

## Analysing Michele Hutchison's translation of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's novel 'De avond is ongemak'

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*De avond is ongemak* is the debut novel of Dutch writer and poet Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, published in 2018. The book was translated into English in 2020 by Michele Hutchison under the title *The Discomfort of Evening* and later that year became the first ever Dutch novel to win the prestigious International Booker Prize. Hutchison's translation introduces the international audience to Rijneveld's sensationally graphic and oftentimes brutally shocking story about loss, abandonment, the mystery of adolescent sexuality, religion and, above all, the fine line between fantasy and reality. Her translation strategy involves preserving cultural references and adding a sense of foreignness to the translation, while also aiming to make it accessible to an English-speaking audience. Her approach is to deconstruct and redesign the Dutch text from a lexical, syntactic and stylistic perspective in order to best convey its rhythm, flow and poetry through the translation.

*The Discomfort of Evening* is a harrowing story of a Reformed farming family in the Dutch countryside shaken by the death of a child. One day Matthies, the oldest sibling of ten-year-old Jas, does not return home from skating and leaves his sister behind in a family falling apart in grief. The different ways in which each family member deals with their loss over the following two years is depicted through the eyes of Jas, who is becoming increasingly caught up in disturbing fantasies. Her parents are completely paralyzed with grief and fail to notice how Jas, Hanna and Obbe are slowly derailing as they are trying to make sense of the void their brother has left behind. Under Obbe's leadership, they undertake morbid experiments with animals, while Hanna and Jas passionately long for a Rescuer, a man who can take them to the other side and help them uncover the secrets of their sexuality (Van der Pol, 2018).

With regards to paratextual information, the first striking difference between the original edition and the translation is how they depict Jas in the cover picture. On the cover of the Dutch edition, she is portrayed with dark hair, wearing black and holding a collage of herself and a countryside scenery in front of her face. In contrast, on the cover of the translation, she is depicted wearing her red jacket and having blond hair, blue eyes and somewhat bluish skin. The two artworks seem to focus on different aspects of the story: while the Dutch cover reflects on the confusion and disturbing fantasies Jas has in her head about

the farm, the lake, “the other side” and herself, the English cover puts the red jacket she refuses to take off into focus and, with the coat covering her mouth, seems to allude to her inability to express herself. It also hints at the ending of the story by depicting Jas with blue skin, looking almost frozen.

The back cover is an obvious reflection of the differences between the target audiences of the two editions. The cover of the original displays a photo of Rijneveld, who was already an established author in the Netherlands at the time of publishing, therefore putting their picture on the cover makes sense from a marketing perspective. The back cover of the translation, on the other hand, gives almost as much attention to the translator as to the author, acknowledging that the book was “exquisitely captured in Michele Hutchinson’s translation”. A further difference is that in the English edition, the synopsis can be found on the back cover, while it is inside the book, on the first page of the original. There is a brief introduction about Rijneveld in both, but while the Dutch focuses on their previous work, the English adds a couple of sentences about the author’s background. This is presumably because it is a debut novel and the writer is still relatively unknown to an English-speaking audience. In the English edition, there is also a brief introduction of the translator, which, for obvious reasons, is not included in the original. There are further reviews on the first pages of both books, although significantly fewer in the Dutch version. With positive reviews also displayed on the front cover of the English edition, one gets the impression that more effort had to be put into making the translation appealing and marketable, presumably because Rijneveld is less established among international audiences. There is also a difference regarding the quotations at the beginning of the book: while in the original the Maurice Gilliams quote<sup>1</sup> is located before the title “Deel I” and the Jan Wolkers quote<sup>2</sup> is after, in the translation they are on the same page, both before the title “Part I”. This implies two ways of interpreting the Wolkers quote: either reflecting the content of the first part, or that of the whole book. The poem mentions a “cruel start”, which might allude to the story beginning with the death of Matthies in Part I, but its other motifs, such as “grief” and “violence”, are present throughout the story, therefore both interpretations are substantiated.

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<sup>1</sup> “Restlessness gives wings to the imagination.”

<sup>2</sup> “It is written, ‘I am making all things new!’/ But the chords are a clothesline of grief,/ Razor sharp gusts snap the faith/ Of he who would flee this cruel start./ Ice rain beats blossom to a glassy pulp,/ A cur shakes his pelt bone-dry in the violence.”

The aim to preserve culture-specific elements of the source text (ST) but make the target text (TT) accessible to an English-speaking audience was undoubtedly an important part of Hutchison's translation strategy. One of the most striking expressions of this is the preservation of names - in particular the name "Jas" - in the English text. Because "jas" means coat in Dutch, it adds an extra layer of meaning to the coat metaphor, emphasising that Jas sees the coat almost as part of herself and strengthening the contrast between how much the adults in her life are concerned about her coat and how little they are concerned about her. The fact that this extra layer is lost in translation, might also have motivated the decision to put the coat into focus on the cover of the English edition. The importance of adding a sense of foreignness to the TT is acknowledged by Hutchison herself, who said in an interview that they decided not to change the name into something like "Jacky" or "Parker" because "it would lose its Dutchness" (The Booker Prizes, 2020). Similarly to "Jas", the other Dutch names are also kept, such as "Lien", "Boudewijn De Groot" and "Dieuwertje Blok". Exceptions to this are "Tiesje", which is changed into "Tiesey", and the cow names "Máxima, Juweeltje en Blaartje" (p. 291), which are translated as "Maxima, Jewel and Blaze" (p. 196). Interestingly, "moeder" and "vader" are not translated as "mother" and "father", but instead Jas calls her parents "Mum" and "Dad" in the English translation. This choice arguably causes a macrostructural shift (Van Leuven-Zwart, 1986) because it implies a less impersonal and somewhat warmer relationship between Jas and her parents.

There are numerous examples of preservation of cultural references in the TT: a "blik van Bogen" (p. 14)<sup>3</sup> is kept as "Bogena tin" (p. 3), "Nederland 1, 2 en 3" (p. 24) stays "Nederland 1, 2 and 3" (p. 10), "pepernoten" (p. 337) stays "pepernoten" (p. 227) and "Het land van Maas en Waal" (p. 161) also remains the same in the translation (p. 108), even though the song came out in English as well with the title "The land at rainbow's end". Apart from preservation, there are examples of explication or explicitation of cultural references as well: "Lingo" (p. 26) becomes "a quiz show called Lingo" (p. 11), "op het platteland" (p. 39) "in the Dutch countryside" (p. 21) and "het liedje van Kortjakje" (p. 266) "the Dutch nursery rhyme about Kortjakje" (p. 179). On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of translation, generalisation and substitution of culture-specific references too. Instances of translation include the "Reformatorisch Dagblad" (p. 132), which becomes "Reformist Daily" (p. 89), "Agrifirm" (p. 225), is translated as "Daily Farmer" (p. 151), "De Muzikale Fruitmand" (p. 161) as "The Musical Fruit Basket" (p. 108), "hagelslag" (p. 207) as

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<sup>3</sup> In Dwarsligger Edition

“chocolate sprinkles” (p. 139) and “Sinterklaas” (p. 336) as “Saint Nicholas” (p. 226). Examples of generalisation and substitution are the translation of “Friese doorlopers” (p. 25) to “strap-on skates” (p. 11), “tompouce” (p. 27) to “cream slice” (p. 25), “stoofpot” (p. 28) to “casserole” (p. 13) and “krantje van de Intertoys” (p. 29) to “any of the toy catalogues” (p. 13).

Taking these examples into account, it is obvious that the TT does not aim to relocate the story to an anglophone setting. It seems like Hutchison’s strategy involves preserving most references that are easy to understand for an English-speaking audience and only translating some that are very specific and perhaps less relevant to the story. This explanation does not account for all of her choices though, for example it is unclear why she translated “hagelslag” but not “pepernoten”. When asked in an interview whether there was anything that had to be altered or left out of the book, Hutchison said that she and the editors decided to keep the references to the Dutch setting to preserve some of the foreignness and sense of Dutchness, because that was part of the book’s appeal (Edbookfest, 2020). She also agreed that this extra layer of foreignness might even contribute to the sense of alienation an anglophone reader experiences. In the same interview, Rijneveld said that they thought Hutchison did a fantastic job and said it was “a special feeling to see all the cultural references come across in a different language”. What did have to be left out; however, is a joke that Jas makes to Hanna about Hitler: “Waarom pleegde Hitler zelfmoord? Omdat hij de gasrekening niet kon betalen”, which can be translated as “Why did Hitler commit suicide? Because he couldn’t pay the gas bill”. The joke was apparently deemed “too offensive to put into the English version”, although Rijneveld said that they did not intend it to be provocative, emphasised that the story was written from a child’s perspective and thought it was a shame that the joke had to be removed (Sisley, 2020).

Another important element of Hutchison’s translation strategy is to keep the rhythm of the ST and recreate the same poetic effect in the TT (Boase-Beier, 2011, p. 38), but change the vocabulary, redesign the sentence structures and alter the punctuation in order to achieve this. At the start of her translation, she splits the second sentence of the ST into two sentences in the TT, but reflects the alliteration of “kloven, eeltringen en bloemkoolachtige knobbeltjes” by “cracks, calluses and cauliflower-like lumps”. Another example of this type of microstructural shift in the first chapter is the sentence “De deksel van het blik was zo vetig dat je hem er alleen met de theedoek af kon draaien; het rook naar gaargestoofd

uierboord, dat in dikke sneden besprenkeld met zout en peper weleens in een pan met bouillon op het fornuis stond en waar ik van gruwelde, net als van de stinkende zalf op mijn huid.” (p. 14), which is broken up into three sentences in the TT: “The tin’s lid was so greasy you could only screw it off with a tea-towel. It smelled of stewed udder, the thick slices I’d sometimes find cooking in a pan of stock on our stove, sprinkled with salt and pepper. They filled me with horror, just like the reeking ointment on my skin.” (p. 3) There are examples of the opposite as well, i.e. Hutchison combining two sentences in the TT that were separate in the ST. For instance, the sentences “En al woonden we niet op de Zuidpool, koud was het hier wel. Zo koud dat het meer dicht lag en de drinkbakken bij de koeien vol zaten met ijs.” (p. 19) became “Even though we didn’t live at the South Pole, it was cold here, so cold that the lake had frozen over and the cows’ drinking troughs were full of ice.” (p. 7) She also handled pragmatic particles and expletives in the ST flexibly, leaving them out of the TT when they would have sounded unnatural in English and did not add much to the meaning. For example, “toch”, “nou” and “even” in the sentences “toch zette moeder haar dikke vingers in ons gezicht...” (p. 14), “dat komt er nou van...” (p. 15) and “en even aan ons de bruine en witte vlekken liet zien” (p. 19) were entirely left out of the translation.

When talking about trying to find the right voice in English for Jas, Hutchison said that she “deconstructed the sentences and then put them back together in layers”. She tried to get the rhythm right by playing with the punctuation and get the stark imagery right by carefully choosing each individual word (Harvey, 2020). In the first chapter, there are two instances when Hutchison left a sentence or sentence fragment out of the translation (beginning with “Alleen moet ik eerst nog hartig (...)”, p. 16; and “want dan hoefde moeder niet (...)”, p. 22). Considering vocabulary, she did not always stay loyal to the ST either. For example, she translated “lokken” (p. 22) as “hair” (p. 9), “vloerbedekking” (p. 22) as “floor” (p. 9) and “Ik ben voor de schemering thuis” (p. 23) as “I’ll be back before dark” (p. 9), although there are probably more “accurate” equivalents in English. She feels that “recreating the same effect, overall feel and rhythm” are more important than complete loyalty to the ST (Edbookfest, 2020).

These choices allude to a “doeltaalgerichte” (target-language-oriented) translation strategy from a lexical, syntactic and stylistic aspect (Van Leuven-Zwart, 1986) as the TT adapts to the structures of the target language, in this case English. This is somewhat different from Hutchison’s approach to cultural references, in which case her strategy is more

“brontaalgericht” (source-language-oriented) as she clearly makes an effort to keep a great amount of Dutch references in the TT. Regarding her translation methodology, it also seems like it might have been more structural with respect to syntax and style: there is a consistent pattern across the microstructural shifts in that rhythm and poetic effect are prioritised over adhering to ST punctuation and sentence structures. With respect to cultural references, Hutchison’s methodology seems less structural and rather linear; one might even get the impression that she made her decisions spontaneously and instinctively. Why translate “Tiesje” to “Tiesey” but not “Matthies” to “Matty” or “Matthew”? Why leave “Het land van Maas en Waal” unchanged but translate “De Muzikale Fruitmand”? And there is also the example of “hagelslag” and “pepernoten”, of course. These choices seem arbitrary, but they might actually form part of a strategy where Hutchison aims to keep some of the Dutch references to add local colour but tries not to overwhelm the reader with them. It is quite plausible that she simply “played it by ear”, attempting to keep the rhythm of the ST but make the TT accessible and readable for an international audience as well. Loyalty to the ST in a literal sense might not be her priority, but recreating the same poetic effects in the TT clearly is. After all, she said herself that the thing she gets complimented on the most is the rhythm and flow of her translations, never their accuracy (Harvey, 2020).

## Retranslation of a passage (p. 22-23)

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‘Can I come with you?’ I asked. Father had brought my Frisian skates down from the attic and tied them to my shoes with their brown leather straps. I’d already been walking around the farm in skates for a few days, my hands behind my back and the protectors over the blades so that they wouldn’t leave too many streaks in the carpeting and Mother wouldn’t have to use the flat nozzle of the vacuum cleaner to clean up the traces of my desire for the tour. My calves were hard. I’d practiced enough now to go on the ice without the help of a folding chair.

‘No, that’s not possible,’ he said. And then more quietly, so that only I could hear it: ‘Because we are going to the other side.’

‘I want to go to the other side too,’ I whispered.

‘When you’re older, I’ll take you with me.’ He put on his woolly hat and smiled, I saw his braces with their zigzagging blue elastic bands.

‘I’ll be home before dusk,’ he called to Mother.

*My aim with this retranslation was to illustrate a more source-language-oriented translation strategy that somewhat contrasts Hutchison’s approach. I adhered to ST sentence structures, vocabulary and cultural references where possible.*

## Original translation (p. 9):

‘Can I come with you?’ I asked. Dad had got my wooden skates out of the attic and strapped them to my shoes with their brown leather ties. I’d been walking around the farm in my skates for a few days, my hands behind my back and the protectors over the blades so they wouldn’t leave marks on the floor. My calves were hard. I’d practiced enough now to be able to go out onto the ice without a folding chair to push around.

‘No, you can’t,’ he said. And then more quietly so that only I could hear it, ‘Because we’re going to the other side.’

‘I want to go to the other side, too,’ I whispered.

‘I’ll take you with me when you’re older.’ He put on his wooly hat and smiled. I saw his braces with their zigzagging blue elastic bands.

‘I’ll be back before dark,’ he called to Mum.

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