Normally an expression such as (9) ("die duiwel...torring" [= the devil...is pestering]) would not be associated with sewing in Afrikaans. However, the manner in which "torring" [= unpick] in (9), a verbal focus in the focus expression, is textually specified by the metaphors in (8) and (10), results in its inclusion in the semantic domain of sewing. The expression in (10) is uttered by a minor character, but it could just as well have been uttered by Fiela; it is included here to illustrate the global effect of the vertical interaction of the same types of focus expression in a text.

As is evident from the few extracts above, most of the metaphorical expressions in Fiela's speech have been substituted, paraphrased or not translated at all. Very few expressions have been translated *sensu stricto*. If more metaphors had been translated *sensu stricto*, the global interaction between metaphorical constructions in the farm-life paradigm would not have been disturbed by inconsistent translation.

The metaphors that manifest themselves in Fiela's speech in the translation do not reflect her environment or her character as farmer and countrywoman. In other words, the characterisation technique by means of which her subconscious awareness of life was reflected in the original, is lost in the translation.

This is also true in respect of the other characters in this novel who are typified by means of metaphorical expressions in their speech.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

It could be said that, as a translator, Dalene Matthee does not always make full use of the semantic potential of the metaphors in the speech of her characters and is not consistent in sustaining the different interaction processes necessary for analysing and interpreting metaphorical expressions in



narrative texts. Accordingly, the primary qualifying function of focus expressions with regard to arguments in the syntactic frame is regularly neglected. The translated text, i.e. *Fielas Child* (Matthee 1986), does therefore not answer in all respects to the source text in its characterisation: the central communication technique of concretisation in terms of metaphorical expressions, which forms an integral part of Dalene Matthee's literary style in Afrikaans, is weakened. The target text characters have become mutants of the characters in the source text.

In view of this investigation, it can be concluded that a flawed translation of metaphors has semantic and communicative implications for the target text. Not only does the target text lack the semantic density of the source text, but loss of meaning adversely affects the way in which fictive characters are depicted by means of their speech. In turn, defective characterisation, of necessity, negatively influences the reader's reception of the narrative text and the success of the translated novel as a literary work can be jeopardised.

Although the strategy developed here to translate and evaluate metaphors in narrative texts is illustrated by means of an Afrikaans novel, it could be implemented successfully by writers of review articles and critics of literary translations alike. It could also be used in translation teaching programmes aimed at an objective, or at least a less subjective, assessment of the translation – not only of metaphorical expressions – but also of various other features of characters' speech in narrative fiction.

## Notes

1. The House model excludes literary source texts which necessitate overt translations, i.e. translations which must obviously be translations because a direct match between source text and target text is not possible (House 1981). However, Knauer (1987) adapted the House model by adding a dimension of literary techniques to establish equivalence criteria for the analysis and interpretation of the novel as source text.
2. As developed by Genette (1980), Bal (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983).
3. According to substitution views metaphors can be replaced by their literal meaning without loss of meaning; comparison views regard metaphors as similes from which the comparative element (like) has been deleted. In contrast, interaction theories maintain that the metaphorical word interacts with another lexical item or items and that the new meaning which is generated as a result of this interaction cannot be expressed in any other way than in a metaphor.
4. Following Richards (1936), Black (1962) and Reinhart (1976), Gräbe (1984, 1985) develops a framework and terminology for the analysis of interaction processes in poetic metaphor by redefining current terminology, modifying and extending syntactic (local) interpretative procedures and developing textual (global) interaction strategies.
5. Cf. Van den Broeck (1981), Newmark (1981, 1988), Mason (1982), Toury (1985), Van Besien & Pelsmackers (1988), Snell-Hornby (1988: 56-64). Kruger (1990), on the other hand, illustrates a textual (global) approach to the translation of metaphors by means of the novel *Fielas se kind*.
6. Cf. Kruger (1990) for a detailed description of the structures of the different local metaphorical constructions in *Fielas se kind*.

7. Kruger (1990) provides a detailed analysis of all the forms of speech, reflecting the different semantic domains, in both *Fiela se kind* and *Fiela's Child*.
8. Van den Broeck (1981: 74-5) describes lexicalised metaphors as "those that have gradually lost their uniqueness and have become part of the established semantic stock (or 'lexicon') of the language".
9. According to Van den Broeck (1981: 77) substitution as mode of metaphor translation applies to those cases where the source language vehicle is replaced by a different target language vehicle with more or less the same tenor. The source language and target language vehicles may then be considered translation equivalents in that they share a common tenor.
10. Van den Broeck (1981: 77) maintains that a source language metaphor is paraphrased whenever it is rendered by a nonmetaphorical expression, by "plain speech", in the target language.

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