
Translation and South African English Literature: van Niekerk and Heyns' *Agaat*

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An exploration of the creativity of one particular effort at translation of an Afrikaans novel into English

English is in many ways the language that is assumed to be the giant in the South African literary field. The mere mention of South African literature has a different nuance to, let's say, African literature, since African literature has a vast array of national, colonial and post-colonial contexts, whereas South African literature is focused on one nation and one historical context. This difference in context is important when evaluating the use of English in South African Literature. In many ways, the South African literary field has grown, not only in number of contributors, and the diversity represented there, but also in genre or style. South African literature is becoming more fluid, more energetic, and more democratic in all the ways that the word implies. Writers like Lauren Beukes and Lily Herne are writing science fiction worlds where Cape Town is controlled by autocratic fascists or zombie wastelands that stretch from Table Mountain to Ratanga Junction; Deon Meyer writes crime thrillers, and Renesh Lakhani plumbs the depths of what it means to be South African after democracy. In many ways, the entire field of literature has changed in South Africa in the last twenty or so years. But one aspect has remained the same: the expectation, that while anyone who has anything to say at all, creatively, politically or otherwise, can by all means write it in their mother tongue, if the author wants to be read by more than a very specific fraction of society, then they need to embark on the perilous journey that is translation, and above all, translation into English.

The act of translation is difficult precisely because, as anyone who speaks more than one language will confirm, there are words that seem

beyond translation, or more importantly, *seem* not to be transferrable in nuance from one language to another. However, translations in and of themselves are often beautiful texts, artworks in their own right, such as the works of Leo Tolstoy or Gabriel García Márquez, which have gained acclaim in their translated form. This would argue that something is not necessarily lost by the act of translating from one language to another. The question then is whether there are such examples in South African literature, where English, or more precisely the translation of the text into English, has not marred the original. However, this might be jumping ahead a bit. When speaking of South African literature, one must first come to grips with what it is defined as in the light of all this diverse development. The complexity of dealing with this issue is touched



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on by de Kock, who interrogates the term 'South African literature' as follows:

Whose literature was it, then, when one invoked the term 'South African' as pointing to a composite body of writing? Was it English, isiZulu, Tswana, Afrikaans - and which variant of Afrikaans might that be? On the 'English' side, the lines of fracture spread even further. Was it the imperial survey, the colonial fireside tale, the oral panegyric 'rendered' and mediated into written English for scholarly use, the settler's diary, the cosmopolitan modernist poet born in Natal, the Bushman invocation of shamanic passage, rendered into English, the written tales of Xhosa folklore, later translated, the eventually-to-become Nobel prizewinning novelists and their many less prominent fellows writing pedestrian social realism? (de Kock, 2005: 70)

What de Kock highlights is the fact that one cannot just assume that there is a unified notion of any language, that within language there are variations and context that change the language. When he questions what variation of Afrikaans or what type of English one is dealing with, it becomes clear that there are many deviations in a South Africa whose history is fragmented and consequently hosts a plethora of various social, political or linguistic contexts. De Kock implies that the language that is being rendered into English needs to be investigated as well as the type of English that is being used in the translation. This links back to the notion that translation is a nuanced and difficult process, and it seems as if this variance that exists within language itself is what complicates the goals of translation. De Kock continues his definition by arguing that South African literature functions 'only as a signifier whose reference is complicated, divergent and contradictory, held together by the need to proclaim a South African oneness against the forces of division' (de Kock, 2005: 70). This unification, according to de Kock, is a construction based purely on the need to have some sort of 'oneness' that is closely linked to building nationalist awareness. Consequently, one is left with having to investigate one particular text in its original and in its translated form, to fully scrutinise the complexities of English currently at work in a South African novel.

Marlene van Niekerk's farm novel *Agaat*, published in Afrikaans in 2004 and translated into English by Michiel Heyns in 2006, is a perfect platform for this type of endeavour. *Agaat* is a farm novel set on *Grootmoedersdrift*, a farm in the

area of *Tradouw* in the Karoo. The novel begins in the last few months of Milla Redelinghuys de Wet's life, in the late 1990s. Milla, who at seventy is suffering from motor neurone disease, is bedridden, and the narrative is framed around her experience of her disease as well as her reflection on the life that she has led as an Afrikaner woman. The focus of these memories is often the relationship between Milla and Agaat, a girl she adopts as her own in 1954, a choice that causes local uproar due to racial segregation enforced by apartheid. Even though Milla initially defies these conventions, Agaat is traumatically reduced to the role of nanny and housekeeper once Milla gives birth to her son, Jakkie, in 1960. The relationship between these two women is constantly shifting as they try to come to terms with the complexity of their connection, as well as their individual identities. The novel gives a complete scope of the altering kinship between them, as it is Agaat who has decided to stay with Milla and nurse her during her last years, effectively reversing the roles between them.

As a text, *Agaat* is intertextually entwined with Latin, German and Afrikaans literature, musical references and what Heyns calls 'cultural goods' (Heyns, 2006: i). Under this economically loaded term he lists the following: 'songs, children's rhymes, children's games, hymns, idiomatic expressions, farming lore' (ibid.). Ultimately, Heyns immediately pinpoints what could arguably be seen as the crux of translation, namely to transfer the cultural, which is entrenched in one language, such as Afrikaans, into a language such as English, which might not have the same cultural inferences. This is, as Hardwick states, the most significant part of translation, as it 'involves translating or transplanting into the receiving culture the cultural framework within which a [...] text is imbedded' (Hardwick, 2000: 22). The term 'transplanting' highlights the concept of not losing anything that might be implied by the original text; 'cultural goods' should therefore be uprooted and transferred wholesale into the new language. This, along with de Kock's insistence that languages are in and of themselves nuanced, specifically when looking at the South African context, and that all these nuances are important in 'transplanting' effectively, seems to further muddy the water for translation purposes. However, Heyns states in his Translator's Note to *Agaat* that, with regard to the 'cultural goods',

I have as far as possible made my own translation of these, in an attempt to retain something of the

sound, rhythm, register and cultural specificity of the original. (Heyns, 2006: i)

This strategy of translation is interesting, as Heyns talks about cultural specificity, but also about what could loosely be termed the ‘feel’ of the text, considering aspects such as the sound, rhythm and register of the original. His idea, then, is to make the English version of the Afrikaans novel feel like Afrikaans.¹

Making the English ‘feel’ Afrikaans is addressing precisely that which arguably encompasses the supposed ‘loss’ that occurs in translation. The question of how this can be done is shown by Heyns’ small change to what the English looks like on the page. In the translation, the English vowels are accented, mimicking the Afrikaans diacritical marks, which change the sound value of the vowel or add emphasis. For instance in the original ‘*Tóëlaat, sê ek met my oë, tóëlaat!*’” (van Niekerk, 2004: 89) is translated as ‘*Allów, I say with my eyes, allów!*’ (van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 2006: 85). This strategy is repeated with an Afrikaans saying, which falls under what Heyns characterises as ‘cultural goods’ found on the same page: ‘*Knákkerteknák, sê sy. Búig die boompie, knák die riet.*’ This is translated as: ‘*Knick knack knick, she says, bénd the tree, snáp the stick.*’ From a literary perspective, the small inclusion of diacritical markings in the English translation does render the language alien to some degree. These changes are not indecipherable, or in any way difficult to read, as they occur occasionally rather than constantly. But they constitute an alteration which an English reader would not be able to ignore. This grey area between retaining the ‘feel’ of the original, while at the same time translating it into another language, is an interesting aspect of *Agaat*. Certainly, the choice to include the markings of Afrikaans is a way in which Heyns has chosen to negotiate what is seen by many critics as the difficulty for any translator, namely the choice between creating a translation that is faithful to the original or new in its own right. Umberto Eco (2003: 11) frames the question as follows:

Should a translation lead the reader to understand the linguistic and cultural universe of the source text, or transform the original by adapting it to the reader’s cultural and linguistic universe?

The question therefore is basically one that focuses on which takes precedence in the translation, the original, ‘source’ text, or the transformation of this source text. Eco, along with others,

argues that successful translation occurs in the negotiation of these apparently opposing options.

The particular nuance of the English translation of *Agaat* is that often there is more than one layer to the negotiation between languages. The use of accents and diacritics in English is a very visual interpretation of changing the look of the English to ‘feel’ more Afrikaans. It also necessitates a pause from the reader, as there is no English way of sounding out words like ‘*knick*’, ‘*bénd*’ or ‘*snáp*’. The impulse is to emphasise those vowels, perhaps elongating them somewhat. English here is metamorphosed into something which is English with a suggestion of the Afrikaans, although this might only be apparent to someone who is familiar with Afrikaans as well. The word order in the English version of *Agaat* maintains as far as possible the word order that is present in the original novel. The novel is full of examples of this, but for the sake of illustrating the layering that is present in the English translation it might be useful to return to a previously mentioned example. For instance ‘*Allów, I say with my eyes, allów*’ is a word for word translation from the Afrikaans. Even though ‘permit’ is an option as a synonym for *toelaat*, the vowel presence in ‘*allów*’ seems more in line with *toelaat*. This might be a little far-fetched, but when changing the focus from diction to sentence structure, Heyns’ choice is consistent. Even though there is nothing particularly incorrect about the phrase ‘I say with my eyes’, it is a direct translation none the less, and it could very easily have read ‘my eyes tell her’, which is still correct in implication, but immediately changes the sense of the sentence. Therefore, just from this sentence, and the myriad of translation choices it implies, one could argue that Heyns, if nothing else, is consistent in transplanting into the English text the cultural framework within which the Afrikaans exists.

Of course this becomes increasingly difficult when dealing with the cultural nuances such as idioms, sayings or farming lore. However, even here Heyns is equal to the task. Idioms, nursery rhymes and so on, tend to work with rhyme, rhythm or the sound of the words themselves, for instance alliteration or assonance. This way of playing with words, or definitions of words, makes it difficult to translate across languages. Words such as ‘*diddle*’, ‘*mimsy*’ or ‘*whiffing*’ are whimsical, nonsense English words that are inherently about the act of forming the words rather than having a concrete meaning or definition. These words, found in every language, achieve significance through sound alone. ‘*Knákkerteknák*’ is an Afrikaans example of precisely this

phenomenon. What is interesting here is that Heyns does not find an English equivalent for this non-sense word, as he says he does with some of the Afrikaans poems in *Agaat*. In this instance he chooses to recreate the word as a phrase in English, as '*Knick knack knick*'. Deceptively close to the phrase 'knick-knack', which is defined as a trinket or ornament, it is in and of itself used in the sense that the 'knick' is historically just a repetition of the 'knack' which was the trinket itself. By repeating the 'knick' before and after the 'knack', it underlines the repetitive, playful nature of the phrase being used, while at the same time resembling the Afrikaans original. A feature of this type of idiom is often the rhyming aspect. Even though the Afrikaans original does not have this feature, it is present in the English version, almost as if to authenticate what is essentially a constructed English phrase. In other words, the translation models the idiom that is created closely on the source text, added to which the internal rhyme of 'knick' and 'stick' is added to endorse the idiom's existence in English. As the original '*riet*' is directly translated as a 'reed', the choice of 'stick' is easily argued to have been made to enable this rhyming English idiom.

The English translation of *Agaat* is written in a manner that incorporates an Afrikaans sensibility, in sentence structure as well as sound. Therefore, the translation is faithful to the cultural specificity of the original language as far as possible, by trying to emulate the sound, or at very least the look, of Afrikaans on the page. The translated English version seems to manipulate the English into a nuanced version of English that is directly influenced by Afrikaans. In this sense, the complexity of unpacking the original language and the version of English that the text is translated into that de Kock mentions is addressed simply, and, one cannot deny, with a certain stylistic flair. The negotiations of *Agaat*, as a translated text, are therefore constantly in touch with the source text as well as forming something quite new. Specifically with a text of multiple narratives that span diary entries to first person accounts of the protagonist, this attention to detail is an accomplishment that cannot be shrugged off as coincidental. This minutely crafted style is sustained throughout the novel, which is possibly why Feldman along with other critics postulates that:

In what appears to be a seamless melding, two master forgers of prose have come together to produce an extraordinary work for the English-speaking world.

[...] It's an extraordinary achievement on the part of both author and translator (Feldman, 2008).

This 'seamless melding' implies that the translation is indistinguishable from the original, with Heyns and van Niekerk seemingly working together as 'two master forgers of prose'. Here the emphasis is perhaps strongly placed on their collaboration, as Heyns is also an author in his own right. It is, however, an interesting interpretation of the project of translation to see the translator working alongside the author as well as the original text. Stating that the translation itself is 'an extraordinary work for the English-speaking world' might be viewed as an overstatement, or as erroneous since the novel in question is not originally written in English. However, it does link importantly to the initial focus of the role of English in a South African context.

If this assertion for the importance of *Agaat* as an English text is taken seriously, it means that the English-speaking world could be enriched by a version of English which has been crafted to have aspects of the sound, rhythm, register and cultural specificity of Afrikaans or other languages. This shows the complexities of 'versions' of language that are available in the vast divergence that is South African literature, and more specifically English within a South African context. One could argue that it is the attention to detail, the transplanting of cultural sensibility, the sensitivity to cultural relativity, as well as the ability to play with words, which has made the English version of *Agaat* a successful translation. The success of the translation is evident in the fact that *Agaat*, a technically difficult work of translation, won the South African *Sunday Times* fiction prize in 2007. It was the first translated work to win this award, which at least implies that, as an English novel, *Agaat* has become an artwork in its own right. Whether translated or not, it has opened up the scope of what English is capable of achieving, even when used as a vehicle of translation, as a means to reach a wider audience. This novel disproves the notion that there is inevitably a 'loss' in moving a text from one language to another.

The multiplicity and complexity of South African literature, as it has developed in recent years, means that this type of translation work has become possible, as translators, authors and audience become more aware of nuances contained within languages. However, *Agaat* also seems to suggest that there is no reason for authors to feel that the essence of their mother tongue is lost in

translation, or that English is, to use the initial metaphor, a trampling giant that obliterates the artistic creation in its path. ■

Note

1 This has been pointed out, very briefly, in Leon de Kock's review of *Agaat*, 'Found in translation', *Sunday Times*, January 28, 2007, p. 18.

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