



# Interventions

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## To Refuse Containment, To Resist Translation

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# TO REFUSE CONTAINMENT, TO RESIST TRANSLATION

Two South African Examples

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**African  
languages**

**multilingual-  
ism**

**South African  
English**

**translation**

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*This essay is concerned with translation in situations of linguistic or social inequality. Its focus is South African English and its relationship to the other South African languages. Its argument is that much of the translation work done in South Africa serves to extend and confirm monolingual privilege. Translation in official contexts in South Africa tends to happen into English, out of other South African languages, and the labour of translation is performed by heteroglots for the benefit of monolingual English-speakers, who are able to remain monoglot since the work is performed by someone else. A further inequality of this situation is the fact that monolingual South Africans tend to be English-speakers, and tend to be the beneficiaries of racially and linguistically determined privileges. When translation takes place out of other South African languages into South African English, this monolingual privilege can be confirmed and extended. The essay concludes that a refusal to translate out of African languages into South African English may be necessary in order to destabilize the hegemony of English.*

## Introduction

This essay builds on Robert Young's insights that translation is like a colony (a far-away reproduction, a not-quite same copy), but that translation also is very similar to the 'central activity and political dynamic of postcolonialism' (Young 2003: 138–9). In other words, translation is *like* a colony, but it is also *like* the work of the postcolonial subject or historian. It is this seeming contradiction (like colonialism, like postcolonialism) that interests me in this essay.

I start the discussion by examining some of the ways in which translation is often figured (as a form of travel, as a border crossing), and suggest that there is more than one way of interpreting this border crossing. I seek out instances of interpreting the border that are not celebratory of the crossing, but instead suspicious of how the border is defined and by whom it can easily and readily be crossed. In thinking about translation as being 'like a colony', I pay attention to two features of this discursive field, namely that of the closed border (rather than the border which is there in order to be criss-crossed by anyone) and the border that is open in one direction only. Linked to this is the way traffic takes place in the classic colonial situation, with profit – whether human labour or trade goods – being extracted in one direction only. Both discursive fields figure rather more darkly than the more optimistic ways in which metaphoric fields of travel and mobility sometimes do in postcolonial studies (see for example James Clifford's influential *Routes* (1997), in which travel and translation are seen as constitutive of a complex modernity).

I take two examples from the same region – South Africa – both to do with language and crossings, to explore this interpretation of the border. In the first case I look at the ways in which we understand a linguistic border (a border which can be scrutinized both diachronically and synchronically), and how translation is to be understood if we think of languages as diverse within themselves. The first example I look at is that of South African English and its particular internal diversity. In this part of the argument I show that the conflicts within a language, and the other languages with which it imagines itself sharing a border, are crucial to understanding the nature of the border and what border crossings may mean.

The second example relates to the ways translation can be understood in terms of metaphors of labour and extraction of profit. A concept that is core to our understandings of the colony, this use of profit aims to think about translation as a process by which one language gains something, while the other loses something. Not what is lost in translation, then, to use one of the often-repeated metaphors clustered round translation, but what is *gained* in translation, and by whom. I try to see how this understanding of gain can illuminate situations where translation is 'like a colony'.

## Tropes of Travel and Translation

The ways in which travel and translation figure in ethnography and in writing about postcolonial situations are well documented and underpin the conference these essays come from (for the key early text in this debate, see Asad 1986; see also Clifford 1997). The use of metaphors of travel and mobility for the work of translation can lead to an understanding of these encounters that is largely benevolent. One could go even further and say that, in some examples of this literature, the ethnographer or postcolonial critic manages to present her or his work in ways that are complimentary and that celebrate the scholarly endeavour (one such example is Behar 1994). When the metaphor of translation is used together with the metaphor of travel, these benevolent meanings can multiply. In this version of postcolonial studies, the theorist as well as her or his subjects (and sometimes these two overlap) are restless and transgressive. Meanings are carried across borders, conflicting or complementary interpretations are placed alongside one another, and the postcolonial scholar is at the centre (that is, at the centre which is the margin) of this theatre of movement and transmission.

The arguments in this essay are built instead on a growing strand in translation studies, one that is suspicious of itself and its own good intentions (a strand well represented by the conference where the essays collected in this volume originated). Translation, Susan Bassnett has written, can be understood as ‘an effect of inequalities’ (Bassnett 2002: 4). In this version of translation it can be seen as a suspect activity in which inequalities (of economics, politics, gender, geography) are not only reflected but also reproduced in the mechanics of textual production. Bassnett summarizes this work:

Perhaps the most exciting new trend of all is the expansion of the discipline of translation studies beyond the boundaries of Europe... More emphasis has been placed on the inequality of the translation relationship with writers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tejaswini Niranjana and Eric Cheyfitz arguing that translation was effectively used in the past as an instrument of colonial domination, a means of depriving the colonized peoples of a voice. For in the colonial model, one culture dominated and the others were subservient, hence translation reinforced that power hierarchy. (Bassnett 2002: 4)

The insight that translation features in asymmetrical relations is of course not new. Talal Asad (1986) had this to say on the inequality of languages:

I have proposed that the anthropological enterprise of cultural translation may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies. And I have suggested that

anthropologists need to explore these processes in order to determine how far they go in defining the possibilities and the limits of effective translation. (Asad 1986: 164)

This line of enquiry has been taken up in another context by Tejaswini Niranjana: ‘Translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism’ (Niranjana 1992: 2). Niranjana argues it is possible for bilingual translators to ‘challenge earlier Western versions through retranslation’ (84); in other words to think here of translation as an act of resistance. I want, in this essay, to try out the idea that the act of *refusing* to translate or be translated may be a possible form of challenge. Resisting translation of course runs the risk that it can be confused with silence – and the complications around the reputed silence of the ‘subaltern’ have received a great deal of attention.

Niranjana concludes her book by writing that,

since post-colonials already exist ‘in translation’, our search should not be for origins or essences but for a richer complexity, a complication of our notions of the ‘self’, a more densely textured understanding of who ‘we’ are. It is here that translators can intervene to inscribe heterogeneity, to warn against myths of purity, to show origins as always already fissured. Translation, from being a ‘containing’ force, is transformed into a disruptive, disseminating one. The deconstruction initiated by retranslation opens up a post-colonial space as it brings ‘history’ to legibility. (Niranjana 1992: 186)

What this means here is clear: the postcolonial translator (or retranslator) has to resist the homogenized (orientalized, some might say as a shorthand) representations of ourselves/themselves and offer instead heterogeneity and a refusal of essence. As part of the postcolonial project, this strategy is clearly politically useful. I would want to insert an addendum here, to point out that of course the colonizer too is a creature of heterogeneity; in an effort to see the postcolonial as a translated being (translation as resistance) we might risk forgetting that the colonizer’s language, too, is not unitary, that here too translation and lack of origin are always at play.

Like English elsewhere in Africa, its identities and uses are complex.<sup>1</sup> In terms of South African English, the version of translation studies outlined in Niranjana’s work can lead us to disrupt the myth of (colonial) origin and language purity (see also Mesthrie 2011). If translation concerns border crossings, translation studies can provide us with a lens precisely to examine these borders, to uncover their fabrication and heterogeneity. All languages, one can argue, are polyglot within themselves (as Robert Young argued for English in his unpublished paper ‘English Literature, Multilingualism and Translation’, which was the keynote address to the Translation and the

1 A vast literature exists around this. See Mesthrie (2002) for an overview of the scholarship.

2 For further information on the conference and the research network that organized it, see <http://www.postcolonialtranslation.net/>.

Postcolonial conference).<sup>2</sup> However, in some instances, translation can in fact provide opportunities for drawing these borders in bold, so that translation facilitates the myth of homogeneity in the text or language from which translation is to take place. Translation, in this sense, can be used to create a fiction of homogeneity within a language, in an attempt to keep the polyglot and heterogeneous nature at bay. In the two cases I discuss below, I illustrate this argument.

### English in South Africa: The Borders Within

The status of English in South Africa in relation to the other South African languages is not a simple one, and has undergone many changes (for a discussion, see Mesthrie 2002, 2011). The case I have chosen for my first example is one in which translation does not figure explicitly, but where the nature of language and language ownership features.

The earliest documented example of English being used on South African soil comes from 1607, when a passing English captain commented on the fact that a local Khoi man had managed to remember some English. By 1638 communication between local men and seamen on passing English and Dutch ships had become so successful that there were attempts to appoint local men as agents of the English and the Dutch. The use of Khoi individuals as postal agents provides a fascinating early chapter in the history of translation and interpreting in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> The Cape was strategic in trade and the control of sea routes, and the first British occupation (in 1795) is interpreted as a battle between the British and the occupying Dutch East India Company. In this history the position of the local Khoi inhabitants is absent. The Dutch briefly reclaimed the Cape (1803–6), but after 1812 the Cape came again under British control. Britain was a colonizing power until 1910, and South Africa remained a member of the Commonwealth until the declaration of the (non-democratic) Republic in 1960.

The status of English changed significantly in the period after 1960, though it was retained as one of the two official languages alongside the increasingly powerful Afrikaans language. South Africa's recent history is more familiar, and it is in 1994 with the election of the first democratic government and the writing of the constitution that English was adopted as the language of government, though officially it exists alongside ten of the other South African languages – including nine African languages. When one wishes, then, to think about the borders of English in South Africa, it is clear that historically this is not always the same border, drawn with reference to the same inside and outside. This concerns translation studies directly: which language(s) South African English imagines itself to be bordered by (for analyses of a wide range of topics concerning South African languages, see

3 For a fuller analysis of this material, see Coetzee (2012).

4 See, for example, the difference it makes to call the 1899–1902 war either the Anglo-Boer War or, as many historians now do, the South African War. For a discussion of this issue, see Nasson (2010: 11–12).  
5 For an interesting discussion of the relationship between English and Afrikaans, set in the context of English and its meanings in Africa, see Mphahlele (1984).

Mesthrie 2002). In some early texts, English is defined in relation to Dutch and later Afrikaans.<sup>4</sup> At other times, South African English may be defined in terms of its relationship with ‘English’ as it is (imagined to be) spoken in the United Kingdom, or more recently English as it is spoken and used in other contexts in Africa. These multiple lenses point to a complex language biography; South African English is at times threatened, at times stigmatized, defensive or inclusive in turn.

Translation out of or into this English thus raises complex questions of audience, context and reception, and I’ll come back to this in my second example.<sup>5</sup> One of these is the relationship of English to adjacent, less powerful languages. Mona Baker writes in her introduction to the four-volume anthology *Translation Studies*, the ‘issue of translation and minority languages is not a peripheral concern but the single most important issue in translation studies today’ (Baker 2009: 17). In the second example I discuss, a translation of a Xhosa-language testimony to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I return to this aspect of translation, how translation can in fact marginalize the original utterance or text.

## The English Academy of South Africa and Ownership of English

One possible way of approaching the question of South African English and its interlingual contexts (and borders) is through examining an organization called the English Academy of South Africa. It was founded in 1961 and is still the only academy for the English language in the world. To anyone familiar with South Africa’s history, 1961 will resonate as a year in which English saw itself as endangered by Afrikaans, the National Party’s official language. It is also one year after the Sharpeville massacre, and the year that all black political organizations in South Africa were outlawed.

The academy was founded at a moment when English seemed under threat from the new hegemony of the Nationalist Party and Afrikaans; its early border, in this sense, is with Afrikaans. There is another border too, though, and that is the assertion of a link with England. So an interest in rules of grammar and language use can be seen as an example of continuing a link with what Niranjana might describe as a myth of origin. Significant here, though, is the lack of a sense of an African context, or a border with the other South African languages. This version of the academy’s work could not be sustained, of course. The current description of the academy’s work to be found on its website includes the following:

The vision of the English Academy of Southern Africa is of a democratic society in which effective English is available to all who wish to use it, where competent instruction in the language is readily accessible and in which the country’s diverse

linguistic ecology is respected . . . The English Academy is concerned with all forms and functions of English. It interests itself in English in education, promotes research and debate, organizes lectures, makes representations about language matters, rewards excellence and fosters the creative, critical and scholarly talents of users (and would-be users) of English in Southern Africa. (English Academy of Southern Africa website, <http://www.englishacademy.co.za/>)

In 1983, when it was still using the Tudor Rose as its emblem, the academy started to publish a journal, the *English Academy Review*. A review is of course a name for a certain kind of academic journal, but when one reads the first few volumes of the publication, it is clear that the editors of the journal also intended the publication to act as a ‘review’ of the role and ideals of the English Academy, its management and their vision – and of English in South Africa. The review includes a range of essays that place English in South Africa in the context of African languages debates (two major essays by South Africa’s grand old man of letters, Es’kia Mphahlele, are included, for example, both discussing the ownership and political uses of English – see Mphahlele 1983, 1984). Yet at the back of each review are included the minutes and annual reports of the academy, written as if the speaker had not read the rest of the volume, nor taken note of its content, revealing the internal divisions and conflicts that evidently must have existed within the academy.

One unintentionally ludicrous item from the annual report of 1983 serves to illustrate this point:

To complete the picture as far as our specifically language-related activities are concerned: we were represented at a ‘Military Language Congress’ organized by the SA Defence Force at Voortrekkerhoogte, in May this year; we have finally won our battle to have the ‘equals’ sign banished when a word is broken at the end of a line – the hyphen is back, in both English and Afrikaans. (Anon. 1983: 125)

This victory shows no awareness of the fact that the SADF was considered by many South Africans at the time as an agent of racism and civil war. This small paragraph reveals a great deal about the agenda set by the academy, and the official contexts in which it sees itself perform a role.

An item printed near the back of the volume in the section reflecting on the business of the year, and that echoes my argument in tone, is the ‘Acceptance Speech for the Pringle Award for Criticism 1982’ by J. M. Coetzee, in which he speaks of reading his prize-winning piece of criticism and being struck by his own premise in it, ‘that we ought to be suspicious about everything’ (Coetzee 1983: 139), and that suspiciousness is the hallmark of much contemporary literary criticism. Reproduced here, in this publication which



my argument has read as an illustration of the disputed border, the words take on a further significance.

Included in this volume, too, is an opening address to the conference of University English Teachers of South Africa given by Es'kia Mphahlele (Mphahlele 1983). At the end of a carefully structured argument about humanism and its limitations, Mphahlele writes:

The use of English, French and Portuguese in all of Africa is a political statement. These languages unify a diversity of language groups and are thus vehicles of nationalism. In South Africa, where the political establishment has been undermining English for the last thirty years and relegating it to the position of a mere 'second language' for some twenty-five million blacks, black writers, more than whites, use it not only as a political statement but also as an act of faith: that there is someone out there who is constantly tuning in to their literary creations: an audience clearly or vaguely defined. (Mphahlele 1983: 26–7)

The meanings attributed to English in this speech show an immersion in the debates about English in Africa and its potential suitability as a tool of liberation. At the same time, Mphahlele points out the differential relationship that black and white South African writers writing in English can and do have with the language and the traditions:

Black writers have been shut off from the voices of their predecessors who were silenced by the political authority and they have experienced a dissociation from the Africa-wide tradition of letters. So the white South African writer has a greater sense of literary tradition and sense of belonging in the civilization in which that tradition is enshrined. His education and lifestyle perpetuate this outlook. Hence his commitment to the idea of *making* literature in addition to addressing the South African condition. He is consequently more conscious of the cumulative impact literature has over generations. (Mphahlele 1983: 25–6)

This engagement with the cultural and racial politics of language in South Africa contrasts markedly with the understanding of the 'battle' about the hyphen in SADF documents, to borrow a metaphor from the annual report.

The ambivalent position of the academy – on one front seeking to maintain an equal position with Afrikaans and on the other addressing the language politics of the country and opening up to black South African intellectuals – is the context for one of the most influential lectures ever given in South Africa, 'The English Language and Social Change in South Africa'. It was delivered by South African intellectual and academic Njabulo Ndebele as 'the keynote address . . . at the jubilee Conference of the English Academy of South Africa; Johannesburg, September, 1986' (Ndebele 1991: 99–118) many years before the first democratic elections. The tone of this lecture is



one of suspicion and mistrust, and its theme can be read as that of refusing ‘translation’ and resisting the kind of absorption that neutralizes the meanings of one’s words.

Njabulo Ndebele, scholar, academic and critic, was invited by the academy soon after winning the prestigious Noma award for publishing in Africa in 1984 (awarded for the best book in any language published in Africa) for his collection *Fools and Other Stories*. His international prominence may have prompted this invitation. Since then, Ndebele has gone on to publish other fiction but it is his cultural and literary essays that have come to have the greatest influence. Two collections of essays and addresses have appeared, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991) and *Fine Lines from the Box* (2007).

Many of Ndebele’s pieces collected in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* and in *Fine Lines from the Box* were delivered as addresses and lectures and many of them carry traces of the particular context in which they were delivered. Ndebele typically builds references to the context into the speech – something those of us interested in translation think about, too. He also often foregrounds questions of audience in his addresses, and another intertextual way of approaching this feature might be with reference to orality and its sensitivity to context. There are frequent references to the fact that his address (or addressee) is divided, that he is addressing audiences with differing assumptions and values. In this speech delivered to the English Academy in 1983, for example, we read Ndebele saying:

It should be clear that much of the talk about reform and change, from the point of view of white South Africa in general, is premised not on what the whites of South Africa may have to unlearn, but on what black people, those ‘prospective citizens of the Republic’, need to be speedily introduced to so that they can become ‘responsible’ citizens of the future; so that they can become westerners in black skins. (Ndebele 1991: 108)

About white South Africans (who make up the audience to whom he is speaking about the changes in the country) he says that ‘unfortunately, whites are not present while these significant changes [to black South Africans’ sense of themselves] are taking place’ (Ndebele 1991: 110), and later, ‘it cannot be taken for granted that whatever white South Africans have to offer is inherently valuable’ (111). Thus Ndebele draws attention to the fact that the audience in his thoughts is not the audience in the room; also that what this audience regards as significant and normative in terms of an agenda for social change is not regarded as such by him. The essay ends with the revealing phrase: ‘The aim of this paper was to *seize the opportunity* to present and formulate the problems from the perspective that I have adopted’ (117, emphasis added). For Ndebele, then, the seeming benevolence of the invitation is to be read carefully, guardedly. There is a disjunction between

the utterance (you are welcome, you are our keynote speaker) and its supporting context (our organization defends a particular version of English).

Ndebele's lecture takes as one of its structuring themes a close reading of the English Academy of South Africa's mission statement. In terms of the argument I want to make here about translation, Ndebele is scrutinizing the borders of his own utterance, to see which intertextual field the academy has imagined for it. In other words, he draws attention to the audience that is present (an audience that he assumes not to share his own understanding of what is important), and to the agenda of the academy, which through its assumptions marginalizes what many South Africans have to say.

The English Academy of South Africa, we read with Ndebele, is an association dedicated to 'promoting the effective use of English as a dynamic language in Southern Africa. Membership is open to all persons and organizations identifying with the Academy's mission and sharing its vision' (Ndebele 1991: 100). 'Thus the organization stresses "openness"', but it is an openness that comes with a border guard: the need to identify with and share its vision. The doors of the academy are open to those who 'identify with . . . and shar[e] [its] mission'. While the mission statement does not say one has to be a mother-tongue speaker, it does say one has to speak 'effective' English. The test for this is unclear; what Ndebele suspects, however, is that he is not being invited to address this body because it intends to broaden its definition of effectiveness, dynamism or vision; instead he suspects he is being invited in order to make him conform, to contain his difference:

The current political context appears to have left its mark on the manner in which this conference itself was conceived and organized. I am thinking here of the attempt on the part of the organizers to consult various individuals and groups, anticipating that a diversity of interests can be accommodated in the various discussions that will take place in the course of the conference. Such conduct is, no doubt, fully in keeping with the demand of the oppressed of this troubled land for full democracy in the conduct of every aspect of the country's life.

Yet, well-meaning though these attempts may have been, it is essential, at such times, that we exercise a state of vigilance that will enable us to express tactical reservations – if only to ensure that all relevant issues have been brought to the surface, so that we can make pure motives even purer. (Ndebele 1991: 99)

This, of course, goes to the very heart of translation studies, the main work of which is the movement between contexts and cultural references with strategies that can be 'foreignizing' or 'domesticating'. Translation theory is extremely interested in the reader, or listener, and in how the text needs to be



interpreted for the particular listener or reader the translator has in mind. The reader Ndebele addresses in his speeches is often, perhaps typically, one he assumes to be hostile towards (or at least defensively containing of) his black consciousness politics. Perhaps the key statement in this important address to the English Academy can be read as a direct commentary on the academy's intentions in inviting him to be their 'keynote' speaker:

Practically, this need to maintain control over English by its native speakers has given birth to a policy of manipulative open-mindedness in which it is held that English belongs to all who use it provided that it is used correctly. It is assumed, of course, that it is the native speakers who will determine the standards of correctness. (Ndebele 1991: 101)

The term 'native' is here used ironically, to refer to the linguistic use of the phrase 'native speaker', but also to the apartheid understanding of the word used as a derogatory term for Africans (though a word that has recently been reclaimed in other, nativist contexts). Ndebele in this speech articulates the position of what Simon Gikandi in his most recent (as yet unpublished) project is calling 'the other English':

Observing the spread of English throughout the world, and how the phenomenon has meant that, with the advance of years from the era of colonialism, the development of English in various parts of the world has taken forms that have gone beyond the control of the native speakers, [some renowned thinkers, who are native speakers of English] have concluded that English is no longer the exclusive property of its native speakers. (Ndebele 1991: 100)

This 'other English' – this other way of using English – seems to me to be closely tied to the fact that the speaker speaks another language in addition to English. Being a multilingual English-speaker positions one very differently from someone who is a guardian of the one and only language – English. In his most recent work, which he has not yet published, Ndebele is said to be experimenting with writing in more than one language (although English may well end up dominating). English is thus constructed as polyglot within and as a result of speakers who speak English, but not only English.

### **Translation and Translation Failure**

If speaking in English (a particular version of English, one that sees its origin in 'English English') and being a member of the English Academy can be considered a way of exercising a benign form of containment, translation out of African languages into English can also be a form of containment, a

deletion of the border and its accents and political concerns. In this case the labour of translation remains invisible, the smoothness of the English-language translation replaces the original utterance, which becomes over-inscribed with the new translated version, rendering the original (in this case the African-language text or document) invisibly contained.

In this version of translation the burden of labour falls on those who speak languages in addition to English; that burden is to translate into English, allowing English to remain the standard and norm. This also allows monolingual English speakers to remain monolingual, benefiting from the work of those who translate. In the discussion of my second case study, I build on the insights about the inequalities and asymmetries inherent in any inter-language encounter. In the previous part of the essay my focus was on the borders of language and how language users define the intertextual and interlingual contexts of the language. In this second part the connected question of the labour of translation is what is at stake, and who is to benefit from the work of translation.

Pascale Casanova, in her essay (or rather the English-language translation of this essay), ‘Consecration and Accumulation of Literary Capital: Translation as Unequal Exchange’, writes: ‘Far from being the horizontal exchange and peaceful transfer often described, translation must be understood, on the contrary, as an “unequal exchange” that takes place in a strongly hierarchized universe’ (Casanova 2009: 86). Casanova is interested in the role translation can play in the consecration of authors and texts, and how literary ‘capital’ is generated and transferred through the work of translation. My interest is not so much in the status of the texts and authors as ‘capital’, but rather in the work of translation, the labour, itself.

Recent work on interpreting and witnessing in war and conflict situations has much to offer us in this regard. Emily Apter in her book *The Translation Zone* pays attention to metaphors of war and regionality, and wants to bring to the surface the potential political meanings of translation and its limits: ‘The book aims to rethink translation studies – a field traditionally defined by problems of linguistic and textual fidelity to the original – in a broad theoretical framework that emphasizes the role played by mistranslation in war, the influence of language and literature wars on canon formation and literary fields, the aesthetic significance of experiments with nonstandard language’ (Apter 2006: 3). Apter is also interested in what she terms ‘nontranslation, mistranslation, and the disputed translation of evidentiary visual information’ (15). Mistranslation here refers to ‘a concrete particular of the art of war, crucial to strategy and tactics, part and parcel of the way in which images of bodies are read...It is also the name of diplomatic breakdown and paranoid misreading’ (15). For Apter, it would be accurate to regard war as, in fact, ‘a condition of nontranslatability or translation failure at its most violent peak’ (16).



In the South African context, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the way its work has been reported provide a fascinating example of such a translation failure. Some might argue that the TRC is the opposite of war, it is a commission that has as its intention the unification of a nation after civil war. Yet insisting on mistranslation and non-translatability has been one strand in the critical response to the commission. Understanding, in this version, risks containment; for to understand means to forgive. (For an example of a refusal to forgive, see Biko 2000.)

The literature on the commission is vast (for academic responses see, for example, Posel and Simpson (2002), Villa Vicenzio and Verwoerd (2000) and Wilson (2001)), but I want here to highlight just one aspect of this literature, what Apter might call ‘translation failure’. I am interested in particular in the ways in which this translation failure can be interpreted as a form of resistance. Failure to translate, in this argument, can be read as a failure to be included in a particular version of the past.

Debates around the TRC also provide excellent examples of the ways in which translation into English is not neutral, and in which the direction of translation itself has a history. Interpreters and translators laboured to translate the testimonies of victims and survivors *into* English, the translated version being taken up as the *official* version.<sup>6</sup> Mark Sanders, in his *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of the Truth Commission*, provides the most sustained reflection on the languages of the TRC. He writes:

Repeated reference is made to the translation apparatus at the hearings, and to the policy of taking statements in the language chosen by the witness (*Truth Commission Report 5: 2–8, III; I: 146–147, 298–299*). The crucial fact that these statements were then ‘record[ed] in English (*Truth Commission Report 5: 5*) is not, however, underlined. I will underline it: the fact that the report and the eleven million pages of transcripts are in English, and the original language less easily accessible on audio- and videotape housed at the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria, means, once again, that the decolonizing impulse to restoration and restitution is an equivocal one. (Sanders 2007: 155)

Sanders makes (in passing) the link that my essay wants to develop more completely, that translation into English may at times not serve the best interests of those who are translated, nor the interests of those who perform the labour.

We can read a specific example of this process in a recent book co-authored by three South Africans (a journalist, an interpreter, a psychologist) – *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (Krog et al. 2009). The book addresses the question of the political significance of translation and raises questions about translation and

6 For a discussion of the way in which the statement-taking was set up, and how English came to replace original-language versions, see Richard A Wilson’s chapter ‘Technologies of Truth: The TRC’s Truth-Making Machine’ in Wilson (2001). The essays collected in Posel and Simpson (2002) pay attention to the language of the TRC, and the impact of language and terminology choices on the commission’s search for ‘truth’.

its beneficiaries. It provides the reader with a skilful and many-layered investigation and restoration of the testimony of Mrs Konile (concerning the murder of her son) to the TRC human rights violations hearings in April 1996.

The transcript that forms the basis of the analysis in *There was this Goat* is retranslated and reinterpreted into English from a set of tapes of Mrs Konile's testimony. The researchers have found this recording (and there are haunting references to the boxes of unnamed and unlabelled tape recordings in the archives), retranscribed it and retranslated it, restoring to the audio recording of Mrs Konile's voice its status as original. The text of the book contains the 'original' transcript, which is revealed to be but a poor transcript of Mrs Konile's Xhosa-language testimony. It also contains an improved transcript, with notes as to the conception and development of the new, improved transcript, which is now presented as a truer 'original'.

One may read the book as an excellent example of the difference a respectful translation can make to the 'original' words of a speaker, especially one who is not a powerful person. The text uses words like 'excavation' and 'opening up' about its desires and aims, clearly pointing the way to a reading that leads to 'greater understanding'. The research project and the book that comes out of it, we see, start out as an investigation (an uncovering, an opening up) of the influence of cultural codes and filters on the way we understand one another (Krog et al. 2009: 122), and can therefore be read as part of a nation-building project. It wants to bring to the surface the fact that South Africans often disagree about what it is they have seen or heard, that there are codes and practices that determine what we understand. But it also wants to show that, with careful attention to the words and contexts, and with respectful translation, these misunderstandings can be overcome. In this reading, the book's aims are in accordance with the TRC's official aims, as a process that wishes to uncover the past and through that point the way to a future of openness and reconciliation.

To this end, *There was this Goat* proposes, through the transcript of the work of and conversations between the three authors, a model of a 'nuanced South Africanness' (Krog et al. 2009: 102), a South Africanness that is aware of difference and which acknowledges the need for labour to be performed in order to 'excavate' and 'open up' discourses and utterances that are not immediately understood by all. In this way of understanding the work of the book, we may read it as an example of what is possible for politically progressive translation studies. This is the way the book wants to be read, and ostensibly what it wants to achieve. But – perhaps not surprising in a co-authored project in which the authors themselves at times *perform* code differences and disagreements – they themselves sometimes disagree about the meanings of what they have heard or seen. There is, in other words, at

least one other strong trend in the book that runs exactly counter to this drive to ‘understanding’ and reconciliation.

In this other version (reading against the grain, exposing disagreements within the text), we may read the book as showing precisely a *lack* of understanding and embodying a level of mistrust about how and to whose benefit ‘understanding’ is to be achieved. This more cautious (less conciliatory) approach to the book (and at moments in the book itself) is the one that rhymes with the critical project of Njabulo Ndebele, and with the interests of my own argument here.

This part of the argument is also interested in another and associated aspect of translation; namely, in how reported speech (differently understood, a translation) runs the risk of being absorbed into another speech with another set of codes and desires, those of the text quoting and containing the reported speech. In this case the context is the transcript of the translated words of Mrs Konile, which becomes part of the TRC’s archive, in a version that is very different from her own words and meanings. There are, the book shows, many ways of *not understanding*; the address of the reading (where, by whom, for whose benefit) affects the ability and desire to either understand or resist understanding. A translation that can, in some contexts, make a statement easy to understand may in fact be emptying out those things that *ought* to make the statement and what is described in it hard to understand.

*There was this Goat* refers to the theoretical issues surrounding transcription and simultaneous translation and includes a chapter (‘The Interpreters’) which contains a transcript of a conversation between translators and interpreters. The translators and interpreters reflect on questions such as the general challenges faced by interpreters (in South Africa as elsewhere), the particular challenges of the TRC process, and the emotional toll on interpreters of doing the work of translating and interpreting words that express suffering and violence (Krog et al. 2009: 103–19). The project is an attempt at restoring Mrs Konile’s identity and speech, and at providing her and her words with a better, more informed, more suitably coded interpretation. Nosisi Mpolweni (the interpreter), for example, hears the regional (and rural) references in Mrs Konile’s accent and vocabulary. This gives her a clue as to how to listen again to references to matters that seemed incongruous – for example the goat, which is a central feature of the testimony.

At the same time, the project is cautious about seeing this ‘original’ and restored testimony as something simple and easy to understand. This insistence on not understanding attaches itself to the signature of Kopano Ratele, the psychologist. Ratele wants a model of learning that insists on learning to ‘experience the gap’ (Krog et al. 2009: 34) between the untranslated and translated versions of experience and texts; that is, he



wants the limitations of the translation process to remain visible. He also wants what Mrs Konile has to teach (as learning and teaching were words used frequently to describe the work of the TRC) not to be to the benefit of ‘whites’. In other words, the labour involved in making Mrs Konile understood is not intended for the benefit of those who feel themselves to be loyal to ‘white’ concerns. Like Nosisi Mpolweni (the retranscriber and retranslator of the original words), Ratele is not overly concerned about whether the translation ‘opens up’ the words to white listeners. But what his work is deeply interested in is the distorting effect of this imagined, spectral eavesdropping white ear.<sup>7</sup>

7 The use of ‘white’ and ‘black’ in the book, and in my paragraphs here, is an instance of the untranslatability of South Africa’s history. Ratele does not believe in a scientific definition of race, yet in his careful and complex arguments he takes recourse to the shorthand of ‘white’ and ‘black’ quite frequently. Derrida’s maxim about the untranslatability of the word *apartheid* can be invoked here, but there is something more to it – an acceptance of a set of terms as an adequate description of a reality South Africans lived through. When Ratele says ‘white’ and ‘black’ he invokes an intertextual and contextual field with which one may disagree, but which all South Africans nevertheless share.

In the chapter of *There was this Goat* that describes the researchers’ visit to Mrs Konile (‘The Visit’), the reader overhears a conversation between the three authors. It is a conversation that is recorded almost by chance (but transcribed here deliberately), to familiarize themselves with the equipment they have borrowed from the university. On the way to meeting Mrs Konile, the researchers ‘try out’ their recording equipment and get involved in an argument about the conflict between kinship ties (a topic that is very important during the visit) and apartheid. In this conversation, Krog (the ‘white’ journalist) is concerned with a topic that she returns to in her work over and over – how to be South African and be connected to the unweeping ‘men of her race’ (that is, connected to an Afrikaner identity) at the same time (for a discussion of Krog’s work, and her translations between English and Afrikaans, see Coetzee 2000). In his response to this dilemma, Ratele articulates what it means for him to have this version of whiteness brought up as a topic of conversation.

Ratele’s words to his co-researcher reflect on their work (what was shared, what was not). Transcribed here as the record of the research work, it addresses a broader question. His comments want to develop a way of understanding the relationship (one might want to say the translation) between the white gaze and the black gaze. What Ratele describes is the result of the inequalities in society, historical and present inequalities, which mean that (in the South African context, which is his concern) a black person is always already inserted in a set of white quotation marks. The labour needed to be performed is the erasure, the removal of this imagined (by which I do not mean not-real) eyes and voice. Ratele concludes his part of the conversation (or the transcript of the conversation, the recording that was meant to ‘try out’ the equipment) with this statement:

We never had the space as black people to tell the truth to each other and to reconcile with ourselves, with who we are, also to reconcile with ourselves as our own enemies. Now whiteness literally surrounds us and we never had a chance to say: so here are some white people, how do we interact with them? We have never asked ourselves that question without losing ourselves. (Krog et al. 2009: 129)

As soon as Mrs Konile starts to perform the labour (or have the labour performed on her and on her behalf) of translating herself into English, to 'whiteness' and for 'whiteness', she risks being contained within the quotation marks of that initial 'white conversation' and within whiteness and its desires. It is this conversation that irritates Ratele and leads him to categorize the 'white' desires and comments as literally 'outside' the transcript of the joint project.

After the visit to Mrs Konile, the text of *There was this Goat* recounts Ratele's response:

While walking there, Kopano [Ratele] remarked that Mrs Konile on one level reminded him of all the older women he knew who struggled to raise children. 'I can make sense of it because it doesn't make sense, precisely because it doesn't make sense, precisely because there is such a lot of sedimentation in black life in this country. On another level it feels to me that, to use Claude Lanzmann's expression, 'the obscenity of understanding', I have to refuse to understand what has happened to her. It is through hanging on to this non-understanding that I will keep being engaged with her and keep believing that what had happened to her is not, and should never ever be, in the realm of human understanding. (Krog et al. 2009: 172)

In other words, he wants to insist on the fact that sometimes there is no equivalence, that to translate can have the effect of demeaning and diminishing, and that sometimes it is preferable that not everyone 'understands'. This position is developed in a number of strands that are not always explicitly knotted together in *There was this Goat*, but that converge around a position similar to Ndebele's resistance to neutralized and neutralizing absorption.

## Conclusion

Translation nowadays in official contexts in South Africa tends to happen *into* English, out of other South African languages. The border crossings enrich English, the labour is performed by heteroglots for the benefit of monolingual English-speakers, who can thus 'afford' (to extend the economic metaphor) to remain monoglot since the work of heteroglossia and translating is performed by someone else. A further inequality of this situation is the fact that monolingual South Africans tend to be English-speakers, and tend to be the beneficiaries of racially and linguistically determined privileges. When translation takes place out of other South African languages into South African English, this monolingual privilege can be confirmed and extended. Here we see translation serving an agenda of

neutralizing accents and diluting heteroglossia; and in the case of the English Academy potentially also an agenda of policing borders – borders of language and borders of social mobility.

Instead of trying to think in terms of crossing boundaries to get *out* (out of the national, into world canons), this essay has considered ways of understanding translation (and sometimes refusal to translate) as a way to get *in*. Historically, in South Africa, English and its borders have been policed by speakers who speak *only* English and who do not themselves seek out border crossings into other local languages. In such a language environment, crossing the border *into* English may in fact require the deletion of traces of the crossing. In other words, a crossing into the monolingual's language is a border crossing that requires one to conform, and that seeks to contain and to neutralize any traces of the border. That leads to my conclusion that, in some contexts, resisting translation and resisting comprehension may be a more just response.

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Carli Coetzee

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