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'MY GRANDFATHER THE HUNTER': A HUMOROUS TRANSLATION FROM AFRIKAANS TO ENGLISH

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If language is a symbolic representation of culture and if it is primarily used for interaction between individuals, it is understandable that some problems might develop in a bilingual community. Language contact brings about cultural contact across the whole spectrum of language use: from the simple communication between children up to the abstraction of symbolic logic. It all has one major concern and that is for a speaker or author to make himself understood.

Words in different languages can be related, but will not necessarily express the same meaning. This is evident in the difficulties which are sometimes experienced in translation. Sometimes a word-for-word translation does not make sense at all, or it might bring about humorous results.

South Africa is a bilingual country where about 60% of the population has Afrikaans as a first language; English is also an important language in South Africa. Afrikaans and English are, in fact, the two official languages. It is understandable that the degree of bilingualism will vary from person to person — some will know and speak both languages equally well, while others will know only one of the two with little or no knowledge of the other.

These two official languages are used in all walks of life, be it by the man in the street, or by the president in parliament. Translations from Afrikaans to English and vice versa are a common occurrence in South Africa. Because the languages are both Germanic, there are many similarities (and near-similarities) and differences (and near-differences) between them. This often causes some mistakes on the level of phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and consequently on the level of interpretation.

Of course humorous mistakes are often the result. Evidently all translation mistakes are actually mistakes of meaning, because it is always language-in-use, or interpreted language. Many such mistakes are notorious in South Africa and have become the object of jokes. Other kinds of mistakes are intentional and very funny stories are being made up with only one purpose — to emphasize the wrong translations with resultant mirth.

A story, often related in the so-called broken English of an Afrikaans speaker, is the following in which the words concerned will be numbered:

My grandfather was a Front Puller¹ in the Great Pull². One day while pulling³ to the north, he and his heavy⁴ went on a chase⁵. They wanted to chase sea-cows⁶ and camelhorses⁷; my grandfather had a two walk rifle⁸. One walk was for bullets, and the other walk for hail⁹. While walking in the bush, they saw a shallow pig¹⁰. My grandfather took kernel¹¹, shot the shallow pig and there it lay, bones¹² in the light¹³ while ashbirds¹⁴ gathered around.

The correct English for the previous near gibberish is the following:

My grandfather was a Pioneer¹ in the Great Trek². One day, while trekking³ to the north, he and his brother-in-law⁴ went on a hunt⁵. They wanted to hunt hippopotami⁶ and giraffes⁷; my grandfather had a double-barrelled gun⁸. One barrel was for bullets, and the other barrel for shot⁹. While walking in the bush they saw a warthog¹⁰. My grandfather took aim¹¹, shot the warthog and there it lay, with the legs¹² in the air¹³ while vultures¹⁴ gathered around.

To begin to understand the reasons for the bad translation, the Afrikaans version will be given next:

My oupa was 'n Voortrekker¹ in die Groot Trek². Eendag, terwyl hulle besig was om te trek³ na die noorde, het hy en sy swaer⁴ op jag⁵ gegaan. Hulle wou seekoeie⁶ en kameelperde⁷ gaan jag; my oupa het 'n tweeloopgeweer⁸ gehad. Een loop was vir koeëls, en die ander loop vir hael⁹. Terwyl hulle in die bos geloop het, het hulle 'n vlakvark¹⁰ gesien. My oupa het korrel¹¹ gevat, die vlakvark geskiet en daar lê hy toe, bene¹² in die lug¹³ terwyl aasvoëls¹⁴ rondom vergader.

In the following columns the words in Afrikaans, the broken English translation and the correct English are put on one line for comparison. The reason why the broken translation is possible, where it comes from and what is funny about it will then become obvious in the explanation which follows:

AFRIKAANS	BROKEN ENGLISH	ENGLISH
1. <i>Voortrekker</i>	front puller	pioneer
2. <i>Groot Trek</i>	big pull	migration by a group of settlers
3. <i>trek</i>	pull	trek
4. <i>swaer</i>	heavy	brother-in-law
5. <i>jag</i>	chase	hunt
6. <i>seekoei</i>	sea cow	hippopotamus
7. <i>kameelperd</i>	camelhorse	giraffe
8. <i>tweeloop geweer</i>	two-walk rifle	double-barreled rifle
9. <i>heel</i>	hail	shot
10. <i>vlakvark</i>	shallow pig	warthog
11. <i>korrel</i>	kernel	aim
12. <i>bene</i>	bones	legs
13. <i>lug</i>	light	air
14. <i>aasvoëls</i>	ashbirds	vultures

VOORTREKKER
GROOT TREK
TREK

These three terms will be scrutinized together, because they have their origin during the same era in the history of the Afrikaner. Originally a *Voortrekker* was one of the first pioneers who left the Cape of Good Hope in the year 1838. The main reason was to escape British rule and to find a new life in the interior. This movement away from the Cape came to be known as the *Groot Trek* ("Great Trek"). The Afrikaans word *trek* found its way into the lexicon of English (e.g., Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*) and it still means to migrate under strenuous circumstances by means of ox-wagon, and a migration of this kind is also known as a *trek*. *Trek* then is used as both a noun and a verb. Because of the great number of people who took part in the migration which started in 1838, it became known as the "Great Trek". The funny side of the broken English translation is

the fact that the word *trek* can also be used for the English word “pull” obviously doesn’t have the devine meaning that “trek” has in *Groot Trek* and *Voortrekker*. Add to this the translation of *voor* which here has more of the meaning of being “ahead, or taking the initiative” to “front”, and the farce is complete.

SWAER

This Afrikaans word has the form *swager* in Old Dutch and like lots of other words, the intervocalic *g* disappeared in Afrikaans, leaving one with a long vowel like in English “father”. It means “brother-in-law” as shown in the good English translation. In Afrikaans the word for “heavy” is spelt *swaar* (something weighing a lot) and because of the similarity in pronunciation, it is used for the ridiculous translation. The spelling is ignored and the fact that it is a homophone is deliberately used for effect.

JAG

In Dutch this word is spelt “jacht”. If one is a “hunter”, one can go on a “hunt” and you “hunt” wild animals; in Afrikaans, if one is a *jagter*, one goes on a *jag* and one *jag* wild animals. Where does the wrong translation of “chase” then come from? It comes from the Afrikaans verb *jaag* which means “to follow”, or to “chase”. This is a misuse of the homophonous principle; *jaag* and *jag* have a long and a short vowel respectively. Unlike other vowels in Afrikaans, the length of this vowel (like in English “father”) changes the meaning of the word. The wrong one “chase” (for *jaag*) instead of “hunt” (for *jag*) is deliberately chosen for its humorous effect.

SEEKOEIE

This word is the plural of Afrikaans *seekoei*. In Dutch the word is “*nijlpaard*” or “*hippopotamus*”; earlier the word “*zeekos*” was used in Dutch for a kind of seal. In English the word “sea-cow” is also used. The first settlers in the Cape of Good Hope, the southern tip of South Africa, started using this name for the hippopotami they found there. “Sea-cow” is a word-for-word translation of the Afrikaans name; this translation is amusing, because of the non-existence of any real “sea-cows” in South Africa and a vision of a milk cow with its habitat in the sea is created.

KAMEELPERDE

In older Dutch “*kameelperd*” was already used (from Middle Latin *camelopardus*). In Afrikaans *kameelperd* was used for the giraffes found in South Africa. In the broken English translation, “camelhorse”, a name is created which emphasizes the clumsiness of an Afrikaans-speaking person not knowing the word “giraffe”. A cross-breed between a camel and a horse is highly improbable and that is what “camelhorse” suggests.

TWEELOOPGEWEER

The first part of *tweeloopgeweer*, *twee* means “two”, while *loop* is the barrel of any rifle or pistol. Another Afrikaans word *loop*, means “walk” and in the bad English translation the meaning of the wrong homonym is deliberately chosen with the absurd “two-walk rifle” as a result.

HAEL

This Afrikaans word is used for both “hail”, the small balls of ice, and “shot”, the small lead or steel pellets used in a shotgun. The word *hael* is also one of those which lost an intervocalic *g*. In the case of the broken translation, the wrong meaning is used.

VLAKVARK

Vlakvark, the name for a kind of wild pig, consists of two parts: *vlak-* and *-vark*. It is the name for *phacochoerus aethiopicus* and *phacochoerus africanus*, family *Suidae*. The *vlak-* part is probably used because it lives on the *vlakke* which is a flat, outstretched part of the veld; *-vark* of course means “pig”. The word *vlak* is also used to say that something is not deep, like in “shallow water”. This is now used to describe the particular animal as a pig which is not deep, or as a “shallow pig” instead of “warthog”, the correct name. Again this will only be possible when an Afrikaner has a poor knowledge of English.

KORREL

In Afrikaans this word is used for the front sight of a rifle and also for the action of “taking aim” with a rifle. *Korrel* is also used to name a “grain of sand” or “kernel” of wheat for instance. Again the broken translation uses the wrong homonym and makes the grandfather “take kernel” instead of “take aim”.

BENE

This word is used in Afrikaans both for the “bones” of a body and “legs” of an animal or a person. As in most of the previous examples, the wrong alternative is used and the shot animal then seems to lie dead with bones sticking up.

LUG

Lug is the Afrikaans word for the “air” which one breathes. It is also used in the sense of putting up your hands (in the “air”). Another word exists in Afrikaans, *lig*, which is pronounced very much like *lug*. *Lig* is the word for “light” and the deliberate wrong translation can be used because of the similarity of pronunciation — with comic result.

AASVOËLS

This is the word for “vultures” and it consists of two parts — *aas-*, meaning “carion” and *-voëls*, meaning “birds” (incidentally, *voël* has also lost an intervocalic *g*). Why then the translations of “ashbirds”? Another Afrikaans word *as* which means “ash” is used. The *a* like in English “was” differs only in length and the wrong word’s translation is used, resulting in an absurdity like “ashbirds”.

This little story about a grandfather on a hunt is obviously a deliberate patching together of circumstances to use the very words which can possibly have an amusing translation.

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