

# Writing 'double Dutch'

*A Dutch edition of an English book returned a war story to its country of origin. Aletta Stevens and Meritha Paul-van Voorden describe their work*



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After my book *Looking for Uncle Joop: A Long-Lost Story from Nazi-Occupied Holland* (London: Ashgrove Publishing) was published in 2017 I was often asked whether there would be a Dutch edition. People from Gaasterland were particularly keen – not only because the book describes the events that took place in that rural area of Friesland during the Second World War, but also because the book was partly based on the memories of people who lived there. In the province of Friesland, Frisian, the Netherlands' second official language, is spoken alongside Dutch, and English comes only in third place, so a lot of older people in particular felt their English was not of a high enough standard to read the book as it stood.

While I was still promoting the book in England, I received an unexpected offer. Meritha Paul-van Voorden, a colleague in the ITI Dutch Network, asked if she could translate the book into Dutch. Her appreciation and enthusiasm were so persuasive that I decided her ambition to go into literary translation deserved a chance.

## The value of objectivity

I am frequently asked: 'So why didn't you translate the book yourself? You're a translator, aren't you?' It sounds almost like an accusation, as if it was somehow lazy of me not to translate it myself. Naturally, it was something I had carefully considered. On the other hand, there were a lot of reasons why I felt this was not a good idea.

First, writing a book and then translating it yourself seems rather like 'navel-gazing'; I wanted to write

my next book, rather than linger over the first. Second, I knew that I might be tempted to rewrite the book while I was translating it. Finally, it had been difficult for me to let go of the source language to recreate an authentic version in the target language in the first place. A different translator now would bring objectivity to the project.

Since the story is part of my family history, however, a condition of our agreement was that I supervise and approve the translation. After I had found a Dutch publisher willing to buy the translation rights from my English publisher, and

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Meritha's test translation had been approved, we were ready to start.

## Seeing the text afresh

The first time I saw my English writing in Dutch was a strange experience. Although Dutch is my mother tongue and I had gathered all the research and factual information for the book in Dutch, the writing was very personal. Initially, the Dutch translation did not evoke the same emotions in me. I had spent years formulating the English and it was close to my heart. When I was checking the Dutch, the English original would play in my

head. It took a while to push it to the back of my mind and to judge the Dutch on its own merits.

Some passages did not need to be translated, as they were my own translations of quotes from sources such as a war diary and personal letters. My task here was to find the original passages and pass them to Meritha. I had also used personal testimonies and interviews in many places, and tracking these down was more of a challenge. It was important to retain the original words. Moreover, we needed to use the terms specific to the locale. For example: during *Dodenherdenking*, Dutch Remembrance Day on 4 May, the Dutch take part in a silent procession. Although 'procession' can be translated as *stoet*, in combination with 'silent' it is always referred to as *stille tocht* in Dutch. Similarly, a 'ditch' can be translated as *sloot* or *greppel*, depending on whether it is wet or dry. In the context of locals fleeing from the Nazis through the fields, it was definitely the wet variety that had to be negotiated. If you were a spy being dropped near woods at night, on the other hand, you would be looking for the dry variety to bury your parachute and harness in.

The many questions Meritha asked and the few inaccuracies she noticed forced me to review the text in places. She was also prepared to defend her translation choices, referring to external sources to back her decisions. The publisher allowed us to correct and add text where necessary, so *Het tweede schot: Een familie verhaal uit bezet Friesland* is an 'enhanced' edition. For me, it has been a fascinating kind of reverse translation process, a deconstruction of my creation in order to bring about a Dutch reconstruction.

We both attended the launch in Gaasterland and went on live radio together. It felt like teamwork. The book has been warmly and enthusiastically received. I am happy that, thanks to Meritha's initiative, the story of Joop Schweitzer is now back in the Netherlands, and back in Friesland.



**Looking for Uncle Joop is now available in the language of the people whose own memories made it possible**

### Meritha's perspective

When Aletta accepted my offer to translate her book I was overjoyed – and at the same time filled with slight feelings of anxiety. It would be my first literary translation of this magnitude, and I had never been involved in the process of publishing a book before. There was, however, no need to worry. The cooperation with Aletta has not only been educational but also enlightening, and through doing it I became more aware of my weaknesses and strengths. Aletta always spoke about 'we', which was reassuring, as if she wanted to say 'We are in this together and you can count on me'. And indeed, during the entire process Aletta would continually show her support. Whenever appropriate she would mention my name under the banner of #namethetranslator and highlight my efforts. I really felt this demonstrated how much she valued the profession of translator.

### Getting to know each other

Having said this, we had to get used to each other and to our respective ways of working. Author and

translator do not usually share the same native language. And in this case it was even more complex because Aletta is not only an author but also an experienced translator, and as such she was clear that she wanted complete control over my translation. However, these initial hiccups were easily dealt with. The source text presented us with more difficult challenges.

First, it contained many historical, cultural and geographical facts that needed checking or needed to be domesticated. Second – and this was probably the most distinguishing characteristic of the source text – Aletta had authored her book largely based on Dutch sources. *Looking for Uncle Joop* was written in English and it fell upon me to render it into Dutch using, where possible, the same original sources. To sum it up, the starting point for the text is Dutch, the story is English, and the translation is Dutch again. Trawling through the enormous amount of original data, some of which contradicted itself, and keeping track of what originated from which source and where it should be inserted in the target text was not always easy, to put it mildly.

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Then there were other translation problems. Some things were fairly rare; there were only a few times when there were potential differences in interpretation, or when I had to choose between a semantic translation versus a communicative one. The problems were more frequently ones that arose because of culture-bound terms or specific conventions in the target culture. For instance, there was the issue of whether the places and waterways should be referred to in Frisian, as the official language, or not. In the end, the editor decided against this, as referring even to major cities in

Frisian could cause too much confusion for the reader. Only the waterways are now written in Frisian.

Verb tenses posed another problem. Generally speaking, there are a number of differences between the use of tenses in Dutch and English. In English, the use of the past tense is much more precise than in Dutch. In *Looking for Uncle Joop* Aletta repeatedly switches back and forth between the present tense and the past. In a particular passage featuring Queen Wilhelmina, for instance, she uses the present tense to bring the story to life. However, when the Queen reminisces in this passage, her memories are described in the past tense. By now I had translated so much of the source text that I was familiar with Aletta's writing style; and in Dutch, depending on the perspective of the reader, you could describe these events either in the past or in the present tense. The editor and proofreaders, on the other hand, had to discuss this passage intensively at the final editing stage.

### Proofreading problems

Finally, the publisher also played a role – sometimes problematically – in the editing process. Once the manuscript had been submitted, the publisher used their own professional proofreader, who appeared to be inexperienced and made not only editorial changes but also substantive ones, where they would alter the meaning of the text. This was extremely frustrating and time-consuming as their amendments had to be checked against the source text and my original translation. We expressed our dissatisfaction, and a second, much more knowledgeable proofreader was appointed.

Working with several proofreaders and the editor at different stages of the translation strengthened my self-belief. Yet I also experienced plenty of doubts. It is hard not to let it get to you when every single word you've written is repeatedly scrutinised. Words and sentences are changed only to be changed back. This merely proves that translation is a subjective, dynamic process and therefore never fully finished.

All in all, writing 'double Dutch' has been a unique experience that I will long cherish. 